Quality Assurance of Professional Studies and The Development of 21st C Skills Among Students in Cameroon Private Universities: The Case of Private Universities in Mfoundi Division

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the provision of professional studies, its quality assurance practices, and the undesired increasing lack of 21st century skills among graduates from private universities in Mfoundi division. The rising unemployment rate and inability to create jobs for graduates from these private institutions is a menace to the realization of 2035 emergence dream in Cameroon. Based on the interpretivist philosophy, the researcher employs the interview guide to collect data from 75 stakeholders from private universities in Mfoundi division. Content analyses were employed to examine the various opinions. The findings reveal that the quality of teaching staff is questionable, and the pedagogic activities are too theoretical due to a lack of quality assurance practices. We, therefore, recommend that private universities in Mfoundi division should design specific quality assurance units to ensure the smooth functioning of its systems.

Keywords: quality assurance; professional studies; development

INTRODUCTION

The Development of an individual, the community, and the society, in general, depends strongly on the type of education, the quality of the education, and the systems put in place to steer the education and society concomitance. Education is at the center of human development and society is fast evolving technologically as well as in other domains. The technological domain is spreading widely to all domains and the actors are challenged to meet up with the technological opportunities and maximize them for improvement and growth. The digitalised new normal has compelled all educational system, processes, and procedures to go obsolete giving space to new education practices that garbs the present-day requisite skills. Some institutions have considered innovations in curriculum, pedagogy, and management while others have embraced quality assurance strategies to meet up with the fast-evolving society. Many graduates from today's educational system find themselves neither with jobs nor with the required skills to create one because they are not career-ready. This is because most educational institutions are still holding on to the past practices, and old curriculum, whereas society has evolved.

Quality education

According to MINESUP (2012), there is no specific standard definition of quality education. We can generally define quality in education following the different approaches: matching exceptional standards (excellence); compliance with standards; adequacy with institutional goals; added value (in terms of skills) to students; satisfaction requirements expressed or anticipated by the customer. It must be acknowledged that institutions have diverse functions, priorities, and visions. This makes the quality assurance system to be a focus on these priorities and therefore produce different results depending on what is being measured and the purpose of measurement.

Quality education is one that provides all learners with the capabilities they require in order to become economically productive develop sustainable livelihoods, contribute to peaceful and democratic societies and enhance individual well-being, (VVUB, 2020). According to this definition, quality education is the powerhouse for the production of human capital in an economy. The two definitions above introduce a somewhat continuous process or a chain of operations that specialises in building learners from one step to the other. The system set the vision and objectives which interest the customers (students), and they decide to take the training with known possibilities of amassing knowledge, skills, and competencies embedded in the program.

Quality education in the context of our research finding can be observed as an educational endeavour that systematically conceives the program (courses) in collaboration with all stakeholders, set rigorous processing strategies and compelling evaluation methods in a bit to ensure the learners experienced a behaviour change and are able to impact themselves, their environment and the society. This research takes this definition dimension because education is made with the central aim of transforming learners by adding positive behaviours which can ease his/her living standards and that of their entourage. This particular research looks at how the quality of education can fulfill this mission by getting graduates ready and willing to take on their respective careers and become better in them.

Quality assurance

Quality assurance is a multidimensional concept whose definition attracts different views and conditions depending on the area of existence, a vision of the system, and the elements to be evaluated.

According to the commonwealth of learning, (2010) Quality assurance refers to all those activities, attitudes, actions, objects, and procedures that through their existence and use, and together with the quality control activity, ensure that appropriate academic standards are maintained and enhanced in and by each program. It extends to making the process and standards known by the educational community and the public at large.

According to UNESCO (2004), Quality assurance is an all-embracing term referring to an ongoing, continuous process of evaluating (assessing, monitoring, maintaining, and improving) the quality of higher education systems, institutions, or programs. This definition is not only shallow but also inappropriate. This is owing to the fact that quality assurance is not just about evaluation. The idea of evaluation comes at the end of the process to determine the success or failure of the target system. This definition is not far from quality control which has an accreditation process and auditing as its main tools. The process of quality assurance in a school is an inherent process that begins at the same time as planning, it embraces every aspect of the operation in the system.

The Catholic University of Eastern Africa (2008) defined Quality Assurance as the ongoing core functions of a university. In other words, quality assurance is the planned and systematic activities implemented in a quality system so that quality requirements for a product or service will be fulfilled. This definition utilises the respective elements that quality assurance stands for. The plan and systematic activities run from the start to the end of the program or production.

For the convenience of this research, quality assurance can be seen as an all-embracing strategy conceived by all stakeholders involved in the operations carried out systematically within and without the institution from start to end to ensure customer satisfaction. In the context of education, the quality of customer satisfaction is both measurable (the number of graduates per session, employers survey, alumni survey and feedback, number of employments within a period of six months) and immeasurable (knowledge, know-how, soft skill, behaviours). The study is focused on the graduates' career readiness in which case, the majority of students in the Cameroon higher institutions are looking forward to becoming experts in different career options which are available in society. We, therefore, look at the quality assurance in the dimension of arming learners to career ready and further successfully evolve in the respective areas.

Context and Justification
The rapid changes in societies around the world and Cameroonian society specifically are exerting substantial pressure on the educational system. Society is increasingly looking up to the educational systems to step up and meet the evolving societal exigencies by producing skilled human capital to propel envisaged projects to enhance development. Technology is fast taking the center stage. Cameroon higher education is unconditionally constrained to transcend from the historic traditional educational systems, its traditional overpopulated classroom situation, and lack of didactic material to online studies that are open, relatively cost-effective, flexible, and somewhat available. With the passage of time, higher education in Cameroon is faced with overpopulated classrooms, a fall in funding as international funders no longer support the education system, a lack of well-trained lecturers, and examination malpractices among others that have reportedly crumbled the quality of education. For some decades, private individuals, and parastatal, missions have engaged in the provision of higher education to Cameroonians.

An applaudable action that lifted off the load from states whose inability to provide higher education for all Cameroonians. The prevalence of higher education is fast gaining ground and many such private individuals are fast becoming business-oriented, profit maximization is fast becoming the vision and mission of these schools. The study decries the lack of quality assurance practices in these private universities that are making universities to increasing graduates "skilless" and half-baked human capital to the Cameroonian society.

Literature review
The new managerial, pedagogic, and employability strategy (quality assurance) as adopted from the industries is used in higher education to ensure institutions attend objectives, meet their visions, and improve on the higher education institution. according to Okebukola, (2021) quality in education is an attribute that distinguishes a product or service from others and is assessed against some minimum standards. These imply that the university is expected to put in that specific personal touch in its impute, processes, and outputs in order to make sure its products meet their purpose. Though the concept of quality has many different interpretations, it is generally relative, depending on the institution's vision, mission, and objectives (FOSSIMOCK, 2021). Having the ability to introduce quality in the university system is one twist in today's society, but the process of assuring quality is increasingly a hard knot to untie. Quality assurance is viewed from two main angles, external and internal quality assurance. Internal quality assurance is the act of giving confidence or the state of being certain about an event or phenomenon, (Okebukola, 2021). While external quality assurance involves the systematic assessments, inspections, and controls effected by external quality assurance bodies to ensure that institutions are doing what they promised, (Fossimock, 2021).

In Cameroon, the ministry of higher education plays the external quality assurance role to all private universities. These roles are stipulated in documents, yet the implementation is superficial and limited at the level of documentation. Sometimes, the commissions sent to control the activities are bribed and they return with positive results.

Pedagogic activities
Pedagogy remains the science and art of teaching (including evaluation). Specifically, it is principally concerned with the teaching of teachers how to teach people effectively. For every educational system to be effective and efficient, all the teachers have expertise in pedagogy and not just in their subject matter. This is because one cannot effectively separate the methods from the subject matter of teaching nor the person involved and the environment. Teachers who do not master pedagogy simply transfer the knowledge to the extent to which they master the subject matter in a given subject or discipline.

To such teachers, they believe that teaching just entails pouring out knowledge as the expression goes to empty vessels (students). This is probably not an objective knowledge transmission method. An effective teacher is knowledgeable in the art of knowledge transfer with respect to the inclusive nature of the class. They are aware that just talking or pouring out facts, ideas, or principles to learners is only a small part of teaching. Teaching means that the teachers organise the learner's environment in such a way as to make it possible for the learner to learn. This organisation of the environment could be in the form of talking directly to the learner, asking the learner to find out new ideas, interpret concepts and create their phenomena from people or other phenomena around them.

Research and observation have shown that private higher education teachers in Cameroon universities are masters in their subject matter and not in the art of transformation of learners. In Cameroon state universities, some untrained lecturers who gained employment through the contract employment policy of 25000 launched by the President of the Republic of Cameroon in 2011 take students for experiments. This lack of pedagogical knowledge amongst University teachers greatly hampers the training of students in different skills that give them the possibility of responding to the question of, 'what can I do?' in the job market. The teachers transfer the same theories they have in store to the children even more narrowly and passively because of the lack of professional training programmes and the lecturer's quest for money from several institutions at the same time. Although it gives extra experience in their profession, it makes most lecturers perpetual absent from school, rarely available for student's needs.

Lecturers Quality
The teaching staff in an institution plays a pivotal role in enhancing quality assurance and learners career readiness. However, the most private university may not be aware and probably be limited in competencies. According to the Association of African Universities AAU (2018), *des nombreuses recherches sure l'enseignement Supérieur on révèle que la plupart des membres des personnels des institutions n'ont pas des connaissances et les compétences nécessaires pour assurer la qualité.* This is other words implies that most teachers in higher education institutions do not have the expected competencies to play their pivotal role in assuring the quality of an institution. This implies that every institution has to institute a quality assurance system that prioritises the quality of teachers in its system. The quality of teaching staff in this research takes from experience, recruitment practices, qualification, determination, motivation, environment, and teacher empowerment.

According to Carlow College ST. Patrick (2017) organisations must strive to recruit, develop and retain the best quality of employees (managers, teachers, and other staff) in order to meet the needs of their learners through their respective roles. This is effectively done through recruiting and retaining lecturers and support service employees who share the belief of delivering educational excellence in accordance with the school's strategic plan, incorporating the vision, mission, objectives, and values characterising the quality assurance mission. Some universities set standards or determine target skills that they expect the staff to have and the staff's readiness to cooperate with the rest of the functioning body to attain set tasks.

Recruitment in a private university institution could be demanding and time-consuming but it is always recommended that it should uphold certain values such as fairness, effectiveness, transparency, and equality for all involved in the process. According to Saniwoliba et al. (2015), to ensure such values, both the line managers and staff are expected to consider and respect a systematic process design to ensure the most cost-effective deployment of the institution's current and potential employees before filling the vacancy. Every participant in the recruitment process must be provided with the comprehensive information, steps, and guidelines valuable throughout that recruitment session. In these regards, it facilitates the process of selecting the most suitable qualified staff members to share in its vision, mission, and objectives, thereby providing an excellent educational centre for its learners to successfully enter and progress in their respective careers.

After recruitment, the school managers face another challenge on how best they can manage these staff towards the institution's vision, mission, and objective attainment. Employees are recruited into a challenging and diverse workforce, in order to ensure their effectiveness and efficiency; there is a need for strong leadership skills, career growth and development scheme, commitment to work, and motivation to coordinate the system.

The problem
The coming of private universities into the Cameroon educational system was a well-applauded move to increase access to professional higher education for all Cameroonians who desired to get higher skills. The government of Cameroon accorded the creation of these private universities with the hope that they will provide the right training that makes graduates professionally ready for the job market. They train in different professional fields which are fast evolving.

However, observation has proven that most of these private universities turned to betray the trust bestowed on them by the state by focusing largely on profit maximization. They have become capitalist in the process to the detriment of the trainings offered. Most of these schools advertise courses that they do not offer, they employ untrained and poor-quality lecturers and pay them very insignificant sums, their infrastructure is far from the programmes they offer, their schools are constantly on the rise meanwhile the graduates are increasingly becoming unqualified. The pedagogic methods are largely theories and narrations of stories by this poor caliber of staff. These problems are increasing the unemployment rate among graduates in Cameroon. In 2018, the ILO held that the graduate unemployment was 4.4, a year after, UNESCO said it was 4.20. as a result of this lack of 21st century skills, graduates are migrating to unknown places, the dependency ratio is increasing on parents, and the living standards are falling. Many are becoming internet scammers, and theft and juvenile delinquency are also fast taking the center stage.

Methodology
Drawing from the interpretive viewpoint, this study adopts the qualitative approach. Its target population is stakeholders of private's universities in Cameroon. Using the interview guide, the data was collected and analysed via the content analysis technique.

Presentation of findings
75 graduates from 15 private universities were interviewed and the results showed that about 80% of them did not have work because they lack the soft skills that are required for the 21st century job market. The majority repeated that "what was advertised was hardly accomplished". This proves that many private higher institutions advertised but do not implement what they say. This shows that the crux of the limitation is at the implementation stage.

Moreover, the results show that the majority of private universities do not have institutional quality assurance systems that could enable them to attain their objectives and vision. The absence of an internal quality assurance system or unit in these universities constitutes a huge drawback to the training process. The teaching-learning process and programme evaluation are nearly in fiasco mainly because a majority of the teaching staff are untrained are somewhat unqualified. And in this context, there is little of no internal training to empower these staff.

Private universities in themselves may not be different around the world, but the systems can be different depending on the country's policies and political atmosphere. According to the participants, the quality of the teaching staff remains key to how students learn and further apply in life. This view goes in line with the World Bank (2018) who opined that a growing body of evidence suggests the learning crisis is at the core of the teaching crisis. For students to learn, they need good-quality teachers. In this same light, Borman and Kimball (2005) classes taught by higher-quality teachers produced higher mean achievement than those taught by lower-quality teachers. Moreover, Sanders and Rivers (1996) also found that the effects of teacher quality on student achievement are additive and cumulative. From this, researchers conclude that "lecturers' quality is the single most important school variable affecting student achievement." from the above shreds of evidence, Seebruck (2015) posits that many sociology of education researchers argue that teacher quality is one of the predominant predictors of student achievement.

Furthermore, pedagogy in Cameroon private universities is a call for concern. As the results of the hypothesis hold (Fossimock, 2017), pedagogy influences youth's employability. Therefore, if the teaching method is one of the causes of youth's employability in private universities, it implies the transformational teaching method is inexistent. This is based on the fact that there is no training school for lecturers in the Universities in Cameroon. Most lecturers learn how to teach in class, in front of learners. Evaluation becomes a problem too, with constant loss of marks, and unmerited marks to merited students, thus, the system becomes too difficult for many students to bare. Generally, they drop out and those who follow the system end up without the skills to work.

Pedagogy for skill-based training merits special training where the teachers will have a mastery of the methods of transmission. This is achievable in case the system decides to train teachers too. Just in case the state decides to institute the CBA in the higher institutions of Cameroon, most teachers will not mater it and the problem will remain unchanged. Seminars and conferences are good but not sufficient.

Recommendations

All private universities should adopt a 3 years or 5 years programme evaluation strategy that suits their individual departments and faculties or universities in general. There is a need to constantly watch the evolution of society and consistently design and redesign university programmes to meet up with societal changes. This helps to curb curriculum mismatch which constantly keeps the learner's skills away from the employer's interest (Fossimock, 2021).

Private universities should also consider rigorous in-service training of their staff. This will increase singly groom the lecturers with the techniques of transformational teaching. Transformational teaching because the 21st century necessitates that learners should be systematically transformed into skilled human capital. This is can be assured by the usage of more practices than theories, students centered learning, and the activation of learner's cognitive abilities.

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