

Mechanisms for Quality Assurance of Universities in Cameroon

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This paper takes a perspective look at the evolution of universities in Cameroon and the recent orientation of deregulation as it affects quality assurance in these universities. The paper identifies these flaws by attempting to elucidate the meaning of the mechanism for quality assurance in the face of deregulation. The regulatory mechanisms identified by this paper include inter-alia, appropriate scrutiny of new programs, relying on impartial advice from examiners using the state law NO.98/004 of 1998 to compliment the efforts of internal school administration. And above all opening linkages between universities and relating universities education in the world of science and technology, this paper does not only enhance quality assurance but also builds on the idea of economic growth and development.

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1. Introduction

The idea of deregulation of education especially at the universities level in Cameroon has made issue of quality, whether it is apt or possible. Deregulation entails the private sector initiative in the ownership and management of education in Cameroon. It would be due to economic orientation that there appears to be a proliferation of universities and other allied schools, for example, the approval granted to multiple proprietors to own and manage universities. This idea is also correct and consistent with the global phenomena.

The task hitherto is how does the State Education System ensure quality assurance? What mechanisms could bring about this assurance? Is quality assurance itself possible in the midst of these complex institutions that are established? These questions, though rhetorical, could form the basis of the need of quality assurance in tertiary educational system in Cameroon.

The Cameroon population will continue to increase at a high youthful rate and the illiteracy rate still remains high. Children who have no access to primary and/or secondary education will grow up having more than their counterparts who succeed in having a minimum of high quality secondary education. This is even the very reason which makes the idea appropriate but the Republic of Cameroon's Guidelines for Education (1998) and the National Board as well as National Advisory Council on Education for Universities and Higher

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Teachers' Training Colleges should intensify their functions of supervising the standards in these schools in the categories listed above (Fagbmiye, 2004).

The establishment of the National Advisory Council in 1998 as a Cabinet Advisory Body should acquire a regulatory Status as found in the Law NO. 98/004 of April 1998. The Forum (National Advisory Council) should have organs that carry out the tasks of coordinating the orderly development of the Cameroon University system including its academic programs, physical facilities, fiscal control and maintenance of academic Standards vide Decree NO.98/004 which indicates that the State Government is responsible for the establishment of universities as it deems necessary in every part of the State and Teachers' Training Colleges, both conventional and technical, to bridge the gap of unemployment nation-wide. The country has about ten State owned universities with allied institutions which appear to have slight differences in their curricular. This may make quality assurance impossible.

The government grip on education may not be entirely healthy since it constitutes the judge and the jury. Regulations and conditions imposed on private university owners are very stringent, yet government itself cannot meet those stringent measures or conditions in public institutions run by it (Faagbamiye, 2004). It thus seems inappropriate that government should deregulate the sector and thus restrict its role to funding, regulating and monitoring to ensure that quality assurance is maintained.

In terms of examining the mechanisms for quality assurance in Cameroon universities, the following terms need further explanation:

1. *Assurance*: This denotes a concrete statement about an event that will certainly happen or occur particularly when there has been doubt. It implies guarantee or promise of fulfillment of a happening (Turnbull, 2013). Relating to this study it portrays that there are some conditions that will be fulfilled (i.e. mechanisms) to achieve quality education in Cameroon's universities.

2. *Deregulation*: This refers to passive, to free trade or to business activity which a nation enactment or law approves (Turnbull, 2013). For instance, Guidelines for Education, Law NO.98/004 of April 1998 part (2), paragraph one states that "formulation and implementation of Education shall be the responsibility of State Government, Regional, local authorities, families as well as public and private institutions" (Republic of Cameroon, 1998 p.5). Connotatively, this is relevant in this study.

3. *Mechanism*: According to Joanna Turnbull (2013), mechanism is a set of moving parts in performing a task. It implies the method or a system for achieving success. Relating to this study, it shows that there are factors or principles if followed systematically will yield a higher or excellent achievement in university education in Cameroon.

4. *Quality*: This word means standard of something if compared to other things of similar magnitude. It denotes how good or poor/bad a thing is. In other words, it shows goods of top or higher quality (Turnbull, 2013). Relatively, it is the desire of researcher to see that if the mechanisms would yield the desired aims or goals of Cameroon education.

2. The Concept of Quality

Quality refers to "fitness for purpose" (Okebukola, 2005). Quality assurance in university education for example examined the effectiveness and efficiency of the administrator, teaching, learning, and research. In universities, the quality of graduates could be measured by their skills, the graduates' prepared and ability to produce and serve the demands of labor market and the society in various human endeavors. It could also judge on how teachers are efficient, how adequate and accessible the facilities and materials needed for effective teaching and learning are, and also how prepared and ready the graduates are in meeting the challenges in their area of discipline.

The essence of this paper would be to provide information to the public and other interested parties to improve quality and standards, thus giving credibility towards implying bringing confidence in purchasers that will be making a worthwhile investment when they ended in a program. Ensuring control in respect of public money. It means making it clear regarding the purpose of programs and promoting standards and quality.

3. Mechanism for Quality Assurance in Universities

Mechanisms for quality assurance include: (a) internal regulatory mechanism, and (b) approval for new programs in the universities. It implies that all proposals for the establishment of programs that should follow strict internal guidelines because such proposals emanate from the Ministry of Education and scrutinized through National Advisory Council on Education and Senate.

In this way, all relevant inputs and queries would have been made and addressed. The Vice Chancellors/Rectors of Universities should be carrying out regular monitoring and periodic review of their programs. Such monitoring should consider how effective a program achieves its stated objectives or goals and the success of students in attaining the intended learning outcomes. This function is usually carried out by the ministry providing the program and often involves a program team appraising its own performance at the end of an academic year.

The process should take into account reports from external examiners, staff, society and student feedback, reports from any professional body that accredits the programs and feedback from former students and employers. It may result in adjustments to the curriculum or to assessment to ensure continued effectiveness (Okebukola, 2005).

4. Appointment of External Examiners

It is important for universities to appoint external examiners who should report to the chief executive of the institution. The External Examiners should be independent academic experts, drawn from sister institutions or from areas of relevant professional practice. External examiners give impartial advice on performance in relation to particular programs.

However, institutions require their external examiners in their expert judgment to report on: whether the set standards are appropriate for awards or award elements, by referring to subject benchmark statements, the framework for higher education qualifications, institutional program, specifications and other relevant matters.

The standards of student performance and the comparability of the standards with those of students following similar programs in other higher educational institutions;

The extent to which the process for assessment, examination and the determination of awards are sound and have been fairly conducted.

4.1. External Regulatory Mechanisms

Notable External Regulatory Mechanisms are the following:

1. External Examiner should not have been bought over.
2. Program Establishment in Cameroonian Universities: As universities subject their proposed programs to various levels of scrutiny these same programs prior to establishment have to be approved. Observation by the supervisory body of government has to ensure that the guidelines have been achieved. This is an added mechanism of external examiners of ensuring quality and appropriate standards in Cameroon Educational System.

3. National Advisory Council Accreditation in Cameroonian Universities: In the recent past, there has been an increasing concern on the part of government to ensure that higher education in their countries is worthy of respect. As a result, national approaches to extra institutional examination have been established, which have taken forms that reflect different national styles, beliefs, values and norms.

In the United States of America (USA), for instance, it depends on private accreditation agencies for the accreditation of its institutions, the Netherlands operates a system of peer review which is under the control of the universities themselves and in the United Kingdom (UK), an agency known as Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education is saddled with the responsibility of assuring quality (Okebukola, 2005).

However, in Cameroon the situation is complex because the Netherlands and the United Kingdom methods are applied hence the Ministry of Higher Education does the work as an agency of the Government and since university Authorities desire efficiency, they adopt the Netherlands model. This is because Cameroon is a developing nation desiring to use these two strategies of mechanisms of accreditation of its universities.

The National Advisory Council consists of academicians and professional. This body has produced a working document known as "guidelines for Education in Cameroon". This document contains the minimum academic standard which serves as the reference document for the accreditation of programs in universities and coordinated by a department in the Ministry of Higher Education.

The National Advisory Council and the Ministry of Higher Education are Statutory organs of the Government in accordance to Law No. 98/004 of April 1998 enacted by the president on 14th April 1998 in part (5), section 40-42. These two organs are saddled with the responsibility of overseeing that the minimum academic standards for all programs taught in Cameroonian Universities are according to the guidelines. The functions of this organ include verification of all programs and accreditation of such programs have met the desired aims or goals (Aliu, 1998).

It should be noted that the document is an external regulatory mechanism of enhancing quality in Cameroon universities. It has been revised and coined as Benchmark Minimum Academic Standards (BMAS). Furthermore, accreditation by professional bodies is a feature of quality assurance.

4. School Auditing: This important quality assurance mechanism involving a visitation to be initiated by the authority of the institution. This directive initiated empowers the visitor who should be the president or his representative in case of State Universities and for private universities would be the proprietors.

The Act of the visitor states that "A visitor shall be entitled to enter a university to inquire into the academic or other affairs of the university or conduct an inspection of the university and buildings, equipment and records where the inspection is in the opinion of the visitor relevant to his or her inquiries". Visitation assists in assessing the extent to which an institution's quality assurance schemes that are in practice, operates in a manner which ensures acceptable quality and standards in teaching and learning.

However, in the past visitors posed threat of intrigue and punishments of sorts. Future visitation should be geared towards fulfilling its primary assignment of quality assurance. Auditing means searching all nocks and crannies of the universities. It is therefore an important quality assurance mechanism hence it involves the government because it is a dare needed of manpower especially at this time of science and technology for global competition.

5. Research Assessment Exercise

This exercise is in all State owned institutions in Cameroon except in private universities. It is one of external quality assurance processes. The aim is to give grants to lecturers for research. This has been significantly entrenched in Cameroon universities system but it needs increase.

For the purpose of congruency and promotion of quality assurance in university education delivery, the National Education Board, National Advisory Council, Ministry of Higher Education and the professional Bodies should hold meetings regularly. These meetings will enable both to objectively examine quality assurance issues and problems and also make some changes hence no educational program is static.

6. Recommendations and Conclusions

To ensure quality control of school system in the face of deregulation which has opened the doors of provision and management of schools to private individuals and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOS), the inspectorate department or unit of the Ministry of Higher Education and allied Ministries of Education must arise to their responsibility of ensuring regular visits to both government and private schools to collect data about teachers, their qualifications, specialization, experience, marital and work load.

Other indicators for monitoring the quality of education in Cameroon are:

1. Administrators' preparedness in terms of qualification and experience, availability and suitability of teaching materials, the teaching environment in terms as it relates to school size and pupil/teacher ratio.
2. Another important factor in ensuring quality control is the physical environment of the schools as it concerns the school location, the availability and quality of school facilities (classrooms, sports, areas, office accommodations, toilet facilities etc.).

It should however be emphasized that collecting these data without adequate utilization would amount to wastage of resources. It is the strong belief of the writer that the data based could be used to conduct policy analysis and to inform planning and management decisions in the context of the implementation of Deregulation Policy of the Government as it borders on entrepreneurship education and quality management in Cameroon.

3. Academic staff should be reassessed to ascertain their continuous relevance in the system, those found wanting should be shown the way out.

4. There should be linkages of universities to universities relating to the curriculum contents and issues of quality assurance.

5. There should be universities linkage to world of practical since this is an age of science and technology for universal or global participation of nations hence Cameroon desires emerging a developed nation in 2035.

6. Supervision in schools should be devoid of fault finding or used as an opportunity to settle score.

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