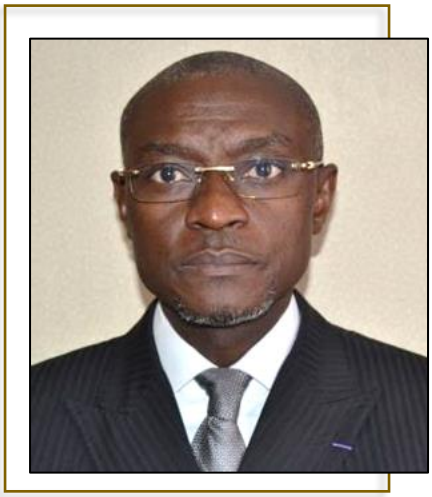
Prospects for Higher Education in the Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC) Region



Prof. Roger Tsafack Nanfosso

Position Rector of the University of Dschang - Cameroon

Introduction

The traditional missions of universities in the CEMAC region are teaching, research and support for development. In some CEMAC countries, the development of multilingualism is implicitly added, particularly where necessary (Cameroon for its bilingualism, Equatorial Guinea for its linguistic insularity).

In CEMAC, the organisation of higher education is subject to both a national and a regional approach. At national level, higher education is governed by national policy laws (or what takes the place of them), which are slowly but progressively being replaced by regional legislation. At regional level, and as in Europe where there is a 'European Higher Education Area' resulting from the Bologna process (1998-2010), the organisation of higher education until 2005 was the responsibility of the Conference of Rectors of Universities and Heads of Research Organisations in Central Africa (CRUROR-AC), created by Regulation no. 08/03-UEAC-019-CM-10 of 28 August 2003; by Regulation no. 09/03-UEAC-019-CM-10 of 28 August 2003 establishing a "Community of inter-university exchange programme" in the CEMAC zone to support it, and then by Regulation no. 10/05-UEAC-152-CM-13 of 7 February 2005 following the "Libreville Declaration of 11 February 2005 on the construction of the CEMAC higher education, research and vocational training area".

This Libreville Declaration led to the adoption of two major Directives and one Decision: Directive n° 01/06-UEAC-019-CM-14 of 11 March 2006 on the application of the BMP system (Bachelor, Master, PhD) in universities and higher education establishments in the CEMAC area; Directive n° 02/06-UEAC-019-CM-14 of 11 March 2006 on the organisation of university studies in the CEMAC area within the framework of the BMP system; and Decision n° 059/06-CEMAC-019-SE setting out a "Form for requesting funding for teaching assignments" in the CEMAC area. In order to implement this ambition for a "Higher Education, Research and Vocational Training Area" as set out in these Directives, the region complied by adopting Regulation n° 04/11-UEAC-019-CM-22 of 19 December 2011 amending Regulation n° 08/03-UEAC-019-CM-10 of 28 August 2003 establishing the CRUROR-AC, followed by Regulation n° 05/11-UEAC-019-CM-22 of 19 December 2011 establishing the internal regulations of the CRUROR-AC.

If we exclude here the strictly inter-state institutions specialised and managed directly from CEMAC headquarters (Ecole d'hôtellerie et de tourisme de la Cemac (EHT- Cemac), Ecole inter-Etats des douanes (EIED), Institut sous régional de statistiques et d'économie appliquée (Issea), Institut sous régional multisectoriel de technologie appliquée, de planification et d'évaluation des projets (Ista),

Institut de l'économie et des finances - pôle régional (Ief-Pr), and the Centre inter-Etats d'enseignement supérieur en santé publique de l'Afrique centrale (Ciespac)), this area under construction, thus solidly marked out both institutionally (the Directives and Decisions) and individually (the Rectors and Heads of research bodies), faces at least six major challenges that it must confront, at a time when people of the CEMAC region have at least four strong expectations from higher education.

1- The six challenges facing the CEMAC higher education area

The first challenge is that of mass enrolment, reflected in a shortage of physical student capacity. Table 1 below gives a general overview of the CEMAC region (excluding research organisations):

Table 1: The CEMAC higher education area in 2022

	Public universities	Higher national institutes	Higher teachers training college (**)	Private universities	Private higher education institutes	Total number of students
Chad	10	6	4	4	65	60 000
Gabon	4	2	-	3	4	35 000
Congo	2	1	-	-	62	60 000
Cameroon	11	3*	-	2	460	500 000
Central African Republic (RCA)	1	-	-	-	20	20 000
Guinea Eq	1	-	-	-	-	10 000
Total	29	12	4	9	611	685 000

Source: Compilation excluding international institutions. (*) With special status. (**) In most countries, these College are part of public universities.

The number of students has grown exponentially in almost all countries, without adequate infrastructure being built. While there was only one university per country at independence, the region now has around thirty as a result of this situation. There are generally two more or less effective responses to address this massification: (i) the liberalisation of higher education by governments, with opening up to the private sector (620 private higher education universities and institutes to date) often without any real quality control but with a powerful capacity to enrol that is limited only by the possible inadequacy of families' financial resources; and (ii) the adoption of Distance Open Training (DOT) and Massive Online Open Classes (MOOCs) successfully tried out since the Covid-19 crisis, which enable learners to be kept at a distance and at home.

The second challenge is that of infrastructure in terms of quantity and quality, since the spectacle of packed lecture theatres and/or obsolete laboratories generally characterises the image of regional universities. Some of them have as many as 5,000 students in the first year in certain options, which is typical of overcrowding, whatever the size of the lecture theatre. In the laboratories, students crowd around the minimal equipment that exists, making the transmission of knowledge difficult and slow. This challenge is also amplified by the issue of the academic orientation of learners, as we are witnessing an overcrowding of social faculties that contrasts sharply with a depopulation of scientific faculties, even though STEM knowledge would seem to be decisive for the region's emergence.

The third challenge is that of access to and availability of university information, which is severely limited either by its complexity, its obsolescence, or both. When data is accessed by extraordinary means, there is still the high cost of the Internet to contend with. Table 2 sheds some light on the situation.

Table 2: Internet costs in CEMAC

Country	Cost of 1GB internet ($)	Internet connection speed (Mbps)
Cameroon	3.48	1.03
Congo	4.45	0.93
Gabon	6.96	1.26
RCA	11.19	-
Chad	12.18	-
Equatorial Guinea	34.80	0.51

Source: Ecofin (2019), Classement des pays africains par coût du GB en haut débit mobile, Alliance of affordable internet (A4AI); and Atlasocio (2020), Classement des Etats d'Afrique par vitesse de connexion internet, Worldwide broadband speed league, M-Lab, Cable

In some universities, the use of optic fibre costs up to $12,000 per month; and the use of mobile internet is no less expensive: compared to Egypt where 1GB of mobile internet costs $1.12 (the cheapest in Africa), in the CEMAC the most accessible, Cameroon, is still $3.48 per gigabit unit, which in fact reflects the potential accessibility of students (the Equato-Guinean learner is thus penalised 30 times more than the Egyptian). In terms of connection speed, compared with Madagascar, which reaches 22.57 Mgbps, CEMAC is well behind, the least disadvantaged country being Gabon, at just 1.26 Mgbps. By way of comparison, a Malagasy student downloads a 5GB course in 00:30:15mn, but a Gabonese student needs 09:03:28mn to do so.

The fourth challenge is energy (water and electricity), because the lack of water is critical in universities for structural, systemic or financial reasons. The lack of electricity is even more crucial. However, as stated in the 2014-2030 White Paper for the ECCAS/CEMAC region, this area, which contains more than half (57%) of Africa's hydroelectric potential, is characterised by an electricity sector with low installed capacity, limited intra- and inter-regional interconnection, a very low rate of access and a quality of service that falls short of international standards. This is mainly due to an infrastructure that does not meet current needs and the development of the region's potential. Even in relatively well-off countries like Cameroon, the problem arises because only 63.5% of the population has access to electricity. Demand is estimated at 1379 MW in 2021, for a supply of 1047 MW, i.e. a deficit of around 330 MW (ENEO Report, 2020). Obviously, the University is one of the first victims, since without energy there is no access to anything.

The fifth and perhaps most pressing challenge is the lack of funding for higher education. In CEMAC, higher education generally accounts for less than 2% of national budgets. Within the strictly Community framework, on the other hand, the share of the budget earmarked for training institutions represents around 20% and concerns the specialised inter-state institutions run from headquarters that we mentioned earlier but which are marginal on a regional scale. It is difficult to have certain ambitions in higher education without an adequate budget. This situation has led to the professionalisation of teaching through the introduction of courses of study which are much more expensive to access than traditional courses (generally between $400 and $2,000, or even up to $30,000 in some countries and for some courses).

The sixth challenge is the shortage of teachers in general (ratios with student vary between 1:50 and 1:150), combined with a shortage of specialist teachers in certain fields. The general shortage is expressed in the lack of lecturers at all university levels (monitors, assistants, senior-lecturers, associate professors, full professors). It is exacerbated by the existence of orphan courses for which the scarcity of trainers is almost endemic, even though countries have a great need for them for their development strategies (STEM, but also welding, boiler making, energy, water and forestry trades, agriculture, livestock farming, etc.). In some countries in the region, foreign development workers are still present to support local teachers.

2- The four expectations of the CEMAC higher education area

The first expectation is that higher education should bring about social change, impacting society through the relevant training of quality human capital, but also in sufficient quantity to meet countries' huge human resources needs. These countries are in dire need of well-filled, but above all well-trained, heads to face up to the challenge of economic emergence.

The second expectation is that higher education should transform society and have a positive impact on its environment by producing a high level of useful research in terms of quantity and quality. From this point of view, as far as invention patents are concern, Cameroon, the region's only performer, filed 365 patents with AOIP[1] in 2020, i.e. 12 to 15% of the total number of patents filed. In 2019, this share was between 20% and 30% of patents filed in several fields. But despite these figures, the country is ranked 121st out of 132 in the WIPO[2] Global Innovation Index 2022. If we look at the rankings (Scimago or webometrics, for example) of universities or the innovations of these institutions, we see that of the top 300 universities in the world, only those in Cameroon appear, with the other five countries in the region missing out. So, there is still a long way to go at regional level.

The third expectation is that of a result-oriented university that promotes and develops the working skills of its students (and not just knowledgeable or scholarly knowledge), while ensuring that its graduates have a future. Indeed, the low rate of professional integration, which reflects the mismatch between training and employment, remains a cause for concern throughout the region (for example, 28% of higher education graduates in Cameroon are unemployed, although 74% of them want a salaried job). The graduate integration rate is becoming a central variable in the quality assurance of regional universities.

The fourth expectation is that of an entrepreneurial university that is vigorously involved in ensuring the effective employability of its graduates. Universities have long been seen as institutions that produce the unemployed or the underemployed, but they must now play their part in creating direct and indirect jobs. It is in this context that incubators and/or accelerators are being set up here and there to enable the creation of companies with more or less close links to the university (university companies) on the one hand, and the creation of traditional companies on the other, sometimes with the participation of previously identified business angels. In addition, university foundations have been set up to solicit national and international philanthropists to raise funds in order to create jobs for graduates. In Cameroon, for example, the University of Dschang has set up a Foundation (which has resulted in the construction of infrastructure and the acquisition of rolling stock), a university company (which provides various services, publishing and agriculture), and already 194 start-ups based on the results of students' dissertations and theses, which are now real business owners and creators of wealth and jobs. Other universities in the region could also be cited as examples.

Conclusion

Article 19 of Regulation n° 05/11-UEAC-019-CM-22 of 19 December 2011 on the internal rules and regulations of CRUROR-AC states that: "The Rectors' Conference may create working groups on specific issues or themes relating to higher education, research, vocational training or **any other areas that may contribute to the construction of the Higher Education, Research and Vocational Training Area (in particular for the BMP reform, Student Affairs, University Sport, etc.)".** In other words, the operational actors of the Area have a mandate to imagine and suggest to the political leaders of CEMAC, all the fruitful ideas that could be necessary so that the challenges and expectations developed above find appropriate responses that should happily illuminate the prospects of higher education in the region.

[1] African Organization for Intellectual Property
[2] World Intellectual Property Organization

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Prof. Roger Tsafack Nanfosso is the Rector of the University of Dschang in Cameroon. He is the General Secretary of the Network of the Universities and Research Institutions of Central Africa, and General Secretary of the International Association of French Speaking Economists. He is the Vice-Chair of the Francophone Association of Development Studies, Chairman of the Circle of Economic Thought of Cameroonian Entrepreneurs Association and Coordinator of the Network of the Researchers in Management of Francophone Economics. He is the Director of the Centre for Research in Applied Microeconomics. He is the former Director of the Economic Policy Management Training Programme of the University of Yaounde II, a Member of a dozen of Scientific Societies including the American Economic Association and the Cameroonian Academy of Sciences, Member of the Scientific or Writing Committee of a dozen of International Journals, Secretary of the "Economics and Management" Chamber of the Cameroonian Society of Agrégés, and Member of the Strategic Studies Group and External Reference Group of the African Capacity Building Foundation. His areas of expertise include economics, microeconomics, capacity building, corporate management and economic policy management. He is author or co-author of about twenty books and more than seventy articles published in Africa, Europe, America and China. He holds a PhD in Business Economics, Doctorate of State ("Advanced PhD") in Economic Sciences, and was ranked first at the Aggregation Contest in Economics in 2001. Knight of the French Academic Palms, Officer of Cameroon National Value Order, Knight of CAMES Academic Palms Order.

This is our eighth issue in a series of articles we are releasing as part of the RUFORUM 2023 Annual General Meeting Digests. More information about the meeting is available at https://www.ruforum.org/AGM2023/. Join the Conversation on Social Media using our Official hashtag **#RUFORUMAGM2023**