

CAMEROON'S HIGHER EDUCATION REFORM FOR SOCIO-ECONOMIC  
RELEVANCE AND RECOMMENDATIONS BASED ON CHINA'S EXPERIENCE - A  
SUMMARY

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**Abstract**

This paper is a summary of my doctoral dissertation; it investigates the recent developments and reforms launched by Cameroon Higher Education policymakers to upgrade and align this sector to the needs of the country's socio-economic development and suggest strategies built from China's successful experience. This qualitative work was done in the broad discipline of comparative education and therefore compared and shared some best practices that China has accumulated in reforming its HE system. As a developing country assuming a different development model or certain independence from the Western model, China constitutes an example that can only inspire Cameroon differently. Considering this systemic difference with the West, including in its Higher Education (HE) system, the adoption of successful Chinese practices in this research provides new and original perspectives on HE. Findings from document analysis and participants' perceptions have shown in the study that Cameroonian authorities, in their recent HE policies have stressed on professionalization, curriculum reform, university entrepreneurship, and on university's third mission. On the Chinese side, strategies in reforming its HE sector were elaborated around prioritization of the HE sector development, a vigorously governmental promotion of the National System of Innovation (NSI), a strategic structuration and organization of the HE sector in poles for more efficient investment, the introduction of market model mechanisms in resources distribution, management, and a permanent effort to align HE to the national development strategies and needs. Among the strategies suggested for Cameroon, this research has insisted on strengthening the NSI, strategic restructuring of HE in poles, the development of public vocational and technological HEIs, and a substantial financial allocation based on market-type mechanisms.

**Keywords:** higher education reform, socio-economic relevance, Cameroon, China's experience

## RÉFORME DE L'ENSEIGNEMENT SUPÉRIEUR DU CAMEROUN POUR PERTINENCE SOCIO-ÉCONOMIQUE ET RECOMMANDATIONS BASÉES SUR L'EXPÉRIENCE DE LA CHINE - UN RÉSUMÉ

### Résumé

Cet article est un résumé de ma thèse de doctorat ; il examine les récents développements et les réformes lancées par les décideurs camerounais de l'enseignement supérieur pour moderniser et aligner ce secteur sur les besoins du développement socio-économique du pays et propose des stratégies fondées sur l'expérience réussie de la Chine. Ce travail qualitatif a été réalisé dans la discipline de l'éducation comparée et a donc comparé et partagé certaines des meilleures pratiques que la Chine a accumulées lors de la réforme de son système d'enseignement supérieur. En tant que pays en développement assumant un modèle de développement différent ou une certaine indépendance par rapport au modèle occidental, la Chine constitue un exemple qui ne peut qu'inspirer différemment le Cameroun. Compte tenu de cette différence systémique avec l'Occident, y compris dans son système d'enseignement supérieur (ES), l'adoption de pratiques chinoises réussies dans cette recherche a fourni des perspectives nouvelles et originales sur l'enseignement supérieur. Les résultats de l'analyse des documents et les perceptions des participants ont montré dans l'étude que les autorités camerounaises, dans leurs récentes politiques d'enseignement supérieur, ont mis l'accent sur la professionnalisation, la réforme des curricula, l'entrepreneuriat universitaire et sur la mission d'assistance au développement de l'université. Du côté chinois, des stratégies de réforme de son secteur ES ont été élaborées autour d'une priorisation du développement du secteur de l'ES, d'une promotion gouvernementale du Système National d'Innovation (SNI), d'une structuration et organisation stratégique du secteur de l'ES en pôles pour un investissement plus efficace, l'introduction de mécanismes de modèle de marché dans la répartition et la gestion des ressources et un effort permanent pour aligner l'enseignement supérieur sur les stratégies et les besoins nationaux de développement. Parmi les stratégies proposées pour le Cameroun, cette recherche a insisté sur le renforcement du SNI, sur la restructuration stratégique de l'ES au niveau des pôles, sur le développement des établissements publics professionnels et technologiques d'enseignement supérieur, et sur une dotation financière conséquente basée sur des mécanismes de marché.

**Mots clés :** réforme de l'enseignement supérieur, pertinence socio-économique, Cameroun, expérience de la Chine.

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### Introduction

Based on the results of the last census made in Cameroon in 2005, recent projections made in 2018 estimated its population to 22 248 044 people, of which 50.6% are women. The structure of the ages reveals the main characteristic common to most Sub-Saharan African (SSA) countries nowadays, the big proportion of the youth. In Cameroon, as in most of these countries, there has been a constant high birth rate since the 1970s. This has led to an increasing number of candidates aspiring to complete primary and secondary education, generating an increasing pressure to develop and widen access to the higher education (HE) system. This has constituted an important factor that accelerated the question of the HE sector's reform. Several other factors among which the poor national economic performance<sup>1</sup>, the slow poverty reduction process<sup>1</sup>, the lack of

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<sup>1</sup> Cameroon's economy in recent years is not growing as fast as targeted in its Vision 2035 document; the country expects to become a strong upper-middle-income country by 2035. Cameroon's GDP growth in 2017 was estimated at 3.5%, below the

adequate human resources with technical and technological post-secondary skills, the HE graduates' unemployment, and underemployment<sup>2</sup> have also urged the reform of the HE sector. In addition to these internal factors, the globalization process that has increased movements and interactions of ideas and practices across borders, plus the information age, the knowledge economy, and the knowledge society have significantly influenced the way knowledge is transformed, disseminated, applied, and also how national policies on education are shaped. Following these processes, knowledge and HE institutions (HEIs) whose business is mostly based on knowledge production, have gained an important place in recent national development strategies; this shift has is justified by the recent theoretical shift promoting the use of HE in the economic field to gain competitive advantages in the global economy (Carnoy et al., 2014; Cloete et al., 2011, p. 2; Lane & Johnstone, 2012; Uetela, 2017). It is in this perspective and context that the HE reform in Cameroon has become a process of major importance for the country's socio-economic development in recent years (Armel & Shizhou, 2022).

Moreover, international trends' impact on local education policies, and experience sharing among countries in the education domain have almost become a norm (Eta, 2019, p. 2). This work which was conceived in the broad discipline of Comparative Education as described by Harold and colleagues<sup>3</sup> investigated an important part of China's HE reform experience and concluded by identifying some of its best practices that can inspire Cameroon policymakers, in adjusting successfully their HE system for socio-economic relevance.

Several reasons justify the choice of China in this research as a reference for Cameroon in HE reform for national development. The first is the remarkable efficiency of China's HE system after several important reforms that have been launched in recent decades. The second reason lies in a certain "failure" of the Western universalism in African HE and the necessity to look elsewhere. There is a certain difference between Asian and Western educational values which allows us to think that the Asian difference may inspire Cameroon differently; it is the third motivation in adopting China's experience, which constitutes one of the most important in Asia (Li & Hayhoe, 2017; Zhou & Spangler, 2016). Finally, we have the recent

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Growth and Employment Strategy Paper (GESP) forecasts, which had projected average growth of 5.5% throughout the period 2010-to 2017. The low performance of the economy was felt in most of the sectors, notably in the secondary sector, which had witnessed a significant slowdown since 2015. The slowdown in the growth of the primary sector began in 2016 and continued in 2017 (a 1.8-point drop after a drop of 0.3 points in 2016). It followed an activity downswing in the industrial and export-oriented agriculture sectors.

<sup>1</sup> As the National Institute of Statistics mentioned in its recent census (National Institute of Statistics. 2018b), the monetary poverty rate has been reduced only slightly between 2001 and 2014 (only 2.4% from 2001 to 2014). 40.2% of Cameroonians lived in poverty in 2001; they were 39.9% in 2007 and 37.5% in 2014 (National Institute of Statistics ECAM 2, p15)<sup>1</sup>. In a population of almost 23 million people, 8.1 million were classified as poor in 2014 while they were 6.2 million in 2001 (National Institute of Statistics. 2018b, p15).

<sup>2</sup> According to the Ministry of Employment and Vocational Training *2015 National Plan for Youth Employment*, University graduates' unemployment is the highest in Cameroon; this Plan notes that 27% of Cameroon's universities graduates are jobless (MINEFOP, 2015; Sosale & Majgaard, 2016). The Ministry of Higher Education evaluated the socio-professional integration rate at 47% in 2019. The average duration of waiting for the first job for a higher education graduate was estimated to be three years in 2000 was estimated to 5 years in 2013 (Ndongo, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Harold J. Noah and Max Eckstein (1993) consider that Comparative education not only describes countries' educational systems, processes, or outcomes but also "assists in the development of educational institutions and practices" and highlights the practices or statements that can help other countries (Mugo & CC, 2013, p. 5) to improve their system.

strengthening of the global partnership and HE cooperation between Cameroon and China; it constitutes a great factor for a successful sharing experience between the two countries.

When the Western paradigm and the East Asian paradigms are brought closer for comparative purposes, different and profound implications of those different philosophical values for education emerge clearly (Li & Hayhoe, 2017, pp. 1–3). According to Ruth Hayhoe and Jun Li, understandings of the values of society, knowledge and the human person in the European, the Soviet, and the American education systems are rooted in the views of Plato, Karl Marx, and Dewey; and the ideas of society, knowledge and the human person in the dominant Chinese (or in East Asian) tradition as presented by Benjamin Schwartz (in his book *The World of Thought in Ancient China*) are mostly rooted in Confucius (551-479 BCE), Mencius (372-289 BCE), Xun Zi (313-238 BCE) and Lao Zi's thoughts combined to the ideas of Buddhism.

In the Western paradigm, Plato sees knowledge as a construction through abstract mathematical reasoning and the perception of eternal forms; something that only philosophers kings or kings philosophers could do, through a rigorous process of deductive logic. For him, knowledge has to rise above the limits of ordinary human experience, while for Confucius, knowledge “does not rise from the chaos of the world of particulars to a world of eternal forms, since.....the way remains indissolubly linked to the empirical world” (Schwartz, 1985, p. 95) as cited in (Li & Hayhoe, 2017). The fact that Plato insisted on innate characteristics when analyzing human beings and knowledge, added to the promotion of the idea that intelligence is inborn, and passed by heredity has in a certain way favored Western universalism. By contrast, Confucius's insistence on the unlimited potential of each person for development through education favored certain mutual respect in sharing experiences, which contrasts with the Western universalism.

Concerning HE specifically, the South East Asian model to which China belongs hides a specificity in the sense that it focuses more on the notion that HE is a “key ingredient in the development model of their societies”, and less on a focus on “the returns of HE”; besides this particularity, “there is a relatively stable “pact” between State Authorities (in these countries) and HE authorities about the main functions HE is expected to fulfill in the further development of the society in which it is embedded” (Cloete et al., 2017, pp. 7–8). China HE has a certain uniqueness based on strong East Asian values and important institutional strengths and potentialities that can “contribute to the global knowledge community” (Mohrman, 2006, p. 72). As famous Chinese scholar Yuzhouo Cai puts it, China is a country that aims to develop a “modern higher education with both Chinese characteristics and world standards” (Cai, 2013, p. 11).

Chinese HE system vigorously defends its South-East Asian philosophical bases, but has still been learning and adopting educational experiences from the West (Caichen, 2021; Li & Hayhoe, 2017; Mohrman, 2006; Mok, 2006; Zha et al., 2019; Zhou & Spangler, 2016) but certainly in a different way (with different targets, approaches, and strategies) compared to other developing countries.

China is the largest developing country on earth, and Africa is the continent that has the most significant number of developing countries. During the last four decades, China's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has been growing at a 9% per year average rate, with the impressive achievement of lifting more than 500 million people out of poverty; this has become a model for many other developing countries in many sectors including HE (Lin, 2017, p3). Strategic and huge investment in HE and R&D expenditure in China has led her to impressive scientific innovation and technological breakthroughs and even to be in advanced than all the other

countries in many technological fields such as 5G, Internet of Things (IoT), electric cars, and facial recognition (Morozov, 2020, p22). As a developing country having such performance by investing the knowledge and using it to bring more prosperity, more security, and more convenience to an important number of Chinese and world citizens, China is a feasible and one of the most appropriate examples for Cameroon and other developing countries on earth.

### **1. Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework adopted to analyze the reforms conducted in Cameroon and China HE sectors was globally turned towards the importance of sharing educational reforms experiences among countries for local strategies improvement, and most importantly, on the perspective of HEIs' reconciliation with the market or with the society needs. Following this perspective, the author chose to use the state-centric/neoliberal, the Liberal/neoliberal model of HE reforms, and the NSI.

Several discussions have been organized on the different models of development or the best way to reform and adapt HE to the new context where it occupies a central position in the national economy. Most of them have been specifically oriented toward the appropriate management of the relationship between the Government and HE for the reason that it is vital to a dynamic and strong future for the HEIs (St. George, 2006, p. 589). Morgan and White (2014) also insisted on the importance of the process of education policy development, considering the interrelation between the State, the Society, and the Market. Following the importance of this relationship, two different models of development have emerged depending on the portion of responsibilities and level of autonomy given to the HEIs by the State: the State-Centric and the neo-liberal model. Considering the fact that “most of them (recent HE policies) generally move from State-centric to Neo-liberal model”, we have decided to go deeper into the neoliberal perspectives of HE policies, the perspective that has been deeply investigated by scholars such as Olssen and Peters (2005), Santiago Paulo, Katrine Tremblay, Esther Basri and Elena Arnal (2008). It is important to mention that, while the State centric approach and the neo-liberal approach debate focuses on general HE reforms or orientations, the debate on the liberal/neoliberal approaches focuses more on the internal management of the University.

Concerning the NSI (National System of Innovation) framework, it was adopted to investigate the systemic environment of Higher Education in Cameroon and China. As a tool, it allowed the author to explore the HE sector in relation with its global external environment. Included as part of the NSI in our study, the triple Helix perspective was used to analyze the connection Government-University-Industry allowing then the National System Innovation system and the University to be seen in specific operational conditions. This perspective was seen as narrow and not very adapted to analyze the University-Industry in developing countries like Cameroon where the production capacities are very much dominated by the informal sectors. On the Government-University relationship, the relation was shown strong in the government's global vision, for a leading role of the HE sector in the country's socio-economic development, but very weak in practice since the Higher Education sector is not associated with the main State's infrastructural and operational projects as it is in China.

The university's “Third Mission” on which Cameroonian authorities in charge of HE have been insisting since 2001 in the HE orientation Law, has also been adopted to enrich the description of the relationship between the university and its immediate environment. This analytical lens has been developed in



China's HE reforms perspective. it allowed us to observe that Cameroon Higher Education Institutions are transforming, but very slowly to become more connected with socio-economic actors through an internal market-smart orientation.

## 2. Methodology

The main research task was to identify strategies that can help to strengthen HE in its current missions, roles, and orientations in Cameroon. It included assessing and understanding the current situation of Cameroon HE after the last almost two decades of primary reforms; investigating stakeholders' conceptions and perceptions of the country's strategies and adaptation mechanisms to align HE with its goal of producing more employable skills and growth in a knowledge economy context; identifying and establishing the challenges and the weaknesses of HE in promoting socio-economic development; assessing and understanding the current situation of China HE delivery and reforms; and generating from successful practices in China some context-relevant strategies than can inspire HE reforms in Cameroon.

The main questions of the study were:

1. What are the challenges of HE in Cameroon?
2. What are the perceptions and reform processes launched to improve the socio-economic relevance of HE in Cameroon?
3. What are the implications of China's successful HE reforms and development for Cameroon?
4. What are the strategies, which could be used to strengthen Higher Education's market relevance in Cameroon?

These questions show that the main focus of the study is on Higher Education reforms in Cameroon, its challenges, and on the identification of successful practices in China that could help to improve HE in Cameroon. Put in this way, the main part of the research was done in Cameroon. Most of the data were collected mostly in Cameroon because it is the system that is facing more challenges at the moment in the use of its HE for socio-economic development.

To understand Cameroon's HE transformations, challenges, and how it can be inspired by China's experience, this research has taken a constructivist interpretative approach and has adopted an exploratory study using the qualitative method. The data collected included text documents and interviews collected in Cameroon and China.

In Cameroon, most of the documents were collected at different levels including ministries (Ministry of Higher Education, the Ministry of Professional Training and Employment), Universities (University of Yaoundé I, University of Yaoundé II, University of Douala, and the University of Dschang), some national institutions such as the National Employment Fund (NEF), and the National Institute of Statistics (NIS). Some of the documents were collected from International institutions or agencies working on Education. An important part of the documents were downloaded from institutions' websites or reviewed online. 29 interviews were conducted with policy-makers, university administrators, lecturers from four State universities, the Ministry of HE in Cameroon, and one State University in China. 24 other interviews were conducted with representatives of the Industry, and with students in Cameroon.

### 3. Dissertation structure

Our thesis is divided into eight chapters. Chapter One, the introduction part, presents the study's background, the policy context of the study, the significance, and research questions. The second chapter provides a brief literature review of the country's profile, its higher education sector, its socio-economic background, and HE's place in the country's national development plans. Chapter three exposes the theoretical and conceptual framework of the study. The fourth chapter describes and discusses the research techniques and the investigation practices which guided the research. The answers to our research questions were organized in the four last chapters (from chapter five to chapter eight). Chapter five presented perceptions of Cameroon HE reforms and the strategies adopted to make the University more socioeconomic relevant. The sixth chapter explored selected successful experiences in China's HE reforms for market relevance in comparison with some Cameroonian practices. The seventh Chapter exposed important Chinese HE reform strategies and important lessons that can be drawn. Chapter eight, which closes the study, presents Cameroon HE challenges and perspectives for policymaking through recommendations for improving Cameroon HE.

### 4. Findings, discussion and recommendations

The main findings of the dissertation have exposed a general emphasis on a professionalization process in the sector as the main HE reforms initiated in Cameroon; this process has been realized mostly through curricular and teaching reforms; the adoption of the Bachelor-Master-PhD system following the Bologna Process, the extension of technical and vocational structures' capacities through an important Support Program to the Technological and Professional Components of HE, and the multiplication of Private HEIs also enter in this framework. The reform of the HE sector has also included governance and the structural reform of the sector, leading to a certain administrative 'independence' of HEIs. The study has also pointed the focus on the promotion of University assistance to development mission (or university third mission), and on the development of entrepreneurship in Universities as parts of major reform conducted in recent years.

Following the analysis of the data collected, we assumed with Cai and Mohrman that the overall objective of HE reform in China since the 1990s is to streamline the relationship between the government, society, and Universities, to develop a new system in which the State is responsible for overall planning and macro-management, while HEIs follow legislation and exercise autonomy in providing education according to the needs of society (Cai, 2013, p. 2; Mohrman, 2008, pp. 32–33). Following this perspective, profound reforms were conducted to introduce market mechanisms in the HE system for a soft and constant adaptation of the offer to the demand, and also for more efficiency in the whole sector. In terms of specific reforms, our thesis described an important number including the promotion of poles of excellence, the promotion of specialized HEIs, the promotion of strong entrepreneurial universities, the development of private HE, the diversification of resource provision (especially the sharing cost policy with students), the curriculum permanent adaptation towards the market needs, supported by a strict regulation, the creation of various HE quality assessment Schemes, and the promotion of competition among HEIs.

In order to improve the understanding of China's HE reforms, our thesis has reconstituted and exposed from the data collected, some of China's global strategies in reforming its HE system. It was the aim of the chapter seven of our thesis. Four important strategies were noted. The first is a focus on gathering forces to

catch up with (international) advanced science and technology; the second lies in seeking unity of thinking for continuity in HE reforms, while the third is the promotion of innovation for HE optimization; the last main strategy that has been noted is the persistence in keeping a closer link between HE on one side, with employment and the country's socio-economic needs on the other side.

The last article in which the findings of the study were exposed highlighted the main challenges of Cameroon HE and the recommendations drawn from China's strategies. The main challenges that Cameroon HE faces are mostly related to the dysfunction of its National System of Innovation (NSI), a weak role of HE in research and innovation for the country's socio-economic development, the inadequate funding strategy, the weak industrial network, and the weak auto/evaluation system mechanisms.

Our thesis has generated nine propositions for Cameroon policymakers; the first is to strengthen the "working together the spirit" of the NSI, the university research structuration, concentration, and orientation towards the country's needs, the promotion of stronger University-Industry collaboration, the involvement of HEIs in graduates employment process coupled with the establishment of a strict enrollment control based on the labor market needs, the development of specialized HEIs or technical and technological poles for a better, stronger and richer research and more vocational and technological enrollment possibilities. It has also recommended the promotion of higher enrollment in professional and technological courses in secondary education, and the development of a focused and substantial HE fund, allocated through competition for knowledge economy promotion in Cameroon. We also suggested putting enrollment in technological and professional states HEIs under contracts.

## Conclusion

The ultimate goal of this paper was to provide a synoptic view of our doctoral thesis, which aimed at generating policy options to maximize the contribution of Cameroon's tertiary education to national economic development, through the identification of innovative and successful initiatives from China's successful recent HE reforms. The project provided a comprehensive analysis of tertiary education policy issues at the national level in Cameroon and in China. The resources gathered from the multiples categories of HE stakeholders including representatives of the Cameroon Ministry of HE, Academics, Students, industries in Cameroon, and researchers in China, committed substantial resources and opened China and Cameroon Higher education policies to analysis and debate. Cameroon HE policymakers launched important policies to adapt the HE sector to national socio-economic needs, stressing on professionalization and on university's third mission; these policies have been unsuccessful, mostly due to weak governmental support, the insufficiency and weakness of bridging structures, and an inadequate funding strategy; all these combine with other challenges have prevented the sector from being substantially socio-economic relevant, to provide a substantial contribution to the country's socio-economic development. Following the Chinese example that has known a successful HE transformation in recent decades, Cameroon should strengthen its NIS, give a strong governmental support and leadership to the NIS, and substantial funding.

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