

**Roadblocks In University Governance as Impediment to
Educational Innovativeness:
A Case Study Of The Distance Education Programme
At The University of Dschang, Cameroon**

By

**Ajaga Nji, Ph.D
University of Dschang, P.O. Box 138, Cameroon, Africa**

**Contacts: Tel. (237) 3345 11 76 Fax: (237) 3345 1955
Mobile: (237) 7772 01 49**

Email: ajaga_nji@yahoo.com

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Abstract

The distance education project at the University of Dschang was conceived in 1988 to establish a diploma in Tropical Agriculture by distance learning. It started in 1991 through a bilateral partnership between the University of Dschang, and the University of Guelph, Canada. Funding was provided by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) for an initial period of five years that later extended to seven years as a result of social, economic and political changes in Cameroon. Project implementation achieved a number of favourable outcomes (national acceptance of distance education to increase access and improve the quality of education), outputs (e.g., the effective establishment of a diploma programme in agriculture by distance), and impacts (flexibility in learning and improvements in the quality of agricultural training at the University of Dschang). But implementation encountered a number of institutional governance problems including policy vacuum, stone-walling, blackmail, oppressive gate-keeping, and back-stabbing. The experience shows that strong leadership qualities, dialogue, accountability, consensus building, trust and the support and confidence of donors and partners contribute to overcome governance barriers in bilateral development projects.

1. BRIEF COUNTRY PROFILE

Cameroon, often referred to as “the hinge between West and Central Africa” (Nelson et al., 1974) covers 1.6% of the surface area of the African continent (UNEP, 2000). Qualified as “Africa in miniature” the country contains Africa's major ecosystems, including 21% of the African fish species, 48% of the mammals, 54% of the bird species, 50% of known continental amphibian species, 50% of the reptile species and 42% of all recorded African butterfly species (Nji, 2003). Its 16 million people speak about 250 languages and dialects with French and English as the official languages.

2. INTRODUCTION

“If it's not broke, fix it anyway before it breaks”, is the internal driving force that in 1988, moved some staff of the National Advanced School of Agriculture (NASA) of the then University Centre of Dschang, in the Western Grassfields of Cameroon, to design what was to become the pioneer distance education programme in Agriculture in Cameroon's higher education system. This paper focuses on the problems of university governance that crept into project implementation and constituted roadblocks on the way of a major innovative and visionary education programme.

The significance of the paper is its grounding in empirical evidence...the type of information that is often neglected for sharing with the larger scientific community. Yet, this type of information testifies to the problems encountered in the introduction of innovations in many resource poor countries. And ODL is one of such technologies!

Since independence up to the late 1970s, the Cameroon higher education system, particularly the School of Agriculture, was doing reasonably well in terms of credibility, access, equity, quality assurance, relevance of curricular and university governance. This reputation attracted international recognition and an interesting blend of bilateral cooperation from the USSR, USA, Belgium and France.

Admission into the school was, and still is by entrance examination. The educational system was not yet broke, although only 200 of the 5000 candidates who wrote the entrance examinations each year could be admitted. The 4800 who were not admitted had to look elsewhere for tertiary education. Other professional schools had limited access as well. For example, only 100 students were admitted into the School of Engineering and sixty in the lone medical school, both located in Yaounde, the nation's capital.

Even under those circumstances, the educational system was not yet broke. Yet, the innovative agricultural educators at Dschang thought that it would be better to fix it before it breaks in conformity with Murphy's Law that “if anything can go wrong, it will”. Meanwhile, in 1982, the Government of Cameroon had signed a bilateral agreement with the Government of the United States of America to set up a Land-Grant-type University in Dschang. By 1988, the project was the largest USAID-funded project in Central Africa, poised to transform Cameroon agriculture.

However, by 1990, the system began to break down with nation-wide student riots coming on the heels of the wind of democracy blowing from the East. Coincidentally, a proposal developed by the visionary thinkers in Dschang was evaluated and approved by CIDA in 1991 “to establish a sustainable distance education project in Agriculture in Cameroon which would serve the English and French speaking rural population in the country”, (Djoukam, 1988).

3. THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE DISTANCE EDUCATION PROJECT

The project started in 1991 for an initial period of five years. But due to an economic recession that started in 1989 bringing with it social and political upheavals, it took seven years to complete planned project activities.

4. THE MACRO-POLICY ENVIRONMENT

Cameroon is a centralist state with the administration of public institutions largely controlled by bureaucrats from the national capital, Yaounde. Although the Prime Minister is supposed to be the Head of Government, Ministers are in reality appointed and fired by the President of the Republic and Head of State who also appoints the Prime Minister. The university system is centralized and placed under the leadership

of a Minister of Higher Education. All University leaders (Vice Chancellors, Deputies, Deans and Directors and Heads of Department) are appointed by the President and his Ministers.

This stifles initiative, innovativeness and creativity since the appointees are accountable to no one else but those who appointed them. Thus, the structure of the University system in Cameroon is centralized and hierarchical with power and authority in the hands of a few politically appointed individuals. This obliges individuals charged with the diffusion of knowledge to develop coping mechanisms that are not necessary in democratic and science-based societies.

In the case of the distance education project, the macro-policy environment was thus rigid and not amenable to the proactive, creative and responsive management. New ideas, including the establishment of new academic programmes and institutions must be initiated from the centre. Thus, the first bottleneck which was eventually overcome was getting the signature of the Minister of Higher Education on the bilateral agreement with the University of Guelph. Yet, the project actors came to realize that "policy formulation (in Cameroon) is a long and labyrinthine process in which all the actors must see their interests protected and projected", (Moore, et al., 1998:7).

In spite of, or as a result of high centralization, local politics and economics did not create an enabling environment for the inception of the project. **High turnover of the university leadership** (5 Director Generals, Rectors or Heads of Institution in seven years), and **institutional changes** which saw the University Centre transformed in 1993 into a full-fledged university with 5 faculties, created a wave of unprecedented shocks in the system. The **lack of a written policy on distance education** in the country legitimized the negative behaviour of the local university administrators.

The greatest obstacles to the project were manufactured and executed by the Dean of the Faculty of Agriculture with the support of several faculty members as will be seen below.

5. LEADERSHIP OF THE PROJECT

The coordinator of the project was elected by his peers, but the Dean disqualified the procedure as improper because in Cameroon, people are *appointed* and not elected..

6. THE "FOUR SCOUNDRELS"

The Dean labeled the initiators of the project the "four soundrels" and mounted an aggressive blackmail against them and their actions both with the local university administration and in the corridors of power in the Ministry of Higher Education in Yaounde. Happily, the innovators were able to quickly find a mechanism to enlist the support of several colleagues to get the idea off the ground.

7. HINDRANCE OF THE NEEDS ASSESSMENT

A total of 1,800 questionnaires were administered in all the ten Provinces of Cameroon to assess the needs and determine the priorities for distance education in Cameroon. Unfortunately, some local university leaders actively designed schemes to hinder, but could not stop progress on the needs assessment.

8. MANAGEMENT SABOTAGE

Members of the Project Consultative Committee were appointed with the Dean as Chair. But he held a total of only two meetings, all of them at the beginning of the project only. Due to a low budget and the devaluation of the CFA Franc, funds budgeted and authorized by CIDA were insufficient to buy a new project vehicle. So project management used their imagination to buy used vehicles in excellent condition with the approval of Canada. But the Dean queried this initiative and disqualified the vehicles imported from the USA as "junk cars". In practice, it is the prerogative of political appointees to control the spending and (mis) management of project funds even when they are not directly involved with the project

9. QUARREL WITH THE CURRICULUM

The Dean, who was there from the beginning in 1988, was the first person to officially declare after the project had started, that the curriculum was incomplete and therefore irrelevant to the needs of agricultural

learners in Cameroon. He argued that the curriculum lacked some courses he considered critical for agricultural training. In view of the structure of the university system, there is no curriculum committee as such. However, project developers had taken the precaution with the participation of their international partners to ensure that the curriculum was balanced and relevant to the needs of learners. The results from the needs assessment were also critical in the design of the curriculum. Despite the hassle, the programme was finally officially launched by the Minister of Higher Education in 1996;

10. UNFAITHFUL GATE-KEEPING

As all correspondence to the Minister and University authorities must pass through all the levels of authority, the Dean acted as an unfaithful gatekeeper between the project management and the university administration. He used his strategic position to play the unfaithful gate-keeper by systematically blocking the communication process and making sure that information did not flow between the project and the university leadership.

11. PETTY JEALOUSIES

Course authors, reviewers and translators were paid a fixed amount for their contributions. Some university leaders found this practice unacceptable even though the fees and procedure were written and approved in the bilateral agreement with project funders. Ironically, when some of the people who quarreled with the system were given a chance to author a course, they were unable to do so.

12. COORDINATOR FORCED TO RESIGN

The whirligig of machinations, administrative blackmail and back-stabbing by key university leaders forced the coordinator to resign in 1994. But the resignation was quickly intercepted by some colleagues with the strong support of partners at the University of Guelph. This action demonstrated the importance of the support of development partners to key stakeholders and actors on the ground when politics tends to hold sway in project management.

13. FIGHT OVER PROJECT EQUIPMENT AND RESOURCES

In an institution and at a time of severe recession when national resources had dried up and all work at the University grounded to a halt by serious dysfunctions in the national system, faculty who could still stand on their feet were seen as enemies to be knocked down. In many cases, some individuals in the system who knew very little, and had lots of power worked out dirty tricks to deprive hard-working individuals of their little resources. This is possible in the present case study because individuals are not appointed or rewarded for their worth, but for the support they give to the political machine in the country.

Thus, under protection of a skewed, screwed and unresponsive administrative system that thrives on subjective rather than objective administration and management, several key university leaders tried on several occasions to confiscate or seize project resources such as vehicles, materials, equipment and even funds. In one such instance, a one time Rector of the University promised project management hail because the coordinator refused to release one of the project vehicles for political campaigns. And when individuals use their personal resources to make a project work in times of institutional stress, such initiative is look upon with disdain.

14. MISMANAGEMENT

Between 1994 and 2000, a total of approximately US\$36,000 had been accumulated in the project bank account as evidence of sustainability. Regrettably, due to poor university governance characterized by lack of accountability to the immediate stakeholders and beneficiaries, no trace of the funds were found by an external evaluator one year later. Because of the system of appointment of university leaders in place, it has been difficult to enforce accountability.

15. OUTCOME, OUTPUTS AND IMPACTS

By 1998 when the final evaluation of the project was conducted, several positive outcomes were realized in spite of the torrent of governance problems highlighted above. The major outcomes are:

- 1) Distance education has effectively been established in Cameroon through a long, painful but fruitful process of institutionalization. In 2000, the process had culminated in the establishment of the first Centre for Distance Education in Cameroon ;
- 2) The programme has indeed increased access and equity in tertiary agricultural education in that, individuals who thought they had come to the end of a dead end road in their training suddenly found a door open to them into the once prestigious B.Sc. programme in agriculture at the University of Dschang. By 2008, seventy-eight people had graduated from the programme and more than twenty of them went on to earn higher degrees.;
- 3) The policy environment has improved significantly with educational institutions and employers embracing distance learning as a veritable alternative to conventional, campus-based face-to-face instruction. The output in educational policy includes two Laws of Orientation on education which give the primacy of place to distance education as a recognized "alternative mode of education delivery in Cameroon" (National Assembly, 2001). In 2003, a national forum, bringing together key national and international stakeholders on distance education was held in Yaounde under the sponsorship of The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) with support from the British Council and the French Cooperation in Cameroon.
- 4) A "Licence en technologie", equivalent to a Bachelor's degree in Information Technology was launched by the Fotso Victor Institute of Technology, a public tertiary higher education institution. Similarly, a B.Ed. degree programme by distance was launched at the University of Buea, Cameroon, in November 2007.
- 5) The initiative has made significant impacts on the quality and relevance of education in Cameroon's higher education system, by improving pedagogy and gradually inculcating a learning by distance culture in Cameroon;
- 6) A critical mass of educators with distance training, learning and management skills has been created in Cameroon, thus establishing fertile ground for building ownership and sustainability of open and distance learning in the country;
- 7) Effective technology transfer has taken place in the education sector benefiting various social groups in the society particularly women. They constitute 12% of the distance learners in the agricultural programme in Dschang, compared to a national tertiary education average of approximately 6%;
- 8) Linkages with the University of Guelph, Canada, have contributed to internationalize the programme as well as open up avenues for international cooperation, collaboration and networking.

16. LESSONS LEARNED AND CONCLUSION

1. Development projects may look good on paper but are hard to implement on the ground if cultural, interpersonal and institutional cultures are not taken into account.
2. Funding agencies may provide the funds for a project, but things can be achieved only if there is good governance or management of the project.
3. Bad Governance is a major threat to technological innovation in resource poor countries.
4. Lack of visionary planning and management characterized by political considerations can blur project success.
5. Individuals with a strong will, courage and management skills, as well as a thorough understanding of the host environment are critical for the successful implementation of ODL
6. Every social system breeds the seeds of its own destruction as can be seen from the negative behavior of some local leaders at the university.
7. The introduction of ODL in various Commonwealth countries has differential successes. This project experience should enable COL and other stakeholders to identify the factors that make some countries tick.

Risk aversion is a key characteristic of innovators and risk-taking is an ingredient of success for strategic planners and visionary managers. Courage, determination, positive thinking and above all the support of international partners to the national project team led to the hard-earned project success.

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