

## EDITORIAL

### Reflections on Professionalization of Education in Cameroon

In his message to the *youth* on the eve of the 2015 11<sup>th</sup> February Youth Day celebrations the Head of State, President Paul Biya, once more called for the professionalization of education in Cameroon. This call comes eight years after the launching of the 2007 New University Governance Policy (NUGP) in higher education with professionalization as a major objective. Then, the Bachelor's, Master's, PhD/*Licence*, *Master*, *Doctorat* (BMP/LMD) system, conceived along the lines of the European Bologna Process was adopted as a model that would deliver on professionalization by aligning the curriculum of each institution to job market demands. Greater employability of graduates and the lofty goal of producing job creators instead of job seekers were touted as the hallmarks of the professionalization. The resuscitation of this theme at this point in time after thousands of BMP/LMD graduates have been put on the job market suggests that earlier calls have either not been heeded to, or have not yet yielded satisfactory results. Thus, it might be asked what happened to the professionalization plans put in place and how might the President's *new* call be handled to ensure success.

Evidently, the earlier calls for professionalization have not fully succeeded since graduate unemployment is still a problem, and despite apparent laudable efforts deployed by various administrations to train and support job creators, we are still to see that crop of expected capitalists/developers flourish. Many reasons could be evoked to explain the failure of previous attempts to professionalize education in Cameroon. If insufficient funding, the lack of appropriate infrastructure and appropriately trained personnel were among the reasons for the failure of previous professionalization plans, the

lack of a coherent holistic strategic action plan to guide the various stakeholders was a major deficiency of the plan. It is, however, not the aim of this editorial to exhaustively enumerate these reasons. But I will highlight a few factors which, if addressed, could improve the chances of success of the latest professionalization drive.

First of all, the *meaning, objectives, content and outcomes* of professionalization need to be defined and then a systematic strategy/methodology worked out on how to achieve the stated objectives. **Currently, there is no agreement on the meaning of professionalization.** Rather, perceptions of professionalization abound. For some, professionalization means whatever is taught in professional schools. Not minding the obvious circle in this type of definition one might cite the so called "*Grand Ecoles*" where entrance is by competitive examinations. For others professionalization is whatever you do in order to get employment and a matriculation number into the Public Service. These definitions are in our opinion deficient because they do not reflect the cardinal attributes of professionalism. They leave the great majority of graduates from the faculties as people trained for no jobs!

**Valuable lessons can be learnt from the academic disciplines, which are traditionally classified as professional.** Medical doctors and other medical personnel as well lawyers, engineers and theologians are generally recognized as professionals, so also are teachers, scientists and researchers. An examination of the common traits of the disciplines producing these professionals can lead to a better understanding of the professionalization process. Without delving into any details, it can be stated that specialized knowledge/skills in a well defined domain is a key requirement of professionalization. A carefully crafted and dynamic syllabus that prepares the

trainee for work in a given domain is usually important. Practice is an important input into professional training, but this is often either omitted totally or partially in the fundamental studies offered in the faculties. Furthermore, apart from thorough grounding in theory and practice, professional training lays emphasis on related ethics and good practices. Thorough supervision of student projects/theses crowns professional training. Thus professionalization of education would need a careful and objective curriculum review including strong participation of the productive and industrial sectors, and effective application of practical training both within training institutions and through internships at the place of work.

It should be pointed out that professional education does not necessarily exclude fundamental studies. In the best of worlds it continues the latter by linking theory to practice within well defined contexts. Thus we have argued earlier that training in the faculties, where fundamental studies predominate, can be rendered more professional by diversifying them through well selected electives (with career objective in view) to contain the appropriate professional skills and /or combining them with professional disciplines. This reminder is necessary to avoid the temptation of trying to dismantle fundamental study programs in favour of professional ones. Both fundamental and applied disciplines are necessary to produce the new generation of graduates who will not only be able to apply, but to create knowledge as well.

The third and often neglected component, that of ethical and moral education of the trainees must be adequately and effectively incorporated in the training programs to render them, not only professional but also more reflective of societal concerns. This neglected component is perhaps the most challenging to teach and learn, let alone to implement. It is an aspect which in the present context puts both teachers and learners at par: requiring teachers to teach not only by the spoken and written word, but also by example and students not only to memorize and recite but also to renovate and to apply their leaning in real live

situations. In a nutshell what is required in today's education is a holistic approach that trains the whole person for productive and peaceful co-existence in a world with increasingly limited resources and exponentially expanding population. Clearly a national consensus needs to be reached on how to tackle this third component of the professional training syllabus. An unproven assumption of the professionalization advocates is that professional training will automatically lead to the employability of the graduates. But this is not always the case; for even in the advanced economies which we wish to emulate, unemployment of university graduates is still a problem. Even here in Cameroon, medical doctors, trained teachers, and even engineers from our professional schools sometimes have to wait for one or two years to get their first posting, and some of them are forced to emigrate to look for jobs elsewhere. Thus professionalization does not necessarily lead to the employment. The complex equation of linking training to employability has still to be solved, by among other strategies, expanding, and diversifying the job opportunities. And this of course is not the responsibility of the universities to the exclusion of other stakeholders. The Government and the private sectors have preeminent roles to play in creating jobs. One can take inspiration from the Government's **Growth and Employment Strategy Paper** which preceded the **Program-Budget of the State** to observe that no development initiative can succeed without a clearly articulated plan and funding. Therefore, a national Professionalization Strategic/ Action Plans are urgently needed to enable the implantation of the President's call for the professionalization of education in Cameroon. The Cameroon Academy of Sciences, given its diverse and highly qualified human resources, can contribute effectively in drawing up such a plan.

Professor Vincent P.K. Titanji

Fellow, Cameroon Academy of Sciences (FCAS),

Fellow, African Academy of Sciences (FAAS),

Fellow, Academy of Sciences of the Developing World (FTWAS),

Editor-in-Chief, JCAS