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PROFESSIONALIZATION OF COURSES AND GRADUATES' EMPLOYABILITY IN CAMEROON

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ABSTRACT

This paper set out to assess the influence of the professionalization of courses in higher education on graduate employability in Cameroon. Lack of marketable skills and work experience were observed as obstacles to finding wage-paying jobs and growing individual career employability. A focus on employability education in higher education (HE) with a marked orientation towards the acquisition of marketable skills through a more market-friendly curriculum could become the safest routes to escape the graduate unemployment trap and help in the development of individual career employability. The hypothesis is that the professionalization of courses has a significant influence higher education on graduate employability in Cameroon. The Human Capital Theory (1964, 1993, 3rded, 2005) is also used. The population consisted of 532 first-degree graduate job seekers from a cross-section of Cameroonian universities registered with the National Employment Fund, Yaoundé branch, of which 143 gained their first employment through the Graduate Employment Programmed (PED). Data was collected using a questionnaire and was analyzed using SPSS. The hypothesis was at the alpha level of 0.05 and the level of significance was 0.000. Spearman rank correlation analysis was carried out. The results have a resilient recommendation.

INTRODUCTION

Our world is continually evolving in terms of economics, politics, and society, posing new demands and difficulties for governments. As the demands of the 21st-century change so quickly, these governments are looking more and more to universities to generate human resources with the appropriate capacities, skills, and knowledge (Kowalski, 2022). There is a broad expectation that universities help their nations gain a competitive edge on the global market by fostering the transition to new knowledge-based economies and high technologies through strong links between research and the labor market (UNESCO, 2009). A knowledge-based society, according to UNESCO (2005) is one that is nourished by its diversity and capabilities. Strong emphasis is placed on the knowledge asset that each culture possesses. In

order to connect and mesh with the new versions pushed by the knowledge economy, intellectual assets are acknowledged and protected, according to UNESCO's World Report. In this light, recent developments have redefined higher education as a fundamental economic tool that is necessary for participation in the global economy. For instance, it has been suggested more and more that Western nations' overall economic performance is strongly correlated with their capacity for knowledge and learning (Kowalski, 2022).

The global population's desire for higher education standards is rising continuously. Every year, more institutions of higher learning are created, and the number of graduates keeps rising. An increasing number of graduates are committed to the caliber and worth of higher education, as seen by their aptitude for jobs or sense of initiative (Ngwa & Ngonba, 2020). While there are more career options than in many other fields and the skills acquired in almost all industries, there is a strong competitive job market for new graduates (Devkota, Rana, Parajuli, Bhandari & Paudel, 2022).

A number of definitions have been proposed to aid stakeholders in understanding employability. According to Satterfield and McLarty (1995), employability is the set of talents needed to land and keep a job, including academic proficiency, career- or job-specific skills, and a variety of attitudes and behaviors. Employability, according to Hillage and Pollard (1999), is the "ability to obtain initial employment, (b) the ability to maintain employment and make "transitions" between jobs and roles within the same organization to meet new job requirements, and (c) the ability to obtain new employment, if necessary, to be independent in the labor market by being willing and able to manage employment transitions between and within organizations. This means that the idea of employability is more about a graduate's level of abilities than it is about their employment position (Rahmana & Shuib, 2011).

When viewed in the context of the workplace and employment market, the term employability often refers to several situational contexts. Firstly, employability is linked to the condition in which an individual would be employed due to his or her competencies that match the demands of certain work and expectations of potential employers. This notion suggests that employability directly relates to the issue of graduate employment status. Secondly, employability entails the readiness of an individual to be employed. Thus, an employable graduate may be referred to as an individual who has completed studies, is currently available for work, has job-related competencies, and makes arrangements to start a job (Godfrey, 1986). The third view of employability is that it refers to the effort that leads to enabling students to acquire knowledge, personal and professional skills; and the attitudes that will support their future development and employment (Brown, 2006). Thus, to enhance employability is to equip an individual with work competencies, which in turn increase the likelihood of an individual

being employed. Employability also relates to the attributes of graduates as a result of the education he or she has acquired. The feature, however, is not necessarily linked to employment but to their competencies. It also refers to the 'usability' of graduates to society, the workforce, the country, and the environment.

The creation of models, techniques, teaching, and learning methodologies in the field of education has affected the professionalization of graduates (Choudary & Ponnuru, 2015). According to Ngwa & Ngonba (2020), *with the recent transition from the job market to the present role-and-trust, career management skills are essential to successfully manage the career-building process based on qualities like lifelong learning and adaptability*. But many universities are still underutilized in terms of their potential to help students be creative and innovative upon graduation (Robles, 2012; Sabir et al., 2019).

One of the most important factors in adapting to the reforms brought on by the problems of the 21st century is advanced higher education (Ngwa & Ngonba, 2020). Graduate education has long been seen as one of the country's active and compassionate tools for battling poverty and promoting socioeconomic improvement. It encourages and develops the information, skills, attitudes, and values that each person needs to become a useful and productive part of society as well as the national development workforce (Tanyi, et al., 2020). The financial investment in education is deemed wasted if graduates do not take on substantial social roles that allow them to financially support the government (Ngu & Teneng, 2020). According to Cruz (2022), the graduates' achievement and realization of their specific goals and plans are crucial for assessing and upgrading training programs

It is important in this section to outline the various periods and ideologies that have shaped Cameroon's educational system, as well as the institutions that prepare lecturers, graduates, and, most crucially, the pedagogic resources that have developed over time to guarantee the labor market. The Cameroonian educational system has undergone continual evolution in terms of policies, strategies, techniques, and practices, which have been influenced by the country's political development and needs. However, it is essential to quickly review its history in order to analyze the concepts and advancements that have molded educational practices so as to construct the first professional training in Cameroonian schools. The history of education in Cameroon is extensive.

Before the advent of Western-style education, indigenous African communities like Cameroon had their own systems of instruction and training for children that included the use of tools. Because it was an integral part of the community, this sort of education was known as

indigenous education. There were no written records of these African customs. Because it lacked supporting evidence, the West labeled that type of schooling as “primitive education.”

However, indigenous or African education was a method by which society could instruct its youths in the social mores necessary for them to exist within the confines of their culture. The main goal of this type of education was to prepare and integrate Cameroonian youths into the workforce.

According to Fonkeng (2007, p. 32), African education consisted of exercises designed to help children develop their motor or physical skills needed for building, farming, pottery, weaving, hunting, and carving, as well as character and moral education, intellectual skills, vocational development, and the development of a sense of belonging and cultural heritage. In his subsequent argument, he says that traditional African education addressed issues of modern education specifically, with reference to the transmission of the cultural heritage in view of continuity and expansion for the management of life in the society (Fonkeng, 2007, p. 32). Angyie, Daniel & Martin (2022, p. 5) emphasizes that learning was a cultural activity, a group activity that involved the duty of socializing, and a collective affair.

Also, it is important to remember that the educational process includes the utilization of informal, community-based, lifelong, oral, narrative, collaborative, and non-formal methods. Since it concentrated on providing knowledge, skills, and attitudes for immediate consumption, it responded to societal requirements. Regrettably, educational innovations over the years seem to disregard their historical roots in the same way that colonial education policies downplayed and neglected African cultural practices and knowledge that shaped indigenous education (Tambo, 2013, p. 18). According to Tamanji (2011, p. 320), colonial formal schools were established in Cameroon as a result of the cooperation between the colonial rulers and the Western Christian Missionaries. As a result, Cameroon’s formal education is intertwined with the West through trade, evangelization, and colonization. Its development can be followed or explained in terms of the significant turning points in the nation's political history.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years, the idea of graduate employability has taken center stage in both the global higher education sector and the job market. Where will university graduates find employment, in other words? Who ought to hire them? Is the Government or the private sector responsible for integrating graduates into the labor force? Or are these graduates expected to find work after completing their education at a university? All of these concerns about graduates’ employability have raised the issue of what role higher education can play in supporting the emerging knowledge-based economy, which depends on highly qualified, capable, and adaptable workers

(Ngwa & Ngonba, 2020; Gokuladas, 2011; Wittekind, Raeder & Grote, 2010). To be able to contribute to this type of knowledge-driven economy, universities are increasingly required to generate employable graduates who can fit in the sector, compete in the global labor market, or create work for themselves. The preparation of students for future employment is seen by many students and society as one of higher education's most important functions. According to (Barrett, Bowman, Singe & Kilbourne, 2022), having a degree enhances a person's professional chances and prospective earnings despite the rise in graduates entering the workforce. Therefore, it makes sense that in order for students to find lucrative employment after graduating from school, they must have the talents and qualities that employers value. This highlights any connections that might exist between receiving a university degree and finding work.

The ability of students to transit from higher education to the workforce has become one of the main functions and obligations of institutions. The challenges that universities must overcome, particularly in light of the rising enrolment, the high youth unemployment rate, and the level of competition in the global labor market, are the relevance of university curricula and how these curricula can increase the employability of their graduates. Data from UNESCO show that enrollment in tertiary education increased significantly over the past 20 years, from 68 million students in 1991 to 151 million students in 2008. At the same time, as noted in the ILO's Global Employment Trends Reports, the financial crisis that started in 2008 has led to an increase in unemployment. In 2010 there was 6.2 percent of people worldwide without a job, up from 5.6 percent in 2007. Young people continue to be the most severely impacted by the employment crisis, with 74.8 million of them unemployed in 2011, an increase of more than 4 million since 2007. However, several nations are reportedly unable to provide enough jobs to accommodate the expansion in the working-age population, according to UNESCO (2009). If nothing is done to stop this tendency, a generation of young, productive employees will face an uncertain future. Universities must provide their students with the skills they need to enter the workforce and develop their ability to meet certain workplace needs if they are to increase their chances of getting respectable jobs that are compatible with their degree and training.

In Cameroon, there have been attempts to solve the problem of employability by considering youth employment as one of the foremost policy concerns. The government recently showed readiness to strive for better integration of youths in the work force in the gigantic attempt to employ twenty five thousand youths, yet the recruitment was hardly skill oriented and many university graduates were recruited into jobs that did not reflect what they studied in the university and or are less than their level of education and training, especially in terms of financial returns. This situation leads to underemployment which in itself, is a form of

unemployment and does not really solve the problem of employability of higher education graduates. According to African Economic Outlook, (2012), this government action is expected to produce results in the short and medium term, but is this enough to sustainably solve the problem of graduate unemployment and employability? The government also currently intensified efforts in this regard through the drafting and implementation of the youth plan (2009 – 2013), which aims at rendering operational the youth policy adopted in 2006. Despite all these efforts, unemployment and underemployment still persist. According to the Growth and Employment Strategy Paper (GESP) (2009), unemployment rate in Cameroon stands at about 13% and underemployment at about 75.8%. Besides, the last national survey of employment revealed that unemployment among people with higher education qualifications is above 13% compared to 9% for those with secondary school qualifications. The average age of young unemployed people with higher education qualifications is 12.9. Most (59%) are first time job seekers; unemployment in this category is generally long-term since 56% of those in this group have been unemployed for more than one year. The average length of unemployment is 34.3 months (African Economic Outlook, 2012). It is therefore evident that inadequacy between employment and training remains problematic and a call for concern. This study therefore aims to find out the extent to which professionalization of courses in higher education institutes in Cameroon, can influence this problem of employability of graduates. It will be dwelling on the fact that, academic qualifications are essential, but the aptitudes and attitudes of job seekers are equally, if not more, important to employers. A high-grade point average alone does not guarantee employment. It is therefore crucial for graduates to cultivate qualities most sought after by their potential employers. These include: motivation, an ability to think “outside the box”, problem solving and communication skills, and an ability to work both as part of a team and independently. It is also vital that graduates liable to work in many different jobs and industries throughout their entire career seek to constantly improve and update their skills, and willing to learn new technologies. Any sign that they possess some of these qualities might persuade employers to offer them jobs. Universities, therefore, have the daunting task of preparing students for a changing world by improving their knowledge and skills to meet the demands of employers and the realities of the workplace.

Since graduates’ employability is seen as a potent tool for enhancing the caliber of human capital, its development has become a priority for universities and national governments all over the world. Due to increased graduate unemployment, inadequate job preparation, and employers' unhappiness with graduate skill development, concerns about graduate employability in Cameroon have been voiced repeatedly over the past 20 years. These worries have intensified as a result of the modern labor market's shifting demands and structures, which are defined by a sharp rise in global trade as well as private, joint-venture, and foreign direct

investment (FDI) organizations (Ngwa & Ngonba, 2020; Nghia & Tran, 2020; Nghia, 2019; Nguyen, Tran & Le, 2019; Tran, Ngo & Nguyen, 2018a; Tran, ThanhPhan & Marginson, 2018b; Anwar & Nguyen, 2014). Graduates with the skills to participate and perform well in a multi-sectoral market economy with a socialist orientation are in high demand. Cameroon also needs more competent human resources with a strong command of English to operate not just in a more "internationalized" local labor market but also in the region and throughout the world due to the country's rising demand for regional and global participation and rivalry (Ngwa & Ngonba, 2020; Tran et al, 2018a; Tran et al, 2018b). In response to the critical need to enhance graduate employability in accordance with the new demands of the labor market and to improve the quality of higher education in general, major higher education reforms have been implemented since the early 2000s (Ngwa & Ngonba, 2020).

Higher education (HE) in Cameroon is guided by national and international policies and conditions that overlap in terms of policy frameworks. Cameroon is a signatory to numerous international agreements for cooperation and solidarity, particularly those pertaining to education, as a committed member of the global community. Its HE has been subjected to recommendations, rules, and re-regulations from international development agencies due to its poverty and dependence on borrowing and handouts. These organizations, which have recently had a considerable role in influencing Cameroonian HE, include the World Bank, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the African Development Bank (ADB). According to recommendations from international organizations, the financing of higher education in Cameroon, like most of Africa, was put on the back burner for roughly 20 years in favor of other sectors and educational sub-sectors. The recent rediscovery of higher education's significance as a driver of economic growth at different levels, however, could be considered as contributing in part to the recent shifts as demonstrated in this study. The international cooperation agreements linked to or involving Cameroon appear to be the primary causes of the majority of the current change processes in higher education in Cameroon.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDG 2000) and educational goals like the Education for All goals are examples of these (EFA 2000). Although it may turn out that the MDG or EFA unfortunately did not prioritize HE, HE is the sector that is greatly impacted by these initiatives' effects and has a substantial impact on their success. In retrospect, it's possible to say that the MDG and EFA had certain flaws in terms of how people perceived higher education. The failure and lack of foresight to foresee the influence and interconnectedness of the several cycles of the educational system appeared. For instance, the higher education (HE) sector in Cameroon eventually began to experience pressures and capacity imbalances in terms

of infrastructure, staffing, quality, and funding after several years of exponential growth in enrolment in the lower levels of the educational system. In retrospect, it's possible to say that the MDG and EFA had a few flaws in terms of how people perceived higher education. The failure and lack of foresight to foresee the influence and interconnectedness of the several cycles of the educational system seems to have occurred. For instance, the HE sector in Cameroon eventually began to experience difficulties and capacity imbalances in terms of infrastructure, staffing, quality, and funding following several years of exponential growth in enrolment in the lowest levels of the educational system.

The HE system urgently needed to adapt to rising demands for secondary and high school teachers, among other skills and competencies, in addition to not being able to handle the enormous growth in student numbers from the lower education cycles. These flaws highlight the significance of adopting a comprehensive strategy when formulating educational policy. The result of the large-scale enrolment in higher education was a mass output of graduates, which led to unemployment issues. Although the 2000 international frameworks (MDG and EFA) did not prioritize HE, the 1998 World Declaration on Higher Education suggested earlier that HE played a significant role in socioeconomic growth through its service function (WDHE). The WDHE claimed in its preamble and mission statement that it was absolutely essential for all stakeholders including students, families, business, and industry to be involved and that HE must use research to *give as part of service to the community, relevant expertise*. Article 6 of the declaration emphasizes on *“long term orientation based on relevance”* and operationalizes relevance as the *fit between what the society expects of institutions and what they do (6a)*. The WDHE urged HE to strengthen its social contributions, including the expansion of the entire educational system. Following Article 7 of the declaration, which underlines the need to improve ties between HE, the workplace, and other spheres of society, is the significance of cooperation.

This study is primarily interested in how higher education and the workplace relate to one another. The 2009 Conference on Higher Education that followed was unambiguous about the status of higher education as a public good thus calling for relentless investments in the sector. It was framed by multiplying evidence of the use of higher education in the economic development of emerging nations in the preceding decade as well as the *transition from information to knowledge society*. The conference's unique focus on Africa is particularly significant. Given the significance of information and higher education, the goal was that *no nation or region falls behind* (UNESCO, 2009).

The development of higher education in Cameroon has been significantly aided by new circumstances and outlets for funding particularly support from international financial agencies.

The public was repeatedly reassured by Cameroonian authorities in a number of public speeches between 2005 and 2010 that the financial conditions surrounding the start of the current major project are better than they were a few years ago, with comparatively sizable financial resources to invest in the social sectors, particularly in education and infrastructure (President's Message to the Youth, 10 February 2007). It is emphasized that the completion of the Highly Indebted Poor Countries' Initiatives (HIPC) in 2006 has made it possible for the majority of the transformation initiatives in Cameroon's higher education over the previous five to six years to be partially and significantly completed. The aftermath of the HIPC led to the creation of the Support Program to the Technological and Professional Components of Higher Education (SPTPCHE), which is promoting the professionalization strategy and policy for a radical transformation towards increased relevance and socioeconomic involvement of HE in Cameroon. With funding from the World Bank, the SPTPCHE expands and enhances PASE-MINESUP, the higher education component of the Support Program to the Educational Sector.

The Cameroon government relies on the Appui a la Gestion des Initiatives Rentables (AGIR) Support Program for the Management of Income-Generating Initiatives of HE to promote income-generating enterprises and an entrepreneurial culture for the HE system. There are recently developed centers and programs for distance learning that get World Bank funding. The most applied higher education institutions in Cameroon are three University Institutes of Technology, which were established with similar sources of finance and co-funding.

Regarding the national frameworks, it is clear that the higher education system in Cameroon is undergoing a transformation and reorientation process toward reducing poverty, reducing unemployment, and promoting economic development. This process appears to be guided by convergent and overlapping national and international commitments, which may also put pressure on the system to act in certain ways. For instance, the Growth and Employment Strategy Paper (GESP), a revised and more focused version of the two Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers from 2003 and 2006, is the current economic development document directing the economic focus of the HE system in Cameroon.

In addition to committing and restating government determination to fully realize the MDG, this GESp describes "the country's progress towards reaching and realizing" Cameroon's economic development goals (GESp 2009, p. 14). The GESp is the first strategic plan that looks ahead ten years, from 2010 to 2020, with the aim of translating the first sets of development objectives and the shared vision of Cameroon emerging as a nation by 2035:

- Lowering poverty to a level that is acceptable in society;
- Attaining the position of a middle-income nation;

- Becoming a newly industrialized nation and boosting national cohesion and solidifying the democratic system.

Government aims to:

- Reduce poverty to the point that not more than 1/10 Cameroonians would live below the poverty levels or raise living standards and alleviate the population's living situations" are more specifically related to the aforementioned.
- Place the transformation of natural resources in the context of current national and global realities when contextualizing national industrial policies.
- Modernize the economy by establishing "the essential framework for the rapid development and widespread adoption of the new information and communication technologies" across all spheres and facets of society. The GESP anticipates that during the period 2010–2020, the emphasis will be particularly on growth, employment, improvement of state governance, and strategic management, as this period is seen as the most and most immediate strategic springboard for the implementation and realization of the long term vision up to 2035 (GESP 2009, p. 17).

The 1993 university reforms should be mentioned first and foremost when discussing the internal policy and regulatory framework governing the societal service function of higher education in Cameroon. It can be said that the societal problem solving component was implicit in the reforms, albeit less articulated than more recent times, despite the fact that they appeared to have primarily focused on addressing the acute access situation at the time through the creation of five additional universities as well as addressing their related funding challenges. The 1993 reforms granted these newly established institutions full financial and steering autonomy as well as the freedom to interact with outside parties in an effort to augment the insufficient government support for their rising enrolments. Even while universities have had different interpretations of the societal service function over the years, many, if not all, of them have created ways to leverage their expertise to solve social issues, particularly with socio-economic operators in exchange for additional revenue.

Later, in the 2001 Law on the Orientation of Higher Education in Cameroon, the societal service function of the HE system was included and institutionalized. The main goal of the HE system in Cameroon is to "provide support for national development initiatives and human advancement," in addition to producing, organizing, and disseminating scientific, cultural, and professional information (2001 Orientation Law, Article 2). Later, in October 2005, a framework that was more comprehensive and uniform was introduced under the name New University Governance Policy (NUGP) (Nouvelle Gouvernance Universitaire). The NUGP

makes it clear that attitudes around the functions of higher education have changed. The policymakers' proactive actions also appear to differ from earlier perceptions. This NUGP offers a tactical route for bringing about Cameroonian HE's *materialization from its actual condition of inefficiency* (NUGP 2009). It establishes a five-part, multifaceted, yet mutually exclusive package that is to be constantly used and is intended to propel higher education's long-term reorientation process.

The Bologna Process

Higher education has grown rapidly during the past few decades in practically all parts of the world (Crosier and Parveva, 2013). Higher education enrollment rose from 68 million in 1991 to 164,5 million in 2009. For instance, the gross enrollment rates in higher education in most of Europe in 2009 were greater than 50%. This rapid growth reflects the growing need for skilled workers in the producing sectors to satisfy the demands of an expanding knowledge economy in a globalized environment. Historically, higher education was provided through a single system of universities. Today, it is provided by a network of varied institutions, including both academic and nonacademic ones. The diversity of higher education can be viewed in terms of providers, programs, students, and funding sources. Higher education institutions offer a range of course levels. Courses offered by non-university schools are frequently vocationally oriented programs that are directly related to the needs of the job market. For instance, in Europe, some countries had bachelor-master programs that lasted four to six years, whereas other nations had degree structures with multiple levels that were incompatible with bachelor-master programs. Transparency and trust between higher education systems are thought to be essential for enhancing higher education's worldwide appeal and competitiveness. The Bologna Process is an effort to do this (Crosier and Parveva, 2013).

These authors claim that the Bologna Process was an effort by European nations to standardize educational practices in order to establish comparable, compatible, and cohesive higher education systems across the region. A common degree structure, a common credit system, a quality assurance mechanism, and the promotion of student and academic and administrative staff mobility between institutions and countries were all envisioned in the Bologna Declaration, which the higher education ministers of 29 countries signed in 1999. In the Bologna Declaration, the ministers affirmed their intention to:

- adopt a system of easily readable and comparable degrees;
- implement a system based essentially on two main cycles;
- establish a system of credits (such as ECTS);
- support the mobility of students, teachers, researchers, and administrative staff;

- promote European cooperation in quality assurance;
- promote the European dimensions in higher education (in terms of curricular development and inter-institutional cooperation).

More and more nations are signing on to the Bologna Process, demonstrating how appealing it is to them. The Bologna Process was implemented in 47 nations as of 2012. According to the report on the process execution at the ministerial conference in 2012 held in Bucharest (EACEA/Eurydice, 2012), one of the process' most important successes has been the adoption of the three-cycle degree structure by the majority of institutions and programs. Additionally, progress has been achieved in the creation of national qualification systems, the ECTS and Diploma Supplement, boosting student mobility, and other areas.

The development of systems for quality assurance and the founding of the European Quality Assurance Register represents another area of success (EQAR). In 2010, the Bologna Process's vision for the development of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) also came to fruition. Today, the Bologna Process is seen as a very important reform that started a domino effect of higher education reforms at the national level. Its implications are not limited to European nations or signatory nations because efforts to harmonize are being made in a number of nations that are not part of the Bologna Process. A program to establish a Latin American and Caribbean Higher Education Area, for instance, was started in Latin America by the Inter-American Organization for Higher Education.

The Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization's Regional Centre for Higher Education and Development is taking steps to create a South-East Asian higher education space by developing a credit transfer system, a quality assurance framework, a diploma supplement, and research clusters (Muigai & Mungai, 2022). In a similar vein, 15 countries in West Africa signed an agreement to promote intraregional student mobility (Cotula, 2013). Many nations around the world are currently implementing harmonization measures that are influenced by the Bologna Process in an effort to bring their universities into compliance with international standards and to create a similar structure for credit transfer systems between universities that are within their zone.

One instance of this is the situation of the nations in the CEMAC region, of which Cameroon is a part. These countless projects across the globe demonstrate how crucial the Bologna Process is to improving higher education not just in Europe but worldwide. The Bologna Process: Its impact on higher education development in Europe and beyond (Crosier and Parveva, 2013) provides a skillful analysis of the Bologna Process's beginnings, growth within the European higher education space, and implications outside the borders of the signatory countries. They provide deep insight into the efforts and process of harmonizing

extremely disparate systems, and their work may be a valuable resource for researchers and policy-makers.

Professionalization and higher education

Higher education has historically served as a catalyst and key component in the global professionalization of service trades (Ajayi, 1996). According to Borgatta & Montgomery (2000, p. 2260), practitioners in other areas as well as members of the general public consider professionals to be *experts with abstract, esoteric knowledge and skills that set them apart from others*. There is not much justification for their status if they don't provide their clientele with specialized resources that are unavailable from other sources. Maintaining that privileged position requires possessing a provable *knowledge base* collection of conclusions, examples of tried-and-true methods, and accumulated tips and tricks that is specific information (Lievore, Pilatti & Teixeira, 2021). This knowledge comes from experience and experimentation in the field. Shulman (1997, p. 154) presents the linkage between knowledge base, university and practice succinctly:

To call something a profession is to claim that it has a knowledge base in the academy broadly construed. It has research and theories. Therefore, professions change not only because rules of practice change, or circumstances change, or policies change, but because the process of knowledge growth, criticism, and development in the academy leads to the achievement of new understandings, new perspectives, or new ways of interpreting the world.

Martin Rein says that the drama and "practice anxieties" for social service providers stem from the fact that their "minor professions" do not appear to have the same sort of rigid technical foundation as, for example, engineering or medicine have (1983, p. 150). He notes that assertions concerning physical relationships are not as strongly confined by contexts of observation as comments about human action (1983, p. 175). Furthermore, there isn't much of an adequate theory regarding cause and effect, and the data used in these investigations turn out to be highly valuable. Values emerge at all points in the analysis, Rein comments.

This does not necessarily signify that the notion of a knowledge base loses all importance in social science professions, but rather that it changes meaning in several interesting ways:

1. First, professionals put as much emphasis on *process* as on *product* – that is, on skill in relating to clients and tailoring services to specific contextual need rather than on the validity of a hard body of technique constituted *ex ante*.
2. Second, emphasis is put as much on the deliberative capacities of the body of professionals and their associations as on the singular judgments rendered by individual experts. What

counts – in this view – is less the formulas that can be applied in a broad range of cases than the ability of professionals to reason about appropriate interventions, to call on a network of colleagues and backstopping institutions that can adjudicate best practice and to constitute in this way credible *communities of practice* (Winans, 2022; Orrill, 1997).

3. Third, increased importance is given as well to means for associating practitioners and clients in the adaptation and development of the knowledge base, through such practices as participatory action research (Xiaofang, 2021; Imel, Brockett & James, 2000; Fueyo & Koorland, 1997). Imel et al (2000, p. 267) conclude that academic institutions would do well to open the debate about the knowledge base to new perspectives and forgotten voices, “allowing for a timely sharing of new knowledge, by voices that reflect the entire spectrum of thought and action”.

Meanings and approaches therefore change, but the notion of a knowledge base retains much of its importance for human service professions, however, without the next element in the triad of requisite conditions for professionalization: dense and supportive institutional networks (Roennfeldt & Byrne, 2021).

Higher Education in Cameroon and Professionalization Policy Dimensions

Professionalization policy in Cameroon higher education is based on five dimensions:

- Support program to the technological and professional components of Higher Education;
- Applied programs through professional schools; Creation of regionally-applied schools;
- Globalization and service-sector oriented programs;
- And a new sector of regionally-applied universities in the form of University Institutes of Technology.

The first dimension refers to programmes aimed at driving the government objectives to improve the capacities of the technological and professional fields of study and to respond to the country’s urgent socio-economic development needs. Within this dimension, the most prioritized domains *are medical, teacher training, and technological education*. This is what brought about the creation of Medical schools in Buea, Douala, and recently Bamenda. For teacher training the upgrading of Higher Teacher Training College (HTTC) Bamenda to a full cycle, the creation of Higher Technical Teacher Training Bamenda (HTTTC) Higher Teacher Training College (HTTC) Maroua and Higher Technical Teacher Training Bamenda (HTTTC) kumba. Technological section brought about the creation of University Institutes of Technology known as IUT in French such as: University institute of Technology Douala, University Institute

of technology in Banjun under the University of Dschang, University institute of Technology Ngaoundere, University institute of Technology Mbalmayo, under university of Yaounde 1. The selection of the above-stated priority programmes was driven by the necessity for the Higher Education System to address certain urgent social development needs of the country during the post economic crisis and Structural Adjustment Programs years.

The second dimension refers to applied programmes that existed in the Cameroon Higher Education System from its initial inception through professional schools and institutes which had been tailored to respond to specific development needs of the country. These are the cases of agriculture, public works, administration, and diplomacy, Journalism, Translation and Interpretation. This dimension of professionalization involved increasing capacities of these establishments and diversifying their programs offerings.

The third dimension follows the necessity to create higher education institutions with programs that provide value to an existing and dominant economic activity of a specific locality or addressing certain urgent problems. This includes the Institute of Fine Arts at Nkongsamba and Fumban, Institute of Sahel under University of Maroua. The rationale observed behind the creation of these institutes was that the education and training offered in the institutes be aligned to the rich cultural and artistic activities of the locality.

The fourth dimension is depicted by the explosion of so-called “market friendly” and business programmes such as Business Administration, Commerce, Accounting, Management, Banking and Finance (Buea, SOA all have specialized programmes. Also, private higher education as in their HND, BTS and degree programmes). The creation of the Higher Institute of Commerce and Management (HICM) in the University of Bamenda and the ESSEC Douala, takes control of these programs.

The fifth dimension is about a new sector of regionally-applied universities in the form of University Institutes of Technology. College of Technology in Bamenda, College of Technology Buea, each having specialized focus, these are the only institutes that exhibit programme differentiation which is that the one in Douala is about industrial engineering, Ngaoundere in food processing and the one in Mbalmayo is on wood Processing. Others suffer what we call programme ISOPHORMISM- that’s copying the programmes of others, forexample, the college of technology in Bamenda is the same with that of Buea (Sup Infos, 2010).

Universities were required to define, in consultation with other stakeholders, the local market needs, involve professionals in the conception of programs, define prerequisites for admission into various professional programs, and develop teaching staff recruitment profiles

in order to achieve this goal. A variety of professional programs have been introduced within the universities as a result of the reforms. Women and Gender Studies, Accounting, Banking and Finance, Nursing, Medical Laboratory Science, Chemical Processes Technology, Materials Science, and Journalism and Mass Communication are a few examples offered at the University of Buea (Njeuma, 1993).

The graduate of any African tertiary institution is therefore, in the words of Kassam (1988), be: (a) One who is significantly playing his/her full roles in the economic development of the immediate and external society; one who participates fully and meaningfully in the social, civil, political, and cultural activities of the community; (c) One who lives a self-fulfilling and optimal lifestyle; (d) One who is highly resistant to any form of oppression, exploitation. This can only be achieved through professionalization of programmes that will enable graduates to have specific skills. The BMD System calls on all programmes to involve the following elements: CM (Lectures) TD (Tutorials) TP (TravauxPractique) and TPE (Travail personnel des Etudiant). Consequently, this brings about learners' autonomy and set the pace for professional insertion and self-employment. It is in this wise a Chinese adage holds: "You tell me I forget; you show me, I remember and you involve me, I learn". Thus, professionalization entails involving the students into programmes in such a way that they have work-place experience that enables them to be integrated into a profession.

The Human Capital Theory (1964, 1993, 3rded, 2005)

The idea that people gain skills and knowledge to raise their worth in the job market was first put forth by Nobel Laureate Theodore W. Schultz and developed by Nobel Laureate Gary Becker. The three basic methods for acquiring human capital are education, experience, and training, with education being the most important for most people. New knowledge and abilities can be acquired more easily through education, which boosts productivity. This rise in productivity frees up resources to produce new innovations, ventures, and riches, ultimately leading to higher economic growth. Education is a *public good* since it helps both the individual and society as a whole (Sebola, 2022). According to Wright (2021),

The twentieth century can be thought of as the "human capital century". The twentieth century became the human capital century because of wide-ranging changes in business, industry, and technology that increased the demand for particular cognitive skills. The early twentieth century rise of big business and large retail, insurance, and banking operations, for example generated increased demand for literate and numerate office workers (p.88).

Gary Becker, an educator and sociologist, defined human capital as *the pool of skills, knowledge, and character traits that are manifested in the capacity to execute work in a way that generates economic value* (1964, 1993, 3rd ed, 2005). It is a skill that a worker develops via training and experience. It is a crucial idea in social and economic theory. The idea behind human capital is that investments in people may be at least as beneficial to the economy as those in buildings and machinery. This quickly introduces the idea that investing in education is a critical approach.

Becker (2005, p. 1), whose Noble Prize in 1992 was partly for his work on human capital, writes that *Education and training are the most important investment in human capital*. He says that “the human capital approach considers how the productivity of people in market and non-market situations is changed by investments in education. Becker (2005, p. 1) notes that “the earnings of more educated people are almost always well above average...” He gives an example of the U.S economy where most of the gross national product is given to the information sector, and says that it is obvious that knowledgeable people are the driving force. According to Becker, schools are the key elements in human capital, developing and distributing knowledge, providing skills and attitudes for the labour market. This is because of rapid changes in technology, business, finance and industry, with a consequent need for employees who are highly professional. According to Moghtader (2021), *many nations are beginning to realise and recognise this link between higher education and the national economy and are investing in a better higher education to be able to produce people with the skills and capabilities to fit the new knowledge economies*.

Human capital theory associated with Gary Becker asserts that education creates skills which facilitate higher levels of productivity amongst those who possess them in comparison with those who do not. Education is costly but brings associated benefits which can be compared with its costs in much the same way as happens with any investment project. We notice from Becker’s view of human capital that human beings can be viewed as capital and that one can invest in them through education and training so that their output can improve both qualitatively and quantitatively. Becker and other proponents of the human capital theory like Mincer (1994) believe that a worker’s income increases as his level of education and experience in the field increases. The worker’s salary should in other words reflect the amount of his input or contribution to the production of the goods and services that generate the general income of the company or enterprise where he works. Becker also distinguishes between ‘specific’ and ‘general’ human capital.

The knowledge and abilities that are specifically relevant to a specific employer or industry are known as specific human capital. Despite the fact that all employers can benefit

from general human capital like literacy. If employees only possess a restricted set of skills and information, they run the danger of losing their value to other businesses and employers if the company to which they are helpful shuts down.

Opportunity costs and the idea of the forgone alternative are other concepts used by human capital theorists. They contend that the price of education includes more than just the resources used to fund it. The opportunity costs associated with forgoing opportunities in order to devote time and pursue education can also be used to calculate the cost of education. People who are impatient and pass up possibilities do not advance to certain levels, and as a result, their incomes are poor, reflecting their educational backgrounds. The job market rewards individuals who can be patient and forsake other possibilities to gain particular skills and more specialized knowledge, particularly in terms of levels of employability and pay.

Education also affects employment diversely. The amount of education (higher education) an individual receives not only affects his earnings, but the quality of his employment as well. In his book *Studies in Human Capital*, Jacob Mincer (1994) stated that educated workers have three advantages relative to less educated workers: high wages, greater employment stability, and greater upward mobility in income. Increased earnings by workers with higher education levels are a result of two factors. First, as discussed earlier, increased human capital results in higher productivity that allows workers to extract higher wages. Second, increased education increases labour force participation, decreases the probability of unemployment, and decreases job turnover. The result is that highly educated workers labour a greater number of hours annually for higher hourly wages than their less educated labour market competitors.

The negative relationship between education and unemployment exists due to two factors: more efficient job searching and increased job-specific human capital among those with higher levels of education. Mincer (1994) explains why more educated workers have lower unemployment. *The more informed the job search, the more likely is a successful job match, hence the longer are workers likely to stay on the next job.* In the same study, Mincer finds out that educated workers engage in higher levels of training specific to the firm, making workers more valuable to their firms, thereby reducing the probability to involuntary job turnover, especially when the training is initiated by the firm and not by the employees.

Summarily, human capital theorists like Becker, Mark Blaug, Mincer and many others assert that education creates skills which facilitate higher levels of productivity amongst those who possess them in comparison with those who do not. Education even though costly, brings about benefits which can be compared with its costs in the same way as with any investment

project. The human capital theory draws links between higher education and employability of graduates in terms of professional or more specialized skilled education that can or should lead to a higher employability of graduates in the sense that the more skills and knowledge graduates have in a profession, the higher the probability of being hired, and the higher the probability of maintaining work or finding new work where need be. The amount of skills and knowledge the individuals have through education will directly affect the general level of productivity in a country that is the gross national product (GNP), and lead to economic growth.

Gruzina, Firsova & Strielkowski (2021) are of the opinion that the ability of a country to apply modern technology to agricultural and industrial production is determined largely by the quantity of its human capital. In spite of the great efforts made to improve on education in developing countries, there is still shortage of human capital because a large part of the adult population lack the skilled labour required for modern technology in agriculture and industrial production. This according to Deming (2022) is due partly to “the impact of a diploma cult in many African countries to the detriment of the acquisition of basic skills and knowledge in science and technology to swell the ranks of poverty in villages and urban centres”. Thus lack of professionalization in our higher learning institutes will lead to lack of the knowledge, skills and attributes required in the labour market, causing the level of unemployment and under employment to rise. Amin, (1999, p. 98) explains: *the low earnings of the poor are partly due to their relatively lower capital investments in education and partly due to labour market discriminations. Education can help alleviate the first but other action is needed to minimize the effects of the second.*

While concurring with Amin here, we think that it is not any kind of education that can lead to conspicuous rise in the levels of employability of graduates. In African countries and in Cameroon in particular, general formal education has proved or is proving inadequate in the world market in our world of advanced technologies and skills. This therefore means that in developing countries, from primary to higher education and even to alternative forms like non-formal education, priority should be placed on skill acquisition. Thus, capital investment in more professional higher education can be very useful as a strategy to fight against unemployment in Cameroon. Skills such as agricultural skills and capabilities, skills in new information and communication technologies, business skills such as in marketing and advertisement could become very relevant in enhancing the employability of graduates either in industries and companies or in self-employment and job creation.

Amin, (1999) equally thinks that education has a direct bearing on the earnings of those who receive it. Psacharopoulos as cited by Amin (1999) found that while having very high returns to primary education, 27%, secondary education is only 15% and 17%, especially in

developing countries, remains a highly profitable venture than in developed countries. Education also has an impact on productivity. Amin, (1999) thinks that the level of earnings as seen above can be used as a direct measure for productivity which best illustrates the impact of education on economic growth. He notes that workers who have had more education are physically more productive than those with less education.

In Cameroon, we believe that if more investment is done on professionalizing higher education, especially on courses, the employability of graduates would have been enhanced and the situation of unemployment improved upon. Lockheed, Jamison and Lau (1980) cited by Amin (1999), compared the agricultural output of farmers with different levels of education concluded that four years of primary education increased productivity of farmers by 8.7% generally and 100% in countries undergoing modernization as in Asia. In Cameroon, primary education is almost attained nationwide with free primary education. The need now is to make good and valuable investment in higher education with emphasis on professionalization, and returns, in terms of employability of graduates could be tremendous. According to Bendickson, Chandler, James & Taylor (2021), the more one learns the more he earns, when he says that *why are we so keen to raise standards in our schools? Because the quickest route to the workless class is to fail your English and math class. In today's world, the more you learn, the more you earn.*

Earlier on, Bendickson et al., (2021) seemed to have been suggesting that it is the role of the government to invest in its citizens in terms of education, so that they can acquire the necessary skills needed to work, when he says;

For 18 years the poorest people in our country have been forgotten by government. They have been left out of the growing prosperity... I want that to change.... We need to change because fatalism and not just poverty and unemployment is the problem we face, the dead weight of low expectations the crushing belief that things cannot get better. I want to give people back the will to win again.

In the case of Cameroon investment is done in higher education, in order to *give people back the will to win again.*

Private Returns to Education

According to the human capital theory, an individual's optimal investment in human capital calls for a consideration of both human and financial capacities, and the prospective utilization of the capital that is being accumulated (Mincer and Polachek, 1974). Consequently, the expectations regarding future family and market activities of individuals play an important role in the determination of the levels and forms of human capital investment, to the extent that labour market earnings are determined by the stock of human capital accumulated by

individuals, a sequence of positive net investments results in an earning power that grows over the life cycle (Fix, 2021). Consequently, educational attainments such as in tertiary education are thought to be plausible causes of earnings differential between individuals. These ideas have given foundation to a huge number of studies on returns to schooling around the world.

Studies carried out earlier on, were mostly to analyze the effect of the length of schooling, experience in the labor market, and the quality of schooling on earnings. Elbanna & Idowu (2021) carried out an extensive survey of studies that had been published on private returns to investments in education in many sub-Saharan African countries. He concluded that, there was a declining pattern of the returns to education over time; with a 24% return on primary education, 18% for secondary education and 11% for higher education. To him, investments in primary education should be emphasized over higher education. His results were put to question by Bennell (1996), revealing theoretical and empirical shortcomings in studies that deal with individual rate of return to education in African countries. While undermining the credibility of Elbanna & Idowu's (2021) aggregate estimates for the continent as a whole, Bennell's arguments led to many other studies of sub-Saharan African countries that did not support Elbanna & Idowu's (2021) result of consistently higher returns to primary education than either secondary or higher education. Manda and Bigsten (1998) and Ghi, Nguyen, Huan & Nguyen (2022) analysed the impact of educational expansion and returns on schooling in Kenya and found that private returns on secondary and tertiary education were high, but close to zero for primary education.

The analysis of the returns on education in Cameroon tends to be scarce, with little empirical evidence. Tafah-Edokat (1998) and Amin & Ntembe (2021), are some of the known studies on private returns to education. Tafah-Edokat (1998), noted that primary education gives the highest returns followed by secondary and tertiary education and concluded that investment in primary education be emphasized and that individuals willing to pursue further education should be made to bear a higher proportion of the cost of such education. His results have been criticized because his sample was mostly civil servants. In their study on higher education and the economic development of African countries, Amin & Ntembe (2021), found that *Investments in higher education provide benefits to the individual and such benefits include higher wages, which may lead to better health and improved quality of life*. Their conclusion is that although private returns to higher education are less than that of primary education, it should nevertheless be noted that higher education does yield an attractive rate of return in Sub-Saharan Africa (11.3%) and to the individual as well (27.8%).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Approach The methodologies used in this study included both quantitative and qualitative analysis. According to Amin (2005), a correlational analysis outlines a crucial requirement for the execution of the regression (pp. 139–140).

Population Samples

This is a survey of recent university graduates who registered with the National Employment Fund (NEF) as job seekers between 2013 and 2023, as well as recipients of the Graduate Employment Program (PED) between 2013 and 2023, who were already working in various capacities. In order to reach a sizable number of university graduates (employed and unemployed) from a variety of higher education institutions around the nation, we decided to use the NEF, a placement agency for HE graduates that collaborate with MINESUP. Additionally, the Graduate Job Program, which meets the employment demands of graduates from higher education, is organized and administered by the NEF. The survey's definition of employability was that it refers to a person's capacity, potential, and ability to obtain, hold onto, and (if necessary) find new, gratifying employment (van Harten et al., 2022; Crossman & Clarke, 2010). Therefore, obtaining employment is just one aspect of employability, coupled with having skills relevant to the labor market and enjoying one's job. Employability also depends on a number of factors that are not related to higher education institutions (HEIs), including social background, which may influence the type of university a person chooses to attend, gender, age, ethnicity, career goals, networks, the standard and availability of work experience, access to information, the peculiarities of job search behavior and recruitment processes, and labor market conditions (Bojadjieva, Cvetanoska, Kozheski, Mujčinović & Gašparović, 2022; Ngwa & Ngonba, 2020).

The population constituted the selected participants, in terms of unemployed graduate job seekers, graduates who have been employed in Small and Medium size Enterprises (SMEs), graduates who are registered with the NEF and employed by the PED, employers of SMEs and large companies in the following sectors: IT, Services & Consultancy, Communication, Microfinance, Environment and Health sectors (Companies employing graduates from the PED), who accepted to participate in filling the questionnaire in the case of the students or being interviewed as in the case of the employers and some content lecturers and administrators in the Ministries of Higher Education, Employment and Vocational Training. This is because workers in the aforementioned sectors can best represent the knowledge economy of the 21st century that formed the background from which this research emanated. In all, we had 532 graduates, with 319 unemployed graduate job seekers and 143 already employed graduates in the aforementioned SMEs and 70 who considered themselves underemployed. At their various

workplaces and at their convenience, the employers, content lecturers, and MINESUP and MINEFOP administrators participated in face-to-face interviews.

Instrument

Attitude scales were used primarily to collect quantitative data from the survey and qualitative data were collected using semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. The questionnaire consisted of 20 questions constructed along the pattern of the Likert scale: strongly agree (SA)= 1, agree (A)=2, uncertain (U)=3, disagree (D)= 4, strongly agree (SA)=5, based on the two variables of this research study: professionalization of courses influence graduates' employability of higher education in Cameroon.

Techniques for Data Analysis

The data collected was analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. The Spearman correlation was the tool used in testing the association between two variables. Spearman Correlation is expressed as:

$$r_s = 1 - \frac{6\sum D^2}{n(n^2 - 1)}$$

Where:

D is the difference between the ranks of X and the corresponding ranks of Y

n= the number of paired ranks

Research Question

The research question that was investigated in this study was as follows: Does professionalization of courses influence graduates' employability of higher education in Cameroon?

FINDINGS

Descriptive Statistics

Figure 1: Professionalization of courses and graduates' employability of higher education

Figure 1a

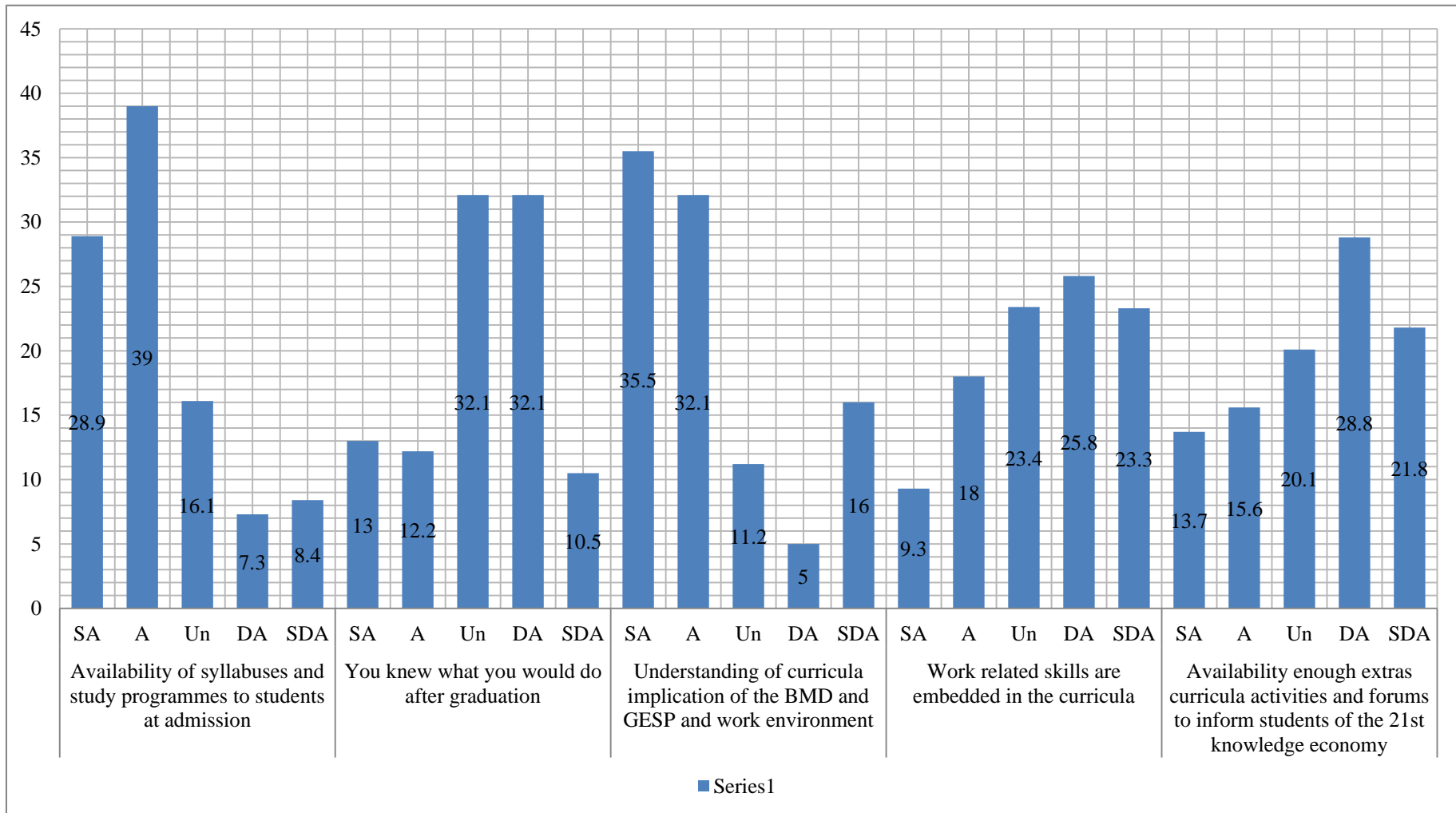


Figure 2b

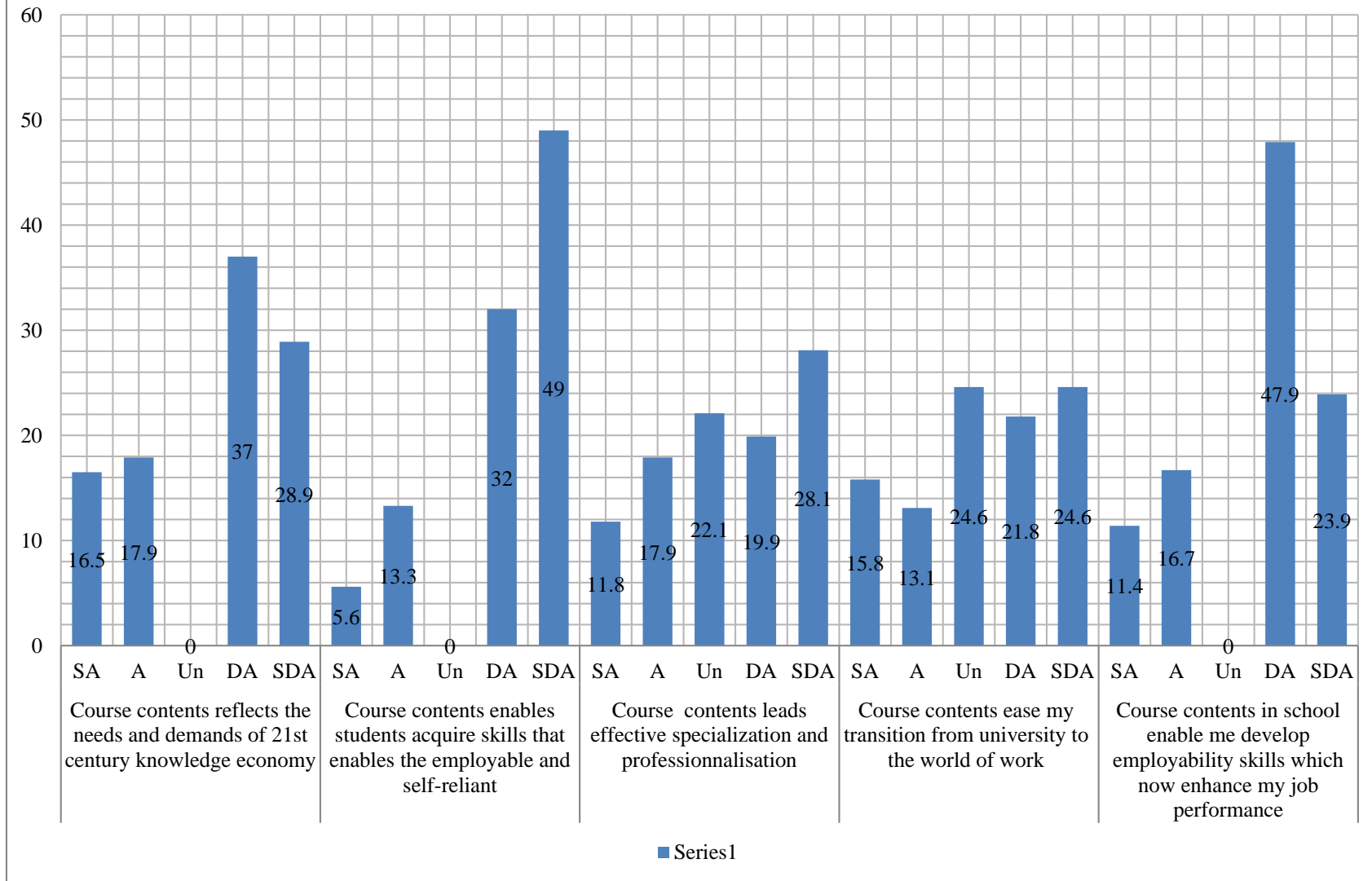
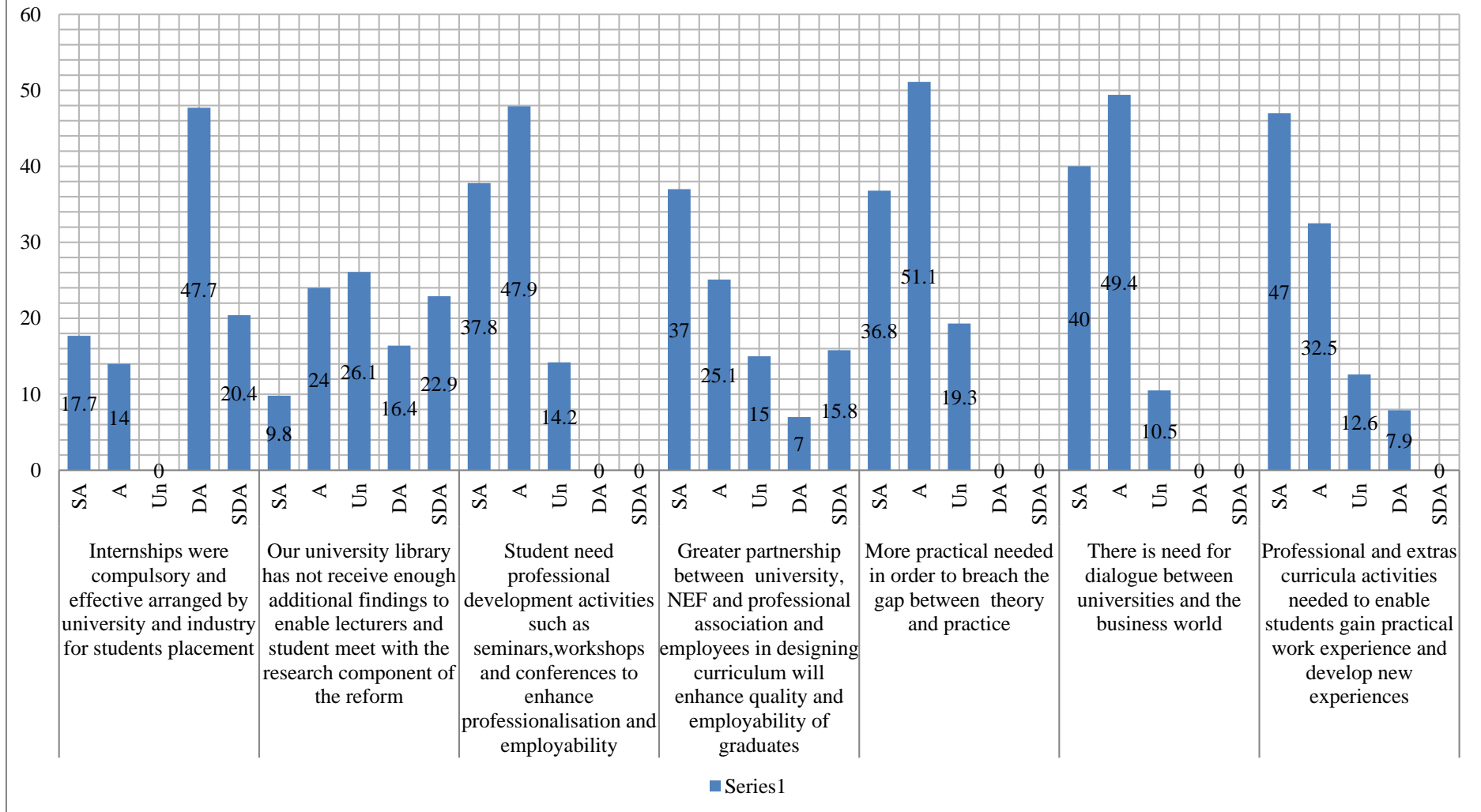


Figure 3c



The items on figure 1 are also graphically represented on the charts that follow the table. Item one on this table is the distribution of respondents according to students who are given access to study plans and syllabuses after they are admitted to the university. 29.6% (154) 40.0% (208) agreed with this statement while 16.5 (86) remained uncertain. 7.5% (39) and 8.4 %(45) did not agree with this statement. This gave us a mean of 2.21 which falls within the region of acceptance. Item two presents the distribution of respondents according to whether after going through these programs, they intentionally chose what to pursue. After graduation, they were aware of their professional options. 13.0% (69) and 12.5% (65) accepted. 32.9% (171) were uncertain while 32.9% (171) and 10.8% (58) did not know what they would do after graduation. The mean, 2.79 falls in the acceptance zone. Even so, many graduates from Cameroonian universities do not know what they would do after graduation. This means that unemployment is high and will continue to grow until measures are taken. Item three presents the distribution of respondents according to whether they are aware on how the GESP, the BMD, and the collaboration between university and the working world will affect courses. 36.3% (189) and 32.9% (171), understood. 11.2% (60) were uncertain, while 5.2% and 16.3% of the respondents disagreed and strongly disagreed with the statement respectively. Based on the data, we got a mean of 2.87, which falls within the region of acceptance. This means that most of the respondents agreed with the statement.

Item four is the distribution of respondents according to whether the curriculum content is work-related. 9.6% (50) and 18.5% (96) agreed with this but 23.4% (125) were uncertain while 26.3% (137) and 23.8% (124) did not agree. The mean was 3.36 accepting the statement. This is indicative of the fact that work related skills are supposed to be embedded into HE curricula so that graduates acquire skills that can help them transit smoothly to work and increase their employability chances. Item five shows the distribution of respondents according to university, there are enough extracurricular programs and activities to keep students current with the needs of the information economy of the twenty-first century. Based on the data, the mean is 3.32 which is found at the acceptance level. Most of the respondents accepted. Even so, a great number of the respondents were uncertain (107) while 153 and 116 disagreed and strongly disagreed. This means that there remains a call and need for adding extra-curricular activities into the curricula of HE so as to prepare them for the knowledge economy after graduation.

Item six is the distribution according to whether the requirements of the knowledge economy in the twenty-first century are reflected in the course curriculum at the university.

Based on the data, the mean is 2.92, found at the acceptance level. This means that most of the respondents supported the statement. Item seven is the distribution of respondents according to students who can gain valuable skills through the course materials, increasing their employability chances and independence. The data gives us a mean of 2.87, found in the acceptance zone. Even so, 170 and 261 disagreed and strongly disagreed with this statement. This could mean that a lot still needs to be done in terms of modifying the course contents to reflect the needs of labor market so that graduates leave HE with the required skills to face the world of work. Item eight presents the distribution of respondents according to whether effective specialization and professionalization are as a result of course content. The data leads to a mean of 3.38 which is accepted. Yet 118 respondents were not sure while 106 and 150 disagreed and strongly disagreed. This implies that even though an accepted number of respondents agreed with the statement, a lot of work still needs to be done on the content of the curriculum to achieve an accepted level of specialization and professionalization.

Item nine presents the distribution of respondents according to whether the transition from university to the working world was aided by the pertinent course material. The statistics produced an accepted mean of 3.14. But a large portion of the respondents still remained uncertain (131) with some disagreeing (116) and strongly disagreeing (131). This implies that even though the mean is accepted, universities must revise and continue to revise contents to reflect market needs so as to help their graduates to transit from University to work more smoothly. Item ten distributes respondents according to whether academic coursework aided in the development of employability abilities that are currently improving job performance 11.7% and 16.7% of respondents supported this statement. 49% and 14.8% disagreed and strongly disagreed. Again we see here that even though the mean of 3.03 falls within the acceptance region, HE course contents are still found wanting in the domain of work skills. Item eleven distributes respondents according to whether the university and industry collaborated to establish internships, which were required as part of the curriculum and provided placement opportunities for students. From the data, the mean is 3.08 which fall at the level of acceptance. Even so, a very large number of respondents (254 plus 109) disagreed and strongly disagreed. This indicates that internships were not effective especially in state universities from where the bulk of our respondents came.

Item twelve is the distribution of respondents according to more furniture in the university library to help students and instructors meet the research component of the reform. Based on data, the mean is 2.86 and is found at the acceptance level. Most respondents accepted

the statement. Yet 139 were uncertain while 88 disagreed and 122 strongly disagreed. Even though the mean is accepted, there are strong indications that HE libraries need to be updated. Item thirteen distributes respondents according to graduates' professional growth and employability; they need more opportunities for seminars, conferences, and workshops. The data gives us a mean of 2.58, which is found at the level of acceptance. Curiously, no respondents disagreed with this fact. Only 76 were uncertain. Therefore, students seriously need professional development activities to enhance their employability chances. Item fourteen distributes respondents according to the quality of programs that will increase, graduates' employability, with more collaboration between our universities, National Employment Fund, professional groups and companies (enterprises). The data gives us a mean of 3.45 which falls within the acceptance range. This implies that most of the respondents agreed with the need of these partnerships in HE curricula designing.

Item fifteen is the distribution of respondents according to whether greater practical application is required in Cameroon's higher education curricula in order to close the gap between theory and practice. Based on the data, the mean is 3.62 found in the acceptance zone. This leads to the conclusion that most of the respondents supported this statement, especially because no respondents disagreed. Only 103 of them were uncertain. Item sixteen distributes the respondents according to the provision of students with more exposure to the workplace, they believe there is a need for increased communication and contact between universities and the business world. According to the data, the mean is 2.64 which is also found at the level of acceptance. This means that majority of the respondents supported this statement. None of the respondents disagreed in anyway. Only 56 of them were uncertain. This implies that more practical dialogue between universities and the business world is needed. Finally, item seventeen presents the distribution of respondents according to the believe that universities should offer more professional extra-curricular projects to help students obtain real-world work experience and learn new abilities, such as project management, soft, and communication skills. Based on the data, the mean is 2.49, falling within the region of acceptance. Therefore, most of the respondents supported this statement.

Inferential Statistics

Hypothesis

Table 1 Table 2: Professionalization of courses and graduates’ employability of higher education

Correlations				
			Professionaliza tion of courses	Employability of Graduates of higher Education
Spearman's rho	Professionalization of courses	Correlation Coefficient	1,000	,807**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	,000
		N	532	532
	Employability of Graduates of higher Education	Correlation Coefficient	,807**	1,000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	.
		N	532	532

***. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).*

The correlation table above presents the correlation between professionalization of courses and employability of graduates of higher education. The correlation coefficient is 0,807 while the level of significant is 0.000. The level of significance is lesser than 0.05 which is the alpha and the standard error margin. The results reveal that professionalization of courses significantly influence employability of graduates of higher education in Cameroon.

DISCUSSION

Data collected on this hypothesis was tested using the Spearman rank correlation and multiple regression. The results confirm that professionalization of courses can influence graduate employability. Statistically, the Spearman rank correlation index stood at 0.807. This positive coefficient reveals that the relationship between professionalization of courses in higher education and graduate employability is significantly high. In other words, looking at the level of significance of 0.00, we can conclusively say that there is no error in admitting that content of higher education curriculum affects graduate employability.

The statistical conclusions discussed previously above are corroborated by literature. Smith (2000), views curriculum as a body of knowledge to be transmitted in an attempt to achieve certain ends in the learners. Bobbit (1928), earlier asserted that this body of knowledge should consist of the needs of the learners. One of the enduring themes in the literature of

employability education has been that it should be in the interest of the learners and that their needs of employment after leaving the university should be considered by curriculum planners and designers before any contents are included into their programmes. (Smith 2000, Bobbit 1928; Tyler 1994). It is also often argued that contents should empower learners to be able to change their social conditions through gainful employment upon graduation. Fordham (1993), explains regrettably that most curricula are ‘top down’ instead of ‘bottom-up’. Top-down curricula do not consider the employment needs of the learners while bottom-up curricula are results of the need analyses of all stakeholders like employers and learners. In the words of Bobbit (1918, p. 42),

The central theme of curriculum is simple. Human life however varied consists in the performance of specific activities. Education that prepares for life is one that prepares definitely and adequately for those specific activities...this requires only that one goes out into the world of affairs and discovers the particulars of which their affairs consist. These will show the abilities, attitudes, habits appreciations and forms of knowledge that men need. These will be the objectives of the curriculum. They will be numerous, definite and particularized. The curriculum will then be the series of experiences which learners must have by way of obtaining those objectives.

Quite early in the history of human civilisation, Bobbit (1918) had already recognized the fact that educational contents should reflect the needs of the learners. Curriculum designers in university should go “*out into the world of affairs and discover the particulars of which their affairs consists*” and include these into their curriculum so that these “*will be the series of experiences which learners must have*” in order to be work ready at graduation. The attention paid to what people need to know in order to work and make their lives livable is what links the views of Bobbit to our work, in that programmes and courses with particular tasks or jobs are analyzed, broken down into their component parts and a list of competencies and skills drawn up and embedded into the curricula. The objectives here will be to develop specific skills and knowledge so that learners can be confident to transition from higher education to the world of work or become self employed by using the skills they have learnt in productive ways. Another employer responding supported the fact that universities should find out from the world of “affairs” what they needed to add to their study programmes to make their students more employable, when he said that:

Universities ought to get the views of industries in terms of feedback in order add what is needed into their curriculum. There ought also to be more cooperation between education and the world of work in talking about what can mutually benefit us. Yet those things only exist on paper and the universities think that we should go begging them.

Tyler (1949), like Bobbit also placed emphasis on the formulation of behavioural objectives which in our case should be the development of competitively employable skills in graduates of higher education. From the points of view of Bobbit and Tyler, we discover that curricula should specifically and definitely reflect the needs of the learners. If we consider the curricula of higher education, which is our particular concern here, we would expect that they reflect the skills and attributes required in the 21st century knowledge economy. In this way, universities will be producing the right human capital in demand in the labour markets of our time.

While on the field (mostly at the NEF), we noticed that those from private universities like the Catholic University of Central Africa, where those affirming that work-based learning activities were embedded in their curricula. The few respondents (50 and 96) strongly agreeing and disagreeing respectively, were mostly from these universities. We also noticed that most of the graduates from these universities who came to the NEF were already underemployed somewhere and were only looking for more gainful employment.

CONCLUSION

This research initially set out to find out the extent to which professionalization in higher educational could influence graduate employability in Cameroon. Employability was mostly viewed in terms of skill development where universities and institutes of higher learning prepare new entrants to the workforce (Stasz, 2001), or developing competency skills in university students during their pursuit of higher education degrees. Graduate employability was also identified as an increasingly important element in the curriculum development process. This trend must have been partially influenced by current economic trends and also due to an increasing realization that graduates should be equipped with skills needed for them to become more employable. In this thesis, various ways through which graduate employability activities could be embedded in He curricula in Cameroon were discussed. Professionalization was also variously operationalized as government policy in HE, content of the curriculum, pedagogic processes and evaluation strategies in HE and their effects on graduate employability.

From our field statistics, supported by literature and theory, one of the major conclusions that could be drawn is that; youths and especially graduate youths are the most affected in terms of unemployment, compounded by the mostly theoretical nature of their higher education which is not well adapted to working in this 21st century knowledge economy. Perhaps the proposal of Ekane (2000:213) could be considered here as the best concluding note. According to Ekane an “*approach to rendering the outdated curricula of the university in general classical faculties in particular to the needs and aspirations of society should be the creation of a centre called the Centr for Institutional Development, CID*”, which to him should amongst other things should: systematically review all course-level processes as a necessary first step towards the acquisition of useable knowledge for the improvement of the quality of undergraduates and professional education and for the development of programmes for the retraining of unemployed graduates on the streets.

RECOMMENDATIONS and FUTURE RESEARCH

At institutional levels, individual universities or departments would have to decide on the most appropriate ways to embed work-based activities in their curriculum, that are well adapted to their university or their departments. Secondly, in this 21st century knowledge economy, it is advisable for all universities and higher education institutes to seriously consider the implementation of boundaryless employability skills across all departments. Skills such as soft skills, team work skills, decision making and problem-solving skills will be very useful in the world of work no matter one’s field of study. It would be interesting to carry out a study to find out the effects of educational mobility and employability.

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