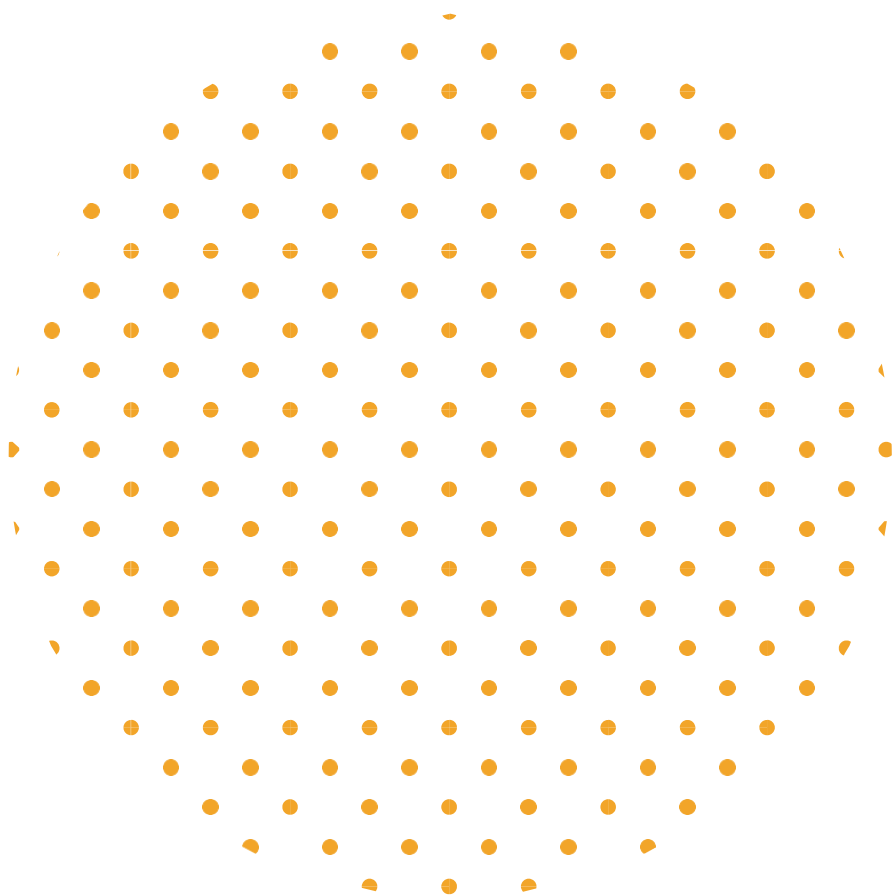


Higher education day

Held on 2 December 2021 on the occasion of the triennial conference of the
Regional Forum of Universities for Capacity Building in Agriculture
(RUFORUM) held in Benin from 25 November to 10 December 2021

Report



**Scholars
Program**



**Université
d'Abomey-Calavi**



Content

1. Background
2. Opening Ceremony
3. Communications
4. Roundtable Discussion
5. Conclusion
6. Appendix

1. Context

Benin hosted the triennial conference of the Regional Forum of Universities for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM) from 25 November to 10 December 2021. This event facilitated the organisation of the first edition of the Higher Education Day on Thursday, December 1, 2021 under the theme: «Higher education and employability of graduates in Benin». The day was organized in the context of national reforms in the higher education sector, recognized for its fundamental role in the production, dissemination and assimilation of knowledge. Given the importance of the sector to nation building, it was timely for its stakeholders to consider strategies and ways to mobilize and address the challenges they face. One of these many challenges that caught enormous attention during the Higher Education Day is related to the employability of young graduates understood as their intrinsic ability to find a job at the end of their training, to stay there and to make a career. The low level of employability resulting in high levels of unemployment and underemployment among graduates has been the subject of considerable discussion. Public and private sector actors, national and international, contributed to the reflection during this activity through communications, panels and debates.

2. Opening Ceremony Cérémonie d'ouverture

It was marked by remarks from individuals invited to the first edition of the Day of Higher Education in Benin.



Rector of the University of Abomey-Calavi

The opportunity of the triennial conference of RUFORUM having favored the organization of this first edition of the Day of Higher Education, the Executive Secretary of the Forum indicated that the conclusions of the discussions will strengthen the practice of dialogue between universities and employers and will build the set of participants from several countries of Africa and the world

In his welcoming address, the Rector of the University of Abomey-Calavi was delighted to host such an event, to share knowledge and experience in order to refine the University's vision and strategies for developing learners' employability.



Professor Adipala EKWAMU

Executive Secretary Regional
Forum for Capacity Building in
Agriculture (RUFORUM)



Mr. Yves Chabi KOUARO

Minister of Secondary Education, Technical and Vocational Training (MESTFP) of Benin

The Minister recalled the importance of the debates that will take place around the main theme of the event, which are part of the reforms undertaken by Benin in order to reduce the mismatch between university training and the needs of the labour market. The Government of the Republic of Benin therefore intends to support initiatives aimed at creating a sufficiently dynamic labour market to help absorb graduates leaving university and training institutions. In turn, they must contribute by the quality of the training they offer to the production of young professionals with the skills sought by employers. The Minister invited the participants to identify the inadequacies of the higher education sector and to formulate recommendations to the various actors to strengthen the employability of young people.

3. Communications

The Higher Education Day was attended by policy-makers, heads of public and private universities, both national and international, lecturers and researchers, business leaders, technical partners and students.

The first highlight of the event was thematic communications.

3.1 Proposals for higher education for graduate employment: private sector perspectives

Bertille GUEDEGBE MARCOS, a Beninese entrepreneur, founder and CEO of Les Fruits Tillou, spoke on behalf of the private sector on the occasion of Higher Education Day. Recalling her own career as a graduate of the Faculty of Agricultural Sciences (FSA) in the late 1980s, having worked as an agricultural engineer and consultant, before leading several entrepreneurial projects, Bertille GUEDEGBE MARCOS reported on her findings as an employer of university graduates from Benin.

She noted shortcomings in academic training and in the placement of students, which mean that they do not always meet the immediate needs of the labour market. These shortcomings relate to courses considered too theoretical and not sufficiently practical, the lack of support for the acquisition of transversal skills useful for integrating a work environment and the lack of consideration for the development of students' entrepreneurial skills.

To resolve these shortcomings, Bertille GUEDEGBE MARCOS recommended to:

- focus during the academic training on supporting students in setting up professional and entrepreneurial projects;
- to develop more knowledge on the quality standards and regulations in force in the fields of university education;
- Strengthen the financial education of students, in particular on the financing capacities of a company;
- promote the acquisition of knowledge about business management by students;
- strengthen the quality of internships and their supervision by teachers and employers;
- invite representatives of companies to participate in university training.

3.2 Proposals for higher education for graduate employment: programmes and projects

Mr Frank KOUYAMI, Head of the Francophone Employability Centre (CEF) within the National Office of the Agence universitaire de la Francophonie (AUF) in Benin, presented the actions that can be implemented by projects and programmes in support of youth employability. Starting from the observation that the unemployment of young graduates in particular that of young women persists in the majority of African countries, the AUF has addressed the question of adapting the training offers to the needs of the labour market so that it can create dignified and decent jobs for young graduates and that of the orientation and the valorization of the research producing wealth and territorial development service. To meet these challenges, the AUF promotes youth entrepreneurship as a process of knowledge creation and know-how, and as a factor of occupational integration.

The strengthening of the employability of young people through the integration of entrepreneurial training in the academic path allows the learner to acquire transversal skills, capacity for innovation and openness to opportunities and more opportunities for integration into employment. The entrepreneurial culture also allows for networking, peer learning or collaboration through mentoring. It promotes the development of skills for responsible citizenship, a commitment to the development of society and the proposal of sustainable solutions to local development issues.

However, the promotion of entrepreneurial culture at university requires a stimulating and open environment, open to the ecosystem of support for innovative entrepreneurship and socio-professional actors. It must be part of a project of establishment validated and endowed with substantial financial means. Such a project must provide for the creation of coworking spaces and incubation programs for student business projects, the introduction of training modules in social and inclusive entrepreneurship, and freeing up working time for students to devote themselves effectively to setting up and managing their business projects.

In order to make a strong contribution to the development of the entrepreneurial culture in the university environment, the AUF highlights its relevant experience, particularly in the implementation of the project Structuring and Accompanying Student Entrepreneurship in the Maghreb (SALEEM) and its other variants in Morocco, Tunisia and Lebanon. This project enabled the adoption of a national status of the student-entrepreneur granted by the Ministry of Higher Education, which demonstrated the importance of recognition in the academic background of the student's business creation project.

In Benin, as part of its new strategy 2021-2025, the AUF through its CEF, will lead the creation and promotion of the national status of the student-entrepreneur, but also the support for the professional integration of students, the development of university-business collaboration, as well as increased support for research to create innovations for development.

3.3 Success and failure factors in higher education development programmes

Professor Sylvie ADOU HOUNZANGBE, teacher-researcher at the Faculty of Agricultural Sciences (FSA) of the UAC and President of the Presidential Cell for Monitoring the Functioning of Schools and Universities presented the elements of reflection on the factors of success and failure of the programs of development of higher education. In her remarks, the communicator focused on the indicators used to measure the implementation of higher education development strategies. Among these is the rate of supervision of students per teacher, which should be 25 students per teacher. At present, this rate is 80 students per 1 teacher on average over the four public universities in Benin.

Another indicator that shows some success in the conduct of university research is the number of publications, which rose from 151 in 2012 to 483 in 2017 and to nearly 1,000 in 2020-21 for the four public universities. However, this indicator does not measure the quality of publications produced by teacher researchers. The implementation of higher education development programmes is also measured by an indicator of the level of infrastructure that students have in place. Measurement data for this indicator are not yet available.

In this case, the communicator also deplors the variability of the indicators from one year to the next, which makes it difficult to really monitor the performance of the higher education sector. For the communicator, the main success factors of higher education development programmes are related to:

- political will, which promotes the development of reforms and development plans for the sector. However, it is necessary to insist on the appropriation of strategy documents by the various actors responsible for their implementation;
- Resource mobilization, which provides funding for activities in the higher education sector. Despite this capacity to mobilize resources, efforts still need to be made to consume these resources, which remain relatively weak;
- improving the institutional governance of higher education, which is then seen as an element that can promote an increase in the capacity for mobilization and consumption of resources.

As for the failure factors, they are relative to :

- massification, which has not been accompanied by structural reforms to accommodate the flow of students and the improvement of the rate of supervision of students by teachers;
- the lack of autonomy of universities in budgetary management, which makes the decision on the use of resources dependent on external factors;
- free higher education for new graduates, resulting in massification, and also reducing the capacity of universities to mobilise resources; the improvement of salary conditions for teachers-researchers, resulting in a reduction in the government's recruitment of new teachers.

Finally, the communicator invites stakeholders in the higher education sector to contribute to ongoing reforms to improve the governance of the sector and enhance the employability of students.

3.4 Reforms, financing of higher education and employability of graduates

Dr Cyrille GOUGBEDJI, lecturer and researcher at the Faculty of Law and Political Science of the University of Parakou, Second Deputy Secretary General of the Government and Coordinator of the Committee for the Monitoring of Reforms in Higher Education, Research and Innovation presented a paper to further inform the audience on the reforms underway in the higher education sector. These reforms are justified by the need to make higher education sufficiently suited to promote the employability of young graduates. The presentation of the state of the sector is a way for the communicator to enlighten the opinion on the basis of these reforms. These include, but are not limited to:

- contrast between the number of students and teachers, previously presented around the rate of supervision and massification;
- the quality of training, the content of which may be found in certain contexts that are out of step with the development objectives of Benin, and which has as a corollary the inadequacy of training offers with the needs of the labour market;
- the support system that produces teachers who do not develop professionally and who lack follow-up to advance in grades, and professors of magisterial rank whose admission to retirement creates deficits in the training and research capacity of the university;
- the lack of funding for higher education and the lack of use of scarce resources for the implementation of genuine higher education development programmes, including the construction of infrastructure, laboratory equipment or continuing training of trainers.

Based on these findings, proposals for reforms in higher education in Benin have been formulated to promote the achievement of two objectives: ensuring quality higher education and putting higher education and scientific research at the service of national development. To promote the achievement of these objectives, the main points of government action focus on the improvement of teaching human resources, the improvement of the framework, Streamlining and guiding the funding of higher education with:

- the pre-qualification to practise the profession of teacher of the higher education; recruitment in higher education;
- internal evaluation;
- collaboration with foreign teachers;
- the control mechanism in higher education;
the continued employment of certain teachers entitled to exercise their pension rights; and
- the legal framework for higher education.
-

This presentation of the general framework of ongoing reforms in higher education in Benin is an indication of future actions to strengthen the employability of graduates. Indeed, the improvement of the institutional framework of universities, student leadership skills and funding of the higher education sector will help to reduce the deficiencies noted and to provide content and training conditions conducive to the development of graduates' professional skills.



4. Round Table

The theme of the Higher Education Day afternoon roundtable was “The Need for Higher Education to Produce More Jobs”. The following panelists were present:

- Professor Brice Augustin SINSIN, Honorary Rector of the University of Abomey-Calavi and Director of the Laboratory of Applied Ecology (LEA) of the Faculty of Agricultural Sciences (FSA);
- Professor Nelly Carine KELOME, Vice-Rector in charge of Interuniversity Cooperation, Partnerships and Professional Integration of the University of Abomey-Calavi;
- Professor Anne FLOQUET, Research Teacher at the FSA and Director General of the Centre Universitaire d'Enseignement Professionnel at the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MESRS);
- Professor Wilfrid Expédit VISSIN, Director of the High School of Hospitality and Tourism (HEHT) of the University of Abomey-Calavi;
- Serge ABIHONA, Executive Director of the incubator UAC Stratup Valley of the Abomey-Calavi University Foundation.



The round table discussions covered topics such as the financing of higher education and research, the professionalisation of training provision, improving the performance of the sector, university cooperation as a lever for the development of higher education and entrepreneurship to increase the youth employment rate.

It is important to remember that UAC graduates who take the path of university research are able to integrate either into teaching or into research projects and programmes at national and international level.

However, because of the small number of those who follow this path, it is necessary to carry out actions to offer support to those who follow the classical or general courses and who may have difficulties of integration into employment.

An action to be carried out in this direction consists in the proposal of so-called vocational training offers, allowing the graduate to learn as much in theory as in practice.

The example of the Hotel and Tourism sector was highlighted thanks to its high rate of insertion into employment after graduation. It is reassuring if there is still a need to offer training opportunities which can meet the needs of the labour market. Thus, if the labour market in Benin seems to be governed by small individual farms, the University should be able to help train young people capable of contributing to this market through new approaches to operation and production.

The essential condition for achieving this will then be to make available training offers the technical and technological support necessary for learners to acquire during their training the skills necessary for an easy adaptation to the market requirements. Another action consists in the introduction of training and support for the development of soft skills. These can relate to professional behaviour, adaptability, communication and resilience, which enable young graduates to integrate despite holding so-called general degrees.

Alongside the so-called traditional courses, the University will then have to focus more on individual support or in small groups to follow the trajectory of learners, help them to build a professional project in response to an identified need on the labour market and to carry out experiments according to their professional objectives. A better framing of the work placement will then have to make this tool a means of acquiring knowledge and know-how useful to the professional development of the student. In this regard, it was recalled that the University's vocation is not to find or create a job for all the graduates it delivers on the market. This would require a sufficiently dynamic economic fabric to absorb this mass of workers.

It is for this purpose that a third approach, that of entrepreneurship, has been presented to the public. It offers two interests, that of fostering the creation of enterprises capable of employing university graduates, and that of preparing young people to be, if not good entrepreneurs, at least knowledgeable employees capable of supporting business leaders in achieving their business objectives. By setting up university incubators, higher education institutions can thus make a considerable contribution to increasing the survival rate of enterprises created by young people and at the same time the capacity of graduates to absorb them into the labour market.

University cooperation has been presented in this regard as a means to create opportunities through support for projects and programmes and the development of innovation frameworks for capacity building of young learners. The UAC Startup Valley incubator is one of the fruits of this cooperation, as is the Mastercard Foundation Scholarship Program at the University of Abomey-Calavi. Through its project to support the transition to employment of young fellows, the Centre develops individual and collective services and support for the preparation and support for the professional integration of learners at the University of Abomey-Calavi.



5. Conclusion

The Higher Education Day allowed speakers, panelists, discussants and other participants to ask themselves the urgent questions for a harmonious development of higher education for the employability of graduates. These issues can be summarized as follows:

- Does the exemption of tuition fees for new graduates leading to massification contribute to a good training of students?
- Can the University produce immediately employable graduates?
- Does the economic fabric of Benin present enough companies capable of absorbing the mass of university graduates?
- Can the University reform itself to the point of offering other services in addition to training and research to facilitate the employability of young people?
- The answers to these questions can be found in several respects in this report and in the statement on the role of higher education in improving the employability of graduates in Benin. They can also be developed through practice, thanks to reforms in the higher education sector and the leadership of the governing bodies that will decide to position the University as a true actor of the socio-economic development of Benin.

6. Annex

Annex 1 : Statement on the role of higher education in improving the employability of graduates in Benin



On the occasion of the triennial conference of the Regional Forum of Universities for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM) held in Benin from 25 November to 10 December 2021, The National Universities of Benin organized the Higher Education Day on the theme “Higher Education and Employability of Graduates in Benin”.

Because of the essential role they play in the production, dissemination and assimilation of knowledge, know-how, universities are at the forefront of nation-building by bringing thousands of graduates into the job market each year.

The question of the employability of these graduates, which covered all the debates on the occasion of the day of higher education, tackles the intrinsic capacity of these graduates to obtain a job, to evolve autonomously in the labour market, keep a job and pursue a career. Essentially, the employability of a graduate is therefore assessed as one of his or her abilities to integrate and progress in a professional situation. However, independently of the State's duty to provide consistent support to training and research institutions, It is useful to note the responsibility of higher education institutions for creating the conditions conducive to the development of skills for the employability of graduates. In this regard, the National Universities of Benin recognize that it is their duty to provide in their policies and strategic plans, actions aimed at promoting the professional integration of their learners.

The National Universities of Benin agree to base these actions for the development of skills for the employability of graduates on:

- the alignment of training provision and development priorities in Benin, taking into account the real needs of the labour market;
- the involvement of employer representatives in academic training;

the integration of training modules on the personal development and professional skills of learners;

- the importance of the orientation of learners from secondary school to university and to job-creating sectors;
- Offering professional skills certification services;
- support in obtaining and supervising academic and professional internships;
- the creation of pathways for alternance training, validation of prior learning and continuing training;

- the development of learners' entrepreneurial skills;
- the support to the ideation and the assembly of the projects of enterprises of the learners;
- the exploitation of research results for the creation of professional opportunities.

Convinced of the need to carry out these actions in a concerted approach, the National Universities of Benin call for the support of the Government and the Parliament for the development of the legislative and regulatory framework for multi-disciplinary collaboration actors and multi-sectors in support of the achievement of the objectives of vocational integration of graduates and the reduction of youth unemployment. In this context, they openly welcome the reforms underway in the higher education sub-sector and commit themselves to taking action to make them operational in order to improve the governance, funding capacity of training and research, the recruitment of high-performance teachers to increase student supervision, the promotion of teachers and the monitoring of ethics within universities.

They also encourage and express their willingness to collaborate with technical and financial partners, both national and international, for the implementation of projects and programmes that contribute to the achievement of results in favour of the employability of graduates.

Read at the Idriss Déby Itno Amphitheatre on December 2, 2021 by the Rector of the University of Abomey-Calavi, Professor Félicien AVLESSI.



**Scholars
Program**



**Université
d'Abomey-Calavi**