



Transforming higher education - the road tailored to meet the development needs from The National University of Agriculture



Context

Universities in developing countries in general and in particular in Benin are set up to meet the training needs of technical executives in different professional fields. In many cases these universities were created without due preparation and the minimum infrastructure and facilities necessary for proper functioning is limited. However, like others, these universities must respond to the three key missions that are training, research, and community services. The newly established National University of Agriculture (UNA), set up in 2013 in Benin is a typical example. UNA works to fulfil the three missions as well.



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University Development Compass

UNA has a Strategic Development Plan (PSD, 2018–2023) which outlines the framework for actions in all areas of intervention. This is a relevant tool highly appreciated by Technical and Financial Partners (PTF) and governmental institutions. The problem at this level is the great difficulty in mobilizing financial resources to roll out the PSD forecasts as planned. Even with these challenges, to guarantee an effective and rapid development of UNA, we pay attention to the quality and the relevance of expenditures as well as optimal and mutual use of infrastructure, facilities and human resources. In addition, our governance favors as much as possible the participatory approach in decision-making on major issues of the institution. Core to our efforts is that that training is needed to strengthen the management capacities of actors, and officials at various levels to help UNA achieve its rapid development.





Training approach to better meet the needs of the labour market

Training offers must consider market needs to increase graduates' employment success. UNA strives to keep up with the changing employability and self-employment needs of graduates. This requires the establishment of multi-actor networks around chosen value chains with regard to the areas of training, to keep active these networks of entrepreneurs who serve at the same time as places for internships, practices and educational outings. But these networks also make it possible to collect the professional concerns of entrepreneurs as well as their specific needs for personnel, training, and specific advice. This continuous feedback from the field makes it possible to review our training offers or programmes as needed, but also makes it possible to take some of the professional concerns as research subjects either for dissertations or for applied research themes.

In order to prepare graduates for self-employment, which is increasingly desired for them, it is necessary to create at UNA an incubation system for entrepreneurship for young people. This need, whose importance no longer needs to be demonstrated, requires financial resources which the internal budgets cannot afford so far. Significant external support is therefore needed to address this aspect of training which is currently very necessary to increase employability and strengthen the capacity of self-employment of graduates of UNA and as such meet the demands of Beninese government and the broader labour market.

Research at the Service of Local Development

Research oriented towards the resolution of relevant professional constraints is what is most recommended to support the development and strengthening of local linking on the sites where universities are located. UNA is currently setting up a framework for reflection to motivate researchers to concentrate their research activities on solving the problems of agricultural entrepreneurs in order to boost the sector while strengthening collaboration between UNA and relevant actors. This strategic axis leads to a better orientation towards applied research. To support this UNA initiative, a competitive research fund has been set up to develop locally identified topics and





relevant professional concerns. For this, financial resources are being mobilized locally and internationally.

Community Services

The role of community service, although recommended and very relevant, is often poorly provided by universities in developing countries in general. UNA aims to strengthen the system in place to support graduates who have just finished training, during training and during the first years of their professional life, but also and above all to organize modular training, training in relevant fields and advice to producers. These community services are open to a wide audience including school dropouts, young people, women, and people from disadvantaged backgrounds to help them develop the capacity to create an activity, and production units to support themselves. In this activity, the need to set up application surfaces and demonstration units as well as training facilities are among needs for which UNA is mobilizing partnerships. Financial and technical support to strengthen the capacities of UNA is desired to gain efficiency and wide impact.

Institutional Strengthening

To enable UNA better support the government in designing agricultural policies and strengthening the economy with more agricultural entrepreneurs injection in the system, it is necessary that managers and all staff be trained in leadership and behavioural change to break with some old poor practices. There is however need for infrastructural, technical, and financial support to bring UNA up to standard, and to support its institutional transformation process. The development of inter-university partnerships and with experienced institutions to set up large-scale collaborative projects to support the development of UNA are areas envisaged to accelerate the development of this young training institution. The UNA expresses its full availability to collaborate with others.

About the Author

Prof. Bruno A. DJOSSA, PhD since 2007, and Full Professor since July 2019, is an ecologist in the field of management and conservation of natural resources and ecosystem services provided by animals, conservation of socio-economically relevant





agroforestry tree species, assessment, management, and conservation of wildlife in natural habitats, and studying domestication of selected games. He has conducted studies on assessment of agrochemical pollution of beekeeping and pollination services for food security. He has published on various aspects in his area of expertise. He teaches various courses including animal ecology and dynamics; wildlife assessment and conservation; wildlife pathology; and conservation and use of ecosystem services. He was Director of the School of Tropical Forestry (EForT) from 2015 until 2021 and is currently holding the position of Vice-Chancellor of UNA in Benin since October 2021. He belongs to several social organizations where he participates in liking.

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