



# Transforming higher education - the sure road, yet less traveled: sharing experiences from The University of Bamenda



## Background

The issues surrounding higher education across the African continent are numerous and include relevance, access, gender balance, massification, underfunding and brain drain. While the societal needs are rapidly changing, Universities are also adapting by making alterations to management regimes, curriculum content and relevance in training programs in order to meet the expectations of the job market and leverage the students with the capacity to build and run start-ups. This is not a straightforward task as it is fraught with a number of threats and challenges. In this piece I share the experiences at the University of Bamenda since it embarked on transformation activities three years ago. Bear in mind that The University was only established in 2010 and went operational in 2011!



Prof. Theresia Nkuo-Akenji,  
Vice Chancellor, University of  
Bamenda, Cameroon

## Transformation strategies at The University of Bamenda

The University of Bamenda is a public institution funded largely by the State through the national treasury. Transforming it therefore means that the principal actors must have a grasp of national policies and development priority domains to have traction among the stakeholders. The first step we took was to develop the Strategic Development Plan (SDP) of the institution to cover the period upto 2025. This SDP encompasses the projected growth trajectory of the institution aligned to the national development plan of Cameroon. The SDP was elaborated to mobilize various government departments including the Ministry of the Economy, Planning and Development, Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Higher Education. At the Town Hall event in the capital city of Yaoundé where the plan was unveiled, the University invited

Cameroon's Development Partners and all echelons of the State political apparatus. This politicking gave the SDP a resounding approval and its content laid bare for potential strategic partners of the institution to exploit. This, coupled with the leading role the University played in elaborating the national contribution of Cameroon towards the World Food Summit 2021, opened inroads for the institution into the centre of decision making at the highest levels including the Ministry of Agriculture. This is also reflected in the relatively convincing ease with which the Cameroon Government signed the RUFORUM Charter brought forth by this writer following clearance from the Presidency of the Republic. The SDP is the institution's guiding compass. The present SDP has a number of features that guarantee the transformational ambitions of the institution and these are:

1. **Financial Prudence:** Over the past three years, the University has cut back significantly on its budgetary projections in order to bring its expected annual expenditure in line with its projected income. The previous philosophy of drawing budgets on an annual projected incremental basis based on national growth projections rather than the means available to the institution was abandoned. This has significantly reduced the debts of the institution and constrained managers to commit budgetary lines to spend only to the level of income that the institution can make. Whilst this approach was radical and initially fiercely resisted, support from the University's Governing Council has led to steady growth at a pace that is manageable and annual debt reduction attainable.
2. **Income Generating Activities (IGA):** The University has taken advantage of the administrative reforms recently promulgated by the Cameroon Government to allow public institutions set up consultancies and limited liability companies. The University of Bamenda is the principal shareholder and limited partner of the Company UBa Ventures. The University retains 30% of all proceeds from contracts won by UBa Ventures; staff members as well as external partners of the institution are shareholders. An example of a very successful activity UBa Ventures has engaged in is in improving the local agricultural farm to market food supply chain. The University purchases food directly from the rural farmers through UBa Ventures which is then supplied to the students University restaurant. The IGA entity functions completely as a company without recourse to any administrative interference from the University management. The University with participation of UBa Ventures is in the experimental phase of wheat production on its own lands through the College of Technology where agricultural training is lodged. It is worth mentioning that income is also generated from the University of Bamenda Printing Press.
3. **Flexibility and Assiduity in Decision Making:** The University of Bamenda has developed Standard Operational Procedures (SOP) through a bottom-up approach culminating in a workshop where the SOP was adopted. The SOP elaborates simplified procedures to avoid the bureaucracy and hurdles in treating administrative documents. At the heart of the SOP lies digital transformation including the launching of Learning



Management Systems (LMS), Management Information Systems (MIS) to cover financial transactions, staff careers and all student records and online meetings. The investment in the optic fibre network of the institution is bearing fruits in this regard. The massification process is also rendered easy notably in asynchronous mode.

4. **Innovation Centre:** The University of Bamenda now has a functional Innovation Centre, *Institutional Incubator*. This has attracted seed money to the tune of 150 million francs CFA from the Ministry in charge of Small and Medium Size Enterprises (SMEs) and the Ministry in charge of Mines, Technology and Innovation. The operational Unit of the Innovation Centre is the College of Technology. Presently, the RUFORUM grant of \$50,000 to support projects of students that can eventually grow into full flesh businesses and support curriculum transformation, is managed through this Incubator. Closely tied to the Innovation Centre is curriculum reform. Over the past three years the University has been reforming its curriculum by engaging stakeholders to participate in the design of courses. Also previous work experiences and past professional non-academic qualifications allow the University to admit students in the technology fields notably food processing and farm and medical equipment maintenance for a TVET-style training. The agriculture stream of College of Technology (COLTECH) is under review at the moment. The new curriculum should address global issues of the green economy, second generation agriculture, problem-based learning in the rural food supply chain, food processing and post-harvest technologies, and establishing start-ups in agriculture. The emphasis must shift from a textbook focus to skills development with credits earned through structured field-based programs and resolution of clearly articulated problems in the farming community. This transformation that begets staff and students to put on boots and soil their hands more often shall leave no corner of the institution untouched.

## Challenges

The transformation landscape at The University of Bamenda sketched above is faced with a number of challenges. Human resource development requires investment in time and financial resources to achieve the change in mindset. Turning persons away from old routine practices is a major challenge, yet it creates opportunity for management to be more resolute in its determination to bring about reforms. Being a public institution, the University cannot seek to raise revenue through fees increment as this is determined by national policy. Challenges imposed by changing climate such as shortage in water supply and interruptions in power supply are external to the University and call for more innovative thinking; this requires more financial inputs.





**About the Author**

*Prof Theresia Nkuo-Akenji is the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Bamenda (2015 to present) having served as Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Dean of the Faculty of Science, Dean of the Faculty of Health Sciences, Vice Dean and Head of Department all at the University of Buea, Cameroon. She is the current Board Chair of RUFORUM and Vice President of the Association of African Universities (AAU). Prof Akenji is the founder of the Cameroon Interdisciplinary Research Consultancy (CIRECON). She is a Parasitologist/Immunologist specializing on tropical diseases and has served on Cameroon's National Elections Observatory. Website: [www.uniba.cm](http://www.uniba.cm)*

This is our Seventeenth issue in a series of articles we are releasing as part of the RUFORUM Seventh Africa Higher Education Week and RUFORUM Triennial Conference Digests. More information about the conference is available at <https://www.ruforum.org/Triennial2021/>. Join the Conversation on Social Media using our Official hashtag **#AfricaHEWeek2021**.

