

Survey of current status of distance education in Cameroon

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Executive Summary

This Survey Report is a response to a request made by the Ministry of National Education of the Republic of Cameroon to the President of The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) to assist in the implementation of "distance education initiatives to be undertaken by the Cameroon".

The Survey was conducted from 16th - 24th February, 1998.

The Republic of Cameroon recognises the importance of education in the overall development of the country. The education system is being re-structured at all levels to meet the country's needs. A National Forum (22nd-27th May, 1995) which was convened to discuss educational issues proposed ways of improving the quality of education. The two major recommendations were the establishment of free compulsory basic education and the training of competent teachers. Currently pre-university education lasts thirteen (13) years: six (6) years of primary and seven (7) years of secondary school education. This is followed by tertiary education in various institutions.

The concerns of educationists and the public at large included the lowering of education standards due partly to lack of teachers and lack of access to education at various levels. Access decreases and facilities worsen as one goes up the ladder. Non-availability of qualified teachers aggravates the situation. One of the greatest needs of the nation, therefore, is to train teachers for the empty classrooms dotted all over the country.

The Ministry of National Education had attempted to solve the problem through Distance Education from 1967 to 1994. The programme targeted both qualified and unqualified teachers and it sought to upgrade the qualifications of professional teachers and provide non-professional teachers with basic professional training. The programme failed mainly because of poor funding and non-availability of appropriate learning materials.

This was the earliest attempt at using distance education to solve the manpower problems of the country. The Ecole Normale Superieure (ENS) has a distance education programme which aims at improving the competence of teachers to teach French as a second language. The programme has its own problems. The most efficient distance education programme in the country is that of the University of Dschang in agriculture. The management and organisation of the programme is similar to any programme one could find anywhere. Apart from these formal programmes there are other informal short-term programmes meant to achieve specific goals. They constitute civic education and/or public awareness programmes carried on the radio or television. These are funded by specific Ministries or organisations such as CIFFAD and CIDA. One was struck by the programme being organised by a Teachers Subject association for science teachers in secondary schools. It is, therefore, apparent that there are few isolated distance education programmes in the Cameroon.

The Government of the Cameroon has shown keen interest in distance education to enable the country to increase access to education at various levels. Emphasis was placed on post-secondary courses for:

1. Training teachers with specialisation in pre-school, primary, language studies, science, vocational and technical education.

2. Legal studies - lawyers, magistrates, court registrars and other legal specialists.
3. Health programmes for doctors, nurses and other health personnel.
4. Engineers of various types.

Other educationists also expressed the need to train middle-level personnel in Gender Studies, Family Life and Population Studies, Environmental Education and Business Studies in addition to the subject areas already identified. They see distance education as an avenue for expanding manpower training.

Distance education could benefit from the expertise of various institutions and individuals in the country. The Ministry of National Education has the staff of the Institut Pedagogique a Vocation Rurale (IPAR) and the staff of Teachers' Resource Centres in different provinces and individuals with a background in distance education. The universities, especially the University of Dschang and the ENS, have staff with some knowledge and experience in distance education. The existing expertise should be harnessed in the service of a national distance education programme.

Opportunities should be created to offer requisite training to upgrade and update the competence of these individuals because my survey revealed that lack of training had contributed to the collapse of the earlier programme. Experience in other countries has proved that training of course-writers helps to sustain the programme. To achieve cost-effectiveness, in-country training should be organised by experienced consultants for course-writers, editors and the like; more people could be trained by this approach. Specialists in distance education could be trained outside the country. Equipment needs to be upgraded and increased; very few equipment were available and functional.

Planning for the programme needs to start immediately to take advantage of the enthusiasm which was evident in the places visited. A national Technical Committee should be constituted to draw up an Action Plan. The Plan should decide on subjects to be covered, cost the programme and budget for it, decide on equipment requirements and acquisition and draw-up and Implementation Programme. A national body to be given an acceptable name could be established to manage the proposed distance education programme. This body would guide the existing programmes and any new ones to maintain their peculiar characteristics to meet the needs of their clientele but also ensure that national interest are catered for.

COL has an important role to play to facilitate progress in the Cameroon in this area. This is a challenge that needs to be tackled.