



BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN HIGHER EDUCATION AND EMPLOYABILITY: A STUDY OF SCIENCE GRADUATES FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF YAOUNDE I AND THE LABOUR MARKET IN CAMEROONⁱ

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Abstract:

Unemployment among young graduates represents a significant challenge in Cameroon. This phenomenon is widespread and particularly affects graduates of Higher Education, especially those from the Faculty of Science at the University of Yaounde I. This situation reflects, to some extent, a mismatch between the training programmes offered and the actual needs of the job market. This study seeks to demonstrate that this mismatch constitutes one of the factors contributing to the challenges graduates of this institution encounter when entering the professional world, and proposes that an effective alignment be established between the skills imparted and the demands of the job market. Through a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative surveys of graduates, interviews with employers, and analysis of training programmes, the findings reveal a disconnect between the curriculum content and the profiles sought in the labour market. This study, therefore, advocates a curricular reform that incorporates more practical and professional skills, the development of partnerships between universities and businesses, as well as the establishment of mechanisms to monitor graduate employment outcomes.

ⁱ LES DIPLÔMÉS DE LA FACULTÉ DES SCIENCES DE L'UNIVERSITÉ DE YAOUNDÉ I FACE AU MARCHÉ DE L'EMPLOI

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These measures are essential to enhance the employability of graduates and to reduce the unemployment rate that affects young people in Cameroon.

Keywords: training-employment alignment, graduate unemployment, employability, University of Yaounde 1, curriculum reform

Résumé :

Le chômage des jeunes diplômés constitue un défi majeur au Cameroun. Ce phénomène est largement répandu et frappe particulièrement les diplômés de l'enseignement supérieur, notamment ceux de la Faculté des Sciences de l'Université de Yaoundé I. Cette situation dans une certaine mesure d'une inadéquation entre les offres de formation proposées et les besoins réels du marché de l'emploi. Cette étude vise à démontrer que cette inadéquation est l'une des causes de la difficulté d'insertion socioprofessionnelle des diplômés de cette institution, et propose d'établir une correspondance efficace entre les compétences enseignées et les exigences professionnelles. À travers une approche méthodologique mixte combinant enquêtes quantitatives auprès des diplômés, entretiens avec les employeurs et analyse des programmes de formation, les résultats révèlent un décalage entre le contenu pédagogique et les profils attendus sur le marché de l'emploi. L'étude préconise alors une réforme curriculaire intégrant davantage de compétences pratiques et professionnelles, le développement de partenariats entre université et entreprises, ainsi que la mise en place de dispositifs de suivi de l'insertion professionnelle. Ces mesures sont essentielles pour améliorer l'employabilité des diplômés et réduire le taux de chômage qui fragilise la jeunesse camerounaise.

Mots-clés : adéquation formation-emploi, chômage des diplômés, employabilité, Université de Yaoundé 1, réforme curriculaire

1. Introduction

In Cameroon, graduate unemployment in Higher Education constitutes a critical socio-economic issue that hinders national development. According to the National Institute of Statistics report (INS, 2023), the unemployment rate among young graduates aged 25 to 35 stands at 14.8%, which is five times higher than that of young people without university education (Sika Finance, 2023). The University of Yaounde I, a leading institution in the country, is no exception to this trend. Its Faculty of Science, despite offering a diverse range of courses, struggles to adequately prepare its students for the demands of the Cameroonian labour market.

This situation is exacerbated by a mismatch between the skills taught within the faculty and those actually sought by employers, both in the public and private sectors. Referred to as the training-employment mismatch, this phenomenon is widely recognised as one of the major factors contributing to graduate unemployment in many African countries (Actu Cameroun, 2021). Indeed, theoretical education that is often

detached from professional realities limits young people's employability, exposing them to long-term job insecurity.

This research, therefore, poses the following questions: to what extent does the mismatch between the courses offered by the Faculty of Science at the University of Yaounde I and the needs of the labour market contribute to the high unemployment rate among graduates? How can scientific training be aligned with professional requirements to improve the employment prospects of young Cameroonian graduates? Our general hypothesis is as follows: in its current state, the training programmes at the Faculty of Science of the University of Yaounde I do not sufficiently equip graduates to make them employable and operational upon completion of their studies. This hypothesis is broken down into three specific hypotheses as follows:

H1: The current programmes at the Faculty of Science do not fully meet the skills demanded by the labour market.

H2: The mismatch between training offer and job market supply significantly contributes to graduate unemployment.

H3: The implementation of a targeted curricular reform will substantially improve the employability of young graduates.

This study not only addresses an urgent need to better understand the structural factors behind graduate unemployment in Cameroon but also offers concrete avenues for reforming Higher Education, with the aim of contributing to the country's economic development and curbing brain drain. By specifically focusing on the Faculty of Science, this research sheds light on a key sector for innovation and technological growth. Indeed, the Faculty of Science plays a significant role in research supporting development efforts. This study will first assess the alignment between the skills acquired by students and those sought by employers. Then, it will measure the impact of this mismatch on the unemployment rate among graduates. Finally, a number of recommendations will be proposed to strengthen the training-employment alignment at the Faculty of Science.

2. Overview of Current Literature

This section offers a critical review of the existing literature. It covers research related to the link between training and employment, Higher Education, and the analysis of unemployment data.

2.1 Theoretical Foundations of the Training-Employment Alignment

The alignment between education and employment is a fundamental principle in the fields of educational sciences and labour economics. It denotes the optimal correspondence between the skills acquired by graduates and those required by the labour market (Robert *et al.*, 2015). According to Perrenoud (2004), education must foster in students transferable, practical, and contextually relevant skills in order to ensure their employability. Competency-based education places particular emphasis on the

acquisition of practical skills and interpersonal or behavioural abilities that are directly aligned with the needs of businesses and institutions (Ait Haddouchane *et al.*, 2017).

Closely related to this concept, employability refers to an individual's ability to obtain and retain employment that matches their qualifications (Hillage & Pollard, 1998). It depends not only on the quality of initial education but also on the ongoing adaptation of knowledge and skills to the socio-economic context. In sub-Saharan Africa, the mismatch between education and employment is frequently cited as a major cause of youth unemployment, which in turn hinders sustainable development (Fofack *et al.*, 2019).

2.2 International and African Studies on Graduate Training and Unemployment

At the international level, several studies have highlighted the negative consequences of a mismatch between training offer and labour market needs. In Europe, the European Union has made significant investments in reforms aimed at improving alignment through the implementation of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and the expansion of professional internships (CEDEFOP, 2016). These measures have contributed to enhancing the employability of young graduates and reducing the duration of post-university unemployment.

In Africa, however, the issue is more acute. According to Mbaye (2018), African education systems, which have long been focused on traditional academic knowledge, do not sufficiently take into account the needs of a rapidly changing labour market. Several countries, such as Senegal, Morocco, and Ghana, have initiated reforms based on the competency-based approach, but the impact remains limited due to a lack of resources and strong partnerships with the private sector (World Bank, 2020).

In Cameroon, recent studies confirm these trends. Ndjio (2021) points out that in the science departments at the University of Yaounde I, the training remains highly theoretical, with few opportunities for real-world professional experience. This situation creates a significant gap between graduates' skills and employers' expectations (Ndi, 2023). Furthermore, the Cameroonian private sector frequently criticises the mismatch in recruited profiles, highlighting a lack of autonomy, practical skills, and soft skills (Cameroon Business Review, 2022).

2.3 Cameroonian Data and Analysis on Graduate Unemployment

Youth unemployment among graduates is documented by several official sources. The INS (2023) report estimates that the unemployment rate for university graduates stands at 14.8%, which is five times higher than that of non-graduates. This situation is particularly concerning in scientific fields, where graduates struggle to find stable employment (Sika Finance, 2023).

According to a survey conducted by the Ministry of Higher Education (Minesup) in 2022, about 40% of Higher Education graduates are unemployed or in precarious jobs within three years of leaving university (Minesup, 2022). This precarious situation is

attributed to several factors, including weak practical training, the absence of structured internships, and poor connections with key industry sectors.

In this context, the University of Yaound I serves as a clear example of the issue. A qualitative study conducted by Ndi (2023) shows that graduates from the Faculty of Science often lack the digital skills, entrepreneurial abilities, and practical know-how required to enter an increasingly competitive, demanding, and diversified job market.

2.4 Public Policies and Cameroonian Initiatives on the Training-Employment Alignment

In response to this situation, the Cameroonian government has implemented several measures to improve the alignment between education and employment. The Labour Market and Skills Observatory (OMDES), created by the Ministry of Higher Education (Minesup), is tasked with collecting data on professional integration and advising universities on curriculum adaptation (Actu Cameroun, 2021).

Additionally, the National Employment Fund (FNE) supports job creation and assists young graduates with their professional integration, particularly through entrepreneurship support programmes (FNE, 2023). University incubators are also beginning to emerge, although their impact remains marginal due to their limited integration into the overall educational strategy (Cameroon Magazine, 2024). However, these initiatives often remain isolated, with little effective coordination between faculties, businesses, and public institutions, which limits their effectiveness (Actu Cameroun, 2021).

2.5 Comparative Approaches: Lessons from Other African Countries

In the region, some countries have succeeded in reducing graduate unemployment by implementing more ambitious structural reforms. Morocco, for instance, has introduced competency-based training in several universities, in close partnership with the private sector, to better meet market needs (Ait Haddouchane et al., 2017). This model includes mandatory internships, the validation of professional projects, and the establishment of joint university–industry committees. In Ghana, the government has created vocational training centers integrated within universities, offering hybrid programmes that combine theory and practice, particularly in applied sciences and technology (World Bank, 2020). These experiences highlight the importance of dynamic leadership and cross-sector collaboration to ensure real alignment between education and employment.

3. Institutional Context of the Faculty of Science at the University of Yaounde I

Below is an overview of the Faculty of Science (FS) at the University of Yaounde I, including a presentation of the faculty, its administrative organisation, academic programmes, and external relations.

3.1 Presentation of the University of Yaounde I and the Faculty of Science

Founded in 1993 following the division of the former University of Yaounde, the University of Yaounde I (UY1) is one of the main public Higher Education institutions in Cameroon. It comprises several faculties and schools, among which the Faculty of Science plays a key role in scientific, technological, and research training (UY1, 2023). The Faculty of Science offers a wide range of programmes in mathematics, physics, chemistry, life sciences, geology, and computer science. The aim of these programmes is to train professionals capable of meeting the country's scientific, technical, and environmental needs.

3.2 Training Offer: Programmes and Content

Training programmes at the Faculty of Science are structured around traditional Bachelor's, Master's, and Doctoral degrees, with a strong emphasis on the theoretical aspect. According to the official curriculum (UY1, 2023), most courses prioritise lecture-based teaching, with limited time allocated to practicals or professional internships. Course content remains focused on fundamental knowledge, with minimal use of interdisciplinary approaches or cross-cutting skills such as entrepreneurship, professional communication, or project management. For example, in Biology or Computer Science, internships are either optional or poorly supervised, thereby limiting students' practical preparation.

3.3 Administrative Organisation and Training Management

The academic management of the Faculty of Science falls under the responsibility of the dean, assisted by several specialised departments. Pedagogical decisions are often made in a centralised manner, with limited involvement from external stakeholders such as business representatives, decentralised local authorities, student associations, or professional organisations, among others (Nguimkeu, 2022). This institutional organisation creates a certain compartmentalisation between academic programmes and labour market demands, making it difficult to swiftly implement appropriate reforms.

3.4 Relations with the Private Sector and Socio-Economic Actors

Collaboration between the Faculty of Science and the Cameroonian private sector is currently limited. There are a few formalised partnerships, and mandatory internships are rarely systematised or closely supervised by the academic staff (Minesup, 2022). This weak relationship hinders the effective feedback of employers' skills needs, creating a gap between the training provided and professional reality. Moreover, mentoring, integration, and graduate follow-up programmes remain in their early stages.

3.5 Recent Initiatives and Ongoing Projects

In response to these gaps, the Faculty of Science has recently launched several projects aimed at strengthening the alignment between training and employment. These include the gradual introduction of modules on entrepreneurship and professional

communication, as well as the creation of a dedicated service for student guidance and career integration (UY1, 2024).

Additionally, a few partnerships with local and international companies are being negotiated to develop supervised internships, work-study programmes, and continuing education programmes. However, these initiatives are still in a pilot phase and currently involve only a minority of students.

4. Methodology

The following section presents the methodological approaches adopted for this analysis, specifically the study approach and the various instruments used.

4.1 General Approach

This research adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative data, in order to comprehensively examine the mismatch between the training programmes offered by the Faculty of Science at the University of Yaounde I and the labour market, as well as its impact on graduate unemployment. This triangulation makes it possible to obtain results that are both measurable and contextually rich (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

4.2 Population and Sampling

The target population consists of two main groups: on the one hand, graduates from the Faculty of Science across all disciplines who completed their studies between 2018 and 2024; and on the other hand, selected public and private employers from the scientific, technological, and industrial sectors in Cameroon.

A stratified sampling method was used to ensure representativeness per academic field (Mathematics, Biology, Computer Science, etc.) and per economic sector. A total of 250 graduates were contacted through an online questionnaire, with an effective response rate of 72% (180 respondents). In addition to this, 25 semi-structured interviews were conducted with employers from companies, public institutions, and international organisations operating in Cameroon.

4.3 Data Collection Instruments

Several instruments were used to collect the data for this study.

4.3.1 The Questionnaire

A structured questionnaire was developed to gather quantitative data from graduates. It included sections on socio-demographic profile, the nature of the training received, current employment status, assessment of the relevance of acquired skills, and difficulties encountered during professional integration. Closed-ended questions and Likert scales were used to obtain quantifiable data suitable for statistical analysis.

4.3.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

The interviews with employers aimed to gather qualitative information on skill requirements and desired profiles, perceptions of Cameroonian university education, collaboration with universities, and recommendations for improving the alignment between education and employment. Each interview lasted an average of 25 minutes and was recorded with consent for transcription and thematic analysis.

4.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were processed using SPSS software (version 27), employing both descriptive analyses (means, frequencies) and inferential tests (correlation tests, chi-square) to test the hypotheses.

Qualitative data from the interviews were subjected to thematic analysis following the Braun and Clarke (2006) method, thereby facilitating the identification of key categories related to perceptions of the alignment between education and employment.

4.5 Methodological Limitations

This study has some limitations. Firstly, although the sample size was sufficient for exploratory analysis, it does not facilitate full generalisation to all Cameroonian graduates. Secondly, there is the possibility of response bias, particularly among employed graduates who may understate the difficulties they encountered. It is also worth noting the challenge of obtaining full access to detailed faculty programmes for an in-depth documentary analysis. These limitations were taken into account when interpreting the results and underscore the need for further research.

5. Results and Analysis

The processing of the questionnaire and the interview content yielded some findings that will now be presented.

5.1 Characteristics of Graduate Respondents

Out of the 180 graduates who responded to the questionnaire, 58% were men and 42% women, with an average age of 26.8 years (standard deviation = 2.4). The distribution per field of study was as follows: Biology (30%), Computer Science (25%), Physics (20%), Chemistry (15%), and Mathematics (10%). The majority (68%) had obtained their Bachelor's Degree, while 32% had a Master's.

5.2 Employment Status of Graduates

The results show that 41% of the graduates surveyed were either unemployed or in precarious employment (temporary contracts, underemployment) at the time of the survey, thus confirming the official data (INS, 2023). This rate varied per field of study and was particularly high in Mathematics (55%) and Physics (47%), with more favourable outcomes observed in Computer Science (28%).

5.3 Evaluation of the Training-to-Employment Suitability

The majority of graduates (62%) felt that the skills they gained during their education didn't match the requirements of their jobs or the expectations of the job market. More specifically, 75% considered their practical and technical skills to be inadequate. A total of 68% reported a lack of training in digital and technological tools, while 55% pointed to a deficiency in transversal skills, such as communication, project management, and entrepreneurial awareness. These findings support the hypothesis of a significant mismatch between the education provided and the needs of the labour market.

5.4 Employers' Perceptions

Interviews with 25 employers confirmed these observations, revealing several key themes. First and foremost, a lack of practical skills was highlighted. Employers noted that graduates often lack hands-on experience, which makes additional in-house training necessary (Employer 7). Secondly, there was concern over graduates' limited proficiency with current technologies. The technological lag in academic training was frequently mentioned, particularly in applied sciences (Employer 12). All of this culminates in a mismatch of profiles. Some employers criticised the rigidity of university curricula, finding them too academic, which doesn't foster young graduates' adaptability to diverse professional contexts (Employer 3). Finally, the limited collaboration with universities can be blamed. The absence of formal partnerships restricts the co-development of training programmes and the creation of opportunities for internships (Employer 18), apprenticeships, and the involvement of professionals in university teaching.

5.5 Statistical Analysis

A Chi-squared test revealed a statistically significant relationship ($p < 0.01$) between the field of study and employment status, confirming that purely theoretical disciplines are associated with a higher unemployment rate. Furthermore, a significant negative correlation ($r = -0.62$, $p < 0.01$) was observed between the perceived adequacy of skills and individual unemployment rates. These findings confirm that the mismatch between training and employment directly contributes to unemployment among graduates from the Faculty of Science at the University of Yaounde I. This, therefore, corroborates our general hypothesis.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study confirm and expand upon its core premise: the mismatch between the programmes offered by the Faculty of Science at the University of Yaounde I and the expectations of the job market is a crucial factor in graduate unemployment. This inadequacy, primarily characterised by a deficit in practical, technical, and transversal skills, compromises the employability of young graduates and limits their professional integration.

Statistical analysis highlights a disparity across different fields, with particularly high unemployment rates in disciplines that are heavily theoretical, such as mathematics and physics. This phenomenon aligns with observations made by Ndjio (2021) and Ndi (2023), who underscore the insufficient professionalisation of these courses, which don't allow students to acquire skills directly transferable to the workplace.

Employer perceptions corroborate these observations, revealing a clear misalignment between university training and the actual needs of Cameroon's economic landscape. The lack of practical experience and limited mastery of technological tools are particularly concerning in a global context where innovation and digitalisation play a key role in competitiveness. This disparity partly explains why graduates struggle to adapt quickly to the demands of the job market.

Furthermore, the weakness of formal collaborations between the Faculty of Science and the private sector, as well as other stakeholders involved in developing training programmes, limits opportunities for internships, mentorship, and professional integration. This observation aligns with the World Bank's (2020) recommendations, which emphasise the importance of robust partnerships between universities and businesses to ensure employment-oriented training.

Beyond just technical aspects, the deficit in transferable skills—like communication, project management, or entrepreneurial spirit—is a major obstacle to employability. These skills are crucial in modern professional environments, which are often multidisciplinary and demand high levels of autonomy and collaborative work.

The Faculty of Science's recent initiatives to incorporate entrepreneurship modules and strengthen career guidance are encouraging, yet remain insufficient given the scale of the challenge. The continued reliance on centralised academic management, with limited openness to socio-economic partners, hampers the responsiveness and adaptability of the programmes.

These findings, therefore, call for a profound reform of the Cameroonian university education system, through:

- a revision of curricula based on the regular analysis of the labour market and national needs;
- the systematic integration of internships and practical professional experiences;
- the development of practical and transferable skills;
- and the strengthening of partnerships between universities, businesses, and public institutions.

Such an approach would align with international recommendations and successful experiences in other African countries, such as Morocco and Ghana (Ait Haddouchane *et al.*, 2017; World Bank, 2020). This study highlights that the mismatch between education and employment is not only a structural issue within the Faculty of Science at the University of Yaounde I, but also a major national challenge. To effectively combat graduate unemployment and promote inclusive economic development, it is imperative to align educational offerings with market demands through proactive public policies and strengthened cooperation among stakeholders.

7. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the mismatch between the training programmes offered by the Faculty of Science at the University of Yaounde I and the needs of the labour market is a key factor contributing to graduate unemployment. The current programmes, overly focused on theoretical knowledge and lacking sufficient emphasis on practical, technical, and transferable skills, do not effectively prepare students to integrate into a rapidly evolving professional environment. The significant disparity in unemployment rates across different fields of study, along with feedback from employers, underscores the urgent need to reform university curricula to better meet Cameroon's economic and technological demands. Finally, the limited interaction between the university and socio-economic stakeholders reduces the ability of programmes to adapt and restricts the employment opportunities available to recent graduates.

In light of the findings and analyses, several recommendations have been put forward to improve the alignment between education and employment and to help reduce graduate unemployment.

It is essential to adapt the curricula to incorporate more practical instruction, technological workshops, and transferable skills (such as communication, project management, and entrepreneurship). This process should be carried out in consultation with economic stakeholders to ensure its relevance.

It is important to make internships compulsory and to better supervise their implementation to ensure genuine immersion in the professional environment, thereby encouraging companies to engage more actively in student training.

Minesup, and more specifically the Faculty of Science, should further establish sustainable collaborations with the private sector and public institutions, notably through the creation of advisory committees, mentoring programmes, and professional integration initiatives.

We must work towards establishing an effective career guidance and professional integration service to support students in their career choices and job placement, particularly through post-graduation follow-up.

Continuing professional development for teaching staff should be strengthened to update their skills and incorporate new technologies and pedagogical methods focused on professionalisation. All these recommendations aim to advocate to government authorities for an inclusive educational policy. Such a policy would prioritise employability, support applied research, and facilitate job creation in sectors related to scientific training. If implemented with commitment, these measures will help reduce the gap between education and employment, improve graduate employability, and consequently contribute to stronger economic and social dynamics in Cameroon.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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