

Students' Re-imaginings of the Future of Higher Education in Cameroon

Etta Mercy Aki, Nguehan Simeon Boris, and Echari Lisa Ebenwei

Abstract

The unprecedented changes in our society are re-shaping the future of higher education; therefore, re-imagining the future of higher education is a constructive process of development. This study is aimed at exploring the re-imaginings of students in higher education from their own analysis of their previous and current experiences at three key stages: before entry, participation, and graduation. This exploratory study collected qualitative data from 68 current students through synchronous online focused group discussions. Analysis revealed that students' experiences position higher education in Cameroon as invisible at lower levels, providing limited opportunities and promoting dependency upon graduation. However, they hope that the future of higher education will be characterized by a strong link between higher education and lower levels that will lead to the acquisition of practical skills relevant to the context and will leave graduates self-reliant. Recommendations that go beyond developing a policy to implementation and action are equally discussed.

Keywords: re-imaginings, future, higher education, aspirations, expectations.

Introduction

Policy initiatives and plans such as the Incheon 2030 and The Africa We Want Agenda 2063 has echoed the need for higher education systems in Africa to make proactive and informed decisions that will not only allow them to stay relevant in a globally competitive world but also to realize the futures they want in a rapidly changing society. However, the future of higher education in Africa is still blurred as higher education provisions remain unchanged and completely divorced from the contextual realities and understanding of students who are central to its core functioning. For instance, it was only at the dawn of the COVID-19 pandemic that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Cameroon started searching for ways to meet the changing needs of teaching and learning (Meirieu, 2020; Béché, 2020) even though more than 59% of Internet users in Cameroon are young people including university students (Mbodiam, 2020). This will mean that HEIs do not leverage the opportunities and resources that students bring into the teaching and learning process. The rapid changes in society require that key stakeholders in education must lead the change they want (rather than being led by change). Leading change can happen through a re-imagination of the future of higher education as imagining represents an extensive constructive process of development. Miller (2018) views the "future" as an anticipation in the present of "what will be." The anticipatory process can be shaped by one's wishes, motivations, hopes or experiences that in turn shape an understanding of the future, or in other words, an anticipated future. While it is not easy to get an accurate prediction of the future, frames of an individual's understanding can provide a peek into the future (Miller, 2018). With the changing times, research and practice are dominantly focusing on the future of higher education, but leaders and teachers are dominating these conversations and re-imagining a future for students with little or no place for the active imaginations of students

themselves (who are already in the future of higher education). It is for this reason that this study aimed to explore the experiences of students to provide a peek into the type of higher education that students want in Cameroon using the lens of students' imagination. This study was steeped in an analysis of students' previous experiences as aspirants to higher education, their current experiences as students in HEIs, as well as their prospected life after graduation, to allow other stakeholders to have a realistic picture of higher education that students want. This understanding can facilitate improvement for practice and provision.

Students' Re-imaginings of Higher Education

The view of using an imaginative lens to understand the future of higher education from the perspectives of students is limited (Martin et al., 2016); however, findings can be extrapolated from literature on students' experiences in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The difficulty associated with this approach is that it has been limited to students' current and past experiences without a corresponding link to how the students perceive the future. In actuality, all we do now is in consideration for tomorrow; and therefore, planning for tomorrow can inform the practices of today for tomorrow. Imagination is a complex term viewed differently and from different perspectives such as culture, social psychology among others. For instance, Zittoun and Glăveanu (2017) view imagination as thinking beyond the here and now, a mental travel that allows one to think about new possibilities. Individuals can analyze a phenomenon through the experiences of others, and the future can be seen through a realistic assessment of one's current situation in relation to the past paving a way for possible actions and linking these possible actions to possible results. Imagining therefore represents aspiring, expecting, visioning, considered as individualistic and therefore a subjective approach. However, one's view of self and possible self is steeped in a collective view of expectations and realities that cannot be divorced (Martin et al., 2016). We use such thinking to look at three key broad periods that characterize a student's life with regard to higher education. This includes higher education preparation (before entry), higher education participation (while in HEIs), and higher education graduation and beyond (leaving HEIs).

Students' experiences are complex as they are individual and bound by space, time, context, and so on. A recent report by Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) in 2020 described students' experiences in higher education as a totality of an individual student's interaction ranging from when they decide on a university or higher education institution until they leave. In this paper, students' re-imaginings represent an evaluation of their experiences of higher education before admission, after admission, and their possible selves upon graduation. Research related to students' experiences of higher education before admission has been dominantly linked to studies on transition to higher education (higher education preparation). A majority of these studies indicate that student transition is complex; however, a more contemporary view has been offered in a study conducted by Thompson et al. (2021) where the authors carried out a qualitative study with students in their first and second year in a post-1992 university in South West England involving focus groups and interviews with 10 students. Thompson et al. (2021) found that one of the major challenges of students is adapting to an independent life. This lack of preparedness causes distress that can hamper their academic performance. Similarly, Gravett and Winstone (2019) used a story-telling method to understand students' transition, and concluded that it is also complex and diverse and can be characterized as troublesome, rhizomatic, and becoming. These findings conform to the previous findings of Belfield et al. (2017); Murtagh (2012); Lowe and

Cook (2003), to name a few. While these studies are dominantly focused on western cultures and on the first-year students, they consistently indicate the need to inform and intentionally guide students' as they prepare to enter higher education. With the complexity and diversity of students' lived experiences, it is important to understand students' experiences in Cameroon to paint a more realistic picture of their education experiences and guide provision and policy of higher education in Cameroon.

Research with regard to students' participation in HEIs has been multifaceted focusing specifically on teaching and assessment, curriculum, and student engagement which are considered central to students' experiences. However, taking on a broader approach allows students' voices in Cameroon to determine the focal points of need and required change in HEIs while recognizing that students' articulations and perspectives are steeped in the expectations and realities of the broader social context. These aspects cannot be divorced, and that is why one's perspective is valid in itself. In exploring students' perspectives, Leathwood and O'Connell (2003) carried out a longitudinal study in the UK using several instruments such as questionnaires, focus groups, and interviews to analyze the experiences of 310 students in higher education. They concluded that students' experiences are bounded by a "struggle" (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003, p. 608) characterized by financial constraints, low levels of confidence in their abilities, and a lack of support from the university. With regard to students' imagination beyond graduation, Oldenburg (2016) used an ethnographic lens to examine the relationship between higher education, war, and aspirations of youths in Eastern Congo. Oldenburg's findings indicated that though youths had limited employment opportunities, higher education was still a booster to a better future. In this way, unemployment opportunities do not prevent students from participating in education. More extensively, Chan (2016) reviewed 60 peer-reviewed articles and 25 books, and found that undergraduate students expect to fulfill their economic goals by graduation yet these students do not acquire the necessary knowledge, attitudes and skills in traditional HEIs. Available literature suggest that students' experiences of higher education are shaped by their experiences before higher education and these experiences influence their participation and shape their life after leaving the frontiers of HEIs. However, most empirical studies provide a less comprehensive picture of these realities from the students' perspective. This study employs a system-thinking approach with regard to the future of higher education that allows students to socially construct their own realities by examining and making meaning of their prior and current experiences to develop a vision of "what they anticipate."

Understanding Higher Education in the Context of Cameroon. Cameroon like many other African countries established HEIs such as universities after independence in the 1960s. The need for higher education then was to train national cadres for senior positions in civil service as well as to meet the specific needs and interest of a newly independent state (Njeuma et al., 1999). Since then, several reforms have been made to capture the increased demand for higher education resulting in the creation of eight state universities, a host of private universities, and other professional schools within the territory. Section 2 of Article 1 of the Law No. 005 of April 16, 2001, to guide higher education in Cameroon describes higher education as all post-secondary training courses taught by public and private education institutions approved by law (Ministry of Higher Education, 2001). Nevertheless, most of these institutions are universities, and the most populated universities are the eight state universities with a minimal fee of 50,000frs CFA (approximately 93usd). Pre-university education involves 13 compulsory years of schooling including 6 years of primary education and 7 years of secondary education.

After successfully completing secondary education, students can proceed into any higher education institution of their choice. These secondary schools, and specifically public schools, have guidance counselors charged with guiding students who are aspiring for higher education. In more recent times, universities also prepare flyers, organize student forums and other independent initiatives annually to advertise their programs to prospective students. In meeting the needs of the evolving time, in 2013, some universities started using online application systems in partnership with mobile money services aimed at facilitating the application process and avoid queuing for students in distant areas. To this effect, anyone with a mobile money booth or kiosk becomes involved in assisting students with completing their online application forms. Regardless of these practices, admission into most HEIs, including universities particularly, is based on certain criteria such as the number of points earned and the types of subjects passed at the General Certificate of Education/Advanced Level (GCE/AL) (e.g., English certification for secondary education or baccalaureate [French certification for secondary education]). An exception can include cases of professional programs such as medicine and engineering in which competitive entrance exams are written. Once in higher education, students spend at least three years in regular programs dominated by face-to-face teaching and learning, even in its five-year ongoing socio-political armed conflict and current COVID-19 pandemic. It is imagined that these situations would have precipitated changes in higher education provisions, but the situation remains almost the same. One of the biggest challenges for higher education graduates in Cameroon has been the increasing rates of unemployment. Latest 2019 data showed a 0.02% increase from 2018 (World Bank, 2019) regardless of the objectives to promote professionalization in higher education and produce multipurpose graduates as stipulated by the law of orientation (Ministry of Higher Education, 2001). These narratives situate the context in which students' imagination is founded because imagination must be active to capture the realities of the context.

Methods

This research is an exploratory study where qualitative data was collected through seven synchronous Online Focused Group Discussions (OFGD) and an online survey.

Participants. 68 current students representing eight HEIs in Cameroon were drawn into the study using snowballing techniques in which students' and colleagues served as referrals to disseminate the information and recruit students into the study. Students' ages ranged between 18-50, with most aged 22. A slight difference was seen in students' gender as 51.8% were males compared 48.2% females. Students from public HEIs (62.5%) dominated the discussion compared to private HEIs (37.5%). Similarly, postgraduate students (54.41%) were slightly higher than undergraduate students (45.59%).

Ethical Considerations. Students' consent was solicited through the survey form; and, whilst in the study, students were not coerced to participate against their will. The final sample constituted only the number of students who responded to the prompts. The use of an online platform increased anonymity, which to a certain extent equally helped us maintain privacy. Anonymity was further enhanced in the presentation of results as no names or other characteristics of identification were used. As data was collected about students' lived experiences, it is likely that some students' may have recalled some frustrating experiences. Therefore, to reduce any possible risk of harm, moderators ensured that the discussion tones and language provided a

supportive environment for students to safely express themselves and benefit from the strength of the group.

Instrument and Data Analysis. Data were collected through OFGD led by a moderator and two facilitators in a 90-minute synchronous voice and text chat session. The discussion was carried out in seven synchronous groups; however, the number of students indicated were only those who responded to the prompts and shared their experiences of higher education through the voice or text chat. A Google form was created and used to obtain students' consent and demographic data before participation in the study. The survey also included access links to telegram groups with seven different time slots scheduled for the discussion. The focus group was conducted using a software - telegram in order to leverage its features of live and text chat in real time (synchronous). Using an online platform was optimal at these times as data were collected during COVID-19 where large gatherings were prohibited. Prompts were framed to capture students' experiences as they perceived it and how they think it should have been or should be in the future in all three periods (preparation, participation, and graduation). Data, collected in the form of text and voice recording, was examined using transcript analysis to elicit the re-imaginings of students. In performing the analysis, moderators independently listened to the audio repeatedly. Responses from the chat text was equally organized to fit into the segments of discussion (experiences before, during, and after HE) that were framed before the discussion. After identifying common themes from the audio and text, statements and words were labeled and organized. Data from each moderator was then converged at this point and the themes were defined. These were further grouped and re-grouped into themes and sub-themes along with relevant quotes. Finally, these themes and sub-themes were organized into more dominant segments to bring clarity to the findings.

Results

To paint a picture of students' view of higher education in the future, students were engaged in an Online Focus Group Discussion. Findings have been presented in two sections: Section 1 presents students' experiences with regard to higher education preparation, participation, and graduation while Section 2 presents a comprehensive picture of the higher education system that students hope for in the future.

Section 1: Students' Experiences Related to Higher Education. This section presents findings related to the experiences of students in three sub-sections including; higher education preparation, participation, and graduation. Each sub-section, presents findings using themes, sub themes, and quotes that emanated from the data.

Higher Education Preparation. When students were prompted to evaluate their experiences about higher education before entry into HEIs, findings revealed that higher education realities and expectations were invisible for students at the secondary school level. Students' expressions of invisibility were captured by three sub-themes as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Students' Experiences Indicate that Higher Education is Invisible in Secondary Education

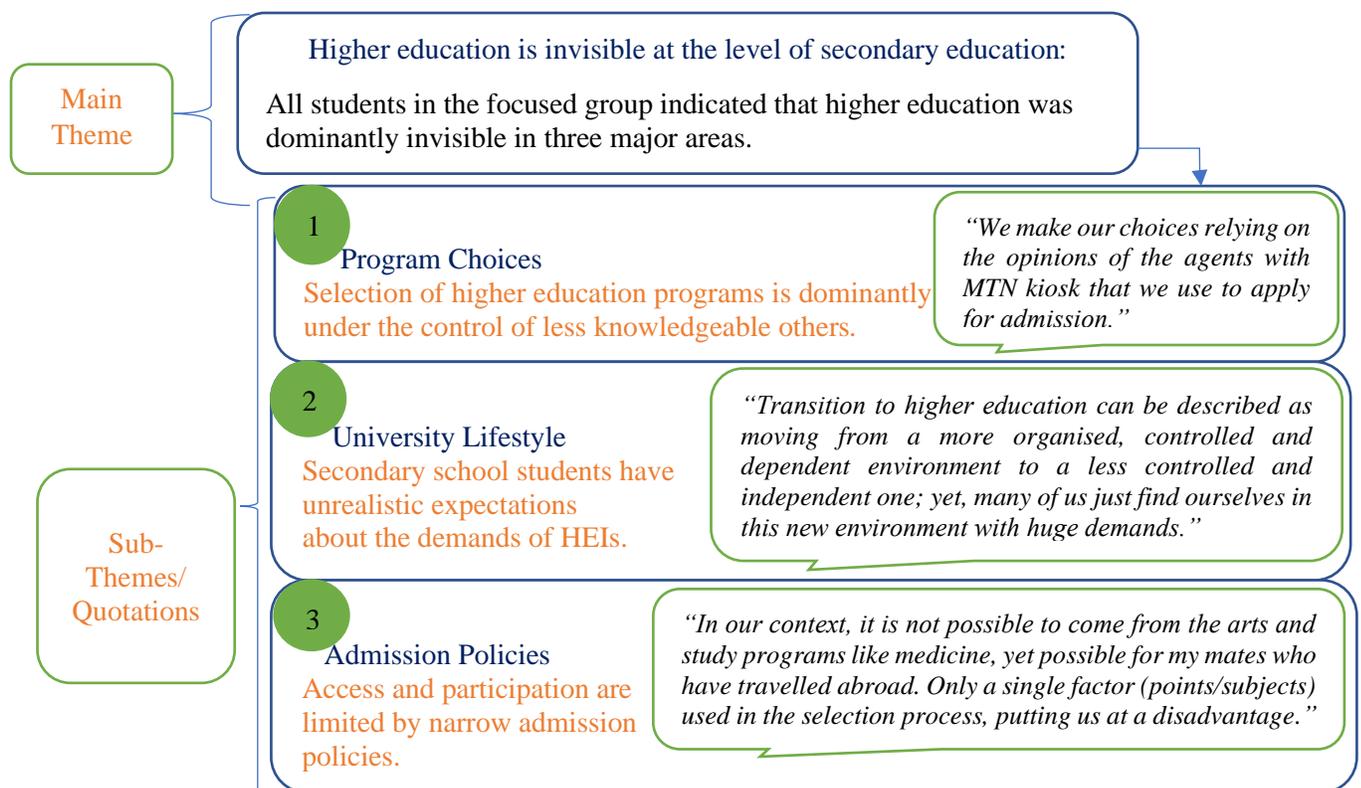


Figure 1 indicates that higher education invisibility in secondary schools was evident in the area of selecting program choices as students reported that they relied on the knowledge of their peers and business agents who assisted them in completing their application forms (see sample quotation in Figure 1). Furthermore, all groups associated poor performance and increased dropout rates to poor program choices. For instance, expressing the effects on academic performance, a participant indicated the following: "I applied for Biochemistry and was admitted to read EDL because my points were not enough. I was demoralized and failed most of my courses."

Similarly, expressing drop out, another participant indicated the following: "I was admitted to read management but after the departmental orientation, I decided to drop and reapply the following year because I discovered that it was not what I thought it was."

These comments specifically provide evidence that program choices are not informed before participation in higher education. A second re-occurring sub-theme describing the invisibility of higher education in secondary education was students' unrealistic expectations (see Figure 1) that most associated with poor performances, particularly during the first year of study as expressed by a participant: "If noticed, performances of students in the first year is very poor because of the faulty idea that higher education is a place to rest, get the freedom that was missing in secondary school."

Students also described invisibility of higher education from the area of admission policies (see Figure 1). They indicated that admission policies were based on narrow indices as they compared these policies to cases in western countries. For instance, a participant indicated that with the

same academic background, the opportunities of achieving one’s dreams of studying a desired program was possible for students who studied abroad compared to those who studied in Cameroon (see sample quotation in Figure 1). Similarly, another participant indicated the following:

I was not admitted to read management just because I did not have 20 points in the G.C.E., other factors such as an aptitude test or providing mentorship would have been better. I even got lucky as I was admitted for another program, my friends went to another university.

Higher Education Participation. When students were prompted about their experiences after admission into HEIs, findings revealed that higher education services promote inequalities and limit students’ opportunities to compete with the evolving society. Students’ experiences with HEIs were captured through four sub-themes as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Students’ Experiences Indicate Inequalities and Limited Opportunities in Higher Education

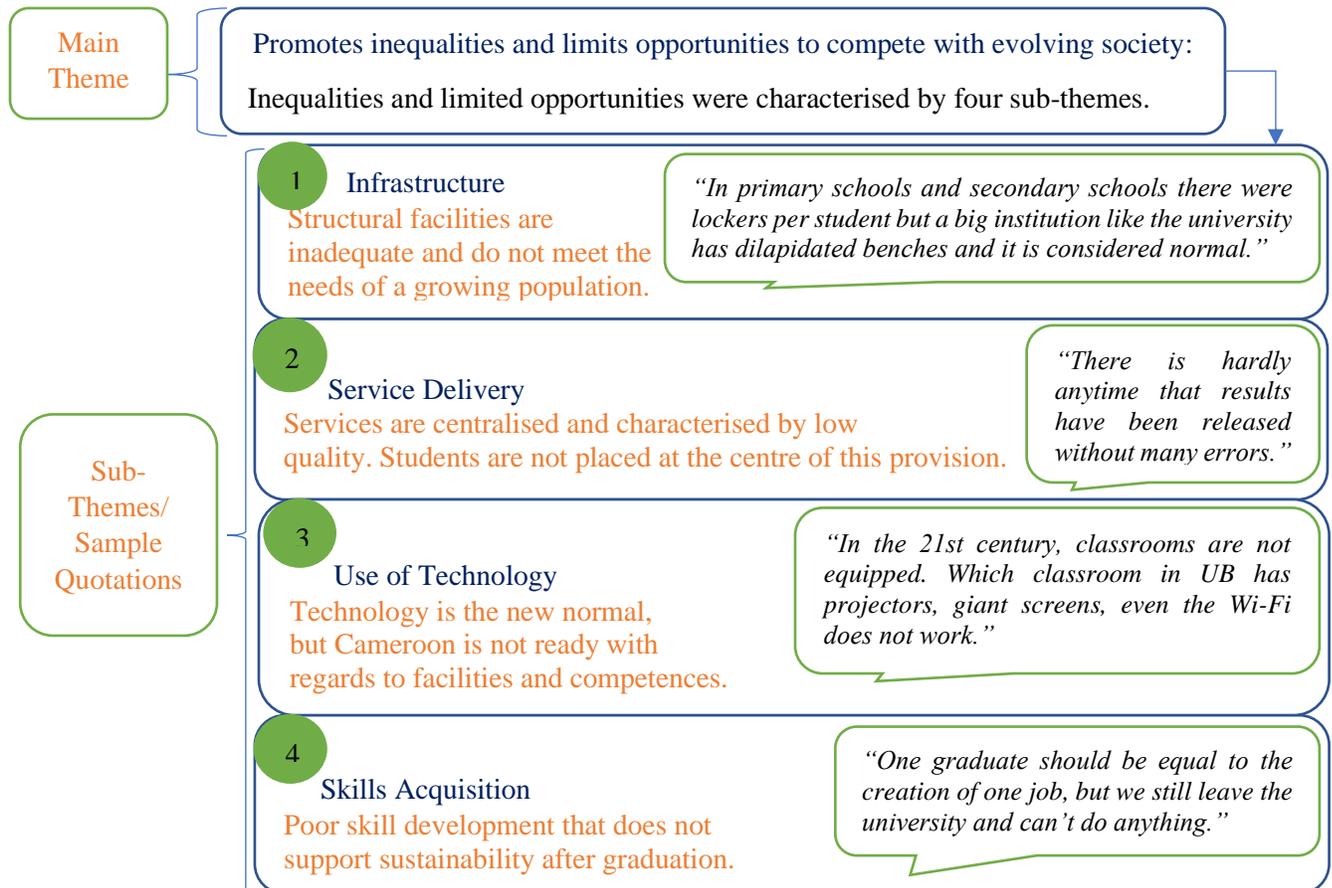


Figure 2 indicates that higher education services promoted inequality and limited students’ opportunities to engage fully in an evolving world. For instance, most students indicated that infrastructure was inadequate (see sample quotation in Figure 2), traditional, and did not meet the needs of the modern and changing times as expressed in the following: “I will say universities

like UB and SOA are not different from what use[d] to be 25 years ago. Even with the growing population, we still have 100 seats for 900 students.”

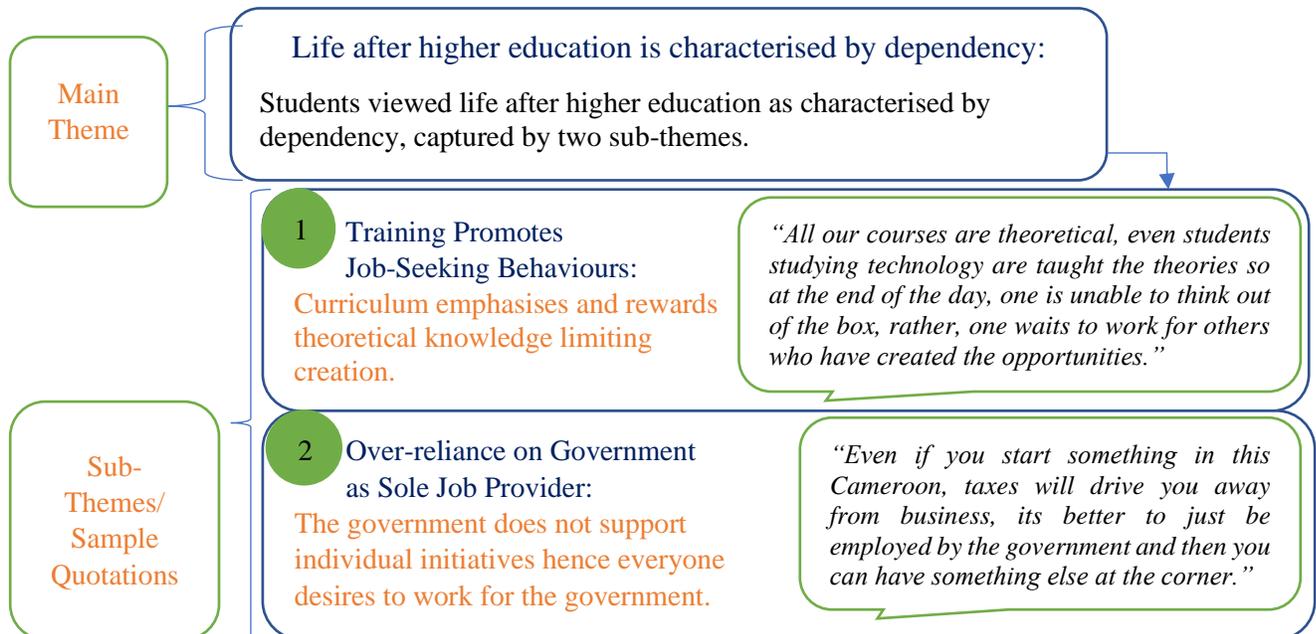
According to this participant, infrastructural development is not commensurate to the growing demand for higher education in Cameroon. Most students also indicated that service delivery quality was low citing high rates of errors with students’ results as seen in the sample quotation in Figure 2. These errors equally resulted in undue delays in graduation as expressed by this quote: “Many students have stayed in the university and repeated a course just because of transcript errors whereas it was not their fault.”

However, students also felt that the use of technology in university systems was limited, limiting their opportunities to compete with the changes in an evolving world (see sample quotation in Figure 2). Furthermore, some students reiterated that technological competencies for teachers were low as expressed in the following: “At the time of COVID-19, most lecturers came to us to create WhatsApp groups for them. Many did not even know how to use a Gmail account so this online teaching will require a lot.”

Higher Education Graduation and Beyond. When students were prompted to share their experiences about how they foresee life after higher education and beyond, findings revealed that life after graduation is perceived as characterized by dependency as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3

Students Prospect a Life of Dependency with the Current Higher Education Provisions



Students unanimously agreed that the quality of life after higher education was a function of the skills and knowledge acquired within the higher education context. Consequently, they described life after higher education as characterized by dependency as they viewed higher education curriculum as more theoretical than practical thereby promoting job-seeking attitudes for their

graduates (see Figure 3). Students also described life after graduation as characterised by dependency because working for the government is the most rewarding effort.

Section 2: Future of Higher Education as Perceived by Students. As students shared their experiences, they also described the type of higher education that they wanted for themselves in the future, and this view was captured in one theme: a higher education of possibilities. To express students’ re-imaginings, they painted the following picture of higher education for the future in Cameroon as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4

A Peek into the Future of Higher Education that Students Want in Cameroon

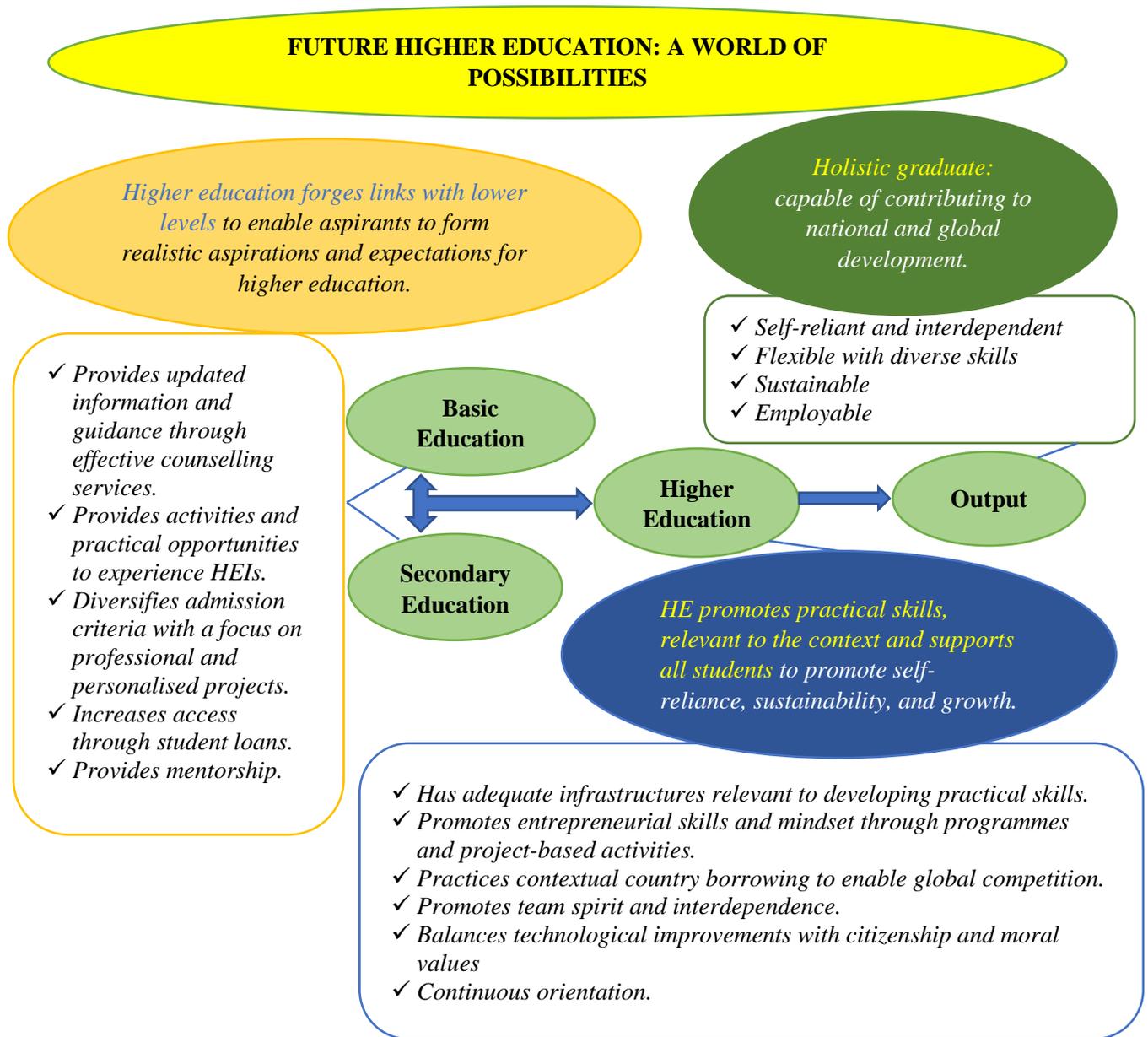


Figure 4 indicates that students hope for a higher education which opens them into a world of possibilities. This world of possibilities was described as one in which higher education systems forge a link with basic and secondary education through the provision of professional support as expressed by this quote: “Students have a picture of higher education, but what matters is who paints these pictures for them. They need professionals who provide expert guidance.”

Equally, expressing the need for experiential activities, a participant noted the following: “There should be a bridge between higher education and secondary education; for instance, teams should regularly come down to secondary education to orientate these very excited secondary school students of the realities of higher education.”

According to the students, these links will pave a way for effective participation and access to HEIs. While in these institutions, higher education enables students to gain practical skills relevant to the context and supports all students as shown in Figure 4. According to students, to achieve these skills, they hope to see HEIs with infrastructures that are not only adequate but relevant in developing practical skills as expressed by this sample quotation: “Faculties should become more practical. Practical is not just for science students. Faculty of arts, for instance, needs a lab where students can actually produce movies as a learning activity rather than sitting in class to learn steps involved in producing a movie.”

Students also hope that in the future, HEIs will promote entrepreneurial skills and mindset through its programs and project-based activities, practice contextual country borrowing that enables global competition, emphasize team and collaborative activities to promote team spirit and independence, increase socio-cultural activities to promote unity, etc. (see Figure 4). For instance, expressing entrepreneurial skills and mindset, a participant said the following: “Students could be compelled to work in teams and create a job as part of their graduation requirements so they can become more creative and prepare their minds in this way.”

Similarly, another participant indicated more vigorously: “Higher education should prepare students for the worst; there are no jobs out there, and students need to know these truths. Let them change the mindsets about employment.”

In all, students indicated that having entrepreneurial skills will break down over dependency, resulting in the development of a holistic graduate capable of contributing to societal development as shown in Figure 4. Students indicated that in the future, when one says they have been to the university or other HEIs, they should become self-reliant, interdependent and independent, flexible with diverse skills, sustainable, capable of continuous growth, as well as being employed. Expressing self-reliance, a participant noted the following: “All graduates want a government job. A country that relies on its government as we do can make the government collapse. Going to the university should guarantee one that upon completion, you can even start your own thing.”

Discussion of Findings

This study sought to explore the re-imaginings of students regarding the future of higher education in Cameroon which is steeped in what students want. As students re-imagined the future, they discussed their past and current experiences related to higher education provisions

and functioning as well their hopes for the future. The findings indicated that students hope for a world of possibilities in the future as their previous and current experiences of higher education presents it as limiting their opportunities. Specifically, with regard to higher education preparation, students re-imagined a higher education in which they will receive adequate support in terms of information, activities, and increased access to help them form realistic aspirations and expectations of higher education. Meeting these information needs requires forging a link between higher education and lower levels of education, as an evaluation of their experiences indicated that higher education is invisible at the secondary school level leading to poor performance and drop out. These findings indicate that students' expectations do not match the realities in HEIs as that of Thompson et al. (2021); Gravett and Winstone (2019); Belfield et al. (2017); Murtagh (2012); Lowe and Cook (2003). However, our findings specifically pinpoint program choices and admission policies as areas where improvements can be made.

It is evident that all students need support to effectively participate in HEIs; however, it is key for this support to come from knowledgeable others indicating that it must be well tailored toward guiding students in forming realistic aspirations and expectations. Efforts toward supporting all students must therefore be active, intentional, and ongoing starting even from basic education through higher education. It is because many students themselves are less certain about their own plans that they can easily fall prey to “scammers” who determine their selection of these study programs. While the situation would not seem bad at all for those who sailed through smoothly, it is worse for those who become disengaged, lose motivation, and drop out. Support should become a constant in the trajectories of student life, not limited before entry, but rather incorporated all throughout their experiences of higher education. In this way, educational systems must therefore be viewed more broadly and encompassing rather than closed levels serving students' needs in isolation.

Partnerships between higher education and the secondary and basic school levels, with regard to actions and activities, can support students in the development of realistic aspirations and expectations, which will lead to effective participation. The findings also make clear the need for performance appraisals of guidance counseling services charged with the greater responsibility of providing this guidance to re-strategize for better action. Nevertheless, the responsibility must go beyond these services to include community partners who can support and engage these students in co-constructing their own pathways and forming realistic aspirations and expectations of higher education. A continuous mismatch can leave students dis-empowered and less motivated or even incapacitated to create and bring about meaningful changes that can drive national growth and development. Students equally compared admission policies and reported that admission policies were more favorable in western countries than in Cameroon. These comparisons help us realize how exclusive our structures are. There is nothing wrong with having set criteria for admissions, as long as they are not excluding students with the potential to participate. When these students are excluded, they become “fit” in the hands of others while their own systems perish. “One fit all” practices no longer work in a time like this of diversity and need for inclusion.

With regard to higher education participation, students re-imagined the future of higher education as one in which the environment (characterised by adequate and updated infrastructures, entrepreneurial skills, relevant collaborative activities, etc.) promotes all students to acquire practical skills relevant to the context. These skills must build self-reliance,

sustainability, and growth in them relevant for success in a rapidly changing world. The environment must therefore be supportive to bring about a more positive experience as current higher education environments promote inequalities and limit opportunities to compete with an evolving society. These students dominantly focused on the roles of the institution and institutional factors consistent with the findings of Leathwood and O'Connell (2003), which indicated that institutional factors, specifically support from teachers, categorized a major part of students' struggles. However, our findings revealed other aspects of institutional factors such as infrastructure, curriculum, services, and technology that are not supportive of students needs.

The high demand for higher education must be commensurate to growth and availability of infrastructures; but as evident in the discussion, this growth is not happening if "900 students still use the 100 seats of the 19th century." The problem is not limited to just availability but adequacy, and not just adequacy but relevance. Infrastructural development must go hand in hand with curriculum revisions to meet with the changing needs of the society. These issues have been catered by policy documents as evident in the 2001 higher education orientation law of Cameroon, but the realities on the ground do not conform to these plans. With the rapidity of change and need for proactive solutions, higher education systems in Cameroon can no longer continue to amass policies but must go further to implement actions and evaluate the extent to which these policies are meeting the needs of learners.

It was not surprising that the issue of graduate employability was factored into the imagination of students, but it did not dominantly support the view that jobs must be created; rather, students should be supported to create their own jobs (entrepreneurship). Students even uttered that creating these jobs should become one of the performance indicators specified by the curriculum. Beyond the need for employability, these students show readiness to actively participate in realizing their own dreams as they shift the responsibility of job creation from others (government leaders) to themselves with support from higher education processes. This new surge for self-reliance and interdependence provides a fertile ground for service providers to leverage programs and actively involve the students in the planning, assessment, and feedback processes of HEIs. Interestingly, students emphasized that entrepreneurship should characterize educational provision at all levels and not just higher education, echoing the view that higher education should not be an isolated space in preparing students for participation in higher education.

Students' "imagined future" after graduation was closely linked to higher education provisions. However, they hoped that higher education graduates will be holistic, characterized by self-reliance, interdependence, flexibility, sustainability, employability, as well as opportunities for growth. Students' hope for the future was in sharp contrast to their analysis of the present situation where they held that life after higher education is characterised by dependency as training promotes job seeking rather than job creation and supports a reliance on the government. This finding in part is founded in the review of Chan (2016), which indicated that higher education is not perceived as a training ground for job acquisition; however, in our context, students best describe it as supportive of job-seeking behaviors. Similarly, it extends the findings of Oldenburg (2016) related to limited employment opportunities for youths. Students depict a world of possibilities where they can contribute to the development process. To them, the goals of education are inextricably linked to interdependence which depicts a balance of self and others. Students are not advocating to be left in a world of their own; however, the existence of

their “world” should be acknowledged and supported. In sum, this study raises three key issues: higher education is not an isolated space; students are co-constructors in realizing their own imagination; and, higher education provision must be sustainable.

Recommendations

Higher education stakeholders, in collaboration with basic and secondary education, can equip communities with guidance and support services through pop culture (including news, TV shows, social media, comedy, etc.) and campuses through websites, brochures, and flyers. Community involvement must go along with strengthening already-existing guidance and counseling services in schools at all levels. With increased demand and cost, HEIs must start meeting the challenges of infrastructure and use of technology by transforming programs to online modes. Entrepreneurship training must be practical and factored into all programs in order to guarantee self-reliance and greater interdependence in the future. Finally, action must go beyond policy formulation to ensuring that the policies which are already in place are effective.

Conclusion

It is widely agreed that in a rapidly changing society, higher education systems must be proactive and make informed decisions about the future; yet, understanding the future of higher education from the perspectives of students in Cameroon is limited. Using the power of imagination, 68 students were engaged in an exploratory study that employed the use of seven synchronous Online Focused Group Discussions to explore the type of higher education that students want. Students revealed the inadequacies of HEIs based on their experiences that position higher education as invisible before entry, plagued with inequalities, and providing limited opportunities that relegate them to a life of dependency after leaving these institutions. Students wanted something different for the future as they re-imagined a higher education that makes them self-reliant, interdependent, flexible, and employable. Students’ hopes for the future are intimately linked to the quality of provision in HEIs and what supports exist before participation in higher education.

References

- Belfield, C., Britton, J., Dearden, L. & Van der Erve, L. (2017). Higher education funding in England: Past, present and options for the future. Institute for Fiscal Studies. ISBN 978-1-911102-48-9. <https://doi.org/10.1920/bn.ifs.2017.bn0211>
- Chan, R. Y. (2016). Understanding the purpose of higher education: An analysis of the economic and social benefits for completing a college degree. *Journal of Education Policy, Planning and Administration (JEPPA)*, 6(5), 1-40. <https://scholar.harvard.edu/roychan/publications/understanding-purpose-higher-education-analysis-economic-and-social-benefits>
- Glenn, M. (2008). The future of higher education: How technology will shape learning. The New Media Consortium. <https://www.learntechlib.org/p/182088/>
- Gravett, K., & Winstone, N. E. (2019). Storying students’ becomings into and through higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 46(8):1578-1589. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2019.1695112>

- Leathwood, C. & O'Connell, P. (2003). 'It's a struggle': The construction of the 'new student' in higher education. *Journal of Education Policy*, 18(6), 597-615. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0268093032000145863>
- Lowe, H., & Cook, A. (2003). Mind the gap: Are students prepared for higher education?. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 27(1): 53–73. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03098770305629>
- Martin, J., Ungruhe, C., & Häberlein T. (2016). Young future Africa – Images, imagination and its making: An introduction. *AnthropoChildren*, 6, 1-18. <http://popups.ulg.ac.be/2034--8517/index.php?id=2508>
- Mbodiam, B. R. (2020). Cameroon's Internet penetration rate reaches 30% in 2020, thanks to the arrival of 570,000 new Internet users. <https://www.investiraucameroun.com/economie/2402-14084-le-taux-de-penetration-de-l-internet-au-cameroun-atteint-30-en-2020-grace-a-l-arrivee-de-570-000-nouveaux-internautes>
- Meirieu, P. (2020). Distance education: An educational divide? <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/podcasts/20200427-%C3%A9cole-%C3%A0-distance-une-fracture-%C3%A9ducative>
- Miller, R. (2018). Sensing and making-sense of Futures Literacy: towards a Futures Literacy Framework (FLF). In R. Miller (Ed.), *Transforming the Future: Anticipation in the 21st Century* (pp. 15-25). UNESCO
- Ministry of Higher Education (2001). Law No.005 of 16 April 2001 to Guide Higher Education. Cameroon Government. http://www.minesup.gov.cm/ipescam/en/textes/1_LOI_N%C2%B0_005_du_16_avril_2001.pdf
- Murtagh, L. (2012). Enhancing preparation for higher education. *Practitioner Research in Higher Education*, 6 (1): 31–39. <http://insight.cumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/1330/>
- Njeuma, D. L., Herbert N. E., Mbuntum, F. F., Nalova, L., Nkweteyim, D.L., Musenja, S. & Ekanje, E. (1999). Reforming a national system of higher education: The case of Cameroon. *ADEA Working Group on Higher Education*. http://adeanet.org/clearinghouse/sites/default/files/docs/he_cameroon_en.pdf
- Oldenburg, S. (2016). "I am an intellectual": War, youth and higher education in Goma (Eastern Congo). In J. Martin, C. Ungruhe, & T. Häberlein (Eds.), *Special Issue 6: Images, Imagination, and the Making of Future: Children, Youth and the Role of Education* (pp. 1-19). AnthropoChildren. https://edoc.unibas.ch/39991/1/Oldenburg_AnthropoChildren_Nov2016.pdf
- Quacquarelli Symonds (QS). (2020). *Defining the student experience: International student survey: Vol 3*. https://info.qs.com/rs/335-VIN-535/images/QS_Vol3-International_Student_Survey_2020.pdf
- Thompson, M., Pawson, C. & Bethan, E. (2021) Navigating entry into higher education: the transition to independent learning and living. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 45(10), 1398-1410. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2021.1933400>
- World Bank (2019). Cameroon unemployment rate 1991-2021. <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/CMR/comeuroon/unemployment-rate>>Cameroon Unemployment Rate 1991-2021. Retrieved 2021-05-29

Zittoun, T. & Glăveanu, V (2017). Imagination at the frontiers of cultural psychology. In T. Zittoun, & V. Glăveanu (Eds.), *Handbook of Imagination and Culture*. Oxford University Press. ISBN: 9780190468729.

Etta Mercy Aki (etta.mercy@ubuea.cm) is a senior lecturer in the Department of Educational Foundations and Administration and Vice Dean in charge of Studies and Students' Affairs in the Faculty of Education at the University of Buea, Cameroon. Follow her on <https://www.linkedin.com/in/dr-etta-aki-a33360214>.

Nguehan Simeon Boris (nguehan.boris@ubuea.cm) is a senior lecturer in the Department of Educational Psychology in the Faculty of Education at the University of Buea, Cameroon.

Echari Lisa Ebenwei (atuobolisa@gmail.com) is a graduate student at the Faculty of Education at the University of Buea, Cameroon. Follow her on <https://www.facebook.com/echari.lisa.5>.