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Brain Drain in Africa: Issues and Challenges in the Context of Higher Learning in Cameroon

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ABSTRACT The so-called brain drain is a topical issue globally, and especially in Africa, where the phenomenon is multifaceted. Inspired by similar trends reported for Africa, this conceptual paper highlights the case of Cameroon by exploring the structure of academic staff recruitment by state universities, which is managed through a highly centralised bureaucratic public service system. The tendency to appoint people to key university positions, such as vice rectors, deans, and heads of departments, by presidential decree exacerbates the situation. In addition, the limitation of 45 years as the maximum entry age into the public service deprives universities of highly skilled professionals, who seek employment elsewhere although they have the potential to contribute to the development of the economy through involvement in the local higher education system. To mitigate this situation, it is imperative for governments to separate state universities from the broader public service system, and grant the universities autonomy to manage their own affairs, including recruitment based on their peculiar realities. Giving universities the authority to manage their own recruitment and promotion processes will encourage competition, boost output and reputation, and curb brain drain.

INTRODUCTION

Brain drain refers to "the international transfer of human capital resources… [and] highly educated individuals from developing to developed countries" (Docquier 2014: 2). Nechad (2018: 58) describes it as "the flight of human capital". It is a worldwide phenomenon, which has existed for many decades, and was exacerbated by globalisation (Rizvi 2005). From a global perspective, Benedict and Ukpere (2012: 2421) observe that, whilst China, Haiti and Portugal are examples of countries affected by the brain drain phenomenon, the case of India is peculiar, as "about 80 percent of its computer programmers migrate to the USA, depriving the Indian economy of about US$2 billion a year in innovations" (citing Onduba 2000). In spite of its global nature, the extent and characteristics of the brain drain are unique in some circumstances, and it has particularly adverse effects on developing countries (Rizvi 2005; Bagdanavièius and Jodkonienë 2008; Docquier 2014), especially in Africa (Benedict and Ukpere 2012; Masanjala 2018), and most significantly for sub-Saharan Africa (Kigotho 2013; Masanjala 2018). Although general migration from Africa is well documented, and also cause for concern, it is the outward migration of skilled and highly educated people that is the focus of this paper. In this regard, Kigotho (2013) reports that in sub-Saharan and developing countries, the emigration rate of the skilled population was higher than the total immigration rate, reflecting the higher outward mobility of people with educational attainment. According to Kaempf and Singh (1987: 12), "migration of highly qualified personnel, in particular from less developed societies, leads to widening of the gap between the poor and the rich countries of the world".

The brain drain phenomenon in Africa is caused by factors that could be conveniently grouped as pull and push factors. These factors range from socioeconomic factors and political instability, to security concerns (Docquier 2014; Nyatcha 2019). Policies related to employment and the retirement age (Netongo et al. 2019) make matters worse. Docquier (2014: 3) identifies the following as the primary causes of brain drain in

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Africa: "Poverty and a lack of economic growth… discrimination, political repression, and a lack of freedom". Due to these circumstances, skilled professionals in Africa migrate to the developed world, where they gain employment in what they consider a more stable environment (Bechem 2018). Similarly, in an exploration of push and pull factors for the brain drain phenomenon in the health sector, Najib et al. (2019: 93) identify some of the pertinent factors in Zimbabwe that pose threats to job security, salaries and training and career opportunities. The preferred destination for Zimbabweans in this category in the United States of America; Najib et al. (2019) describe this migration as detrimental to Zimbabwe's health care system. Similarly, Chand (2019) reports that the number of Ethiopian doctors practising in a single city, Chicago, is about three times the total number in Ethiopia; thus, signifying the implications of brain drain for African countries.

Concerning the age of retirement, Netongo et al. (2019) argue that the retirement age of 60 years, which is typical in many African countries, is counterproductive because it deprives the continent of skilled professionals, who then seek employment abroad, where their skills are valued after the age of 60 years. Ngadaya et al. (2019) are of the view that this low retirement age deprives younger scientists of experienced supervisors, who retire, as required by law, at a time when their services are in demand the most. This pattern is disturbing because many African scientists attain a first degree between the ages of 25 and 30 years, and a PhD between 40 and 45 years (Harle 2013; Ngadaya et al. 2019). Some of the causes of the trend of late graduation relate to the ongoing socioeconomic and political challenges faced by the continent (Ngadaya et al. 2019), as well as corruption (Bechem 2018; Transparency International 2018). These challenges, indirectly, deprive many professionals of the opportunity to contribute to the much-needed national development of African countries. This practice of putting an age to the recruitment of university staff differs from that in most parts of the world, where policies do not place age restrictions on university staff recruitment. A case in point is South Africa, where staff recruitment for universities is not restricted by age, and retirement age can be up to 65 years (Higher Education South Africa (HESA) 2015). In South Africa, the mean age of doctoral graduates is 40 years, and one fifth of PhD graduates are over 50 years at the time of graduation (HESA 2011); the average enrolment age is 38 years (HESA 2015). This means the age restriction practiced in Cameroon is not the case in South African higher education.

Capuano and Marfouk (2013) report that many African economies are continuing to lose skilled labour to the developed world, despite Das having raised concern about this phenomenon more than 40 years ago. In addition, Das (1971) explains that, although African students studying in countries like the United States of America have the desire to return home after completing their studies, their decisions are influenced by the dynamics of the labour market in each country. A case in point is the Kenyan economy where the diaspora, through remittances, improved the real estate investment and other sectors (Bamahriz and Masih 2018).

In relation to the brain drain as it relates to women and the medical profession, Capuano and Marfouk (2013) suggest that the existing trend in Africa is likely to get worse. In their view the ongoing socio-political and security crises in many African countries, including Cameroon is exacerbating the situation. Increasing the rate of brain drain has negative implications for African countries in terms of losing human capital and resources that were invested in training these professionals (Kaempf and Singh 1987; Rizvi 2005; Docquier et al. 2007; Capuano and Marfouk 2013). Morocco is an example of an African country that spends a great deal on education without reaping the dividends of this investment, as its trained professionals prefer to migrate to other parts of the world rather than staying in Morocco (Nechad 2018). Another challenge faced by African countries is that, due to the nature of their economies, the workforce that has been trained cannot be absorbed, which causes many graduates to migrate to other parts of the world in search of work (Kaempf and Singh 1987). Docquier (2014) cautions that migration may escalate in situations of war and insecurity, which is applicable to the case of Cameroon.

Based on brain-loss-brain-gain rhetoric (Martineau et al. 2004), Das (1971) questions the recurrent notion that developed countries are rob-

bing developing countries of their human resources. In Das's (1971) view, many professionals migrate because the economies of their home countries do not possess conditions favourable for their employment – this claim is reinforced by recent protests in Cameroon by about 200 PhD holders, caused by lack of employment opportunities (Chimtom 2019). These events align with the view of Arocena and Sutz (2006) that when people with knowledge and capabilities do not have opportunities that enable them to put their skills to use, they are likely to look elsewhere, and these opportunities are more likely to be in the developed world. In essence, African countries need to create an atmosphere that is receptive to their citizens who have acquired specific professional skills either at home or abroad. Mberu and Pongou (2016) agree that creating such conditions will enable the harnessing and use of existing skills appropriately for national development in the countries of origin of professionals.

Docquier (2006: 1) explains that skilled professionals can make enormous contributions to areas such as "quality governance and increasing return on education". The United Nations (UN) (2008) reveals that a receptive atmosphere will enable these professionals to act as engines of growth in their home countries. In addition to gaining direct employment, these professionals can give back through entrepreneurial skills (UN 2008). However, the success of this approach depends on the nature of laws governing businesses in individual African countries that allow people, especially those in the diaspora, to invest their skills. Carrington and Detragiache (1998) surmise that the diaspora population is likely to be more educated than the population back in the home country, hence the need to create conditions that would enable the diaspora population to contribute to development in their home country.

In light of the ambiguities associated with the brain drain phenomenon (Das 1971), the authors of this paper have coined the term "artificial" brain drain to emphasise factors that are human-made, as opposed to those that are natural. Artificial brain drain refers to instances where the skilled population is forced to migrate to other countries due to dire socio-political and economic situations in their home countries which are, in most cases, the result of the actions, or lack of action, by people in power. In contrast, natural brain drain refers to those factors that are caused by natural disasters, and are completely beyond the control of the people who migrated.

The authors argue that centralising recruitment for institutions of higher learning in Cameroon – as well as the great deal of documentation, which can be discouraging, therefore restrict some skilled professionals who wish to apply for these positions, especially those in the diaspora. This has implications for universities and the economy as a whole. For example, the Cameroon central government decides when universities should recruit, and prescribes the number of new staff per department, irrespective of the needs of these universities (Sina 2018). It can be argued that there is no doubt that the dependency of universities on the political will of the central government to initiate massive recruitment processes, and to make appointments, negatively affects the functionality and output of these universities.

Objectives

Against this background, the specific objectives of this paper were to interrogate the nature of recruitments and appointments in Cameroon's state universities and to explore the way the highly bureaucratic system of governance exacerbates the brain drain in Cameroon.

METHODOLOGY

In this qualitative and exploratory study, the authors interrogate the phenomenon of brain drain in Africa, with a focus on the context of its implications for state universities in Cameroon. An interpretivist paradigm was assumed, as the authors sought to understand the socially constructed reality immersed in the data set (De Vos et al. 2011). Qualitative content analysis was the methodology employed. Nieuwenhuis (2007) contends that content analysis involves looking at data from different angles, with a view to identifying keys in the text that will help to make meaning of the raw data. The 'keys in the text' referred to above is what Stemler (2001: 1) considers as "compressing many words of text into

fewer content categories, based on explicit rules of coding".

The qualitative content analysis procedure involved selecting units of analysis and the process of making meaning of the data (Elo and Kyngas 2008). The units of analysis selected were official documents sourced through a desktop research process. The main document was the 2018 presidential decree that ordered the recruitment of PhD holders into state universities in Cameroon. Although other decrees of similar nature were issued in previous years, that of 2018 is used to contextualise this paper and others are only referred to in order to buttress arguments as the need arises. Like a domino effect of this presidential decree, the various state universities followed up with media releases that echoed the government's call, while universities placed emphasis on the numbers needed by specific departments at each university. Therefore, the content of the central decree and the universities' releases were analysed for convergences and divergences. Moreover, sources were consulted such as ministerial releases, online newspapers and other media sources, concerning the appointment of administrators into different echelons of the management structures of state universities in Cameroon. The key question underpinning our investigation was: How does the nature of recruitment for and appointments into state universities in Cameroon contribute to brain drain? This key question directed the meaning-making process of the data. Informed by this question, the researchers made sense of the data by open coding the different documents and creating specific categories. The coding and categorisation produced themes that were abstracted, and are presented as findings below. Also important is the use of the emic perspective (Markee 2012), by which the authors ensured that, as insiders in the study, their subjective views of the reality of the phenomenon were involved in the research process as a point of analytical departure. This implies that, to some limited extent, their experiential knowledge of the context and phenomenon under study was considered in the analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section will present the findings and discussions of the study. The recruitment of university lecturers (processes and documentation) and the appointment of university administrators through presidential decree emerged as human-made factors that contribute to exacerbating brain drain in Cameroon. First there is a brief analysis of two previous recruitment events that had implications for higher education: the 2011 recruitment of 25 000 graduates (Kendemeh 2011) and the 2018 recruitment of researchers (Sina 2018).

Recruitment of Lecturers

In 2011, the Prime Minister and Head of Government at the time, Philemon Yang, put in place a 15-member commission to manage the recruitment of 25 000 graduates into the public service, as mandated by the executive arm of the government. The secretary in the prime minister's office and his deputy were dedicated as chairperson and vice chairperson of the commission respectively. Ironically, the committee selected candidates and then distributed them among the various state universities (Muluh 2011; MINESUP 2018), irrespective of the priorities of universities. It is not clear what proportion of the 25 000 graduates were absorbed into the higher education space as lecturers, although, since then, no other recruitment has been done until the last call of 2018. Logically, the gap of seven years between recruitment events is too long for a country that has a high unemployment rate but produces skilled professionals, and which considers itself as emerging. The employment approach in place restricts Cameroon's state universities from recruiting the personnel they need, and ignores their needs.

In a recent media release for the recruitment of 150 researchers in Cameroon, the advertisement reserves 30 positions for Cameroonians living outside the country, irrespective of skilled graduates available locally and the needs of universities (Ahone 2019). Compared to previous years, this advertisement is more accommodating; for the first time, it allows Cameroonians out of the country to deliver the required documentation at the closest Cameroonian embassy. However, it is unclear whether the documents required in the past still numbered 14. In addition to the demanding list, the socio-political situation in Cameroon exacerbates the lack of

confidence Cameroonians in the diaspora have regarding the selection criteria and in those in charge.

The 2018 recruitment authorisation by the presidency specifies that candidates must be holders of PhD degrees and aged at most 45 years on 1 October 2019 (Government of Cameroon 2019a). Considering that many degree holders in Cameroon remain unemployed for many years after obtaining a first degree, they often engage in low-paying jobs to raise money to further their studies. For this reason, they are likely to obtain PhD degrees at an advanced age, hence warranting their exclusion from employment opportunities at Cameroon's universities through the centralised public service that is age restrictive. This is because the recruitment requirements clearly stipulate that applicants must be 45 years old or younger by the date of submission of the application. Researchers such as Harle (2013) and Ngadaya et al. (2019) calculate the average age for Africans, including Cameroonians, to obtain PhD degrees is between 40 and 45 years. Therefore, specifications for recruitment by the Cameroonian government show an encouragement of the brain drain, be it directly or indirectly. Docquier (2014) agrees that extreme restrictions are detrimental to the international mobility of skilled professionals and have adverse effects on the development of their countries of origin.

Furthermore, the recruitment process requires candidates to complete and compile 16 documents (Government of Cameroon 2019a), many of which have to be certified with paid fiscal stamps – a requirement which could be considered a deliberate attempt to boost the government treasury. Considering that few Cameroonian students are financially empowered, due to the lack of financial assistance during their studies, compiling this list of documents naturally excludes some prospective candidates, based on lack of funds. The requirement that prospective candidates have to produce a hard copy of their PhD thesis (requirement No. 5) increases the financial cost of applying for employment (Government of Cameroon 2019a). Furthermore, some of the specific documents, by their nature, exclude potential candidates. A case in point is requirement No. 10 (Government of Cameroon 2019a), which states that candidates need to be permanently employed at a recognised university to qualify for application. This requirement questions the government's commitment to encouraging its skilled citizens to participate in nation building, or as most countries prefer to give permanent employment to their citizens, making it very challenging for expatriates without the proper documentation to secure permanent lecturing positions abroad. Consequently, these expatriate Cameroonians with PhDs end up looking to their home country for an opportunity to gain permanent employment and contribute to nation building.

Regarding the age requirement, in 2017 the government, through the Ministry of Scientific Research and Innovation, launched a competitive process to recruit 173 assistant researchers and researchers. The advertisement stipulated that candidates for assistant researcher positions be no older than 30 years, while those applying for the position of researchers should not be older than 35 years on 1 January 2017 (Sina 2018). Considering the analysis of Ngadaya et al. (2019), the age limit for researchers excludes many potential candidates.

There are cases where the clustering of disciplines fails to specify what the advertisement is recruiting for. For example, in the case of Bamenda University, the following disciplines are clustered under the Department of Science Education and involve one position: philosophy of education, counselling psychology, educational psychology, educational administration and planning, curriculum studies and development, sociology of education and psychometrics (statistics in education) (Government of Cameroon 2019b). The ambiguity of this list not only undermines the independence of the various disciplinary fields of knowledge, but also reduces the opportunities of potential candidates whose specialisation happens to fall in that cluster. This means that potential applicants must compete for one position within their discipline and with other disciplines in the cluster of science education, as indicated in the advertisement. This grouping also questions the feasibility of selecting a single candidate to cover all the knowledge domains clustered under the Department of Science Education, considering the specifics of each discipline.

Appointment of Administrators

The centralisation of authority concerning Cameroon's state universities extends to the appointment and promotion of heads of departments, deans and rectors through presidential decree. This procedure is contrary to appointments at universities in other African countries, and beyond, where students and staff members have a voice. For example, the appointment of new rectors for Cameroon's universities in September 2015 followed Decree No. 2015/398 PRC of 15 September 2015 (Government of Cameroon 2015). This appointment procedure questions the role of university management, and the implications of such decrees on the functionality of institutions of higher learning. Logically, such appointees are unlikely to serve the interests of the university, as their appointments are largely political, rather than academic. Such absolute centralisation of power and politicisation of academic positions stifles the voices of the academic community, who cannot, in any way, make decisions that correspond with their professional ethos. In such circumstances, those who desire meritorious career progression are likely to migrate to other countries, thus, exacerbating brain drain.

CONCLUSION

Evidently, the brain drain in Africa is ongoing due to the existence of various challenges such as the high level of centralised and bureaucratic administration. In the case of Cameroon, the situation is exacerbated by the socio-economic and political challenges including the ongoing war in the Anglophone regions of the country. Gauging from experiences in some African countries, especially in the southern part of the continent, giving leverage to institutions of higher learning to manage their recruitment and management processes will enable Cameroon's state universities to fill vacant posts with the relevant skills and within acceptable timeframes. This paper has demonstrated that the interference of government ministries in the recruitment and appointment processes in state universities in Cameroon enhances the likelihood of corrupt practices. This assertion is supported by the 2018 Transparency International report that ranked Cameroon 25th on a corruption perception index, with some of the indicators linked to malpractices around the higher education space.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the authors recommend a change in policy by the government of Cameroon towards the higher education sector and especially concerning state universities in order to curb the phenomenon of brain drain. The new policy should decentralise these universities and give them autonomy in matters of executive management and recruitment of personnel. In advancing this policy recommendation, it is also noted that a framework needs to be developed for the government to continue its role of oversight and provision of subventions so that these institutions can be financially sustainable. Furthermore, adjusting the current employment and retirement age in the public service for researchers and lecturers would enable the country to benefit from its skilled professionals and thus minimise the current trend of 'artificial' brain drain. Our submission is that if these two recommendations are implemented, the phenomenon of brain drain in Cameroon will be transformed to brain gain, as skilled expatriates living in the diaspora will be more willing to reinvest their knowledge in their country of origin.

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