

Research Management in Universities in Cameroon: Case of the University of Buea

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Abstract

All eleven State universities in Cameroon operate under a higher education policy and framework, which ensures strict adherence to a harmonized programme designed by the government to meet the threefold mission of teaching, research and outreach to the public. The University of Buea (UB), a 30-year-old Institution and one of two Anglo-saxon universities in Cameroon, was the first to operationalize a research management framework. With a current student population of over 33,000 and a teaching/research staff strength of about 600, UB has taken advantage of every available opportunity to develop and maintain an environment friendly to promote its research mission. Emphasis has been on the improvement of quality, visibility, impact and relevance of its research within its community and beyond. Research management instruments include Research Policy and Management Guide, Research Strategic Plan (2018-2024), Thesis Guide for student research, Faculty and Departmental Scientific Committees and UB-Ethical Review Committee.

Several postgraduate programmes are running, and in the past four years (2019-2022), 2500 dissertations/theses were deposited in the library from staff and students' research on campus. UB's top-notch scientists have won many big externally-funded, highly competitive research grants and continue to author publications in high-impact factor peer-reviewed journals. In addition, the University has subscribed to more than one million electronic peer-reviewed journals under the open-access initiative to facilitate the dissemination of research findings and increase visibility for both the scientists and the institution. UB has partnered with more than 50 universities in Africa, Europe and North America to support its teaching and research missions. More research communication and visibility platforms include the institutional radio station (Chariot FM), UB Research and Innovation Fund, the UB website, a bi-annual magazine and a quarterly Newsletter. The research office staff are actively involved in the management of external grants. This involvement has gone a long way to ensure compliance and recovery of indirect costs, which has been ploughed back to grow research through the Research and Innovation Fund. Research support roles and functions at UB are the most visible and appreciated in the higher education sector in Cameroon.

Keywords: Research management, University of Buea, Cameroon.

Introduction

Universities in Cameroon are under the supervision of the Ministry of Higher Education (MINESUP). The ministry develops and implements Government policies and programmes, carries out pedagogical control, promotes the sustainability of the traditional missions of higher education and guarantees the promotion and dissemination of University research to the international community. Predominantly, MINESUP studies and advises the government on ways to adapt the higher education system to national, social and economic realities. It issues accreditations and controls the pedagogical level of private higher education establishments, ensures permanent liaison with all sectors of national life with a view to develop professional courses and supervises the delivery of the certificates.

Article 2 Section 1 of Law No. 2001/005 of 16th April 2001, on the Orientation of Cameroon's Higher Education Institutions states that the fundamental mission of higher education is to produce, organise and disseminate scientific, cultural, professional and ethical knowledge for national development and the advancement of humanity.

Teaching, research and outreach are the triple missions of Universities in Cameroon. These missions are the backbone of the MINESUP policy and strategic framework in Cameroon. In

2005, a New Policy on University Governance was passed following decree No. 2005/383 of 17th December 2005. The decree aimed at improving the governance of higher education in four dimensions: managerial, academic, financial and social governance. The decree lays emphasis on effective and efficient management of Universities to meet market exigencies (Doh, 2015). The need to improve the administrative and financial management of universities triggered the signing of the decree.

Cameroon's higher education system comprises of two sub-systems: The French and Anglo-Saxon systems. The French sub-system operates in eight out of the country's ten regions meanwhile the Anglo-Saxon sub-system operates in the Northwest and Southwest Regions of the country. The degree structures of the two systems have been harmonised although they have different appellations. The French structure comprises of Licence, Master and Doctorate cycles. This corresponds to Bachelor, Master and Doctoral cycles in the Anglo-Saxon structure.

Article 3 of Order No.18/00035/MINESUP/SG/DDES/DAJ of 28 January 2018 to define regulations governing the award of Bachelor's, Master's and Doctorate/Ph.D. (BMD system) degrees in Higher Education in Cameroon contains the general and specific objectives of the BMD system. The general objectives of BMD are to level up Cameroon's Higher

Education system to international system, promote professionalization to resolve the unemployment of graduates, ensure Learner-Centred Learning and facilitate student mobility, transferability of credits and comparability of curricula. The specific objectives are to ensure greater clarity in the grading system, content of training and adaptation to the job market for parties involved, train multi-skilled graduates endowed with knowledge, know-how and interpersonal skills likely to guarantee social and professional insertion, set up a training system characterised by flexibility and international comparability, reform curricula and diversify training programmes so as to provide students at all levels with capacities to adapt easily to the contemporary world, foster student to the national, sub-regional and international levels, ease the comparability of certificates, encourage cross-curricular learning, develop innovating teaching methods and promote entrepreneurship.

Creation of the University of Buea

The University of Buea was created in 1992 following wide-ranging university reforms in Cameroon. The reforms focused on providing universities with more academic and management autonomy, expanding and increasing higher education opportunities and making university programmes more professional and more responsive to market forces.

Decree No. 92/072 of 13 April 1992 transformed the University Centre of Buea into a fully-fledged university (Doh, 2015) which became operational in May, 1993. The mission of the University of Buea is to provide opportunities for quality education through teaching and research in an environment that is conducive to such pursuits and in ways that respond to market forces (Atindogbe, 2019).

Since the creation of the University in 1992, the University has tailored its programmes toward providing opportunities for quality education through teaching and research in an environment that is conducive to such pursuits and in ways that respond to market forces. The University is dedicated to the continuous quests for excellence, the promotion of moral and human values, and service to the community.

The teaching and research programmes of the University of Buea emphasize relevance, encourage tolerance and promote creative, critical and independent thinking. The University is committed to the provision of quality programmes and research skills. Graduates from the University are playing an essential role in national development. This is because the University produces high quality graduates with contemporary skills.

The University of Buea is made up of eight faculties and three professional schools. The faculties include Arts, Social and Management Sciences, Education, Science, Health Sciences, Agriculture and Veterinary Medicine, Laws and Political Sciences and Engineering. The schools comprised College of Technology, Advanced School of Translators and Interpreters and the Higher Technical Teachers Training College (HTTTC).

The governance system of the University is based on concentration and devolution of management, with structures such as the Council, Senate, Congregations and Committees on which staff and students are represented. This enables the University to make considerable strides and to be recognised as a progressive African University of choice.

A highly qualified and diversified staff of about 600 teachers (not including part-timers, visiting lecturers and instructors) are catering for the academic and mentorship need of over 33,000 students, with the aid of partners in Africa, Europe and North America. In addition to teaching, the staff embark on research in diverse fields that are relevant to national development. The University has more than 500 support staff.

The University of Buea is equipped with modest infrastructures including lecture halls, teaching and research laboratories. The University is connected to the outside world through fibre optic linked to the Cameroon Telecommunications (CAMTEL) network. Also, the Information Centre (IT) of the University eases communication with the outside world.

The outreach and cooperation activities of the University of Buea seek to create strategic alliances with institutions and organisations at home and abroad in order to exploit the opportunities of an increasingly globalised world. The University has established relationships with some private institutions in Cameroon and abroad. The relationship facilitates the exchange of staff and students. Also, international organisations provide assistance to the university through capacity building workshops for staff and students and research funds.

Equally, the University of Buea mentors several private universities and plays a supervisory role to several tertiary educational institutions across Cameroon. The aim of the partnership is to assist newly created private institutions grow in stature to produce graduates with skills that meet market forces.

Research management instruments of the University of Buea

1. Thesis and Dissertation Guide for students

This guide is intended to facilitate postgraduate training in the University of Buea. The guide unifies procedures and nomenclatures taking into consideration national texts that govern postgraduate studies in Cameroon while retaining specificities and nature of the University of Buea. The guide prescribes timelines for postgraduate training, outlines the duties of the supervisor, supervisee, Department and Faculty Scientific Committees and the appropriate table of contents for theses and dissertations across broad areas of specialisation.

The Thesis and Dissertation Guide specifies that the timeframe for completing a master's programme is two years and the Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D) programme is between 3 and 5 years. The revised edition of the University Buea Thesis and Dissertation Guide was published in 2021. The guide is available on the University's website and students are encouraged to consult it at each phase of their dissertation or thesis writing.

2. Faculty and Departmental Scientific Committees

The Department and Faculty Scientific Committees in the University of Buea comprise of the Head of Department and eminent researchers. The Faculty and Department Scientific Committees play an instrumental role in enhancing the quality of research in the University of Buea. The committees provide advice and consultation to all Postgraduate candidates throughout the research process, approve postgraduate research proposals, make qualitative judgement on every PG candidate's written work including substance, format, style, grammar, design, methodology, procedures and conclusions, set the direction of studies by approving research proposals, assist the

Heads of Department and supervisors in providing direction for research studies, approve the style manual (typesetting formats, bibliography) to be used by PG candidates, approve the final draft thesis or dissertation for submission to the Graduate Office for the public defence, and ensure that the rights of human subjects are protected in the research phase of PG programmes.

The Scientific Committees achieve the aforementioned tasks partly through the medium of pre-defence seminars. The seminars form an integral part in monitoring the research activities of PG students. The seminars are divided into three parts. Seminar I takes place after the students have had a series of meetings with the supervisor to agree on the research problem and topic. Seminar II is midway into the research proper and serves as a progress report seminar where the Scientific Committee appraises the progress of the student and gives directives on how to improve the speed and depth of the work. Seminar III is pre-defence. At this stage, the Scientific Committee ascertains the level of completeness of the first draft of the work and also gives an authorisation for the student to do the last set of corrections, then prepare and bind the research work for submission to the department.

A team of examiners designated by the Departmental Scientific Committee grade the seminars. Seminar I takes 35%, Seminar II takes 25% and Seminar III takes 40% of the total mark allocation. During Seminar III, the Scientific Committee must ascertain whether or not the final thesis document is acceptable.

Research policy and management guide

The research policy and management guide states how research should be conducted and managed in the University of Buea. The policy outlines the procedures and guidelines to assist researchers in the University to initiate, plan and complete their research. Supervisors and students are expected to respect the guidelines stipulated in the research policy and management guide of the University in order to ensure quality research. The guide stipulates that research conducted in the University must be subjected to peer review to guarantee quality study.

UB Ethical Review Committee

The Ethical Review Committee of the University of Buea is a body made up of duly recognised officials and scholars who are charged with the responsibility of reviewing, approving, and implementing research protocols and proposals to ensure the respect for research ethics. The Ethical Review Committee evaluates the ethical aspect of research studies carried out in the University and ensures that good scientific practices such as the respect for human rights and safety, informed consent, voluntary participation, source acknowledgment, confidentiality and anonymity are followed.

Importance of research to the University of Buea

The University gives maximum priority to research. Research is one of the key administrative units under the supervision of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor in charge of Research, Cooperation and Relations with the Business World (DVC/RCB). The unit is a common feature of the organisational structure of all public universities in Cameroon. It has the mandate to support the development, promotion and dissemination of research activities. It serves as the Secretariat of the University of Buea Scientific and Research Committee.

The Research Division has two services: the research service and publication service.

The research service focuses on searching and publicising funding and capacity building opportunities relevant to research development, planning and delivering sensitisation/consultation and capacity building activities, monitoring research activities to ensure compliance and grant management. One of the main activities of this service is the organisation of the annual University of Buea International Research Conference on October 25.

The publication service focuses on tracking research outputs, reporting research to inform strategic management and enhance uptake, organisation of dissemination activities and targeting internal and external stakeholders and promoting staff publication. Its main publication is the University of Buea quarterly Newsletter which gives visibility to research and other activities of the University of Buea. It can be downloaded from the University website: www.ubuea.cm.

The research division collaborates closely with other units both at the Central Administration and at the level of the Establishments (Faculties, School and Colleges) to ensure effective support for university research. Therefore, the staff of the Division work constantly to ensure good working relationships with all its partners within the university. The Division strives to provide customer-centred services to ensure that the support provided responds to the needs of researchers and leadership, whilst constantly benchmarking service provision to stay abreast of innovations and improvements in the area of research and innovation management.

In 2022, the DVC/RCB organised a one-day maiden research conference on scientific writing, grant and proposal writing for emerging researchers, interdisciplinary approach to research, managing research grants for maximum results, sustainability and impact development, dissemination of scientific knowledge, research ethics and intellectual property rights, research monitoring process, research networking, importance of research and sourcing for research funding. The maiden conference was part of the activities of the Research Division to equip staff and post graduate students with research skills and has been factored into the University calendar of activities as an annual international event which is held on October 25.

Outcomes of research

Research is very instrumental in producing knowledge. It facilitates quality teaching and the learning process in the University of Buea. Lecturers in the University understand the scientific process of gathering new knowledge. They utilise their research skills to search for quality information from books, media and journal articles. This enables the students to be exposed to quality content.

The Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor in Charge of Research, Corporation and Relations with the Business World organises research seminars to enhance lecturers' and students' prowess in research. The seminars are useful in building the research capacities of lecturers and students. Also, the availability of the University of Buea Thesis/Dissertation guide helps to overcome differences towards research organisation and management. It enables supervisors to follow a standard approach in conducting research.

Also, research activities in the University of Buea enable students to identify societal problems and provide solutions to them. As part of the conditions to earn a Bachelor, Master or Doctoral degree in the University, the students are expected to identify topical research problems and investigate them. The problems are centred on people, phenomenon, organisations, technology, policies and laws. Lecturers act as supervisors to the students. The supervisors ensure that the theses and dissertations are original, free from plagiarism, and clearly relate to students' programme or department. Furthermore, the supervisor overviews the final version of the thesis or dissertation document and prepares the student towards the final defence. The University constantly reminds students to undertake research activities that solve societal problems and not merely to fulfil a graduation requirement.

Equally, research activities in the University facilitate academic promotion for teachers. Teachers are promoted from Assistant Lecturers to Lecturers, Lecturers to Associate Professor and from Associate Professors to Professors. The requirements for academic promotions comprise the number of scientific publications, number of supervisees at the Masters and Doctoral levels and Outreach research-related activities.

Furthermore, research activities give visibility to the University of Buea. The University organises an Annual International Research Conference that brings together experienced researchers from different countries. Links are also made available for those who cannot be physically present. Also, Research Newsletter, Faculty publications, and the University website publish research activities in the University. These outlets give international visibility to the University of Buea.

Governance structure in higher education in Cameroon and the place of research

The governance structure of higher education in Cameroon comprises five domains: administrative, financial, digital, infrastructural, and academic domains. These domains guide research management in State Universities.

Administratively, the DVC/RCB makes routine visits to research laboratories in the institution. The visits enable the DVC/RCB to monitor ongoing projects, share research knowledge and opportunities with the coordinators of the laboratories and discuss on the possible ways to meet the demands of the laboratories in order to enhance research activities.

Also, there are quarterly meetings for Vice Deans in charge of Research and Cooperation (VD/RCs). The quarterly meetings bring together VD/RCs from various faculties to discuss ways of improving research activities at the faculty level. The VD/RCs are responsible for coordinating research works at the Faculty level. They work in collaboration with the DVC/RCB.

Equally, the DVC/RCB submits quarterly reports to hierarchy. The reports provide a comprehensive account of research activities in the University. It also identifies research demands, proposes innovative research projects, provides information on ongoing research projects in various faculties and schools and suggests ways to ameliorate the state of research in the University.

In addition, Research Division has enabled the University of Buea to co-sign Memorandum of Understandings (MoUs) and Conventions with donor organisations. For instance, the University of Buea is partnering with York University as well as other institutions and organisations in Africa to use Local data, Artificial Intelligence and Mathematical Modelling expertise to manage disease spread, with focus on the current COVID-19 pandemic. The research department is responsible for drafting MoUs and cooperation agreements on behalf of the University or between external organisations and individual researchers (Ngomo, n.d.). The University respects its own part of the conventions.

Digitally, the University is committed to the fight against plagiarism and publication in predatory journals online. Section 21 of Order No.18/00167/MINESUP/SG/DDES/DAJ of 30 June laying down the modalities for supervision of theses and dissertations within establishments of Public Higher Education Institutions in Cameroon empowers Vice-Chancellors and Rectors in State Universities to control and sanction cases of plagiarism. Research works are tested for plagiarism before they are defended in the University of Buea.

Also, a research portal has been established in the University to serve as a repository. The portal stores research information of the University. A Digital Administrator is tasked with the responsibility of controlling and monitoring the portal. Equally, the University established an Information Technology (IT) Centre on 29 July 2002. The IT Centre facilitates the teaching and learning process in the University; simplifies research activities for both lecturers and students; ensures the development and maintenance of the IT infrastructure of the University; eases communication with the outside world; promotes and upgrades individual knowledge in Information and Communication Technology; reflects the dynamic and well-kept image of UB both nationally and internationally; makes internet services affordable to students and the entire university community; and shows ample proof of UB's involvement in the electronic media, technological know-how and a reliable infrastructure for Information and Communication Technology (ICTs).

Concerning financial governance, the Research Division manages the competitive research funds of the University. The University's Management Council, support from external donors, industries and Internal Research Funds provide the budget of the competitive research funds (Ngomo, n.d.). Also, the DVC/RCB's office drafts and verifies Memorandum of Association and Conventions between the University and donor organisations and between individual researchers and donor organisations.

In relation to infrastructural governance, the University has state-of-the-art research laboratories especially for pure science disciplines. The laboratories serve as practical centres for research activities. Newly constructed research laboratories include the Laboratory for Emerging Infectious Diseases. The research laboratories are fostering the University's triple mission of teaching, research and outreach.

As regards academic governance, the University allocates lecturers to supervise Theses and Dissertations. To facilitate the supervision process, the University establishes scientific committees at the Faculty and Departmental levels. The scientific committees are made up of a group of persons who are

charged with the responsibility of assisting departments and faculties achieve their objectives by ensuring standards in the academic affairs of the departments and faculties. The

Committees make sure that teaching, learning and research activities in departments and faculties adhere to the international norms of the field and to the standard set by the University.

Some ongoing research projects in the University of Buea.

S/N	Project title	Funder	Value of Grant	Start date	End date
1	Harnessing Data Science to Promote Equity in Injury and Surgery for Africa	National Institute of Health (NIH)	\$6,492,991	01/09/2021	31/08/2026
2	Mobility for Innovative Renewable Energy Technologies (MIRET)	European Commission: Education, Audio-visual and Culture Executive	€397,875	01/07/2020	01/07/2025
3	Mobility of African Scholars for Transformative Engineering Training (MASTET)	European Commission: Education, Audio-visual and Culture Executive	€1,399,975	01/01/2020	01/01/2025
4	Nature-inspired Identification of Novel antivirals CJI	Bill and Melinda Gates Foundations (BMGF)	\$941,429	26/10/2021	26/10/2026
5	Exploiting the synergy of registered drugs Rifampicin and Albendazole in shorten the treatment of Macrofilariasis for the cure of Onchocerciasis in areas co-endemic with latasis: A pilot phase II clinical trial study (ESRIFAL) Project	European and Developing Countries Clinical Trials Partnership Association Implementing (EDCTP2)	€747,125	01/11/2021	01/11/2026
7	BioactMOs project	BMBF (German Federal Ministry of Education and Research)	€307,866	05/09/2020	31/08/2023
8	Human genetic variation in Cameroonian populations	Uppsala University, Sweden (c/o Prof. Carina Schlebsch)	500.000SEK	01/03/2021	01/03/2024

Benefits of research management in the University of Buea

Research management facilitates the running of several postgraduate programmes in the University of Buea. The programmes are both professional and academic oriented. The professional programmes are tailored towards meeting market exigencies meanwhile the academic programmes transform students into vibrant scholars. Graduates from the University of Buea are occupying managerial positions in corporations and transcending to higher academic ranks.

Also, research management contributes towards archiving students' theses and dissertations in the institution's library. The DVC/RCB works in collaboration with the Director of the Library to ensure that students submit the final copies of their theses and dissertations at the library. Between 2019 and 2022, over 2500 dissertations and theses were submitted at the library for archival. The dissertations and theses are bounded and kept at the library for reference. Similarly, research management networks with international partners to upgrade the standard of the library.

Top-notch scientists in the University of Buea have won highly competitive externally-funded grants due to their mastery in project writing. Interestingly, the scientists engage students in the process of grant project writing. This enables students to acquire practical skills in grant writing. Equally, the University organises annual seminars where the scientists share knowledge on grants writing with other lecturers and postgraduate students.

Furthermore, researchers in the University of Buea have numerous publications in high-impact peer-reviewed journals. The publications are top-notch and are cited in other journals.

The process of publishing in renowned journals is always a tedious one. It involves a too and for movement of submission, rejection and correction. The lecturers exercise patience, resilience and humility during the entire process. These are vital qualities of researchers (Amin, 2005).

In addition, the University provides lecturers with research motivation allowances. This comprises of 1st and 2nd semesters research allowance and Research Modernisation Allowance. These financial motivations enable lecturers to meet various research needs. Also, the University subscribes to international journals to enable students and lecturers have access to recent scientific publications for free. Besides these, the University is partnering with renowned Online Libraries to facilitate access to quality content.

Challenges of research management in the University of Buea

Some staff are uncooperative in fostering research activities in the University of Buea. They are hesitant to submit research data. Also, some staff do not share their articles with colleagues and students. This makes it difficult for colleagues and students to have access to the journals or cite the journal articles in their long essays, dissertations, and theses.

Equally, there is an incomplete research picture of the University of Buea. This is because some grants are managed outside the University. Such grants are undeclared or unreported. This makes it difficult for the Research Office to have a comprehensive account of grant projects won by lecturers in the University.

Also, internet supply is epileptic in the University of Buea. The unstable nature of the internet slows down research activities. It makes it difficult for lecturers and students to access and download online literature. Furthermore, the University lacks modern equipment for research managers. The managers usually rely on their personal equipment to monitor, conduct and document research activities in the University of Buea.

In addition, there is limited financial resources for research activities. Limited financial resources deter research activities in the University. Atindogbe (2019) and Pokam (2016) asserted that limited financial resources are a general problem among state and private universities in Cameroon. The institutions highly depend on subvention from the government. Unfortunately, the subventions are small to sustain quality research. Atindogbe (2019, p. 98) reveals that “although there is provision in the budget of the MINESUP to support academic research, the pressure is so high that the line allocated for research is used for other pressing issues that cannot wait.”

Prospects of research management in the University of Buea

The Cameroon government and the University of Buea motivate research activities through the provision of Research Modernisation Allowance and 1st and 2nd Semesters Research Allowance. This lessens the financial demands of lecturers carrying out research or those supervising students who are conducting research in the University.

Also, the Cameroon government through the Ministry of Higher Education has recruited over 2,000 Assistant Lecturers for the past three years to solve the problem of inadequate Lecturers / research personnel across eleven state Universities in the country. In the University of Buea, 228 Assistant Lecturers were recruited. The Assistant Lecturers are involved in activities that project the teaching, research and outreach capacities of the University of Buea.

Equally, the Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are giving visibility to researchers in the University of Buea and exposing them to international research networks and funding opportunities. The technologies equally expose lecturers and students to quality literature on grant writings and grant templates. This enable lecturers and students to acquire skills on writing grant proposals.

Furthermore, the Cameroon government has launched a programme to digitalise State Universities across the country. Optic fibre cables and Routers have been installed in the University of Buea as part of government’s vision of digitalising state universities. This digitalisation of state universities will facilitate teaching and research activities among teachers and students. Also, there is a unique platform to collect and manage data for teachers and researchers in Higher Education in Cameroon.

In addition, the Cameroon government and international donors are contributing in creating and equipping new research laboratories in the University of Buea. The donors provide the financial resources and equipment to modernise or construct new research laboratories. The availability of the laboratories and equipment propel research endeavours in the University.

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