

Côte d'Ivoire Reforms Higher Education

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When Côte d'Ivoire became a sovereign nation in 1960, President Felix Houphouët-Boigny's first priority was to develop an educational system that would train a cadre of Ivoirians capable of taking over the reins of the rapidly growing Ivoirian economy. The basic structure of higher education was developed in the 1960s and was closely modeled on the French system. There was a university and six *grandes écoles*, which offer courses in specific fields.

The effort was so successful that in one generation sufficient Ivoirians were educated to completely Ivoirianize many sectors. In fact by the 1980s, the university was producing too many graduates, in certain fields, notably the humanities and the social sciences, to be absorbed by the civil service and the educational system—which had been the two most important employers for graduates in these fields. The only areas in which there are still shortages of qualified Ivoirians are the technical fields and the commercial sector.

As early as the mid-1970s some Ivoirian leaders saw the anomaly in a developing African economic system that emphasized a classical academic education and began efforts to reform the still nascent system. In 1977, an educational reform law was passed but never applied. In 1984 and again in 1989 further attempts at reform occurred, but the times were not ripe for reform.

In 1990, the university erupted in turmoil as part of the general movement toward political pluralism. It was not the first time university students and professors had confronted the authorities. However, this time the confrontation lasted for years instead of days or weeks. The root cause was that by the 1980s the lycées were spewing out thousands of *bacheliers* (high school graduates) who were ill-trained for any work but ready to enter the university, particularly the humanities and social science faculties, in ever-increasing numbers. As a result, the university's student body had grown to more than four times its original capacity of 7,000 students. At the same time, the physical plant, staff, and budget had remained almost static for more than two decades. Scholarships were cut; dormitories, dining halls, and classrooms became overcrowded.

Academically, the university also began to slide. Budgets for libraries and laboratories diminished to almost nothing. Professors could not cope with the growing num-

ber of students. With so many strikes, the number of hours in class dropped drastically and course work was truncated. Even when a young Ivoirian graduated, a degree from the National University of Côte d'Ivoire had become worthless both internationally and within the country.

In the midst of all this tumult, the Ivoirian government began to move once again toward badly needed changes in education. The first step was a general consultation with hundreds of Ivoirians concerned with all levels of formal education. The results were published in May 1994. Then a reform law for higher education was passed in September 1995.

But even before the law was passed there was evidence of physical change at the university. In 1991 and 1992, two new university campuses were established in Abobo-Adjamé, a northern Abidjan suburb, and Bouaké, the country's second-largest city. In mid-1994 renovations of the physical plant started after years of deterioration.

The September 1995 law had the following specific objectives:

- to professionalize educational and research activities,
- to optimize the use of human and financial resources,
- to introduce a contractual system between the state and the various structures of higher education, and
- to give more autonomy to institutions of higher education.

The first objective is an implicit recognition that academic standards and productivity have fallen drastically. The contents of course work and the degree requirements no longer meet generally accepted international standards. Research by Ivoirian academics varies greatly, but overall the amount of research and its quality have diminished over the years.

Of the other objectives, the one calling for a contractual system is the most radical because it implies the development of a system of accountability and oversight of the academic community, both students and faculty. To accomplish this, a National Commission for Evaluation of Higher Education will be created in 1997. Its goal will be to oversee the fulfillment of the "contracts" between the government and the institutions of higher education. In the purely educational arena it will play a role similar to the regional accrediting commissions that ensure academic standards in the United States. Its actual form has not been finalized, but it will be a permanent structure with an administration and governing council whose personnel will be heavily recruited from the private sector.

During the 1995–96 academic year, the first "reform" introduced a new pilot program in two faculties grouping courses into modules with *unité de valeurs* (i.e., credit hours) to be earned in order to pass from one year to the next. At

first, the students in the affected faculties went on strike, but they received little support from the professors and the public and eventually had to relent. The system has been extended to all parts of all universities this year.

In May 1996 the administration of the university system was decentralized. The three campuses became autonomous universities. The post of rector was abolished, and the vice rectors in charge of each campus became the presidents of the new establishments. New governing councils are also being created that will have stronger representation from nontraditional sectors in civil society.

In October 1996 the traditional faculties and the various institutes and research centers were abolished and replaced by a variety of structures—the primary one being *the unité de formation et de recherche* (UFR), in which almost all teaching and research will be based. The creation of new regional university centers (incipient universities) and continuing education centers will also be based in the universities. Already two new campuses in Daloa and Korhogo have been created under the administration of Abobo-Adjamé and Bouaké respectively.

The cynics say that old wine is being put in new bottles. That is true to a certain extent. But renewing the vigor of the public system of higher education will not be easy without putting asunder the old structure—some of which have become sinecures for people no longer actively engaged in teaching and research. It remains to be seen if these measures can really restore quality and vitality.

However, the most important “reform” in higher education during the past decade has taken place outside the public system, almost hidden from sight. In response to the failure of the system to meet the new realities of the 1980s, private schools emerged to give practical training to failed high school students who could not find work. The courses offered are what would appeal to private-sector employers: accounting and office systems technology (still called secretaryship here), public relations and communications, computer literacy, computer science, and electronics technology, resulting in a junior or senior high school diploma.

Over the past decade, these private institutions have also moved up to the tertiary level as high school graduates opted for programs in the same subject areas but leading to a Brevet de Technicien Supérieur (BTS), a diploma equivalent to the American AA/AS degree. In 1996, a third of the 1996 high school graduates, 5,650 out of 16,041, asked the government to secure them a place in one of these schools rather than a university or *grande école*.

Why the change? Ivoirian students and their parents have finally understood that government is no longer a re-

liable source of employment and that a university degree does not necessarily lead to employment in the private sector where the new jobs are emerging. The Ivoirian government has also recognized the usefulness of these private institutions and the education they offer. Therefore, it has worked out a system whereby it pays the difference between the university tuition (which is nominal) and the normal tuition fees of the institution that the student attends. The government now supports about 11,000 students in BTS-level programs in private schools. Therefore, it is an effective subsidy to these institutions that gives them a financial security and allows them to develop more programs.

Is privatization the wave of the future for higher education in the Côte d'Ivoire? For technical and commercial education it has already happened. Will private universities be created? It remains to be seen, but it has already happened in other parts of West Africa. ■

Assistance for African Higher Education:

The Association for the Development of African Education (DAE)

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African universities are struggling to emerge from a decade of crisis characterized by rapid growth, unsustainable financial arrangements, heavy staff losses, frequent labor unrest and campus closures, institutional deterioration, waning relevance, and declining educational quality. In numerous countries, university graduates are less capable and less qualified today than they were 10 years ago, and university research output has almost ceased. As a result, many African universities produce neither the skilled human resources nor the new knowledge necessary to guide national development in the years ahead. At risk is nothing less than the region's future capacity to manage its own affairs at an acceptable standard.

Responding to this challenge, 40 bilateral, multilateral, and private donor agencies from Europe and North America have launched a bold experiment in interagency coordination. To increase the effectiveness of their assistance to the education sector in sub-Saharan Africa, they