

BENIN: Higher education in crisis

Wagdy Sawahel

21 June 2009

Issue: 0081

Higher education in the West African nation of Benin is in crisis as a result of increasing demands from prospective students while internal and external resources are dwindling. An evaluation of the system, aimed at strengthening higher education, will begin this month and is expected to be completed next February.

Objectives include assessing the formulation, implementation and effectiveness of higher education policy by analysing its initial results against targets set for the first phase of a 10-year Education Sector Development Plan from 2006 to 2015. It will also draw lessons from the implementation of policy to inform the second phase.

Akadiri Yessoufou, a researcher in the faculty of science and techniques at the University of Abomey-Calavi in Benin, said that to be effective any proposed reforms should not be too ambitious for the limited resources available and the role of higher education in Benin's development should be recognised.

Unusually in Africa, the Benin government spends more money on education than defence and has cultivated an active intellectual community. But Yessoufou said higher education was suffering a "multi-faceted crisis" stemming from an obsolete institutional framework, uncontrolled student flow, low teaching quality, and insufficient infrastructure, equipment and financial resources as well as poor working and living conditions for students and staff.

There had been a rapid increase in the number of public and private institutions at all levels. The University of Abomey-Calavi, or UAC - formerly called the National University of Benin - is the largest and oldest university in the country of eight million people, and the only public higher education institution.

It encompasses several faculties, professional and technical colleges, teacher training schools, and post-university institutions located at the Abomey-Calavi, Cotonou and Porto-Novo campuses. Yessoufou said the overall functioning of the university - including its structures, teaching, research, financial and personnel management, student services and relations with the state - should be analysed.

"As technological development in Benin has generated a growing need for specialised skills that the UAC cannot meet, private institutions are filling the gap and are becoming a major feature of the education system, representing about 20% of enrolments in higher education in the country," he said.

Most private institutions are in major cities and are rather small. They offer two-year courses in industrial, business and secretarial fields and some are affiliated with foreign higher education institutions, mainly in France, and provide joint higher level courses.

"Pressure from the emerging private higher education sector will certainly be a determining factor in initiating much-needed higher education reforms, as one of the burning issues is the accreditation of these private higher education institutions," Yessoufou said.