# Technical Education in Emerging Economies in the 21st Century: Reflecting on the Anglo-Subsystem of Technical Education in Cameroon

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## THANKS FOR THE INVITATION

Greetings to you, my fellow alumni of Ombe, and friends as well as well-wishers of this illustrious institution of technical knowledge and skill building. I am truly delighted by the invitation to make an encore appearance as the keynote speaker at an Ombe Old Students Association's (OOSA) Annual Convention. My talk this year, 2023, aligns neatly with the Convention Theme to wit, "Technical Education: The Engine of Development." As conveyed by its title, the speech focuses on the importance of technical education in emerging economies with emphasis on the Anglophone subsystem of technical education in Cameroon. I preface the talk by sharing with you some of my musings regarding the widespread myth of technical education as inferior to grammar or general education.

## THE PARADOX OF TECHNICAL EDUCATION INFERIORITY

Many a technical school student or alumnus is patently aware of insinuations or outright pronouncements to the effect that technical education is less prestigious than grammar or general education. This is paradoxical given that up until the 1970s, only students who passed in List 'A' of the Common Entrance, that is, the national competitive secondary school entrance examination, were qualified to be interviewed for possible admission to

Government Technical College (GTC), Ombe. This coveted institution was the only state-owned secondary technical school in Anglophone Cameroon from its establishment by the British colonial government of Southern Cameroons in 1952 to the mid-1970s. For some duration within this time span, the private sector counted three technical secondary schools, namely Kamerun Technical College (KTC), Nkwen, Bamenda, Vocational College of Arts, Science & Technology (VOCAST), Muyuka, and Fess Technical College, Muyuka. Throughout the entirety of that period, the pride of first place consistently belonged to Ombe. Once admitted, Ombe students who originated from every nook and cranny of Anglo-Cameroon, were required to study both general education courses such as English, French, History, Civics, Mathematics, and Physics, as well as technical discipline-specific courses, including Technical Drawing, Science, Engineering Mathematics, Processes and Materials, and Workshop and Field Practice. So, why is it that technical education has always been viewed as less prestigious than grammar school education despite the fact that its curriculum includes general education courses? I herein explain this ostensible paradox with respect to Anglophone Cameroon at two different but inextricably intertwined levels, namely the local and the global.

***Local Perspectives.*** Locally, it would be recalled that the first institution of secondary education in Anglo-Cameroon was a grammar school, namely St. Joseph's College, Sasse Buea, which enrolled its pioneer batch of students in 1939. About a decade later, another grammar school, Cameroon Protestant College (CPC), Bali to be created in 1948. The Government Trade Center (GTC), Ombe, Anglo-Cameroon's pioneer secondary technical school, was not launched until 1952. Note the appellation, "trade center" as opposed to "technical college." This was not inadvertent! Rather, it was designed to accentuate the institution's emphasis on 'trade training' in contrast to intellectual formation. Therefore, for the Anglo-Cameroonian society at large, while Sasse and Bali trained 'book people,' Ombe trained 'trades- or craftsmen.' These latter were, on average older than their peers who enrolled in grammar schools. Consequently, Ombe came to be viewed as an extension of local vocational training workshops or apprenticeship programs. As if to fulfill a false prophecy, technical education in Anglo-Cameroon, until the late-1970s and early-1980s, operated programs that ran for a maximum of four years with no provision for further education. In contrast, general education programs boasted two cycles of five and 2 years respectively; in addition, students had the option of proceeding to the university upon successful completion of the second cycle.

***Global Perspectives.*** Globally, technical education has been saddled with a negative reputation whose roots are traceable to the history, culture, social hierarchical structures, economics and investment biases of Eurocentric civilization. European powers, particularly the erstwhile colonizers of African countries such as Cameroon have historically manifested a preference for grammar school education. This entails emphasis on classical subjects such as the humanities—philosophy, literature, arts, and abstract knowledge writ large. In Eurocentric ethos, these are typically considered intellectual pursuits whereas technical education is associated with manual labor and practical work—or 'blue collar work' in American parlance—and deemed less prestigious.

***Dispelling the Myth of Technical Education as an Inferior Alternative.*** The disparities between the duration of technical and general education, and the other differences I have already identified, have conspired to firmly engrave the paradoxical image of technical education as an inferior alternative to general education in the minds of Anglo-Cameroonians. Yet, I would be remiss if I end this narrative without underscoring the fact that even the most ardent critics are often compelled to question their negative appraisal of technical education. Many technical school graduates have been known to excel and brilliantly serve roles on national, regional and international stages as university professors, entrepreneurs, engineers, scientists, public health experts, medical practitioners, healthcare providers, and military officers *inter alia*.

## THE ANGLO-CAMEROON TECHNICAL EDUCATION SYSTEM

The Anglo-Cameroon education subsystem has largely been inspired by the British model of education or what proponents fondly characterize as the Anglo-Saxon system. From its inception in Britain, this system has been heavily influenced by social hierarchies and class divisions. Historically, grammar or general education was reserved for children of the elites or members of the upper social strata, while technical education was associated with the working class. This invariably created a perception—veritably or otherwise—that technical education was meant for individuals who were less academically apt or of modest means.

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A lot has transpired in the technical education space in Anglo-Cameroon since the 1970s—1977, to be precise—when I graduated from Ombe. Ombe is no longer the sole state-owned technical secondary school in the polity. Secondary

technical education now operates on a five-year (1st cycle) plus two-year (2nd cycle) system. In addition, more general education courses, such as Biology and Chemistry, have been added to the curriculum.

This notwithstanding, technical education in the subsystem continues to leave something to be desired due mainly to its colonial foundation. This seriously compromises its ability to prepare graduates capable of dealing with the challenges of the 21st century. In its current form, the technical education curriculum is deficient on many fronts. Foremost in this regard are the lack of contextual relevance because it was inherited from the colonial past; limited scope because of its primary focus on manual and technical skills designed to address colonial imperatives; Eurocentric bias in that it prioritizes Western knowledge and perspectives while discounting or disparaging local knowledge, indigenous materials and practices; skills mismatch, particularly because the skill set imparted to the learners deviates significantly from what they need in the field; and lack of flexibility and innovation because of the rigid nature of the technical curriculum inherited from the colonial era.

Thus, although the beneficiary of some minimal revisions, the technical education curricula in Anglo-Cameroon remain outdated, and contextually irrelevant. Colonial authorities tailored the specific vocations and trades to suit the goals and objectives of the colonial project. One objective was to exploit the colony and protect the economic interest of the metropole. Another was to, as much as possible, approximate Eurocentric living standards for Europeans in Africa. Accordingly, it was necessary to train technicians who could contribute towards realization of these objectives.

In practice, this meant endowing technicians with the skills necessary to build and maintain colonial public infrastructure. Foremost in this regard are railways, roads, bridges and wharfs that were necessary to exploit natural resources from the colonies for onward transmission to the metropole and other overseas markets. In addition, it was imperative to train technicians capable of constructing and maintaining the buildings that housed colonial officials, their offices, factories and other work places; repair the cars and other machinery required for the colonial project. Thus, the goal was never to train technicians capable of meaningfully contributing towards the realization of development goals in an emerging economy such as Cameroon.

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ROLE OF TECHNICAL EDUCATION IN THE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

It is difficult to overstate the value of technical education as a component in the engine of development in emerging economies. At least eight crucial functions of this genre of education in developing economies such as Cameroon readily come to mind. These include its ability to:

- Equip individuals with practical know-how;
- Groom entrepreneurs and create jobs;
- Promote economic diversity;
- Enhance productivity and competitiveness;
- Bridge the skills lacuna;
- Increase the ranks of the middle-class;
- Address infrastructure deficiencies; and
- Encourage regional connectivity and collaboration.

***A Tool for Equipping Individuals with Practical Know-How.*** In its most basic form, technical education is capable of not only meeting the workforce demands of an emerging economy but endowing individual learners with practical skills and knowledge. These are necessary as direct inputs to specific industries and sectors.

***An Instrument of Entrepreneurial Development and Job Creation.*** The ability of technical education to promote entrepreneurial development and create jobs flows from its proficiency as a mechanism for endowing learners with usable knowledge and skills. In the context of emerging economies, the opportunities for new business start-ups are vast and waiting to be exploited. When this happens, it is safe to conclude that technical education possesses the ability to foster a culture of innovation, creativity and self-employment. By so doing, it contributes significantly to efforts to reduce unemployment the economy.

***A Device for Promoting Economic Diversity.*** Additionally, technical education is an effective tool for economic diversification because it can enable a developing economy to move beyond traditional sectors and explore new emerging industries such as technology, renewable energy, manufacturing, and healthcare.

***A Mechanism for Enhancing Productivity and Competitiveness.*** Also, technical education is capable of enhancing productivity and competitiveness. This is because technical education endows students with specialized knowledge and practical skills that enable them to be more productive and efficient in the execution of assigned tasks.

**A Tool for Bridging the Skills and Job Lacuna.** Technical education, especially when it is flexible and innovative, constitutes an effective tool for ensuring that technical school students acquire the skills most urgently needed in the job market at any given time. It can accomplish this feat by providing training in specific trades and professions, depending on the needs of the industries. Thus, such an education can re-order the skills set of a workforce to suit the needs of the job market in general. Doing so can also address the skill mismatch problem—that is, the incongruity between job requirements and available skills—that is a defining feature of emerging economies.

***An Effective Tool for Increasing the Ranks of the Middle-Class.*** Technical education is also well-known as a tool for facilitating mobility from low- to middle-income. This is because of its ability to empower low-income individuals by endowing them with economically rewarding skills and know-how that can catapult them into the middle-income strata of society.

***An Instrument for Addressing Infrastructure Deficiencies.*** Technical education also possesses the capacity to help meet infrastructure needs in, especially, emerging economies. This is possible through its inert ability to train individuals in infrastructure building and maintenance fields such as building construction, civil engineering technology, welding and metal fabrication, mechanical technology, telecommunication technology, and electrical technology among others.

***A Tool for Encouraging Regional Connectivity and Collaboration.*** Flowing from the foregoing is the capacity to promote regional and international collaboration. Seen from this perspective, it is safe to conclude that technical education can encourage the exchange of knowledge, best practices, and partnerships with institutions and organizations from different regions and countries. Such collaboration possesses a feedback mechanism as it facilitates learning and enables the adoption of advanced technologies and methodologies across regional and international frontiers. Most importantly technical education can be viewed as a critical component in ongoing efforts to contribute towards uplifting and making emerging economies more sustainable and competitive. This is because of its ability to equip individuals with the practical skills and knowledge necessary to thrive in an evolving global environment.

## PREPARING THE TECHNICIAN FOR THE 21$^{ST}$ CENTURY

A logical starting point for the cautiously prescriptive measures that I present hereunder is to appreciate the following. The content of the current technical

education curriculum in the Anglo-Cameroon subsystem, most of which were inherited from the colonial era, is inherently narrow. Therefore, it is incapable of preparing students for the complexities and challenges of the workplace of the 21st century and beyond. To meaningfully prepare learners for the 21st century, secondary technical school programs must perforce, be capable of endowing students with the skills and knowledge required for emerging technologies and hi-tech sectors as well as rapidly evolving industries.

Given the colonial roots of extant technical education curricula, any meaningful effort to revamp must include initiatives to significantly broaden its scope. The aim, at least for a start, must be to introduce new and contextually relevant specialties, especially those designed to cater to diverse industries and sectors such as renewable energy, healthcare, digital literacy and information and communications technologies that were little-known or unknown during the colonial era.

Briefly, a reasonable curriculum for the 21st century secondary technical education in Anglo-Cameroon should seek to equip learners with adaptable skills, critical thinking, problem-solving abilities, entrepreneurship, and new technology literacy. This is necessary to meet the demands of a dynamic and globalized job market. More importantly, the technical education curriculum should not focus exclusively on technical skill-building. Rather, it must prioritize the development of well-rounded individuals with transferable skills, be adaptable and possess a strong foundation for both technical knowledge-building and practical application. At the same time, technical education programs must strive to incorporate local knowledges, cultural diversity, and indigenous practices. At the very least, this is necessary to foster innovation, cultural pride and sustainable development in an emerging economy such as Cameroon.