

## Skills acquisition in Cameroon: How well does the secondary school curriculum equip school leavers for employment?

**Ernest Nkamta**

Nottingham Trent University

Nottinghamshire, England

**Abstract.** The growing need for the secondary education system to produce school leavers with capabilities in terms of skills and attitudes useful for solving youth unemployment challenges has prompted education reforms in Cameroon. Many school leavers, especially those from the secondary general education sector in the country after completing various levels are not easily integrated into the job market due to their lack of employable skills that were not imbibed into them during their training (Esongo, 2017). Despite the government's efforts at restructuring the educational system and redefine its goals to address youth unemployment and social development, recent evidence suggests that Cameroon has achieved little success (Ibid). The ways in which vocational education can be incorporated in the curriculum of schools have been under-researched in Cameroon and stands as the need for vocational education, rather than a constitutive part of the curriculum development process. My research aims to fill the gap by exploring the perceptions of stakeholders in education for developing a broad-based curriculum that incorporates employability skills at the secondary school level. A qualitative case study approach through interviews and questionnaires was applied in this study. The findings indicated that there is a significant relationship between curriculum development, employability skills acquisition, youth unemployment and the efficiency of the school system. It is thus recommended that the government and education authorities should further refine their focus on needed skills to strengthen and enhance youth unemployment; and thus, provide additional positive outcomes for students by enhancing future curriculum development grounded in practice.

**Keywords:** Employability Skills; Curriculum Development; vocational education.

### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to get an in-depth understanding of the relationship between curriculum development and employability skills acquisition in the context of Cameroon. This included exploring the perceptions of stakeholders in education for developing a broad-based curriculum that incorporates vocational studies at the secondary school level. Since 1990, the government of Cameroon, backed by the IMF/World Bank-led economic recovery programme, restructured the educational system and redefined its goals to address unemployment and social development. Additionally, Vision 2035, known as the Strategy for Growth and Employment

Paper (GESP), published in 2010 sets the Government of Cameroon's goals for the country's growth and development; the main aim being for Cameroon to become an emerging economy by 2035. Among other aspects, the GESP identifies youth unemployment and weak productivity as key challenges for the country's development. There is thus the need to review the education received in secondary schools in Cameroon from its traditional content-based approach to the adoption of a pedagogic paradigm relating to the more pragmatic and functional Competency-Based Teaching Approaches (CBTAs) in line with the goals of the 2010 Growth and Employment Strategy Paper (GESP). However, although education stakeholders in Cameroon claim that the education system is competency-based, there is no clear evidence from research which indicates the extent of the implementation of this policy or factors that militate against its smooth implementation (Esongo, 2017). The curriculum in school is skewed towards academic preparation as evident in widespread unemployment among youths (ILO, 2013). Besides, research has demonstrated that employers want employees who possess interpersonal skills, effective communications skills, problem solving and critical thinking skills as well as the ability to work well within a team (Billing, 2003). A similar result from a study of employers' needs from new employees in the workplace was reported by Shivpuri and Kim (2004).

Further, in its report on Global Employment Trends for Youths, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) maintained that youth unemployment is widespread throughout the globe because of a shortfall in young people's skills, job experience, job search skills as well as the lack of the financial resources to find work (ILO 2009). This challenge, the report noted, is compounded in developing countries by the competitive economic and social pressures brought about by the ever-growing pool of people available for work. Despite the recognition that unemployment is a global phenomenon, unemployment and underemployment amongst young people in Cameroon is high. According to the International Labour Organization's (ILO, 2013) report, the unemployment rate in Cameroon is 30% and that of underemployment is 75%. The report showed that, there are about 4-6 million, able and ready to work young people who are currently unemployed in Cameroon. Cameroon remains strategic in terms of institutional arrangement, which involves issues of the younger age group, yet the lack of adequate technical and professional education for youth especially those completing secondary education continues to be a major concern and is one of the main causes for the high rate of youth unemployment in Cameroon (Penn, 2016).

Additionally, Mbangwana (1996), observed parents as being keen to ensure the productivity of their children by acquiring vocational skills that will enable them to bring income into the family or make them better-off and independent. Households rely on the income from labour; hence productivity is largely determined by the acquisition of employability skills (Ibid). There is however, a mismatch between training and employment and the lack of training for self-employment (Ibid). The ways in which vocational education can be incorporated in the curriculum of schools have been under-researched in Cameroon and stands as the need for vocational education, rather than a constitutive part of the curriculum development process. This research aimed to get an in-depth understanding into whether if young people are given sufficient opportunities through secondary education to raise their skills, they would be qualified for available jobs (Winch., 2000, Unwin and Wellington., 2001 and Pring, R. et al., 2009). This means that the educational system should be the driving force for any meaningful development. There is need for the curriculum at secondary school level to be developed such that children in schools can take advantage of the wide range of opportunities that would equip them with employability skills. This study seeks to suggest appropriate solutions and recommendations to stakeholders in the Ministry of secondary education on how to improve on the future curriculum that will make secondary education able to serve as a basis with which students can start life.

### **Aims of Research**

This study explored the perspectives of stakeholders in education for developing a broad-based curriculum which incorporates employability skills at the secondary school level. The research aimed:

1. To find out about the causes of the high level of youth unemployment in Cameroon.
2. To identify the types of knowledge and skills that students need from the curriculum to enhance their working life.
3. To examine the perception of educational administrators and curriculum planners on the responses received and the implications for revising the curriculum.
4. To present a contribution to knowledge through the development of a conceptual framework of the relationship between curriculum development and employability skills to inform future curriculum design in Cameroon.
5. To propose recommendations for curriculum review in Cameroon.

The following three research questions were devised to fulfil the research aim and objectives outlined above:

### **Research Questions**

1. What is the perception of current school pupils (Form 5, 15-16-year olds) on the types of knowledge and skills they need from the curriculum to gain employment?
2. What is the relationship between curriculum development and vocational education from participants' perspectives?
3. How can employability skills be integrated in the curriculum of schools in Cameroon to improve employability skills for students?

### **Relationship between the Study and Existing Empirical Evidence**

To develop a conceptual framework and subsequent methodology for understanding how the secondary school curriculum equip school leavers for employment, I critically reviewed the literature on: Employability skills and prerequisite for vocational education, curriculum development and the structure of curriculum development in Cameroon.

Oni (2007) maintains that vocational education is the type of education which equips the individual for gainful employment in recognised careers as semi-skilled workers, technicians or sub-professionals. In relation to the focus of my study, it is connected to workplace vocational education, which focuses on the knowledge and skills required for workplace performance. In the work place, vocational skills are referred to as the procedures, techniques of carrying out specialised or practical tasks that can easily be measured and quantified. These skills are easily transferred to young students. They are much more easily trained in such skills than in employability skills which are usually referred to as generic or core skills or non-technical skills (Audu et al, 2013). According to Shakir (2009), these skills are not usually taught in schools even though they are highly desired by employers. Dacre and Sewell (2007) define employability skills as the skills, knowledge, understanding and personal attributes that enable an individual to gain employment, thrive in their job and gain satisfaction in their chosen profession. Employability skills can be grouped into three main categories such as interpersonal skills, problem solving skills and decision-making skills (Audu et al, 2013). According to research findings by Bennet, Dunne and Carre (2000), generic skills can be presented in four broad areas of management skills namely: management of self, management of others, management of task and management of information. Vocational skills and employability skills so complement each other that Spencer

and Spencer in (Ali et al, 2012) stated that superior performers in the workplace possess both specialised vocational skills as well as generic employability skills. Employability skills complement the vocational skills to fulfil a vital role of shaping an individual's life (Schulz, 2008). Despite the importance of these skills, it has been noted that schools do not incorporate them in to the curriculum; favouring the learning of information (Robinson 2011). Besides, although varying educational establishments pay much attention to employability skills, Barrie (2005) points out that evidence show that teachers do not include these skills into their teaching, learning and assessment strategies especially in the African context. For example, Boahin, Kamphorst, and Hofman (2010), in their survey of employers in Ghana about skills new employees have when interviewed or recruited indicated that they offered frail employability skills. This was evident in their problem-solving, organisational, communication, teamwork and ICT abilities (Ibid).

In the literature, four main curriculum development models are usually identified: 1) Curriculum as a body of knowledge that focuses on content; curriculum is what is contained in the different subjects (Kelly, 2009). Emphasis is on the syllabus of the various subjects whose contents are transmitted to students and later evaluated. 2) Curriculum as a product, also known as the objective model. This aims to achieve a certain pre-planned and prescriptive end-product. The main features of this model comprise of situation analysis, identifying aims and objectives, choosing and organising content, selecting and organising learning activities and undertaking assessment. 3) Curriculum as a process; compared to the product model, the process model is more open-ended as it emphasises on a continuous process in which the result is the development of potential skills such as critical thinking (Sheehan, 1986). 4) Curriculum as praxis: This model emphasises on a broader view of educational practice in the society. Curriculum built on the curriculum as praxis model does not only include well-articulated plans; it also involves informed and committed action Grundy (1987). In this model, the focus is on continuous social processes – considered as human interactions, values and attitudes; put into practice by educators. This model, however, should not only be viewed as a set of plans to be implemented but should involve a thorough and active process in which acting, planning, and assessment exist in reciprocal and integrative relationship (Yek and Penny, 2006).

Curriculum as praxis model advocates for the production and application of knowledge within student groups; undertaken by members of the group, addressing real problems in real contexts by thinking and reflecting as well as developing constructive skills. The result of this interactive learning process is the understanding of their individual pedagogical responsibilities and what they are expected to achieve. Grundy sums-up as follows:

*Curriculum as praxis is a conceptualisation of curriculum derived from an orientation towards human well-being and which makes an explicit commitment to emancipation of the human spirit. It is a process which takes the experiences of both the learner and the teacher and, through dialogue and negotiation, recognises them both as problematic” (1985:115).*

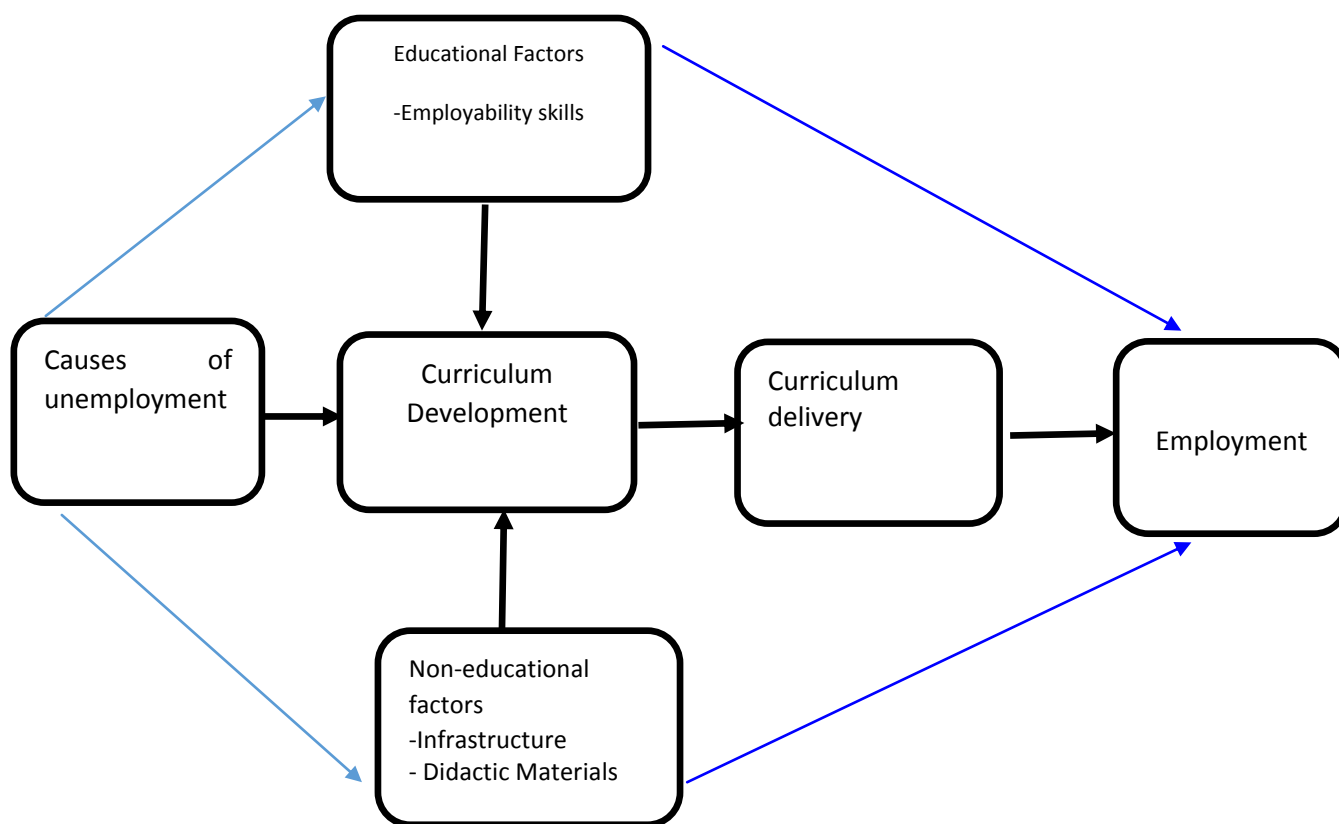
The praxis model further informs this study as it reflects a more dynamic interaction and reflection where action is not only informed; it is committed. The praxis model provides a situation where students can deal efficiently with contemporary world issues. It emphasises on hands-on problem solving, experimenting, projects, having students working in groups, bringing disciplines together and emphasises solving problems in an interdisciplinary way. These inherent qualities of the model are not only important, but also help to acknowledge the way curriculum is viewed and organised and how these impact teaching and learning. The literature on curriculum development models shows that curriculum development models are useful in guiding teachers and education administrators to check whether an institution is implementing or meeting the needs of the students (Ornstein and Hunkins, 2009).

The approach to curriculum development and delivery in Cameroon is top-down. As a result of the top-down curricula approach, to understand how it is structured and operated, it is

important to examine how the structures of the Ministry of Secondary Education extend to regional, sub-regional and school levels. In the ministry are a trained cadre of inspectors to whom the minister appoints to undertake any curriculum initiative. The trained inspectors ensure the effective running of schools by regularly inspecting schools through visits. The inspectors convey ministerial policies to regional delegates who in turn pass them on to the sub-regional delegates. Head teachers are directly answerable to sub-regional delegates who also ensure that any issues affecting schools are relayed to the regional delegates. The minister takes full control of the acts of the ministry, the public and politicians (Forzie, 1990). The implication of this authoritarian approach is that any change can only be carried out through the directives of the minister and as such, any changes are likely to become political. Consequently, the Minister of Secondary Education has full responsibility for curriculum development, curriculum control and the running of schools. Hence, curriculum implementation is often a one-sided process and any classroom feedback or teachers' input is unlikely to be incorporated in the curriculum development process (Ibid).

### Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for the study shows the interdependent relationship between curriculum development, employability skills and youth unemployment. It posits that employability skills are concerned with increasing individuals' skill sets to enhance their attractiveness to prospective employers. While most studies argue that vocational education provides useful skills to prepare young people to gain employment (Quintini and Martin 2006, OECD 2012), others focus on the problem of skills mismatch; often considered as the main cause of high unemployment rates particularly in developing countries (Almeida, Behrman, Robalino 2012).



**Figure 1.0** An analytical framework for linking employability skills curriculum development.

Existing studies particularly in Cameroon have however, failed to establish the relationship between curriculum development and employability skills. The conceptual framework thus maintains that there is a direct relationship between curriculum development and employability skills acquisition. It argues that curriculum development is associated with youth unemployment. The soaring unemployment rates amidst young people in Cameroon is essentially because of lack of employable skills. Students are expected to acquire skills and knowledge from the curriculum, which should be reflected in their employment. Yet these expectations are not realised in the country. The major cause of this problem could not be disassociated with poor curriculum structures and reforms. Hence, to study how well the secondary school curriculum prepares students for employment, a qualitative analysis of students', teachers' and administrators perceptions as stakeholders of education offered useful insights; ways in which the secondary school curriculum could be developed to incorporate skills useful for the labour market.

### **Research Methodology**

The research approach adopted for this study was qualitative case research with the aim to provide the depth required to understand the participants' perceptions of their experiences (Scott and Morrison 2007). To meet the first and second objective of my study, I undertook an extensive review of literature relating to employability skills, vocational education and curriculum development. The literature review involved a review of literature from both developing countries (including Cameroon) and the developed world that illustrate how youth unemployment has resulted in the need to enhance students' employability skills and how this is linked to curriculum development.

To meet the third and fourth aims of the research, I employed an approach that enabled the generation of varying perspectives of stakeholders (education administrators) on the relationship between curriculum development and employability skills. Semi-structured interviews were considered most appropriate in such situations because they enabled me to focus the interview within a framework where all the areas I intended to probe were covered, while giving the interviewee the opportunity to respond fully to issues being discussed or following a line of thought I may not have envisaged (Newby, 2010). Nonetheless, it was crucial to consider and address some of the shortcomings inherent in this approach. Denscombe (2007) examines research that demonstrates how varying responses can be obtained depending on how participants view the interviewer. However, this issue depends on the nature of the topics under discussion and I was satisfied that the methods chosen were appropriate for the study. Alongside the semi-structured interviews, the semi-structured questionnaire format was adopted for my investigation. My choice of format was influenced by Cohen on the advantages inherent in this design. *There is a clear structure, sequence, focus, but the format is open-ended, enabling the respondent to respond in his/her own terms* (2011, p.248).

### **Sampling Strategy**

To meet the objectives of this study, purposive sampling was used (Cohen, et al., 2011) based on the presumption that there are individuals in the country who are knowledgeable in curriculum development issues in the country. I focussed on two specific regions; the South West and Central regions of Cameroon shown in Figure 1.1 below.



**Figure 1.1 – Map of Cameroon showing the 10 administrative regions**

Secondary schools across the country follow the same curriculum and students take the same national examinations; consideration was given to balancing the one Anglophone region (English is the predominant language) and the other from the Francophone region (French is the predominant language). Selection of the research sites for this study was challenging, as there are ten geographical regions in Cameroon as shown on the map with; eight being French speaking while two are English speaking. For this reason, a multistage approach was used to select two regions out of the ten in order to minimise the cost and resources of surveying samples from all regions (Scott and Morrison, 2007 and Cohen et al., 2007). A purposive sampling of 202 form five students (usually 15-16-year-old) and 26 teachers was done and questionnaires were administered. The choice of form five students was found appropriate since at this stage of their education, it is expected that they have experienced the curriculum and are about to leave school. Teachers were sampled because I assumed that they understand the curriculum they are responsible for delivering. Cohen et al., (2007) suggest that there is no clear-cut answer to the issue of correct sample size since it depends on the objectives of the study as well as the population under examination. The selected sample for this study was considered adequate.

### **The Case Study Approach**

Case study was considered appropriate for this study. Yin (2014) maintains that research questions in a case study are investigated in context, from the direct experiences of those whose social actions are highly contextual and of interest. Additionally, a case study requires detailed information from the participants that would not be obtained through other designs (Denscombe, 2014). A case study of four schools and the Ministry of secondary education were used to explore issues relating to curriculum development that addressed the research questions as well as offered a flexible opportunity to obtain a holistic understanding of the phenomena through varying perspectives of participants and stakeholders in education (Yin, 2014).

Furthermore, Yin observed that an inherent characteristics of case study is its ability to deal with varying methods of data such as interviews and document reviews. The implication of this characteristic is that, data is collected from participants and institutions in their day-to-day experiences rather than the *'controlled confines of a laboratory, the sanctity of a library...'* (Yin, 2014 p.88).

### **Participant Interviews**

Participants working at the Ministry of Secondary Education and schools were interviewed. The participants were chosen because they have the capacity to give considered responses, as well as provide some examples of emerging good or interesting policies and practices at national and regional levels. An interview schedule was sent to participants prior to fieldwork describing the purpose of the research and to ensure that all interviewees were given the opportunity to address all issues.

The aim of the semi – structured interview format used in this study was to focus the interview within a framework where all areas I intended to probe were covered, while giving the participants the opportunity to respond fully to issues being discussed or following a line of thought I may not have envisaged (Newby, 2010). Interviews were held in the participants' offices and lasted between 35 to 50 minutes each. All interviews were carried out individually to allow participants to address the same questions to enable comparison of their responses (Clough and Nutbrown, 2012) while recording was done using a tape recorder (Kvale, 2007) to enable the conversation to flow better without diversions.

### **Questionnaires**

The questionnaire was intended to capture the opinions of teachers and students on some important issues concerning the types of knowledge and skills current students and school leavers need from the curriculum to enhance their working life. To meet the aims of the study, the questionnaires intended to:

- (i) Collect information about teachers' and students' knowledge of what is meant by 'employability skills';
- (ii) To determine those skills which are considered most important to meet the needs of employers and the aspirations of learners;
- (iii) To find out about teachers' initiative at incorporating employability skills in their teaching.

Questionnaires were self-administered and I made personal contact (with the support of informal contacts in Cameroon) with the schools and administrators in advance to seek permission. I booked an appointment with the head teacher of the schools and the teachers who in turn informed students about the date to complete questionnaires. Participants were provided with a participant information sheet to understand the nature and purpose of the research. Prior to the completion of questionnaires, a consent form was handed to participants to give consent. The participants retained a copy of the consent form and the information sheet. Further, participants were assured of confidentiality throughout the project by using code numbers for the participants and none of the participants was quoted by name in all documents. All the information I collected – consent forms and recordings were stored carefully.



## Pilot Study

As part of my investigation into how well the secondary school curriculum of Cameroon equips school leavers for employment, a pilot study of questionnaires was carried out. The purpose of the pilot study was twofold:

- 1) To identify weaknesses in the instrument (Newby, 2010).
- 2) To further develop my research objective.

The pilot study of students' and teachers' questionnaires was conducted in spring in 2014 with 20 secondary school students and 15 teachers at a secondary school in the South West Region, Cameroon. The conclusions drawn from the students' responses revealed that, at the secondary school level, learners are not adequately exposed to work or given the opportunity to acquire job skills to help them gain employment. There was however, a mismatch between the students' responses and the teachers' job skills initiatives and positive feedback. While the result of the teachers' questionnaires revealed that teachers teach with respect to the prescribed syllables which stress on practicability of subjects, they give advice to students on job related issues, most students demonstrated limited understanding of the type of skills they need from the curriculum to enable them to gain employment. It was also noted that most students had no work experience (voluntary or paid). The implication of this is that, the secondary school curriculum is not preparing students for the world of work as one would expect. This helped to shape and confirm my research question and merits further investigation on the reliability of the teachers' claim and how the secondary school curriculum could be developed to include skills that prepare school leavers for work.

Although the data from the administered questionnaires was crucial and informed the research tools and methods employed in this study, sequencing of questions and topics, organisation of data and strategies for data analysis; it was not used to inform the content of the final study.

## Outline of Analysis Methods

Data analysis was carried out alongside the data collection process given that these inform each other. The data analysis process involved three main stages:

Stage 1 involved Verbatim (Kvale, 2007) transcription of interviews. This process involved transcribing the interview recordings and identifying key issues in the transcript which were noted and put together across the data segment. These were assembled and compared in order to design suitable codes. The codes were grouped under themes and subheadings which gave an indication of the theoretical direction of the project.

**Table 1.0: An example of coding data in the interview analysis**

No	Relevant Text (Data immersion)	Coding
1	<p>‘...So, I think if there is unemployment, there are, as I say, many reasons: first, they need competence, and the second, is skills...’.</p> <p>‘...there is a high rate of unemployment in Cameroon is because the curriculum or call it syllabuses (syllabus make up the curriculum) the syllabuses which have been there for more than thirty years are already obsolete...’.</p>	Youth unemployment is caused by lack of skills and outdated curriculum
2	‘For now, those who design the curriculum are the pedagogic inspectors..’	Curriculum Developme

	‘...we’ve sat in some pedagogic meetings even at the level of the pedagogic inspectorate and we were given the opportunity to make proposals after their presentations and I don’t know but it seems as though they come to those meetings to tell us what to do and not to listen to us...’.	nt Process in Cameroon is ‘top-down
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**Table 1.1: An Example of generating themes from interviews**

No.	Creating categories	Sub-themes	Theme
1	1. Lack of cohesion (skills) or match between education and labour market demands.	Educational Factors Employability Skills and youth unemployment	The Causes of the high level of youth unemployment
2	1.Outdated Curriculum 2.Inappropriate link between curriculum and employment	Curriculum development and youth unemployment	
3	1.Lack or insufficient level of infrastructure	Non-educational Factors	

Stage 2 of the analytical process involved the segmentation of the data into groups using developed codes from stage one. The coded data was then checked for irregularities and anomalies. This procedure ensured that emerging concepts or theories were established with firm evidence in the actual findings. This was followed by a detailed analysis of the coded data as individual narratives and as coded segments, to interpret data on varying levels.

Stage 3 of the analytical procedure comprised of examining links between the analytical elements of in stage two. It involved refining any emerging theoretical concepts.

Gathered data through questionnaires was checked through as they were handed in by students and teachers for errors such as omitted answers and failure to follow instructions (Cohen, et al., 2011). The task of checking questionnaires was intended to eliminate mistakes made by participants (Ibid). Data from the questionnaires was manually keyed in Microsoft Word and Spreadsheet documents to provide a summary of participants’ responses as well as to enable easy access of the data and to answer the research questions (Sapsford and Jupp, 2008). The responses from each school were allocated a row, with each column representing a separate topic to enable sorting, cutting, pasting and allocation of categories. The closed questions formed were tabulated to provide descriptive data while the open-ended questions had to be reduced to a suitable form to enable the analysis (Sapsford and Jupp, 2008). Keyed in answers were used for illustrative purposes and were extended where necessary by including answers from a larger

sample of the questionnaires (Ibid). consideration and care was taken when eliciting themes to utilise them as evidence to support research questions.

**Table 1.3 An Example of Tabulated Questionnaire Responses**

	School A	School B	School C	School C
<b>Response</b>	<b>No. of Respondents</b>			
Yes	0	0	0	0
No	48	46	43	48
None response	3	4	6	3
Total	<b>51</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>51</b>

### **Ethical Considerations**

Qualitative study involves the researcher interacting with people in their social world. This implies an intrusion into the lives of participants in this research (Cohen et al., 2007). The interaction entails entering in the participants' personal domains to gather data and as such raises several ethical issues that needed to be addressed during and after the process of research. As recommended by BERA guidelines (2011), the informed consent of participants was sought throughout the research process. This means a participant consent form and information sheet was produced (handed to participants) explaining the research aims and objectives prior to completing questionnaires or being interviewed as well as their right to decline any question(s) and to terminate the interview if they wished to. In addition, the participant information sheet detailed all the necessary steps to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of the study participants. I endeavoured to be open and honest throughout the study by clarifying the research aims and objectives to participants. The participants were assured that any quotes included in the final thesis will be anonymised and their names will not be mentioned. Ethical approval was sought and obtained from the College Research Ethics Committee (Nottingham Trent University) and an authorisation to conduct research in Cameroon was obtained from the Ministry of Secondary Education in Cameroon.

### **Access Issues**

Prior to undertaking fieldwork in Cameroon, I sought and obtained authorisation from GLOBE Programme Cameroon, which is the body responsible for global learning programmes in the Ministry of Secondary Education and Basic Education. Authorisation to commence fieldwork took about six weeks; however, the difficulties encountered in gaining access for field research were minimal because of the support of informal contacts.

Due to the lack of information and contact details on the Ministry of Secondary Education website in Cameroon, the role of informal contacts was vital in facilitating access to research sites. As a Cameroonian and having worked in the country, I have maintained continuous relationships (Walford, 2001) with three key informal contacts in the selected regions who were very helpful in the pilot study and instrumental in obtaining permission to conduct research in schools and the Ministry of Secondary Education. The following are some of the key roles of the 3 informal contacts:

Contact 1 – an administrator at the Ministry of secondary Education was instrumental in identifying the administrators to interview and in conveying the authorisation letter to conduct research, participant information sheet and interview schedule.

Contact 2- The head of Department of English at a secondary school in Buea (South West Region) identified and facilitated permission to administer questionnaires in two schools.

Contact 3 – identified and secured permission to administer questionnaires in two schools in the Centre Region.

### **Validity and Reliability**

Silverman, (2011, p289) defines validity as *‘the extent to which an account accurately represents the social phenomena to which it refers’*. Validity denotes that the data collection process reflects accurately the aspects that they are supposed to measure (Newby, 2010). One way of achieving validity is ensure that data is representative of the issue under investigation. This means that attention needs to be paid to the sampling process as well as choosing examples (Ibid). For my study, participants were carefully selected based on the presumption that there are individuals in the country who are knowledgeable in curriculum development issues in the country and consideration was given to balancing the one Anglophone region and the other from the Francophone region (discussed in the “sampling” section above).

Further, to minimise threats to validity, qualitative data through interviews and questionnaires was collected by myself. Qualitative data through interviews and questionnaire data has been presented to give as much information about the findings to the readers to allow them to evaluate its credibility. Newby (2010) advises that validity can be maximised if our *“argument and the evidence that supports it is as complete as we specify it needs to be”* (P.17). During the data analysis process, the transcripts were read back and forth many times to ensure that the recorded evidence was correctly and accurately recorded. Two friends were also asked to listen and proofread interview transcripts to ensure that they were a correct version of the recorded interviews (Kvale and Brinkman, 2008). The data analysis relied on the study participants’ perceptions and the data collected from them was interpreted and themes drawn. Notwithstanding, Cohen et al., (2011), maintain that *‘threats to validity... can never be erased completely; rather the effects of these threats can be attenuated by attention to validity ... throughout a piece of research’* (p.179).

### **Analysis and Discussion of Emerging Themes**

This analysis of data obtained from interviews and questionnaires was aimed to determine how well the secondary school curriculum equips school leavers for employment. The results reveal the main reasons why the current school system in Cameroon does not prepare young people for employment as one would expect of a national educational system. To substantiate this claim, the framework developed for the study was used to analyse the data. Three main factors were noted as responsible for the current high level of youth unemployment in the country. These include educational factors - employability skills and youth unemployment; the curriculum and youth unemployment; and non-educational factors such as inadequate infrastructure. The preceding discussion is indicative of some of the emergent results.

### **Causes of the high level of youth unemployment**

The causes of youth unemployment were found to be linked to educational, non-educational factors and curriculum development. The evidence from the data suggest that youth unemployment in Cameroon is grossly attributed to the lack of cohesion or match between education and labour market demands. Participants overwhelmingly attributed this to the mismatch between education and labour market demands. Three main factors were identified as

responsible for the current high level of youth unemployment in the country. These include educational factors - employability skills and youth unemployment; the curriculum and youth unemployment; and non-educational factors such as inadequate infrastructure. McQuaid et al., (2006) argued that possessing a range of skills such as adaptability, interpersonal and communication skills increases the probability of an individual to secure and sustain employment, and to progress in the workplace. This means that there is a direct relationship between curriculum development and employability skills acquisition.

A matter of primary concern is the association of the curriculum to main cause of youth unemployment since it has not been revised for thirty years suggesting it is not responsive to the needs of the people as maintained study participants. A key aspect of a curriculum development according to Van Rooy, (2005) is the need to meet the challenges of the 21st century by continuously directing efforts towards the understanding of what works well in education and how education in schools can be improved in a rapidly changing world. However, one of the main obstacles is that the curriculum has failed to adapt to changes and as such does not adequately empower students to cope with the work demands for the 21st century.

Further, youth unemployment is also associated with inadequate or lack of infrastructure. Many participants highlighted that the dire situation caused by the lack or insufficient level of infrastructure exacerbates the youth unemployment problem in the country. Insufficient didactic materials, inadequate classroom space and poor ICT facilities impact on any initiatives to facilitate the acquisition of relevant work skills. For education to meet the demands of students, certain infrastructure must be put in place. The implication of inadequate infrastructure and teaching materials means the lack of opportunities for young people to acquire job market skills.

The causes of youth unemployment are important because they play important roles in the process of curriculum development and delivery both of which can in turn enhance youth employment. Correspondingly, Youth and Peacebuilding (2013) note that a dominant aspect of the school system failure in Cameroon is to give priority to education which enables young people to prepare for employment after school, resulting in the high unemployment rates among young school leavers as currently observed.

### **Curriculum Development Process in Cameroon**

Participants unsurprisingly confirmed the curricula approach adopted in Cameroon - top-down curriculum development structure (Forzie, 1990). Pedagogic inspectors at the Ministry of Secondary Education are responsible for curriculum development under the directives and approval of the Minister. This presents a major obstacle to any meaningful change at incorporating employability skills in the curriculum because the process does not solicit input from educators directly involved in delivering the curriculum and students whose lives are influenced by the type of education received. This has contributed largely in determining the outcome of students who experience the system.

### **Curriculum Delivery**

In terms of curriculum delivery, it has been noted that there are varying initiatives and support mechanisms available from teachers and school counsellors to students to enable them learn employment skills. For example, many teachers claimed that they are committed, from their teaching to give students the best possible chance of gaining employment although there was a mismatch between their job-skills initiatives and students' work experience. Additionally, it has been noted that delivering the prescribed curriculum poses some challenges for teachers especially with the problem of harmonisation. These acute problems make it challenging to translate the useful knowledge and skills required by employers from young people.

## Employment

An increasing important observation is that, because of the failed objective and content-based curricula approach, there is a shift towards a competence-based curricula approach. Central to the competence-based approach is the aim to equip young people with concrete work-related skills that is vital in a socially developing world rather than abstract learning (Kitta and Tilya, 2010). For this reason, it is important to underline the perspectives of participants who unanimously favour this approach with a view that it can solve their employment problems by enabling students to find employment when the complete school. Consequently, a solution to the concerns raised about the capability and employability of school leavers as it emphasises the attributes (competencies) to be achieved by learners, hence employment.

## Contribution to Knowledge and Conclusion

The major theoretical contribution to knowledge of this study is that I have developed and applied a framework, which depicts the interdependent relationship between curriculum development and employability skills (Figure 1.0). Previous research has focused on skills mismatch and the need for employability skills acquisition, rather than a constitutive part of the curriculum development process (Penn, 2016, Essongo, 2017). The conceptual framework has been applied to understand why the secondary school curriculum in Cameroon does not equip school leavers for employment and ways in which employability skills can be incorporated in the curriculum. One way of applying the framework is to start by identifying the causes of youth unemployment whilst establishing how these are linked to curriculum development. The case of an African country context (Cameroon) pursued in this project therefore, adds to existing knowledge on the role of country-specific context in our understanding of the mismatch between curriculum development and skills acquisition.

Further, the findings have generated new and original data to enable a clear understanding of curriculum development for curriculum planners and teachers in Cameroon to enhance practice. The study could also influence the restructuring of policy on curriculum development and as a starting point for incorporating job skills in the curriculum of schools. Although limited research exist that explore the phenomenon of skills acquisition in Cameroon, the type of research questions pursued in this study is the first of its kind in Cameroon. The combined authorities in the Ministry of Secondary Education, school authorities and secondary school students in Cameroon do not only constitute the research sample, but play a key role in ensuring that the findings from the research generate new knowledge on how the curriculum could be improved to address the unemployment trends in the Cameroon.

The study also contributes to the world of literature particularly in developing countries with high youth unemployment rates. The research findings provide directions for enhancing future curriculum development by recommending a curriculum grounded in practice.

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### **Appendix 1: Thematic areas for exploration include: -**

Q1. What in your view is the cause for the high youth unemployment rate in the country?

Q2. What skills do you think school leavers need from the curriculum to help them find and stay employment?

Q3. How can arrangements be improved between the Ministry of Secondary Education to create effective mechanisms for employers to connect with schools?

Q4. Do you know who is responsible for curriculum development in the Ministry of Secondary Education?

Q5. Please explain how you ensure that the curriculum is implemented?

Q6. Do curriculum developers get some input from your:

- Students;
- Teachers;
- Careers advisers;
- School Governors/Parents'-Teachers' Association;
- Head teachers/Principals?

Q7. Do you or your teacher encounter any challenges in implementing the prescribed curriculum?

Other additional comments or observations.....

### **Appendix 2**

#### **SKILLS ACQUISITION IN CAMEROON: HOW WELL DOES THE SECONDARY SCHOOL CURRICULUM EQUIP SCHOOL LEAVERS FOR EMPLOYMENT?**

##### **INVESTIGATOR:**

Ernest Nkamta, PhD Student, School of Education, Ada Byron King Building, Nottingham Trent University, Clifton Nottingham, NG11 8NS, UK, Tel: ....., Email:N0324143@ntu.ac.uk.

##### **CONSENT FORM**

Organisation/Department: .....

Respondent No. ....

I have read the Information Sheet dated, 9<sup>th</sup> April 2016 for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information and ask questions and I understand the nature and purpose of the research.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.

- I understand that the interview will be audio taped
- I understand that information gained during the study will be presented in an academic thesis, journal article and conference presentations and will include the use of anonymous direct quotations. I understand I will not be identified and my personal details will remain confidential
- I understand that Ernest Nkamta, supervisors and PhD examiners at the School of Education at Nottingham Trent University, UK will have access to the recordings and transcripts without their being edited confidentiality. I understand that in all circumstances administrative and research staff seeing the data will do so under strict confidentiality conditions
- I agree to take part in the above study

Name of Participant: .....

Signature ..... Date .....

Name of Principal Investigator: .....

Signature ..... Date .....