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**AN ASSESSMENT STUDY OF EMPLOYABILITY SOFT SKILLS IN THE BA  
ENGLISH DEGREE PROGRAM OF UNIVERSITY OF YAOUNDE 1, CAMEROON:  
STAKEHOLDER PERCEPTIONS, NEEDS AND CHALLENGES**

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**Abstract**

**Purpose:** Within the employability discourse, the expectations ascribed to higher education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the need to see studies matched to the requirements of the job market, specifically in the inclusion of soft skills. Because learning and teaching need to be modernized, professionalization and employability for university graduates have become two key themes in the Cameroon government's national development policy plan: *the Cameroonian Growth and Employment Strategy Paper (2009)*, and *the Education Sector Strategic Plan (2006)*. Against this background this paper assesses how the Department of English of University of Yaoundé 1 is meeting up to these expectations of professionalizing the BA English degree.

**Methodology:** The Social Cognitive Development theory (Ormrod 2008), the Contextual Teaching and Learning theory (Mazzeo, 2008; Johnson, 2002; Berns & Erikson, 2001) and the Communicative Competence model of Uso-Juan and Martinez-Flor (2006) were used. The study is qualitative and involved 240 students, 4 lecturers of the Department of English of the University of Yaoundé 1, 12 employers and 10 former students of the Department in employment. Data is obtained from four different questionnaires, a document review of course outlines for active verbs in line with Bloom's taxonomy, and a generic soft skills inventory from Crawford et al (2011), to measure the Department of English courses' reflection of soft skills. Also, 650 test papers were examined for writing skills proficiency through an error analysis approach. For oral communication proficiency, 300 third year students were assessed for grammatical and strategic communication as they did oral presentations.

**Findings:** Results revealed that soft skills are not explicitly taught in the BA English Degree. Students cannot transfer classroom experiences to the workplace because of studies and work skills mismatch. Employer and former students' data, together with job advertisements, expressed the need for specific generic skills to be taught, to enhance the BA English degree's employability.

**Unique contributions to theory, policy and practice:** The unique perspective of the case study, and the insightful findings, certainly serves as additional literature in the growing research on 21st Century soft skills inclusion in higher education. The findings can also serve as possible best practices for departments of English in Cameroon.

**Key words:** 21<sup>st</sup> century skills; employability skills; professionalizing BA English degrees

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

This paper emanates from a successfully defended Ph.D. thesis in the Department of English of University of Yaounde 1, Cameroon. As a research assistant in the Department, I observed that English Department students were not easily and readily employable. Against the backdrop of 21<sup>st</sup> century employability skills literature, and the government's policies for professionalizing higher education, it was apparent that the courses and training of the Department could not be clearly linked to jobs and skills wanted in the job market. Furthermore, the BA degree in English holder's profile could not directly be associated to any job position; (also in Knights 2013), hence it did not sufficiently guarantee the students' access into the job market. Academic practice and intellectual dispositions appeared weak as students were unable to produce texts that met normative requirements and conventions, for example, in writing complaint letters and putting forward claims in a clear, concise, orderly and grammatically correct manner in speech and writing. Lastly, interconnections between academic skills and work-related skills, through internships and work experience schemes were overtly inexistent. This led to the conclusion that the BA English degree holder and the department's activities did not seem to be in congruence with the expected employability soft skills within the government's call for the professionalization of university studies. The present paper attempts to highlight the need for skills inclusion and the need to revamp academic programs to suit present day exigencies.

The possession of generic soft skills alongside core skills by university graduates is highly valued by the employment market (Abel, Dietz, & Su, 2014; Altbach, 2008). The absence of these generic soft skills of value in the employment market is attracting contentious reactions, especially with the growing employer demand for prospective employees to have, alongside their diplomas, certain competencies that will guarantee good job performances. However, as Jerald (2009) points out, it is noticed more often that a wide discrepancy exists between the needs of the job market and the qualifications and skills of university graduates.

The popular perception of the BA degree in English program in Cameroon seems to be that it is conditioned to train, to a larger extent, students who have more of a theoretical analysis of English than practical application, as such, society finds it difficult to appreciate the degree's economic value return to the students and society. Most see its obvious outlet in teaching only. Contrary to such perceptions, reports from Euromonitor International (2010), on the importance of English to Social and economic development presents healthy prospects for the BA English degree holders in Cameroon. However the catch is in the modernization of the curriculum through the development of new and innovative courses and methodologies, and developing a higher education sector with society in mind. This is the problem posed in this paper as it questions whether the BA degree in English of the University of Yaounde 1 is training in soft skills and attributes which enable students to thrive in the workplace of the rapidly changing world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The expectations are that they must possess impeccable spoken and written fluency with strategic, pragmatic and social communicative competence, which should enable them draw benefits from the opportunities created by the global lingua franca status of English (Crystal, 2003). However, the researcher's observation revealed that courses were rather

taught within the limited confines of grammar, phonetics and sentence structure analysis with little regard to links with their application to specific needs of text types and specific discourse communities.

Conversely, students from other disciplines, the public, and workers are taking up English language learning from language centers in order to improve their chances in the job. Language centers have grown in popularity in Cameroon, especially within the government's call for bilingualism and multiculturalism for a better national integration. The impression is that language centers edge out Departments of English because their teaching and learning approaches are more hands-on and practical. They seem to offer laudable tailored approaches in up-skilling in communication proficiency, and it is not uncommon to find graduates from the Department of English retraining in language communication skills in language centers. (Azane, 2019, unpublished doctoral thesis).

In a related idea, graduates from the Department of English are also observed to retrain in other job-related fields for soft skills required for work in order to upgrade their employability profiles as they realize that their degree in English does not give them a competitive advantage in jobs. (Azane, 2019, unpublished doctoral thesis). These are clear indications of the existence of some missing links between studying in the Department of English and using a degree from the Department of English for work.

## **1.2 The functional framework of employability skills**

The 21st century is a period characterized by global interconnectivity; it is technology-driven and market-oriented and with it comes the notion of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. The 21<sup>st</sup> century skills discourse evokes the feeling that there is a distinct disjuncture between learning in the centuries that have past and the one we are into. The world we live in is changing at an ever-increasing rate and with regard to Education, Altbach (2008), in his report titled 'The complex roles of universities in the period of globalization', makes the observation that the impact of these changes is on society and learning. The call is for an urgent need to modernize education so that it meets the needs of the present society. Banerji (2007), and Tapscott & Williams (2010), note that the development, design and use of this generation's learning spaces must include: changes in learning mode; technological developments; increased participation rates; and expectations about outcomes, academic standards and graduate employability. Knowledge forms cut across disciplines, are heterogeneous, socially accountable and reflexive. Researchers with interest in the education and employability discourse such as Cole and Tibby (2013), and Knights & Yorke (2003), have sought to develop typologies of employability from a wide range of disciplinary and ideological perspectives with the common stance being that employability skills encompass those attributes, behaviours and skills that are necessary for individuals to effectively manage their careers and sustain successful employment in the world of work. This paper follows this tradition to examine how the courses, teaching and learning approaches at the undergraduate level respond to the needs of contemporary times, by examining soft skills, and proficiency in writing and speaking.

### **1.3 Cameroon and the professionalization of higher education**

With regard to Cameroon, the professionalization of higher education has been articulated in every major higher education (HE) document as far back as in 1993 soon after the creation of the Ministry of Higher Education. The 1993 reforms for instance, which are contained in a series of presidential decrees signed between April 1992 and January 1993 such as: Decree No. 93/026, Decree No. 93/027; Decree No. 93/034 and Decree N° 92/074; are some worth mentioning. These decrees were aimed at decongesting the then lone University of Yaoundé and professionalize university education. The motive was directly utilitarian and geared at addressing relevance. University education for its own sake was no longer primordial.

The University-Industry Partnership Charter (MINESUP, 2010:5), states that; “*the universities are assigned two additional missions: counselling, and professional integration of students*” and by this emphasizes the need to see universities professionalise studies. Cameroonian Universities are now required to train students to find jobs, to create jobs, and to achieve universal quality benchmarks. According to these policy statements, what should now be prioritized is no longer what is known but what can be done with what is known. Knowledge is expected to be put to work, seen to work and be in work as curriculum change within Cameroonian higher education policy is to be underpinned by notions of relevance and responsiveness to society’s needs. The roadmap of the Cameroon government Higher education Sectorial Paper, SPD (2010), for instance, hints at some strategies through which professionalization could be assured and provided, such as that all the academic programs of the national system are professionalized; from the most classical programs to the creation of new ones. The target is that even the most generic study programs can, and should, be able to receive some professional components from within or externally from other programs to facilitate student insertion into the socio-professional milieu. However these appear mostly to be on-paper policy as only feeble attempts are observed.

### **2.0 REVIEW OF KEY THEORIES**

This study bears heavily on a multi-focal approach in theoretical explorations and anchors the arguments within the confines of a blend of the Social Cognitive Development theory, henceforth referred to as SCD, (Ormrod, 2008), the Contextual Teaching and Learning theory, henceforth abbreviated as CTL, (Mazzeo, 2008; Johnson, 2002; Berns & Erikson, 2001) and the Communicative Competence theory (Usó-Juan and Martínez-Flór, 2006). These are transformative learning theories which fundamentally argue that students retain information longer, and can apply it more effectively, if it is learned within a context, and a context of use in mind.

In other words, when one believes that she/he will be reinforced for learning something, they are more likely to pay attention to it and mentally process it in an effective fashion. When no reinforcement is expected from learning one is naturally less inclined in giving it the expected heightened importance. Similarly, the Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) theory is identified as a promising strategy that actively engages students and promotes improved learning and skills development. Mazzeo (2008:4) broadened the definition, by describing CTL as: “*instructional strategies designed to more seamlessly... link teaching and learning...on concrete applications in a specific context that is of interest to the student*”.

The term Communicative Competence, coined in 1972 by Dell Hymes, is most often understood as a combination of the knowledge of communication and the ability to communicate within social rules and norms. Usó-Juan and Martínez-Flór, (2006), maintain that meaning in language is fundamentally functional. Worth considering also is the perspective of Eagleton (2015) which makes specific reference to Departments of English in the call for a quick sense of institutional consciousness in relating to the social and educational spheres in which the discipline must exist.

According to these theories, successful learning occurs only when students process new information or knowledge in ways that makes sense to them in their own frames of reference and by the application of knowledge towards meaningful use in society and a gainful end.

### **3.0 METHODS**

A qualitative inquiry (Creswell, 2013) was preferred as the main method for data collection and analysis as the approach facilitated an in-depth and detailed understanding of the Department of English students' need for work related skills. The study is exploratory since there has been none before in this Department of English. The four research questions were:

1. **(RQ1)** What specific expertise and skills does the employment market look for in the BA English degree holder?
2. **(RQ2)** Does the BA English degree program meet the needs of employers?
3. **(RQ3)** Which attributes of soft skills and communicative competences are emphasized in the BA English degree program
4. **(RQ4)** What accompanying teaching approaches and pedagogic philosophies are employed by the Department of English lecturers?

#### **3.1 The research participants and instruments**

Four kinds of participants were required for this research; 240 students and 04 lecturers (the internal stakeholders) and 10 former students and 12 employers (the external stakeholders) all responded to the questionnaires. The procedures to recruit them were different. For the internal stakeholders, the respondents were drawn from the undergraduate pool of students in the Department of English, who represented the key stakeholders of the employability skills discourse; and the lecturers of the Department of English of the University of Yaoundé 1. No key conditions were outlined to enroll the participants for the survey components except that they were required to be current students in any undergraduate levels of the Department of English, and for the case of the lecturers, be teaching a course. Care was taken however to ensure that the lecturers represented the two specializations of language and literature.

Former students and employers were also used to collect data through a paper questionnaire. The former students were difficult to be located because of the absence of any official, departmental or institutional alumni forum or tracer studies database. Consequently, it was heavily reliant on personal networks. For the employers, the primary objective was to get in touch with those who were in-charge of recruiting, human resources personnel and the managers.

An assessment of writing and oral skills involved of the students was also carried out, specifically with only level three students (325 participants), who were selected based on convenience criteria because the researcher was teaching a course to them. The number of participants was relatively higher as the exercise was given in the form of a continuous assessment test. Hence it was convenient to use them for the assessment of oral communication and writing skills errors. However for the oral assessment, 300 students who were present in a class session were shared out into groups and given topics to undertake a group research and present their findings after two weeks to the rest of the class.

The study used an inventory of skills from Crawford, Lang, Fink, Dalton and Fielitz (2011) as the key variables for examining employability skills teaching in the Department of English.

**Table 1: Eight soft skills inventory**

| Num | Key soft skill category                         |
|-----|---|
| 1.  | Communication,                                  |
| 2.  | Teamwork and interpersonal skills               |
| 3.  | Critical thinking and problem solving           |
| 4.  | Leadership                                      |
| 5.  | Ethical and moral values                        |
| 6.  | Work Ethics                                     |
| 7.  | Information and Communication Technology skills |
| 8.  | Learning to Learn                               |

**Eight soft skills inventory (Source: Crawford, Lang, Fink, Dalton and Fielitz, 2011)**

In addition to this, a list of the most likely careers for the degree in English holders, put together by the University of Kent, United Kingdom as a global template, was used to verify job categories from the adverts to ascertain the skills emphasized in job adverts for these jobs. With the degree in English possessing no default career pathway, this list (see below) posits that with a BA degree in English, the graduate can easily integrate and succeed in these careers. As a result this list was used in this study because it was deemed that it will be enlightening to see what job advertisements put out as skill for these jobs and compare these with what the courses on offer in the Department of English guarantee as enablers to these students' employability chances for these jobs.



**Figure 1: Careers that English language and linguistics graduates can enter (Source: The University of Kent (UK) humanities career page (2009))**

Online job advertisements were analyzed to ascertain whether they specifically corroborated the soft skills inventory and the job list identified as most popular job destinations and careers of BA English degree holders, from the University of Kent. Online job advertisement was preferred because it is considered a reliable, unobtrusive method for determining the demands of the job market in a systematic manner (Kristin, 2010). Only postings requiring less than 2 years of professional experience were used as it could be loosely equated to entry level positions which normally do not emphasize on a certain number of years of experience.

Textual data from the Department of English, consisting of course outlines and their objectives, and classroom practices were consulted. The tenets of 21<sup>st</sup> century learning were pitted side-by-side with the Department of English studies practices, activities, and courses. The expectation was to find course objectives and practices directed towards attaining outcomes that are observable, measurable and assessable through their statements and the end products of student's learning which would include knowledge, skills, competencies and attitudes. Bloom (1956) revised taxonomies provide a guide as to the expected notions to be explicitly used in course outlines and their learning outcomes. Inspired by these two philosophies a checklist consisting of three key points was formulated to guide this phase of the data collection process.

**Table 2: Document review checklist**

| <b>Source of data</b> | <b>Observation target</b>   | <b>Approach</b>  |
|-----------------------|---|--|
| Course outlines       | <p>Were explicit statements of the employability skills objective given prominence in the courses alongside with their specific learning objectives?</p> <p>Were course outline statements reflecting explicitly such taxonomies as captured from Bloom's revised taxonomies (2000) and Doll's curriculum model with active taxonomies.</p> <p>Were tasks and activities structured to encourage the development of employability skills alongside subject discipline knowledge or otherwise?</p> | <p>Collect copies of course outlines from the Department secretariat/University manual. Where these were absent, approach respective lecturers.</p> <p>Examine course outlines for the stated observation targets.</p> |

**Document review checklist (Source: Researcher's checklist)****3.2 Data Collection and analysis**

In a bid to assess the students' writing and speaking for errors and communicative incompetence, agreement errors (subject-verb and noun-pronoun agreement, tense errors (present, past, progressive, perfect, future): Number (singular-plural) errors, prepositional errors:, articles errors were sought for. To make sure that what was being identified as error was indeed an error, the researcher used several guides such as 'the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary On Historical Principles, volume 1 and 2'; 'the Advanced Oxford English learners' Dictionary'; 'Watch your English (2002)' by Simo Bobda; 'Punctuation and Mechanics made simple (2011)' by Bonaventure Sala; and 'Elements of Writing' by Kinneavy and Warriner (2009).

For the writing skills assessment, the corpus was a formal letter, past examination papers and complaint letters. In all 650 written material was analyzed, made up of 300 randomly selected past examination scripts, 325 scripts from a sit-in and monitored test on writing a job application letter, and 25 complaint letters randomly picked from a pile of complaints submitted to the Head of the Department of English by the students. These documents were all analyzed using the content approach. The errors were identified and the recurrence counted to establish frequency. Deviant writing was considered as an error when it occurred more than once.

For the oral communication proficiency assessment, students were observed in classroom situations during oral presentations for grammatical errors along the lines of the categories afore mentioned as well as for strategic competence. The participants were in a natural class environment doing oral presentations. They were not informed they were being observed and recorded. This was to guarantee natural oral expressions uninfluenced by particular stress,

consciousness and tensions. However they were all aware that as part of the continuous assessment, this exercise was being evaluated at 20% of their overall test marks for the course.

#### **4.0 RESEARCH FINDINGS**

The data from the former student respondents yielded important findings with regard to the most important soft skills from their experiences at work, their perception of the development of these soft skills by the Department of English, and suggestions for improvement of soft skills by the Department of English. In a similar vein, the data from the employer respondents provided clarity on the most important soft skills according to employer perceptions, the perception of the development of these soft skills, the skills where the biggest shortcomings exist according to the employers, and suggestions from employers for improvement of soft skills.

Firstly, the former students' questionnaire, revealed that their job profiles were quite varied, (03 administrative assistant/ head of personnel/ receptionist/ secretary, 02 directors/managers, 01 commercial assistant, 01 teacher,). They also had received varied further training and up-skilling, to get the jobs and none of them gave any credit to the Department for their current position. Using specific on-the-job tasks and duties they executed as examples, they were able to show that the workplace needs specific skills and attitudes which the Department of English did not embellish them with. They agreed with all the soft skills of the inventory as part of their job expectations at work. The data from this group of respondents shows that there is a wide gap of incongruence between what the former students use as skill and what they actually learned. All of them (100%) agreed the use of oral and writing skills was important in their jobs and ranked communication skills as priority with divergences of such skills such as; Communication skills, Decision making, Leadership skills, professionalism and self-management having different rank orders only due to the diverse natures of their jobs and job sectors.

Recommendations advanced by the former students' stated that they strongly wished the Department of English trained with an eye on the employment market. They all answered 'no' to the question whether anyone of them was hired because they possessed the BA degree in English.

From the Employer respondents, it was observed that all 12 respondents agreed to the inventory list, with 02 commenting that any variations will only be as a result of the more technical orientation of the company or job sector. The new additions appended such as professionalism, (3 respondents); Knowledge of the business (2 respondents); workplace culture (2 respondents); work experiences/internship (4 respondents); duty consciousness (2 respondents); Time consciousness and respect of self and others (1 respondent for each), did not provide for any great divergences with the soft skills cited in the literature review but rather corroborated that soft skills are indeed important. The employer respondents were in agreement (100%), that soft skills were not adequately developed in tertiary level institutions and universities, both general and technical universities. They pointed to the fact that it is not enough to be academically strong as employees need to work with other cultures, communicate well, be punctual and dependable, work in teams and collaborate, plan and lead projects, present, write and deliver information with criticality. From the data one point that cut across all the respondents' views was the acknowledgment of a complementary role the employers have to play in developing graduate

employability. In agreement with some of the criticisms advanced in the literature review these local respondents concurred that academia generally ignored the employment world, and there were little or no synergy between courses designed and the needs of the employment world. Most of the respondents (07) proposed that higher education institutions organize career services and provide career advice to their students with regular participation from the employers as well as open them up for internships. All the respondents saw internships as particularly effective modes to enhance graduate employability, suggesting three to six months as the duration of the experience. Four (04) respondents specifically mentioned that humanistic fields and the social sciences are lagging behind because they seem to think that internships and work placements are irrelevant to them.

Findings from the student respondents reveal that all 240 undergraduate students in the Department of English joined the university and the Department with the expectation that the studies will help them get into the job market. All the students also positively believed that the Department of English is the best place to be at for the improvement of communication skills in English as 100% also selected the option ‘to improve communication skills’ as the reason for joining the Department. Teaching was the most natural career pathway with 60.83%. While 88.33% saw communication skills as a skill their training covered. ICT and work ethics were rated at 0% importance. But when presented with exemplars of communication tasks wherein they were asked about what tasks and activities they could accomplish, ( based on a 15 point communication skills inventory generated from the exemplars of soft skills and literature on workplace communication skills), only 18% said they could accomplish the tasks most commonly executed in the workplace. Some of the exemplars were as follows:

- Can you write a standard business correspondence,
- Can you write a standard complaint letter to the faculty Dean, Department Chair or Class-master, requesting a mark or name rectification?
- Can you write a CV, a letter of motivation, a job application letter, following appropriate structure and approaches?

The respondents also did not appraise themselves and their mates positively when it came to saying if they saw themselves as being confident and comfortable communicators in English as presented in:

- In expressing themselves articulately/clearly in speech;
- In making oral presentation,
- Taking part in group discussions,
- In writing, minimizing language errors,

With regard to instructional strategies, all the student respondents (100%) attested that the lecture method was ‘greatly applied’ followed by group work and individual presentations followed suite (sometimes applied) while internships, case studies, simulations among others registered a “rarely applied” and “never applied” ratings respectively.

Lastly, from examining the data from the lecturer respondents’ questionnaire it was found that all the respondents perceived the value of the BA degree in English to be ‘very high’( 100%). All

respondents (100%) agreed that the BA English catered sufficiently for the enhancement of the students' communication skills as enquired. The respondents were however divided with regard to their perceptions of the unique traits the BA English had as 02 (50%) defined the unique trait within the cadre of critical thinking and communication skills, while another 02 respondents (50%) defined the unique trait within the cadre of developing creativity and understanding the fundamentals of grammar in literature. 01 respondent (25%) selected the option of speaking and writing as the foundational skill to all jobs. It is clear from this data that the unique trait of the BA English degree is viewed differently by the two major specialization clusters, the language specialists and the literature specialists.

Concerning the awareness of soft skills in the courses, the lecturer respondents ranked the most important skill as written communication with 100%, followed by oral communication skills (100%) with the quality of 'some importance'. The quality of 'no importance' with 100% response rate was registered for ICT and numeracy skills. From this rating of the priority employability skills, it is revealed that the BA English is already showing some signs of weakness in meeting 21<sup>st</sup> generic employability skills as 08 out of the 12 skills in the inventory are not covered by the courses within the BA degree program.

When further afield in the questionnaire the lecturer respondents were probed to rate specific aspects they taught, the data showed some discrepancies to their earlier assertion that communication skills in speaking and writing were emphasized in the BA degree in English. The data revealed that only 25% of the respondents said they taught letter writing, 0% taught business letter writing; 25% agreed they taught how to summarize and do oral presentations and the same 25% said they taught practical components such as creative writing.

Findings from the document review such as from the course outlines and students scripts and job advertisements revealed that firstly, with specific reference to the revised Bloom's taxonomy and Doll's effective curriculum paradigm, only three (03) courses specifically mentioned the themes of: 'showing students how to analyze'; 'training them to develop'; and 'helping students to assemble'. These are verbs or taxonomies which are more in line with analyzing, evaluating and creating. Most of the courses are described with frequent reference to taxonomies, verbs and phrases such as: helping students remember, recall, define and understand (29 courses), which are more in line with rote learning and cooperative learning. The literature review meanwhile points out that verbs, phrases and taxonomies which are valued as skills oriented for the 21<sup>st</sup> century naturally begin with debating, questioning, surveying and creating, and are designed to inculcate the skills of application or use, evaluation and creativity. No course overtly mentioned employability skills within the terms of reference outlined in the checklist. The popular pedagogic approach which was overtly presented as common practice were observed on all the course outlines as; lecture mode, class discussion, group work, tutorials, oral presentations. None of the respondents mentioned any direct link to work-placement or internships; no practical sessions in language writing and speaking laboratories were mentioned for the courses that emphasized up-skilling in oral and writing skills; and the only learning aid identified were the texts and books prescribed alongside teacher, chalk and blackboard.

From the Job advertisements, it was also observed that most of the jobs advertised clearly mentioned the position and basic qualification and the responsibilities solicited. None was

advertised with a specific request for a degree in English holder, although they provided in most cases associated degrees or other qualifications they would consider for the opening. Skills specified in these job adverts clearly looked like basic criteria that any English degree student could fulfil. Communication for instance, in English or English and French appeared in 72 of the advertisements counted. The same is true with Aid worker jobs and even teaching, which all required statutory skills within English studies. Approximately 80% requested some form of job experience while 60% explicitly required applicants to possess computing skills.

Lastly, from the collection of the scripts, complaint letters, job application letters and oral presentations, the most common weaknesses were in the students' inability to generate sentences that are readable, understandable, and grammatically correct in a conventional and formal sense. In all, 5765 grammatical errors were identified from the 650 writing samples which imply an average of 9 errors per script. Two thousands, five-hundred and sixty-six (2566) errors were identified in the writing which pertained to lexical issues, punctuation and mechanics. It is worth mentioning that these figures bear a lot more weight when one considers that the letters were relatively short, ranging from between 80 to 300 words, which therefore means that the frequency of errors were indeed higher and exceeded 9 errors in the longer essays. Examples could be seen of students' introductory paragraphs covering over 4/5<sup>th</sup> of the content of two pages; formal job application letters were written in one paragraph, same as with complaint letters where one paragraph carried the salutation, introduction, outline of the problem and expected outcome. The standard expectation of an introductory/beginning, body/middle and conclusion/end was visibly ignored. The topic sentence in its standard position at the beginning of the paragraph was also visibly ignored and was observed to be inexistent in many of the scripts.

With regard to the oral presentation, 501 tense and non-agreement errors were identified, meaning every student made at least 1.6 (approximately 2) errors with regard to the rules of sentence formation. This was followed by number agreement especially in cases where they had to use 'someone', and 'all of them'. There were a lot of poor sentence constructions which clouded the meaning of the sentences. In terms of strategic competence, students failed to begin presentations with greetings; to outline the topic and plan; to inform where questions could be asked; and to explain the turn taking strategies they adopt. No group used the expected exit or conclusion of thanking the rest of the class/ audience for their attention and inviting questions.

## **5.0 DISCUSSION**

The overarching aim of this study was to describe and evaluate the Department of English and its courses in the context of employability skills, and to basically explore the interface between the discipline and the world of work. The findings brought to light an understanding of employability and soft skills within the 21<sup>st</sup> century context as notions of prime importance to the accountability of higher education institutions and to the Department of English specifically. The running theme is that university faculties and departments are now increasingly responsible for the welfare of their students and owe it to society to teach specific skills and competencies. These skills were identified as: communication skills, teamwork skills, critical thinking skills, leadership, ethics, ICT skills and leaning to learn skills. Similarly, students as individuals are

now also increasingly responsible for their own welfare and that of society and therefore need to be conscious of the knowledge trends of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and to acquire these specific knowledge and skills. These specific knowledge and skills are expressly of the kind that employers need, hence, the possession of soft skills is now also part of a broad global and new basis for wealth.

The findings call for a conscious harmonization between learning and labour market processes in order to determine the university students' employability. Such an assertion does not dispute the fact that employability is dependent upon the context of the labour market and the overall context of the economy, both local and global, but rather distinguishes between actually gaining a job, which could be qualified as employment and having the most favorable qualities to gain a job, 'employability'. With particular regard to university studies, which this research isolates as the pivot of changes within the modern world, the outcomes indicate the importance of new thoughts on university orientation in that there is the need to reflect upon the role of the University. The university needs to be repositioned at the center of society as an institution which produces and spreads knowledge and development. Along this path there is also the need to rethink the curriculum and align it with corporate needs. From the soft skills which were specifically clarified and defined using the skills inventory of Crawford, Lang, Fink, Dalton & Fielitz, (2011) and from the data generated from the course outlines, the online job advertisements, the employers and past student respondent data, it was established that the Department of English is not sufficiently keeping abreast with employer perceptions.

It was again established that the Department of English is not sufficiently keeping abreast with the stakeholders' perceptions, comments, and needs as the data all show great incongruence between what the students are learning and how they learn and the expectations of the world of work. Students' career choices were in great divergence with the Department's offerings and where the students prioritized communication in English as the best they could get from studying in the Department it was observed the courses in the Department did not really assist in making them proficient in communication.

Again it was established that the Department and institutions of higher learning as an ensemble, need to engage in collaborative partnerships with the work world as per the terms of reference in this paper, which include creating opportunities for internships, engaging in collaborative course designs based on needs assessments, inviting guests speakers from the employment world and having for instance career services.

## **CONCLUSION**

The analogy one draws from the entire paper is that universities and institutions of higher learning, and their academic departments can no longer be complacent about the capacity of their graduates to secure and maintain employment, to develop within a particular job and have the ability to move on to new sustainable employment if required. The economic context and labour market situations are challenging institutions towards reflexivity and accountability as to their purpose, their worth and their value, challenging all to ask the question of what their essence is and what their students are becoming. It is from these perspectives that the need to assess how the Department of English of the University of Yaoundé 1 is meeting up to these expectations was founded.

This paper has investigated the inclusion of generic soft skills and most especially communicative competence in the courses of the Department of English of the University of Yaoundé 1, in a bid to show its shortcomings in the 21<sup>st</sup> century employability discourse. Key generic literature on the employability of university graduates were reviewed with more specific academic literature relating to the present research documented. The literature revealed that generalist higher education studies, such as English studies, do not take sufficient cognizance of workplace skills in the kind of training they offer.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

This study overall has important implications to the stakeholders. With regard to the students it argues for learning strategies and an orientation towards soft skills development which it sees as primordial that they develop awareness of, and engage actively in acquainting themselves with. These can aid them in being employable and successful at their future jobs. However, the greatest importance lies with the educational practitioners, who include; the lecturers, University authorities, the ministry of Higher Education, the ministry of secondary Education, and Education policy makers in Cameroon, as they can use the research findings to improve the future of the Cameroonian Higher Education in the following ways:

The government of Cameroon must actively support the embedding of employability skills across universities and other higher institutions of learning. They must step in as official mediators and guarantors of good practice, put in place adequate policies, supported by funding to enhance consultative reflections on promoting soft skills.

The development of graduate employability skills and attributes should be included in higher education strategic plans, not only as policy, but as monitored practices down to faculty and department levels. Tailored teaching and learning roadmaps of soft skills development with expected outcomes from courses and programs have to be designed and be used in all universities.

The case study, the Department of English, should consider the plight of the BA English degree holders, and proceed to map-out explicitly the transferable skills needs of its graduates. This will be better achieved through the use of needs assessments and tracer studies. Conduits for experiential learning, internships and work placements should be adopted.

Establishing collaborative practices with the employment world should also be strengthened.

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