

The Dual Challenge: Expanding Equal Access and Ensuring Quality in Cameroon's Higher Education

Ngenge Ransom Tanyu, Khofidotur Rofiah, Frederick Ebot Ashu, Chuye Giyoh Jude

Abstract

Cameroon's higher education sector has expanded significantly since the 1960s, growing from one federal university to eleven public and 430 private universities today, with student enrolment rising from 539 to over 350,000. This article examines the tension between increasing access and ensuring quality within Cameroon's dual Anglo-Saxon and Francophone systems. To critically assess the interplay between increased access and educational quality, we adopted a mixed-methods research strategy, including a structured survey of 109 stakeholders, supplemented by a few qualitative online interviews. The results show that while economic and population factors drive growth, poor research output (27.5% of respondents), governance problems (22%) and limited funding (14.7%) make it harder to maintain quality. Over 73% of participants believe that quality has not matched quantitative growth, with financial constraints (56%) and outdated curricula noted as key barriers. Public universities dominate rankings, yet private ones suffer from inadequate oversight, part-time staffing and low wages (e.g., 1,500–3,000 CFA per hour) (1USD=555 FCFA). The article highlights the need for curriculum reform (50.5% priority), faculty training and accreditation strengthening, decentralised governance, increased investment and quality assurance to enhancing graduate employability and equity.

Key words: Higher education access, educational quality, Cameroon, governance challenges, policy reforms

ABOUT THE AUTHORS: NGENGE RANSOM TANYU, email: ransom.tanyu.ngenge@uj.edu.pl, Jagiellonian University, Poland

KHOFIDOTUR ROFIAH, email: khofidoturrofiah@unesa.ac.id, Universitas Negeri Surabaya, Indonesia

FREDERICK EBOT ASHU, email: frederick.ebot@ubuea.cm, University of Buea, Cameroon

CHUYE GIYOH JUDE, email: jude.chuyegiyoh@student.uantwerpen.be, University of Antwerp, Belgium

Résumé

Le secteur de l'enseignement supérieur au Cameroun s'est considérablement développé depuis les années 1960, passant d'une seule université fédérale à onze universités publiques et 430 universités privées aujourd'hui, avec un nombre d'étudiants inscrits passant de 539 à plus de 350 000. Cet article examine la tension entre l'élargissement de l'accès et la garantie de la qualité au sein des systèmes camerounais, à la fois anglo-saxon et francophone. Afin d'évaluer de manière critique l'interaction entre l'élargissement de l'accès et la qualité de l'enseignement, nous avons adopté une stratégie de recherche mixte, comprenant une enquête structurée auprès de 109 parties prenantes, complétée par quelques entretiens qualitatifs en ligne. Les résultats montrent que si les facteurs économiques et démographiques sont les moteurs de la croissance, la faiblesse de la production scientifique (27,5 % des répondants), les problèmes de gouvernance (22 %) et le financement limité (14,7 %) rendent plus difficile le maintien de la qualité. Plus de 73 % des participants estiment que la qualité n'a pas suivi la croissance quantitative, les contraintes financières (56 %) et les programmes d'études obsolètes étant cités comme des obstacles majeurs. Les universités publiques dominent les classements, tandis que les universités privées souffrent d'un manque de supervision, d'un personnel à temps partiel et de bas salaires (par exemple, 1 500 à 3 000 CFA par heure) (1 USD = 555 FCFA). L'article souligne la nécessité d'une réforme des programmes d'études (priorité pour 50,5 % des personnes interrogées), de la formation du corps enseignant et du renforcement de l'accréditation, d'une gouvernance décentralisée, d'un investissement accru et d'une assurance qualité afin d'améliorer l'employabilité des diplômés et l'équité.

Mots-clés: accès à l'enseignement supérieur, qualité de l'éducation, Cameroun, défis de gouvernance, réformes politiques

Introduction

In Africa, access to contemporary higher education continues to be influenced by the continent's history of decolonisation, adoption of market-friendly policies and the expansion of primary and secondary education (Varghese, 2006). From the 1960s to 2014, Africa registered impressive growth in the number of higher education institutions (HEIs) that increased from less than 50 to over 1,820 (Cole, 2023, p. 63). As argued by Garisto (2025, p. 837), however, increasing access to higher education in Africa has coincided with concerns regarding the quality of education. In other words, quality has emerged as critical issue in African higher education, often resulting from inadequate funding, weak governance structures with bureaucratic ineptitudes and corruption, limited access to digital infrastructure intensified

by the COVID-19 pandemic, low research output coupled with poor industry linkages, difficulty retaining talented lecturers due to brain drain and low salaries, overcrowding from rapid enrolment growth without proportional resource expansion, austerity measures imposed by international lenders like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, unclear legal status and irregular quality control of the private higher education sector, government interference and abuses of academic freedom, inadequate infrastructure like laboratories and libraries, use of under-qualified and underpaid staff, shortage of highly qualified experts, dominance of European languages in instruction and gender inequalities, impacting overall educational equity and standards (Ahmed et al., 2025; Cole, 2023; Djomeni, 2024; Dougherty & Reddy, 2011; Mohamedbhai, 2014; Mohamedbhai, 2015; Osei-Tutu et al., 2025; Zickafoose et al., 2024). In this article, we attempt to address the specific quality concerns that have resulted from expansion to higher education in Cameroon.

Conceptual Framing

Access and quality are both complex and contested concepts in higher education. Access often symbolises the phase where students register and pay initial fees, influenced by objective factors like economic conditions, government policy, gender, race and poverty, as well as subjective factors like personal effort and family support (Wanti et al., 2022). According to Wheeldon and Veles (2024, p. 111), inclusion is equally a central tenet of access, whereas Nairz-Wirth et al. (2021, p. 3) state that "access to higher education has reached unprecedented levels with almost a third of school-leavers worldwide attending university." Unlike access, quality is difficult to define and measure, especially given its elusive and multidimensional nature (Clemons & Jance, 2024; Culbertson et al., 2024; Rind & Malin, 2024; Schindler et al., 2015).

Khoo et al. (2024, p. 65), nevertheless, hold that "common conceptualisations include quality as: excellence; value for money; fitness for purpose and transformation". Moreover, quality is purposeful (aligning with mission, vision and standards), exceptional (achieving high distinction), transformative (enhancing student learning and potential), and accountable (optimising resources with zero defects), while quality indicators include administrative (mission, legitimacy and resource management), student support (service availability), instructional (content relevance and instructor competence), and student performance (engagement and skill development leading to employment) (Schindler et al., 2015, pp. 4-6). Both access and quality seem fundamentally interconnected. For instance, enhancing access through increased enrolment and infrastructure investment can improve

quality by strengthening human capital (Cole, 2023; Nji, 2015) but can also negatively affect general education standards by straining limited resources, leading to overcrowded universities and reduced funding per student. In the case of Cameroon, we consider access as characterised by the expansion of institutional capacity and the broadening of enrolment opportunities within the public and private higher education sectors. This includes the measurable increase in the number of universities and student enrolments, boosted by elements such as demographic growth, governmental strategies, economic advancement and a heightened appetite for higher education. Access, in this case, also embodies the structural transformation within the sector, highlighting the rise of private universities alongside the coexistence of dual educational systems, namely Anglo-Saxon and Francophone.

Access transcends mere numerical analysis and is complexly influenced by considerations of equity, from regional disparities and affordability to the marginalisation of underprivileged communities. Consequently, access within the Cameroonian framework serves as both an indicator of growth and a manifestation of underlying systemic obstacles to achieving inclusive participation. On the contrary, quality includes institutional effectiveness, pedagogical standards, research productivity, governance and employment prospects. We used the input–output paradigm (Salam, 2015; Schindler et al., 2015) to assess quality. Inputs are indicative of infrastructure, personnel and financial resources, whilst outputs reflect academic supervision and accreditation, rankings, graduate employability, research output and levels of student satisfaction (Bilola & Pascal, 2016).

Access in Cameroonian Higher Education

The evolution of access to higher education in Cameroon can be categorised into two, i.e., an increase in the number of HEIs and an increase in student enrolment. As of now, Cameroon has eleven public universities in operation and 430 private universities (MINESUP, 2026). Other types of HEIs include the University Institutes of Technology (Instituts Universitaires de Technologie, IUT), Grandes écoles de Formation under State Universities (MINESUP) and other Technical Ministries: e.g., Ministère des Travaux Publics du Cameroun (MINTP), Ministère des Postes et Télécommunication du Cameroun (MINTC) (Campbell and Smar-Jabot, 2021, p. 16). The number and types of HEIs that exist in Cameroon today are remarkable in comparison to the early 1960s, when the country had only the Yaoundé Federal University (Degreume, 2024, p. 28).

The number of private HEIs are a mix of nursing schools, business schools and management schools that provide two-year HND (National Higher

Diploma) programmes often topped up by another academic year to be considered a bachelor's degree, under the mentorship of public universities (Achuo et al., 2022; Etomes & Fonkeng, 2023). One of the research participants had the following comment on this subject:

Students can complete a two-year HND and then add a one-year programme to earn a bachelor's degree. However, this structure raises concerns about the quality of education. Some universities, particularly in countries like Germany, do not recognise this pathway as equivalent to a traditional three-year bachelor's degree. They require three consecutive years of study, which puts Cameroonian graduates at a disadvantage internationally.

Real-time data on gross tertiary enrolment remains elusive (Times Higher Education, 2024). However, various sources suggest that Cameroon is home to 350,000+ university students, with a significant majority (82% or 288,000 students in 2019) attending public universities (Campus France, 2022). The growth in student enrolment is equally noteworthy, particularly when compared to 1962, when the country had 539 students and 22 lecturers (Njeuma et al., 1999, p. 3-4). In 1970, the student population increased to 2,500 alongside 200 lecturers. This number rocketed to 18,000 students by 1985 and further expanded to 39,320 students in 1995. Nevertheless, it was only at the dawn of the 2nd Millennium that there was a significant surge in student enrolment, culminating in a total of 295,058 students registered in 2017. By the end of the 2018 academic year, the number of students rose to 316,631 (Enama, 2020). The rise in student enrolment can be ascribed to the growing population and an uptick in primary and secondary education enrolment figures as well as heightened demand for higher education.

In addition, the Anglo-Saxon system of education and the French system that co-exist in the country can be used to characterise access to higher education (Ngenge, 2020; Ngenge, 2022; Ngenge, 2023). While the existence of a dual system appears to provide students with a plethora of options in terms of the number and types of universities available, it presents a challenge depending on which of the subsystems students studied under, since it can limit their options for public universities. For example, with just two Anglo-Saxon public universities, Anglophone students who cannot study in French or afford to attend private universities must work harder to get admission to the University of Buea or The University of Bamenda. Major gender inequalities persist for instance, women making up only 7% of

professors, 18% of the faculty and generally less than 20% of the population in academia (Atanga, 2021, p. 28).

The distribution of HEIs in Cameroon also reveals significant regional disparities, with the Central and Littoral regions dominating with 83 and 61 institutions (comprising 55% of the total), while the Far North, Eastern and Northern regions remain severely underserved with only 5, 6 and 6 HEIs each respectively (MINESUP, 2026).

Quality in Cameroonian Higher Education

A first criterion for assessing the quality of higher education in Cameroon is university rankings as presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Top 15 Universities in Cameroon

No	University Name	City	Founded	Africa Rank	Global Ranking
1	University of Buea	Buea	1992	88	3460
2	University of Yaoundé I	Yaoundé	1962	92	3518
3	University of Dschang	Dschang	1993	110	3723
4	University of Ngaoundere	Ngaoundere	1982	176	5038
5	University of Douala	Douala	1977	193	5269
6	University of Mountains	Bangangte	2000	228	5879
7	University of Bamenda	Bamenda	2011	269	6524
8	University of Maroua	Maroua	2008	276	6637
9	University of Cameroon	Bamenda	2010	379	7965
10	University of Yaoundé	Yaoundé	1989	419	8923
11	University of Yaoundé II	Soa	1962	451	9595
12	Protestant University of Central Africa	Yaoundé	1989	767	12484

13	Cosendai Adventist University	Nanga-Eboko	1996	892	13179
14	Bamenda University of Science and Technology	Bamenda	1998	941	13410
15	Joseph Ndi-Samba University of South Yaoundé	Yaoundé	1996	1099	14115

Source: Compiled from EduRank 2025

The EduRank 2025 rankings show the domination of public universities in Cameroon's top 15, with the University of Buea, Yaoundé I, Dschang and Ngaoundere leading the way. This trend is consistent with that of other African countries, such as Nigeria and South Africa, where public universities frequently outperform their private counterparts in rankings due to their long history, established academic tradition, access to national research networks, international partnerships, consistent research output, alumni influence and institutional visibility (Papanthymou & Darra, 2022).

Quality in Cameroon's higher education system is also increasingly shaped by its research output and global visibility. As of 2025, Cameroon produced 32,818 scientific documents, accumulated 591,317 citations and achieved an H-index of 200, with an average of 18.02 citations per document (SCImago, 2025). These indicators place Cameroon in a mid-range position among African countries, trailing behind South Africa, Egypt and Nigeria, yet demonstrating substantial progress in regional research engagement. A significant proportion of Cameroonian publications are in English, reflecting the influence of the Anglophone subsystem of education. The Anglo-Saxon model, with its emphasis on peer-reviewed practice, academic autonomy and international collaboration, appears to enhance research visibility and citation impact. However, disparities in infrastructure, funding and policy coherence between Anglophone and Francophone universities suggest that linguistic orientation alone does not determine quality. To advance equitable access and improve research quality, Cameroon needs to invest in harmonised governance, inclusive capacity-building and strategic support for both subsystems.

On accreditation, Campbell and Smar-Jabot (2021, p. 17) show that public universities in Cameroon established by Ministerial or Presidential decree receive automatic and comprehensive accreditation for all their academic programmes. These HEIs are placed directly under the authority of MINESUP,

in accordance with Order No. 93/026 of 19 January 1993, which governs the creation of universities. In contrast, the accreditation process for private HEIs, referred to as Institutions Privées d'Enseignement Supérieur (IPES), is complex and multi-tiered. As stipulated by Order No. 01/0096/MINESUP of 7 December 2001, IPES must first obtain authorisation to operate from both MINESUP and the Commission Nationale de l'Enseignement Supérieur Privé (CNESP).

The CNESP, established by Order No. 073/CAB/PM of 6 December 2001, serves as an advisory body tasked with supporting the Ministry in the oversight, evaluation and regulation of private higher education. Despite receiving operational authorisation, IPES are not permitted to confer degrees autonomously. Instead, they are accredited to deliver MINESUP-approved programmes under the academic supervision—*tutelle académique*—of a designated public university, which awards the final degree. Given that accreditation is programme-specific, an IPES may operate under the tutelage of multiple state universities simultaneously, ensuring both academic conformity and quality assurance. Cameroon's accreditation framework for IPES raises concerns about regulatory enforcement and quality assurance. Of the 430 private universities currently operating, only about 257 are formally accredited by MINESUP, leaving approximately 173 institutions functioning without official recognition (MINESUP, 2026). Interviews with stakeholders reveal that the academic supervision (*tutelle académique*) mandated for IPES often exists only on paper, with minimal oversight from public universities. This gap between policy and practice undermines the credibility of quality assurance mechanisms and calls for stronger enforcement and institutional accountability.

Method

To examine the disparities between access and quality in Cameroon's higher education sector, we integrated both quantitative and qualitative data to ensure a comprehensive and context-sensitive analysis. Qualitative data came from published sources, constitutions, decrees, policy orientations, strategic papers and reports from institutions such as the Presidency of the Republic and MINESUP. These materials were critically analysed to understand historical trends in access and quality. Three interviews were conducted to strengthen the quality of data after the first review.

Quantitative data were collected through a structured survey administered through Google Forms in 2023, comprising 12 closed-ended and one open-ended question. The sample included 109 stakeholders, which included students, graduates, lecturers and professional services staff from both

public and private universities. While the sample size may appear modest, it is sufficiently diverse to capture key stakeholder perspectives, particularly given the exploratory nature of the topic and the challenges of accessing a broader population in a decentralised and unevenly regulated system. The sample reflects a relative balance between institutional types (63.3% public, 36.7% private) and roles within the sector though the sample mostly represents the Anglo-Saxon subsystem. Data were analysed using SPSS version 27 and NVivo, with all ethical measures taken to ensure anonymity.

Findings

Table 2 and Table 3 show a distribution of the stakeholders who participated in the survey and their institutional affiliations. The majority of the respondents, accounting, 43.1%, were graduates, with students following behind at 40.4%. Both the administrative and teaching staff each constituted a mere 8.3%. This distribution is such that the insights and views were mostly represented by those who had just finished their studies or were presently enrolled. This provides vital input on the current situation of higher education from the perspective of its main beneficiaries. Nevertheless, the comparatively diminished presence of academic staff and teachers in the study implies a gap in input from educational institutions.

Table 2: Lists of research participants (%)

	N	%
Academic staff	9	8.3
Graduate	47	43.1
Lecturer	9	8.3
Student	44	40.4
Total	109	100.0

Table 2 shows the distribution of respondents by the type of higher education institution to which they are affiliated with in Cameroon. The majority, 63.3%, are from public institutions, while 36.7% represent private ones. This indicates a higher response rate from individuals associated with public institutions, which may further reflect the larger size and reach of the public versus private sectors in Cameroon's higher education landscape. The distribution provides a diverse view from both sectors, although it is more heavily weighted towards public universities.

Table 3. Distribution of participants across public and private sector

	N	%
Private	40	36.7
Public	69	63.3
Total	109	100.0

Table 3 highlights the factors considered by respondents as primary contributors to the growth in higher education institutions and student enrolment. Economic development and the job market are seen as the main factors (32.1%), closely followed by population growth (27.5%). Government policy and support also play a significant role (21.1%), while globalisation and technological advancements are viewed as less impactful but still notable (14.7%). This suggests that broader economic and demographic factors are driving the expansion of higher education more than direct investments or dissatisfaction with the system.

Table 4. Factors driving institutional growth and student enrolment

	N	%
Economic development and job market	35	32.1
Investment for better education and job opportunities	1	0.9
Foreign investment and partnerships	3	2.8
Globalisation and technological advancements	16	14.7
Government policy and support	23	21.1
Population growth	30	27.5
Fear of unemployment and staying at home	1	0.9
Total	109	100.0

In response to the first question on the state of higher education (Table 4), the majority of respondents (55%) rate the current state of higher education as “good” in terms of both access and quality. Nevertheless, some consider as “subpar” (22%) or “extremely subpar” (7.3%). The lack of any “excellent” evaluation and a very small proportion considering it “very good” (15.6%) means that there is much potential for improvement, particularly in terms of enhancing quality to keep up with the growth.

Table 5: State of higher education in Cameroon

	N	%
Very poor 1	8	7.3
Poor 2	24	22.0
Good 3	60	55.0
Very good 4	17	15.6
Excellent 5	0	0.0
Total	109	100

Table 5 reveals that the main obstacle to improving educational quality in Cameroon, despite growth in enrolment, is poor research, innovation, and professional development (27.5%). The low quality of the sector is partly attributed to challenges emanating from governance and management. One of the stakeholders in the survey said “Cameroon’s higher institutions lack management and proper supervision and follow-up of staff.” Following limited funding (14.7%) issues of access, equity and diversity (13.8%), governance and management (22.0%) are reported to have a significant impact on quality.

Table 6: Factors that hinder improvement in educational quality (%)

	N	%
Dual character of the educational system (Anglo Saxon and French systems)	17	15.6
Governance and management	24	22.0
Limited access, equity and diversity	15	13.8
Limited funding	16	14.7
Poor research, innovation and professional development	30	27.5
Unregulated nature of private higher education sector	7	6.4
Total	109	100.0

With just two governments since independence and the concentration of power in the hands of presidents, the educational sector has not been spared. Despite immense efforts since independence to expand access to higher education for everyone, the quality remains deficient. This is as a result of the controversy surrounding the recognition and preservation of the two existing subsystems (Konings, 2005; Ndille, 2018), the appointment of academic leadership through presidential, prime ministerial and ministerial

decrees (Ngenge, 2020), conflicts between academic and student leadership over management, finances and freedoms (Chimanikire, 2009). Another major argument is advanced by Degreume (2024, p. 34), who states:

In a bid to offer educational opportunities nationwide, the majority of public universities have adopted bilingual instruction in both English and French. While this bilingual education model holds advantages for the internationalisation of higher education, enabling graduates to seamlessly integrate into the global market, the pool of students proficient in both languages remains limited. Disparities in the knowledge levels of applicants from different regions often pose challenges during the enrolment process. To mitigate potential political tensions between regions, universities have historically admitted all applicants meeting basic admission criteria. Unfortunately, this approach has inadvertently led to a decline in educational standards.

Cameroon's higher education governance is shaped by a highly centralised administrative framework; wherein decision-making authority resides with the central government and its line ministries. As Ngenge (2020) observes, "Cameroon's centralised administrative system requires the approval of the central government, represented by line ministries, which has implications for university governance and management." This structure raises concerns about institutional autonomy and the transparency of leadership appointments. Although official policy stipulates that academic leaders, including rectors, vice-chancellors, faculty deans, department heads, registrars and inspectors, are to be selected based on merit, practice shows that political affiliation plays a significant role in these appointments. Specifically, Ngenge (2020) notes that the majority of university administrators are members of the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM), casting doubt on the meritocratic nature of the selection process. Furthermore, a participant's remark that "if Southern Cameroons, aka Ambazonia, finally achieves the restoration of statehood, then the quality and quantity of education will be best as compared to LRC" demonstrates the broader socio-political dynamics influencing perceptions of educational equity and quality. This sentiment reflects deeper regional tensions and aspirations, which may have indirect implications for the governance and performance of educational institutions, as alluded to in Table 6.

Table 7: Rating of accessibility, equity and governance

	N	%
Very poor 1	8	7.3
Poor 2	34	31.2
Good 3	54	49.5
Very good 4	11	10.1
Excellent 5	2	1.8
Total	109	100.0

Access, equality and diversity are part of the crucial factors affecting the higher education sector (Njie, 2019). A number of the research participants highlight the need for "adequate feedback mechanisms [...] to improve the functioning of educational systems in Cameroon." Access is also limited by "inadequate information concerning certain fields in higher education and inadequate government subsidisation in public and private higher education."

In state universities, tutorials often involve a single lecturer addressing a class of up to 1,000 students, which defeats the purpose of personalised support. In contrast, when I was a student at the University of Dschang, tutorials were conducted in smaller groups with PhD students assisting, which was far more effective. In private universities, tutorials are often underfunded, with lecturers allocated minimal hours at reduced pay rates, further compromising quality. What is the source here?

It is indeed the case that private HEIs can provide a superior educational experience when subjected to appropriate oversight, as proven by evidence from Ethiopia, Kenya and South Africa. In these contexts, effective regulation, adaptable curricula, favourable staff-to-student ratios and comprehensive pedagogical training contribute to their success (Tamrat & Teferra, 2025; Mireku & Bervell, 2023; Opuda-Asibo, 2024). However, the circumstances in Cameroon present a more intricate scenario, where most private universities, especially those functioning without official authorisation, predominantly depend on part-time lecturers from public universities or hire under-qualified staff to address staffing deficiencies. Private universities also provide paltry remuneration, which in average amounts to c. 1,500 FCFA (under three USD) an hour. As a result, several lecturers are forced to teach at various universities to simply sustain a monthly wage. Thus, a

mere reduction of class sizes may not necessarily guarantee better quality of education as demonstrated elsewhere.

The 2023 Law on Higher Education Policy lays the foundation for accreditation, quality assurance and regulatory enforcement, which, if implemented well, might substantially enhance the operating efficiency of duly registered private universities. In other words, although the private higher education sector has the potential for excellence, its realisation depends not only on rigorous governmental regulation but also explicit accrediting processes and the consistent enforcement of standards across all institutions.

Table 8: Adequacy of current financing mechanisms for quality improvement

	N	%
No	81	74.3
Yes	28	25.7
Total	109	100.0

Table 8 reveals that a significant majority of respondents, 74.3%, are of the opinion that current financing mechanisms for higher education fails to address quality issues adequately. This indicates a widespread concern over the adequacy of funding and its impact on the quality of higher education, and a consensus on a favourable financial reform to scale up investment to the sector.

A lack of adequate funding presents a significant challenge for both public and private universities. The deficiency in financial resources significantly impedes research initiatives, infrastructural advancements and the acquisition of competent personnel (Bloom et al. 2014). The situation is aggravated by corruption permeating multiple tiers of decision-making, alongside a centralised and fragmented political framework that wields significant power over policy reforms and the appointment of leaders in higher education (Guiaké et al. 2021; Guiake & Zhang Tianxue, 2019; Ngege, 2020). The political dynamics, combined with bureaucratic obstacles and administrative delays, consequently, undermines the quality of education in universities, professional schools and technical colleges. This situation is further exacerbated by inadequate research capabilities, dubious admissions procedures, flawed examination systems and the graduation rates of students (Ngege 2020; Ngege & Tazoacha 2023).

Table 9: Preferred policy framework to address quantity-quality disparities

	N	%
Encourage research and better technology	1	0.9
Enhance curriculum standards	55	50.5
Elevate field studies and practicals as top priorities	1	0.9
Increase faculty training	31	28.4
Strengthen the level of training in secondary education	1	0.9
Strengthen accreditation processes	20	18.3
Total	109	100.0

Table 9 indicates that the majority of respondents (50.5%) are of the opinion that enhancing curriculum standards is the most critical policy framework or initiative to address disparities between the quantity and quality of higher education. The next most significant areas identified are increasing faculty training (28.4%) followed by strengthening accreditation processes (18.3%). The emphasis on curriculum and faculty suggests a focus on improving the core educational content and teaching quality, while accreditation is perceived as important for maintaining high educational standards. Less emphasis is placed on research, technology, field studies and secondary education improvements, indicating that the priority is on foundational changes within HEIs.

Table 10: Satisfaction with growth of higher education institutions and student enrolment

	N	%
Not satisfied at all 1	13	11.9
Less satisfied 2	34	31.2
Satisfied 3	40	36.7
Very satisfied 4	19	17.4
Completely satisfied 5	3	2.8
Total	109	100.0

Table 11: Alignment of educational quality with growth

	N	%
No	80	73.4
Yes	29	26.6
Total	109	100.0

Tables 10 and 11 present insights into stakeholders' satisfaction with the growth of higher education institutions and whether educational quality has kept pace with enrolment growth in quantity. Table 10 indicates that the majority of respondents feel satisfied (36.7%) with the growth, yet a significant portion are dissatisfied (43.1% combined for ratings 1 and 2). Table 11 indicates that a large majority (73.4%) think that educational quality has not kept up with the enrolment growth, highlighting a significant disparity between the growth of institutions and the improvement in educational standards. This suggests a pressing need for reforms focused on enhancing quality rather than merely increasing quantity.

In Cameroon, the quality of education is a crucial concern that has been addressed in several policy papers cited in this study, accounting for 15.4% of them. For instance, the ADEA Working Group on Higher Education (2006) report discusses the need to reform the national system of higher education to improve its quality. It identifies the issues faced by higher education institutions in the country and outlines the steps that must be taken to enhance the quality of education. These papers shed light on the country's efforts to improve the quality of education. For example, the first document, "A Report of the ADEA Working Group on Higher Education: Reforming a National System of Higher Education: The Case of Cameroon", emphasises the need to reform the national system of higher education and outlines the issues faced by higher education institutions in the country to enhance the quality of education.

Table 12: Specific challenges faced in accessing quality higher education

	N	%
Financial constraints	61	56.0
Infrastructure issues	16	14.7
Limited programme options	30	27.5
Equipment and facilities for practical work	1	.9
Practical sessions for science education	1	.9
Total	109	100.0

Table 12 highlights the challenges faced by individuals in accessing quality higher education. The majority (56%) cite financial constraints as the primary obstacle, followed by limited programme options (27.5%) and infrastructure issues (14.7%). Less than 1% mention issues related to the quality of equipment and the rarity of practical sessions, indicating these are fewer common concerns among the respondents. This resonates with the following statement from one of the research participants:

In higher education institutions, just like the University of Buea, students are sometimes diverted from their options and made to go in for unwanted choices (programmes). This poses a problem between consumer and producer, and the consumer (student) ends up suffering more because they either drop out or unwillingly deviate from their dreams. I think it is an issue that needs to be handled.

Table 13: Key changes to enhance higher education quality

	N	%
Faculty development programs	27	24.8
Study techniques supervision	1	.9
More practical lessons	1	.9
Updated curriculum	52	47.7
Upgraded facilities	27	24.8
Miscellaneous	1	.9
Total	109	100.0

Table 13 synthesises respondents' perspectives on key priorities for enhancing quality of higher education. Curriculum reform emerged as the most pressing concern, mentioned by 47.7% of participants, signalling widespread dissatisfaction with outdated content. Faculty development and infrastructural improvements followed, at 24.8% each, highlighting the dual importance of pedagogical capacity and learning environments. In contrast, fewer respondents emphasised study techniques or systemic restructuring, suggesting that foundational reforms, particularly in curriculum and teaching quality, are perceived as more transformative.

Qualitative responses reinforced this viewpoint, with participants criticising government inertia in updating curricula and lamenting the erosion of meritocracy and research capacity. Several accounts pointed to the disconnect between academic programmes and labour market demands. For instance, while internships are formally required, some students circumvent the process through fraudulent practices, undermining skill acquisition and employability. Others advocated for experiential learning through workshops and training programmes, arguing that institutions must move beyond content delivery to foster practical competencies. Recurring themes include the need for entrepreneurial education, early exposure to vocational subjects such as agriculture, and alignment between academic offerings and societal needs. Respondents called for a paradigm shift toward competency-based models that empower graduates to become job creators rather than job seekers. This disconnect between education and employment is reflected in national statistics as nearly 30% of university graduates in Cameroon remain unemployed or underemployed (Ngesi et al., 2024; World Bank, 2022).

Discussion

This article offers a critical analysis of the dual challenge facing Cameroon's higher education sector: expanding access while ensuring quality. Drawing on mixed data from students, graduates, lecturers and academic staff across public and private universities, the findings reveal that institutional growth and enrolment increases are primarily driven by economic development, population growth and labour market demand. These trends mirror broader patterns observed across sub-Saharan Africa, where higher education expansion has been a strategic response to demographic pressures and economic aspirations (Etomes & Fonkeng, 2023; Tamrat & Teferra, 2025).

However, the expansion has not been complemented by proportional improvements in quality. Respondents identified poor research output, limited innovation, inadequate professional development, governance inefficiencies and chronic underfunding as key barriers to quality enhancement. These findings align with studies from Ghana and Nigeria, where similar constraints have turned to undermine institutional performance despite increased access (Mireku & Bervell, 2023; Okebukola, 2021). In Cameroon, the coexistence of Anglo-Saxon and Francophone subsystems adds complexity to governance and curriculum harmonisation, often resulting in substandards and uneven resource allocation (Konings, 2005; Simo, 2017).

The perception of quality among 71% of respondents, who rated it as "good" or "very good", requires careful interpretation. Given that the majority of

respondents were students and recent graduates, this optimism may mostly reflect relative satisfaction with personal experiences rather than systemic benchmarks. As Schindler et al. (2015) and Harvey and Green (1993) argue, quality in higher education is multidimensional and contested, encompassing input (e.g., infrastructure, staffing), process (e.g., pedagogy, governance) and output (e.g., employability, research impact). The seeming discrepancy between perceived and actual quality give emphasis to the need for improved awareness and transparency in quality assurance procedures.

The article also reveals disparities in quality assurance across institutional types. While some private universities demonstrate responsiveness through flexible curricula and smaller class sizes, many operate with little or no oversight, relying heavily on part-time teaching staff from public universities or often underqualified staff who are usually underpaid. This undermines the assumption that private universities inherently offer greater quality. Comparative evidence from Ethiopia and Kenya indicates that when regulatory frameworks are strong, supported by institutions such as the Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HEQRA) and the Commission for University Education (CUE) respectively, private universities can equal or surpass public universities in performance regarding curriculum relevance, pedagogical innovation, and graduate employability (Opuda-Asibo, 2024; Tamrat & Teferra, 2025). The 2023 Law on Higher Education Policy in Cameroon establishes a National Accreditation and Quality Assurance Commission, which, if properly executed, may replicate similar achievements (Republic of Cameroon, 2023). However, the continued existence of unlicensed universities functioning outside this framework remains a major concern.

Governance challenges further complicate quality improvement. The appointment and dismissal of university administrators through presidential decrees, such as Decrees No. 2022/238 and No. 2023/040, raise questions about institutional autonomy and merit-based leadership (Ngenge, 2020). These practices may incentivise political loyalty over academic stewardship, affecting strategic planning and accountability. Despite changes resulting in the establishment of additional state institutions to alleviate congestion, they have insufficiently addressed other critical issues, including faculty development and delays in research funding. Comparable governance issues have been recorded in Zimbabwe, where politicised leadership nominations have impeded institutional efficacy (Ngwenya & Phuthi, 2022).

Structural issues, like the cohabitation of Anglo-Saxon and Francophone subsystems, impact curricular alignment and institutional recognition;

nonetheless, they need distinct empirical studies outside the purview of this article. These results emphasise the need for targeted changes emphasising quality above mere growth. Priorities include enhancing quality assurance, investing in faculty development and fostering transparent governance to guarantee that expanded access results in significant benefits. Future studies may also use graduate employment trend (tracer), employer input and institutional performance measures to evaluate the sector's responsiveness and effectiveness.

In the Discussion Paper and Country Case Studies "The Evolving Regulatory Context for Private Education in Emerging Economies" by Bjarnason, Patrinos and Tan (2008), Brigitte Matchinda discusses the regulatory framework governing private universities in Cameroon, specifically referring to decree N° 2001 / 832 / PM of September 19, 2001, which established the common rules applicable to private institutions of higher education (PIHE), and law N° 01 / 0096 / MINESUP of December 7, 2001, which clearly defines the requirements for the establishment and operation of PIHE in the country. This legal instrument seems to provide the basis for oversight of private universities in theory, yet practice continues to be marred by issues of corruption. Consequently, the important contributions of private universities to the MINESUP's mission, which is to produce, organise, and disseminate scientific, cultural, and professional knowledge and ethical values for the development of the nation, are clearly watered down by the non-application of regulatory texts governing the functioning of these institutions, which often leads to the recruitment of unqualified staff. Another major concern is that many private universities, professional schools and teacher training colleges in Cameroon lack adequate government monitoring and evaluation, raising concerns about the efficiency of quality assurance mechanisms (Varghese, 2006). In particular, the quality of the programs provided, as well as their market-driven inclinations, results in a prioritisation of graduation numbers above educational quality. Programme length, such as two-year HNDs [spell it out], a near absence of reading materials, underqualified staff and examination malpractices are all visible signs of poor educational quality. For instance, relying on academics from public universities to teach part-time at private universities may reduce their efficiency, raising questions about the overall quality of teaching at both public and private institutions.

Conclusions

This article argues that access to higher education in Cameroon has expanded significantly since independence, though quality has not kept pace with this quantitative growth. Challenges such as inadequate funding, unauthorised private universities, and low lecturer wages and outdated curricula continue

to undermine educational standards with corresponding effects on graduate employability. Therefore, curriculum modernisation, faculty development and robust oversight, especially for IPES, are essential to address these issues. Decentralised governance and increased investment remain critical to align education with sustainable development goals, ensuring both equity and quality. Regularising the Anglo-Saxon and Francophone subsystems and tackling regional disparities could allow Cameroon to capitalise on its bilingual advantage, strengthening its role in the African knowledge economy.

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