

Challenges in the proliferation of private higher education institutions in Cameroon: addressing systemic issues and enhancing quality

 *Suares Clovis Oukouomi Noutchie* ^{(a)*}



^(a) Professor, Unit for Data Science and Computing, North-West University, Vanderbijlpark campus, 1174 Hendrick Van Eck Boulevard, Vanderbijlpark, 1900, South Africa.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 07 July 2024

Received in rev. form 11 August 2024

Accepted 17 September 2024

Keywords:

Higher education, liberalization, private institutions, corruption, infrastructure, quality of education, regulation, Cameroon

JEL Classification:

I23, I28, P36

ABSTRACT

The liberalization of higher education in Cameroon has significantly reshaped the educational landscape, leading to a proliferation of private institutions. While this expansion aims to meet the high demand for higher education and diversify educational offerings, it has been accompanied by systemic issues that undermine educational quality. This study explores the impact of these issues, including corruption, inadequate infrastructure, insufficient laboratory equipment, lack of qualified lecturers, poor academic programs, and inadequate evaluation of the quality and relevance of these institutions. Motivated by the urgent need to address these challenges and enhance educational outcomes, this study investigates the primary infrastructure and equipment deficiencies in private institutions and examines how these deficiencies impact the quality of education. It also examines the impact of corruption and maladministration, highlighting the challenges posed by the employment of underqualified instructors in student training, which further compromises educational quality and student outcomes. The findings reveal significant deficiencies that severely limit the capacity of private institutions to provide quality education. The study highlights the need for comprehensive reforms, including stricter regulatory oversight, increased investment in infrastructure, and measures to combat corruption. Additionally, addressing the use of unqualified lecturers and improving the evaluation processes of academic programs are crucial steps. Addressing these challenges is essential to ensure that private higher education institutions can effectively complement public universities and contribute to national development. The findings and recommendations of this study aim to inform policy changes and educational reforms, providing a pathway to improving the quality of higher education in Cameroon. By implementing these reforms, Cameroon can create a more robust and equitable higher education system that meets the needs of its growing student population and supports the country's broader developmental goals.

© 2024 by the authors. Licensee Bussecon International, Istanbul, Turkey. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license (CC BY) (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Introduction

The reform of higher education policies in Cameroon has profoundly transformed the educational landscape, leading to a significant increase in the number of private institutions. This evolution has been driven by a combination of government policies aimed at expanding access to education and the growing demand for higher education among the population. The surge in private higher education institutions is seen as a necessary response to the large demand for access to higher education, which public universities alone cannot meet. Private institutions have the potential to complement public universities by providing additional capacity and diversity in educational offerings, thus playing a crucial role in addressing the educational needs of the country. However, the expansion of private higher education institutions in Cameroon has been marked by a range of systemic issues that have adversely affected the quality of education (Zickafoose et al., 2024).

Cameroon is listed among the 30 most corrupt countries globally. Transparency International cites several reasons for this, including a weak judiciary, a strong executive, widespread poverty, and limited freedom of the press (Transparency International, 2022). This corruption extends to the administration of higher education institutions, where mismanagement and unethical practices are not

* Corresponding author. ORCID ID: 0000-0003-4662-8007

uncommon. Maladministration, characterized by inefficiency and poor management practices, further exacerbates the challenges faced by private institutions, undermining their ability to provide high-quality education.

Given these complex challenges, this study is motivated by the urgent need to address the factors contributing to the poor performance of several private higher education institutions in Cameroon. The importance of this topic lies in its potential to inform policy changes and educational reforms that could significantly enhance the quality of higher education in the country. By understanding the root causes of the issues plaguing private institutions, stakeholders can develop strategies to mitigate these challenges and improve educational outcomes for students.

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the specific factors contributing to the systemic issues plaguing private higher education institutions in Cameroon. To achieve this, the study focuses on several critical research questions designed to uncover the underlying challenges and their implications. These key questions include:

- i. **Infrastructure and Equipment Deficiencies:** What are the primary infrastructure and equipment deficiencies in private higher education institutions in Cameroon? This question aims to identify the physical and technological shortcomings that hinder the institutions' ability to provide a conducive learning environment.
- ii. **Insufficient Laboratory Equipment:** How does the lack of adequate laboratory equipment affect the quality of practical learning and research opportunities for students?
- iii. **Corruption:** How does corruption manifest in private higher education institutions, including student bribing lecturers for marks, lecturers selling handbooks to students for profit, and management bribing government inspectors for favorable reports?
- iv. **Impact on Educational Quality:** How do infrastructure and equipment deficiencies impact the quality of education provided by these institutions? Understanding the relationship between physical resources and educational outcomes is crucial for assessing the overall effectiveness of private institutions.
- v. **Lack of Qualified Lecturers:** What role does the lack of qualified lecturers play in the quality of education? This question examines how the shortage of adequately trained and experienced educators affects the academic performance and competence of students.
- vi. **Lack of Information:** How does the absence or inaccuracy of institutional information, such as nonexistent or outdated websites and inadequate program descriptions, affect students and the overall transparency of the institutions?
- vii. **Government Subsidies:** How does the lack of adequate government subsidies affect the development and sustainability of private higher education institutions? This question explores the financial challenges faced by private institutions and the impact of insufficient governmental support on their operations and growth.
- viii. **Deterring Dubious Investors:** What measures can be implemented to discourage dubious investors from establishing private institutions solely for quick financial gain, which exploit poor citizens and produce inadequately qualified graduates? This question seeks to address the ethical and quality control issues within the private education sector.

By addressing these questions, the study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the current state of private higher education in Cameroon.

This paper is organized as follows: The next section reviews the existing literature on the challenges faced by higher education institutions in the Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa (CEMAC) in general, with a particular focus on Cameroon. This review, based on secondary sources, examines the factors contributing to the low quality of education resulting from the rapid proliferation of private institutions in Cameroon. The third section presents the findings of the study, utilizing a descriptive-analytical approach to detail the identified infrastructure deficiencies, quality concerns, and financial barriers. This is followed by a discussion of the implications of these findings within the broader socio-political and economic context. Finally, the paper concludes with key remarks and recommendations.

Literature Review

The deregulation of higher education in Cameroon has significantly impacted the quality of education, especially at the university level. Deregulation entails the private sector taking the lead in owning and managing educational institutions. This shift has resulted in a surge of universities and related schools, as evidenced by the approval given to numerous proprietors to own and manage these institutions (Matadi and Uleanya, 2022). However, the rapid increase in the number of private institutions has raised concerns about the adequacy of quality assurance mechanisms.

Higher education is a critical sector that contributes to economic growth and development, particularly in an increasingly globalized society. In Africa, various governments and non-governmental organizations have implemented policies to enhance the quality of higher education, aiming to develop human capital and address global challenges (Khaled, 2020). Despite these efforts, the sector faces significant capacity deficits and challenges that jeopardize its sustainability and contribution to socio-economic development. Lack of investment by governments over the decades has left higher education institutions in Africa ill-equipped to meet immediate skills requirements or promote sustained productivity-driven growth. Additionally, low faculty salaries, frequent academic interruptions caused by strikes, inadequate research funding, and limited autonomy discourage qualified professors and students from

remaining in African universities. This underdevelopment has led to high rates of talent migration, with individuals seeking better training, research opportunities, and rewarding careers abroad (Khaled, 2020).

Two significant trends in higher education are privatization and the emergence of the private sector. Privatization involves applying market principles to the operation and management of higher education institutions while maintaining public ownership. In contrast, the private sector refers to the growth of non-state actors in higher education, which typically do not receive government funding (ADEA, 2006). The rise of private higher education institutions has been a response to the inadequacies of public funding and the need to manage the increasing enrollment rates. However, this shift has also brought about challenges related to quality control and financial sustainability.

Corruption is another pervasive issue affecting the administration of higher education institutions. At the administrative level, corruption includes the misappropriation of funds meant for capital projects and the sale of admissions to undeserving students (Chinyere & Chukwuma, 2017). Inadequate learning environments lead to examination malpractices and other unethical practices like bribery. These issues result in the production of graduates who are inadequately prepared for the job market, lacking the intellectual competitiveness required in the 21st century (Chinyere & Chukwuma, 2017).

The liberalization of higher education in Cameroon was formalized with the passage of law No. 005 of 2001, which authorized the establishment of private higher education institutions (PHEIs). This legislation aimed to expand access to higher education by allowing private entities to offer post-secondary programs (Maboh, 2020). However, the rapid proliferation of PHEIs has led to concerns about the alignment of these institutions with statutory norms and their adherence to quality standards set by the Cameroon Ministry of Higher Education.

Historically, higher education funding in Africa was predominantly provided by governments. However, the past three decades have seen a massive increase in enrollments, creating significant demand pressure on public funding. To address these financial challenges, higher education institutions have had to diversify their funding sources. Strategies such as introducing private higher education institutions, implementing new tuition and cost-sharing policies, and diversifying higher education services were adopted to cope with the growing financial demands (Cloete, 2012).

Quality control in universities is virtually non-existent. While institutions like the University of Buea have conducted seminars on quality assurance with international experts, the actual implementation of these measures is lacking (Njeuma, n.d.). The reforms in higher education have also faced setbacks, including resistance to financial participation by beneficiaries, irregular funding by the state, poor quality of academic staff, and inadequate infrastructure. The successful implementation of higher education reforms requires political will, societal support, financial sustainability, adequate infrastructure, effective information management, and experienced university managers (Njeuma, n.d.).

Distribution of higher education institutions in Central Africa

In this subsection, the distribution of higher education institutions in the Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa (CEMAC) is examined using a descriptive-analytical approach. This analysis is based on a 2022 report by the Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM). The data presented in Table 1 highlights the distribution of various types of higher education institutions and the total number of students in each member country, namely Chad, Gabon, Congo, Cameroon, the Central African Republic (CAR), and Equatorial Guinea.

Table 1: The CEMAC higher education profile in 2022 (RUFORUM, 2024)

	Public universities	Higher national institutes	Higher teachers training college	Private universities	Private higher education institutes	Total number of students
Chad	10	6	4	4	65	60000
Gabon	4	2	0	3	4	35000
Congo	2	1	0	0	62	60000
Cameroon	11	3	0	2	460	500000
Central African Republic	1	0	0	0	20	20000
Equatorial Guinea	1	0	0	0	0	10000
Total	29	12	4	9	611	685000

The liberalization of higher education is evident in the presence of private universities and higher education institutes. Cameroon stands out with a significant number of private higher education institutes (460) and 2 private universities, catering to the large demand for higher education. The private sector plays a crucial role in providing additional capacity, especially in Cameroon and

Chad. However, the quality control of these private institutions remains a concern, as rapid expansion may come at the cost of educational standards.

Findings

This section examines the broader challenges facing private higher education institutions within the CEMAC region, focusing particularly on Cameroon. Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of private institutions across the CEMAC countries, revealing that Cameroon hosts over 70% of these institutions, collectively serving more than 500,000 students (RUFORUM, 2024). Despite the high number of institutions, the quality of education remains a significant concern, as Cameroon's education system struggles with various issues.

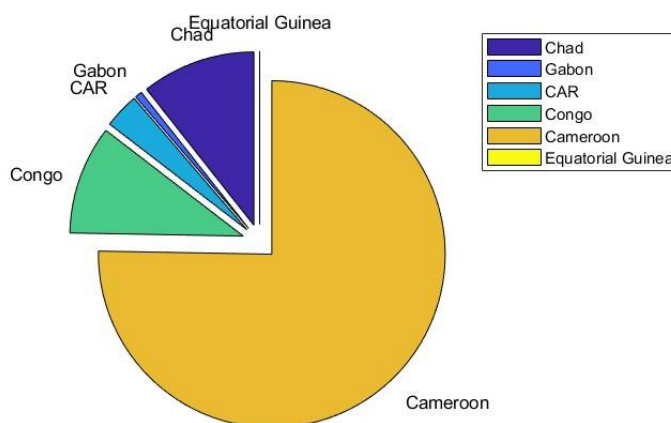


Figure 1: Distribution of Private Higher Education Institutions in CEMAC

The findings of the study focus on eight critical areas affecting the quality of private higher education institutions in Cameroon: Infrastructure and Equipment Deficiencies, Insufficient Laboratory Equipment, Corruption, Impact on Educational Quality, Lack of Qualified Lecturers, Lack of Information, Government Subsidies, and Deterring Dubious Investors.

Infrastructure and equipment deficiencies

The study reveals significant infrastructure and equipment deficiencies in private higher education institutions. Many institutions operate in buildings not originally designed for educational purposes, leading to overcrowded classrooms, inadequate ventilation, and poor lighting. These conditions create a suboptimal learning environment. The rapid increase in student enrolment has not been matched by a corresponding expansion in physical infrastructure. Institutions often lack essential facilities such as libraries, lecture halls, and study areas, further hindering effective teaching and learning.

Insufficient laboratory equipment

Laboratory facilities are critically inadequate in many private institutions. Where laboratories exist, they are often poorly equipped, lacking essential tools and materials necessary for conducting scientific experiments. This is particularly concerning for STEM disciplines, where practical experience is crucial. The lack of proper laboratory equipment restricts students' ability to gain hands-on experience, limiting their understanding of practical concepts and impairing their readiness for the job market. This deficiency significantly contributes to the production of graduates who are theoretically knowledgeable but practically unprepared.

Corruption

Corruption is pervasive within the administration of private higher education institutions. Various forms of corruption were identified, including bribery of lecturers for favourable grades, the sale of course handbooks for personal profit, and bribing government inspectors for positive evaluation reports. These unethical practices undermine the integrity of the education system and erode public trust. Corruption leads to the admission of undeserving students, lowering academic standards, and the misappropriation of funds intended for educational development further exacerbates infrastructural deficiencies.

Impact on educational quality

The combined effect of inadequate infrastructure, insufficient laboratory equipment, and pervasive corruption severely impacts the quality of education. Students are deprived of a conducive learning environment and necessary resources to support their academic growth. The lack of qualified lecturers compounds these issues, leading to poorly delivered courses and inadequate curriculum

coverage (Agbaje, 2023). Consequently, the education provided by many private institutions fails to meet national and international standards, resulting in graduates who are ill-prepared for professional careers.

Lack of qualified lecturers

The shortage of qualified lecturers is a critical issue in private higher education institutions. Many institutions rely heavily on part-time lecturers who are often overburdened and underpaid. This reliance on part-time staff affects the consistency and quality of instruction. Additionally, some institutions employ unqualified individuals to teach courses, further diminishing the quality of education. The lack of investment in professional development for lecturers exacerbates this problem, as there are few opportunities for lecturers to update their skills and knowledge.

Lack of information

Many private institutions lack proper channels for disseminating information. Websites, where they exist, are often outdated and lack comprehensive information about programs, course structures, and institutional policies. This lack of transparency makes it difficult for students to make informed decisions about their education. Furthermore, the absence of accurate and accessible information hampers efforts to monitor and evaluate institutional performance, contributing to the persistence of low-quality education and impeding necessary reforms.

Government subsidies

The study highlights the lack of adequate government subsidies for private higher education institutions. While public universities receive some level of financial support, private institutions are largely self-funded, relying heavily on tuition fees. This financial strain limits their ability to invest in infrastructure, equipment, and qualified staff. The absence of government subsidies means that many private institutions operate on tight budgets, affecting their overall sustainability and ability to deliver quality education.

Deterring dubious investors

The proliferation of private higher education institutions has attracted investors primarily interested in financial gain rather than educational quality. This has led to the establishment of numerous substandard institutions that exploit students and produce poorly qualified graduates. The study suggests the need for stricter regulatory frameworks to deter such investors. Implementing rigorous accreditation processes and regular audits can ensure that only institutions meeting high standards are allowed to operate. Increasing transparency and accountability can help build a more reputable and reliable private higher education sector.

Discussion

The findings presented highlight several critical issues that impact the quality and effectiveness of private higher education institutions in Cameroon. This section discusses the broader implications of these findings and suggests potential strategies for addressing the identified challenges.

Addressing infrastructure and equipment deficiencies

The significant infrastructure and equipment deficiencies identified in the findings necessitate urgent attention. The government, in partnership with private sector stakeholders, should prioritize investment in educational infrastructure. This could include building new facilities and upgrading existing ones to provide a conducive learning environment. Additionally, there should be a focus on equipping laboratories with the necessary tools and materials, especially for STEM disciplines. Such investments are crucial for improving the overall quality of education and ensuring that graduates are well-prepared for the workforce.

Combating corruption

Combating corruption within private higher education institutions is essential for restoring integrity and public trust. Strict anti-corruption policies and measures should be implemented, including regular audits and transparent reporting mechanisms. Creating a culture of accountability and ethical behaviour among administrators, faculty, and students is vital. Ensuring that funds allocated for educational development are used appropriately can help address infrastructural deficiencies and improve educational outcomes.

Enhancing educational quality

Improving the quality of education requires addressing the combined effects of infrastructure deficiencies, insufficient laboratory equipment, and corruption. Enhancing the quality of instruction through the recruitment and retention of qualified lecturers is critical. Institutions should invest in professional development programs to ensure that lecturers are equipped with the latest knowledge and teaching methodologies. Additionally, regular curriculum reviews and updates can ensure that educational programs meet current industry standards and prepare students for professional success (Agbaje, 2023).

Increasing information transparency

Enhancing transparency and information dissemination within private higher education institutions is necessary for informed decision-making by students and stakeholders. Institutions should develop and maintain comprehensive and up-to-date websites that provide detailed information about programs, course structures, and institutional policies. This transparency can help attract and retain students, as well as facilitate monitoring and evaluation efforts to ensure continuous improvement.

Securing government subsidies

The lack of adequate government subsidies significantly impacts the sustainability and quality of private higher education institutions. Advocacy for increased government support is essential. Government subsidies can help alleviate financial pressures, allowing institutions to invest in infrastructure, equipment, and qualified staff. A collaborative approach involving government, private sector stakeholders, and educational institutions can help develop sustainable funding models that foster the growth and advancement of private higher education.

Deterring dubious investors

Implementing stricter regulatory frameworks to deter dubious investors is crucial for maintaining the quality and reputation of private higher education institutions. Rigorous accreditation processes and regular audits can ensure that only institutions meeting high standards are allowed to operate. Additionally, fostering a culture of transparency and accountability can help build a more reputable and reliable private higher education sector. Ensuring that private institutions are genuinely committed to providing quality education rather than pursuing financial gain is essential for the sector's long-term success.

Conclusion

The study highlights major challenges confronting private higher education institutions in Cameroon, including infrastructure and equipment deficiencies, insufficient laboratory equipment, pervasive corruption, inadequate educational quality, lack of qualified lecturers, insufficient information transparency, lack of government subsidies, and the presence of dubious investors. Addressing these challenges necessitates a holistic and cooperative effort from the government, private sector stakeholders, and educational institutions. By investing in infrastructure, combating corruption, enhancing educational quality, increasing information transparency, securing government subsidies, and deterring dubious investors, Cameroon can improve the quality and effectiveness of its private higher education sector. These reforms are essential for equipping graduates to meet the demands of the job market and contributing to the country's broader socio-economic development goals.

Acknowledgement

Author Contributions: This manuscript was written and developed by a single author.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Ethical review and approval were obtained for this study.

Data Availability Statement: The third-party data supporting the results presented in this study can be accessed from The RUFORUM website (<https://ruforum.wordpress.com>). The author affirms that no special access privileges were granted.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Funding: The research discussed in this paper was kindly funded by a grant from the School of Mathematical and Statistical Sciences, North-West University.

References

- ADEA. (2006). *Private higher education in sub-Saharan Africa: Forms and dynamics*. Retrieved from https://www.adeanet.org/clearinghouse/sites/default/files/docs/adea_06_priv_higher_en.pdf
- Agbaje, O. (2023). Curriculum reform in African higher education: Solving society's problems and meeting its needs. *Curriculum Perspectives*, 43(Suppl 1), 141–149. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41297-023-00206-x>
- Chinyere, A.-P., & Chukwuma, O. (2017). Corruption and administration of higher education institutions in Nigeria. *World Journal of Social Science*, 4(2), 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.5430/wjss.v4n2p12>
- Cloete, N. (2012). Higher education and economic development in Africa. In M. Vukasović, P. Maassen, M. Nerland, B. Stensaker, R. Pinheiro, & A. Vabø (Eds.), *Effects of Higher Education Reforms. Higher Education Research in the 21st Century Series* (Vol. 4). SensePublishers, Rotterdam. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6209-016-3_8
- Khaled, S. (2020). *Higher education in sub-Saharan Africa: Challenges and prospects*. Retrieved from <https://oxfordhr.com/thought-leadership/higher-education-in-sub-saharan-africa-challenges-and-prospects-salah-khaled/>
- Maboh, M. N. (2020). Liberalisation of education in Cameroon: The liberating-paralysing impact on nursing education. *African Journal of Health Professions Education*, 12(3), 149-153. <https://doi.org/10.7196/AJHPE.2020.v12i3.1363>
- Matadi, M. T., & Uleanya, C. (2022). Impact(s) of quality assurance requirements for private higher education institutions in South Africa. *The Journal of Quality in Education*, 12(20), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.37870/joqie.v12i20.323>
- Njeuma, D. L., Endeley, H. N., Mbuntum, F. F., Lyonga, N., Nkweteyim, D. L., Musenja, S., & Elizabeth, E. (n.d.). *Reforming a national system of higher education: The case of Cameroon. A report of the ADEA Working Group on Higher Education*. Retrieved from https://knowledgehub.adeanet.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/he_cameroon_en.pdf
- Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM). (2024, March 9). *Prospects for higher education in the Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC) region*. Retrieved from

<https://ruforum.wordpress.com/2024/03/09/ruforum-thought-piece-prospects-for-higher-education-in-the-central-african-economic-and-monetary-community-cemac-region/>

Transparency International. (2022). *Corruption Perceptions Index 2022: Cameroon*. Retrieved from <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2022/index/cmr>

Zickafoose, A., Ilesanmi, O., Diaz-Manrique, M., Adeyemi, A. E., Walumbe, B., Strong, R., Wingenbach, G., Rodriguez, M. T., & Dooley, K. (2024). Barriers and challenges affecting quality education (Sustainable Development Goal #4) in sub-Saharan Africa by 2030. *Sustainability*, 16(7), 2657. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su16072657>

Publisher's Note: Bussecon International stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



International Journal of Business Ecosystem and Strategy by [Bussecon International Academy](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](#).