

RESEARCH ARTICLE

## The persistence of university crisis in Cameroon and the effectiveness of government reforms: A comparative perspective from Sub-Saharan Africa

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ABSTRACT

University education in Cameroon, like in many parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, continues to be disrupted by recurrent strikes, funding shortfalls, and contested governance reforms despite decades of policy intervention. This study examines the persistence of university crisis in Cameroon and evaluates the effectiveness of government reforms intended to address it, situating the Cameroonian experience within a comparative review of university crises in Nigeria, South Africa, Ghana, Chad, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Using a survey of 72 academic staff across Cameroonian public universities, the study applies Systems Theory and Conflict Theory to interpret both the causes of persistent crisis and perceptions of reform effectiveness. Findings show that academic strikes (36.11%) and outdated policies (50.00%) are the most commonly cited forms and causes of crisis, while government reforms perceived by respondents as concentrated mainly in staff recruitment were rated only marginally effective. A majority of respondents (55.55%) reported limited or no awareness of ongoing reforms, pointing to a communication and inclusion gap that undermines reform legitimacy. The study concludes that Cameroon's university crisis persists not from an absence of reform, but from reforms that are narrow in scope, poorly communicated, and disconnected from the governance issues staff themselves identify as central. Policy recommendations include rebalancing reform priorities toward governance and policy modernization, strengthening implementation monitoring, and institutionalizing inclusive dialogue mechanisms with academic staff unions.

KEYWORDS

University crisis; Higher education reform; Governance; Academic strikes; Cameroon; Sub-Saharan Africa; Systems theory; Conflict theory.

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### 1. Introduction

Universities worldwide are increasingly confronted with systemic crises that reflect the complex interplay of economic, political, and sociological forces shaping higher education. At the global level, one of the most pressing issues is the financial sustainability of universities, as declining public investment and rising tuition fees have created structural imbalances that compromise access and equity (Altbach, 2016; Marginson, 2016). In the United States, for instance, the student loan debt crisis, exceeding \$1.7 trillion illustrates how higher education has shifted from a public good to a privatized commodity, with profound implications for social mobility and intergenerational equity (Scott-Clayton, 2018). In Europe, austerity policies following the 2008 financial crisis triggered widespread protests and strikes by academic staff, underscoring the vulnerability of universities to macroeconomic shocks (Marginson, 2016). Meanwhile, in Asia, the massification of higher education in countries such as India and China has expanded access but simultaneously raised concerns about declining quality, overcrowded classrooms, and graduate unemployment (Tilak, 2015). Beyond financial pressures, universities also grapple with governance challenges, including political interference, erosion of academic freedom, and the precarious employment of faculty, which collectively undermine their role as autonomous centers of knowledge production (Kezar & Maxey, 2014).

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified these vulnerabilities, forcing universities worldwide to adopt emergency remote teaching, restructure budgets, and confront declining enrollment. While digital technologies offered temporary solutions, they also exposed inequalities in access and infrastructure, particularly in developing countries. University crises are not isolated phenomena but rather systemic manifestations of broader transformations in the political economy of education, requiring both national and international policy responses to safeguard the integrity and sustainability of higher learning institutions (de Wit, Altbach, & Glass, 2025).

The trajectory of African universities since independence has been marked by both promise and persistent crisis. Emerging from colonial legacies, higher education institutions were initially designed to serve administrative and elite functions, inheriting structural weaknesses such as limited autonomy, centralized governance, and inadequate funding (Ajayi, Goma, & Johnson, 1996). In the post-independence period of the 1960s and 1970s, governments rapidly expanded universities to democratize access and position them as engines of national development. Yet, this expansion was not matched by proportional investment in infrastructure, faculty development, or research capacity, resulting in overcrowding, declining quality, and mounting pressures on institutional sustainability.

By the 1980s and 1990s, the situation was exacerbated by structural adjustment programs (SAPs) imposed by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. These reforms drastically curtailed public spending on education and compelled universities to rely on tuition fees and external donors, with profound consequences for governance and sustainability (Samoff & Carrol, 2003). The consequences were widespread: recurrent lecturer strikes, student protests, and growing disillusionment with higher education. In Nigeria, the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) staged prolonged strikes over salaries, allowances, and autonomy, often paralyzing academic calendars (Egwu, 2021). In South Africa, the #FeesMustFall movement (2015-2017) underscored tensions between access and affordability, while sparking global debates on decolonizing curricula (Ndlovu, 2017). Kenya's universities have similarly faced repeated lecturer strikes over pay and working conditions, exposing governance weaknesses and eroding public trust (Otieno, 2010).

Scholarly and policy bodies have documented these challenges extensively. The Association of African Universities (AAU) highlighted the historical roots of these crises in *The African Experience with Higher Education* (Ajayi, Goma, & Johnson, 1996). Similarly, the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) has consistently emphasized the erosion of autonomy, academic freedom, and financing as central to the persistence of university crises (CODESRIA, 2020). More recently, continental frameworks such as the African Union's Agenda 2063 and the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA 2016-2025) have underscored the role of universities in driving innovation, skills development, and knowledge economies. Yet, implementation remains uneven and often undermined by weak governance and resource constraints (African Union, 2015; African Union, 2016).

These crises are not isolated disruptions but systemic manifestations of deeper structural problems (chronic underfunding, political interference, weak governance, and inequitable access) that collectively undermine the role of African universities as engines of development and innovation. While governments across the continent have attempted reforms (tuition adjustments and infrastructure investments to decentralization policies) such measures have often been piecemeal, reactive, and unsustainable. The persistence of university crises in Africa thus reflects both the enduring legacies of colonial structures and the limitations of contemporary policy responses, situating the continent's higher education systems within the broader global narrative of crisis, reform, and contested transformation. This global backdrop underscores the universality of university crises while highlighting their diverse manifestations across regions. Situating the Cameroonian experience within this wider context allows for a deeper appreciation of how local challenges intersect with global trends in higher education governance and reform.

Cameroon's higher education universities mirrors broader African patterns of promise and persistent crisis, while reflecting distinctive national dynamics. Higher education began with the establishment of the Federal University of Cameroon in 1962, later renamed the University of Yaoundé in 1973. For decades, this single institution struggled to meet rising demand, leading to overcrowding and declining quality. Enrolment rose from 600 students in 1962 to over 50 000 by 1992 in a university able to cater for at most 7000 students (Nayah, 2024). In the early 1990s, decentralization reforms sought to democratise access and reduce regional disparities through the creation of five new universities: Buea, Douala, Dschang, Ngaoundéré, and Yaoundé II (Soa). These reforms marked a significant expansion but were not accompanied by adequate funding, infrastructure development, or governance innovations, leaving systemic weaknesses unresolved (Konings, 2009). The reforms coincided with deep economic crisis in which the state lacked the means to equip the new universities, resulting in salary delays and steep cuts in civil servants pay (Nayah, 2024).

Further expansion continued in the 2000s and 2010s, with the establishment of the University of Maroua in 2008 and the University of Bamenda in 2010. Most recently, in 2022, three additional universities (Bertoua, Garoua, and Ebolowa) were created, bringing the total number of public universities to eleven (Cameroon Tribune, 2022). While this expansion reflects government efforts to

decentralize higher education and extend access to underserved regions, it has intensified pressures on resources, faculty, and governance. The rapid growth has not resolved structural weaknesses but instead magnified them, producing recurrent crises across the system.

The most visible manifestation of these crises is the recurrent strike actions organized by the National Union of Higher Education Teachers (SYNES). Since its creation in 1991, SYNES has repeatedly mobilized lecturers to demand payment of research allowances and improved working conditions. These strikes have disrupted academic calendars, delayed graduations, and eroded public confidence in universities. The 2005-2006 protests at the University of Buea culminated in violent confrontations between students, lecturers, and state authorities, underscoring the fragility of academic governance (Konings, 2009). More recently, SYNES issued a nationwide strike ultimatum in October 2024 over years of unpaid research bonuses, paralyzing lectures across all eleven public universities (SYNES, 2025).

Government responses have included decentralization, promises of infrastructure upgrades, and periodic financial interventions to settle outstanding allowances. However, these measures have often been piecemeal, reactive, and unsustainable. Bureaucratic delays in promotions, weak accountability mechanisms, and political interference in university governance continue to undermine reform efforts. Consequently, the cycle of crisis persists, contributing to brain drain, exacerbating youth unemployment, and weakening Cameroon's broader national development goals by eroding the production of skilled human capital.

Cameroon's university crisis thus reflects both the enduring legacies of colonial structures and the limitations of contemporary policy responses. Situating this experience within global and continental contexts highlights the urgent need for comprehensive, accountable, and transformative reforms that can reposition Cameroonian universities as resilient institutions capable of driving innovation, productivity, and sustainable development.

Against this background, this study addresses two research questions: why has university crisis persisted in Cameroon despite successive waves of institutional expansion and reform, and how effective have government reforms been in addressing it, as perceived by academic staff? Accordingly, it has two objectives: first, to identify the forms, consequences and perceived causes of persistent crisis in Cameroonian public universities; and second, to assess staff awareness of government reforms, their perceived effectiveness, and the priorities staff identify for reducing future crises. Drawing on a survey of 72 academic staff, interpreted through Systems Theory and Conflict Theory and set against a comparative review of five African cases, the study complements accounts of reform that have focused mainly on institutions and policy (Konings, 2009; Nayah, 2024).

## 2. Literature review

The literature on African higher education reveals a persistent tension between expansion, governance, and sustainability. Globally, scholars such as Altbach (2016) and de Wit, Altbach, & Glass (2025) argue that universities face systemic crises linked to massification, declining public investment, and political interference. These global dynamics provide a backdrop for understanding Africa's challenges, where colonial legacies, austerity-driven reforms, and governance weaknesses have left universities vulnerable to recurrent crises.

African universities inherited centralized governance structures and limited autonomy from colonial models, which constrained their ability to serve as engines of development (Ajayi, Goma, & Johnson, 1996). Post-independence expansion in the 1960s and 1970s sought to democratize access, but insufficient investment in infrastructure and faculty development led to overcrowding and declining quality. The austerity-driven structural adjustment programs (SAPs) of the 1980s and 1990s further destabilized higher education by drastically reducing public spending and compelling universities to rely on tuition fees and external donors, with profound consequences for sustainability (Samoff & Carrol, 2003). CODESRIA has consistently highlighted the erosion of autonomy, academic freedom, and financing as central to the persistence of university crises (CODESRIA, 2020).

Recent scholarship underscores how these systemic weaknesses manifest in recurrent strikes, student protests, and governance failures. Egwu (2021) documents Nigeria's Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) strikes, while Ndlovu (2017) analyzes South Africa's #FeesMustFall movement, which sparked global debates on decolonizing curricula. Otieno (2010) highlights Kenya's lecturer strikes and governance weaknesses, while Jowi (2024) explores partnerships and digitalization as emerging responses to these crises. Ivaska (2025) situates African universities' global presence before and after structural adjustment, emphasizing the need for renewed autonomy and sustainable financing. Ahmed et al. (2025) highlight governance and resource mobilization as critical for sustainable higher education in Africa. More recent studies also emphasize the impact of COVID-19, which accelerated digitalization but exposed inequalities in access to technology and online learning (Jowi, 2024).

Policy frameworks articulate ambitious visions but face implementation challenges. The Association of African Universities (AAU) documented historical challenges in *The African Experience with Higher Education* (Ajayi, Goma, & Johnson, 1996) and continues to promote quality assurance and regional collaboration. The African Union's Agenda 2063 positions higher education as central to Africa's transformation, while the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA 2016–2025, extended to 2035) calls for reforms in governance, financing, and curriculum alignment (African Union, 2015; African Union, 2016). Complementary initiatives

such as the African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ASG-QA) and the African Quality Rating Mechanism (AQRM) provide benchmarks for institutional performance. Yet, as CODESRIA (2020) and AAU (2025) note, implementation remains uneven, undermined by weak governance and resource constraints.

Country-specific studies further illustrate the persistence of crises. In Nigeria, prolonged ASUU strikes have paralyzed academic calendars and eroded trust in universities (Egwu, 2021). In South Africa, the #FeesMustFall movement forced tuition reforms but also revealed deeper structural inequities (Ndlovu, 2017). In Kenya, governance weaknesses and repeated strikes have undermined quality assurance (Otieno, 2010). In Cameroon, recurrent SYNES strikes over unpaid allowances and poor working conditions highlight the fragility of governance and the inadequacy of government reforms (Konings, 2009; Mbua 2019). These cases demonstrate that crises are not episodic disruptions but systemic manifestations of deeper structural problems such as chronic underfunding, political interference, weak governance, and inequitable access, that collectively undermine the role of African universities as engines of development and innovation.

Within Cameroon, decentralization has been the principal structural response to these pressures. Following Nayah (2024), the term is used here mainly to mean equitable regional access to higher education institutions, as distinct from the administrative decentralization of agencies such as Chad's CNOU, discussed below. Nayah (2024) shows that the creation of state universities from 1993 onwards, and their later extension to Maroua, Bamenda, Bertoua, Garoua and Ebolowa, was intended to decongest the University of Yaoundé and widen access across regions. The e-Higher Education project launched under the 2015 agreement with China added a digital layer, comprising laptops for students, digital development centres and a national interconnection network, although the same study recommends that lecturers be given more equitable access to these centres. It also records that the 1993 reform was implemented amid severe financial constraints. This suggests that decentralization has expanded the geography of Cameroonian higher education more than it has resolved the funding and governance conditions behind staff grievances

Synthesizing these perspectives, the literature reveals that African universities are simultaneously expected to expand access, produce globally competitive graduates, and drive innovation, yet they remain constrained by underfunding, governance fragility, and political interference. While continental policy frameworks articulate ambitious reform agendas, the persistence of crises underscores the gap between aspirations and realities. This tension situates Cameroon's university crisis within a broader continental and global narrative of contested transformation, highlighting the urgent need for comprehensive, accountable, and transformative reforms.

### **3. African case studies**

Building on the country-specific overview above, it is useful to examine in greater depth how university crisis has unfolded in five African countries notably Nigeria, South Africa, Ghana, Chad, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, since these cases illustrate the range of forms that a common underlying problem can take. As Ajayi, Goma, and Johnson (1996) observed, African universities remain burdened by colonial legacies and post-independence reforms that prioritized access over quality, while Samoff and Carrol (2003) highlight the destabilizing impact of structural adjustment programs on higher education systems. Contemporary scholarship (Jowi, 2024; Ntim, 2016; Tshibangu, 2022) underscores that crises are not uniform but vary in form ranging from prolonged strikes in Nigeria, tuition protests in South Africa, governance disputes in Ghana, politicized reforms in Chad, to instability in Congo (DRC). By situating Cameroon's university crisis within this comparative framework, the following case studies demonstrate that while national contexts differ, the persistence of crises reflects continental patterns of weak governance, inadequate funding, and contested reforms patterns against which Cameroon's own survey findings, presented later in this study, can be usefully read.

#### **3.1 Nigeria**

Nigeria's university system has long been engulfed in crisis, characterized by recurrent strikes, chronic underfunding, infrastructural decay, and governance weaknesses. With over 283 universities 63 federal, 63 state, and 149 private the country has expanded access but failed to ensure quality, as most institutions rank poorly on global scales and struggle with overcrowding and outdated facilities. The Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) has become central to this crisis, staging prolonged strikes such as the eight-month shutdown in 2022, which paralyzed academic calendars and left millions of students stranded (Egwu, 2021). These industrial actions, while highlighting systemic neglect, deepen instability and erode public confidence in higher education. Chronic underfunding, with education receiving less than 7% of the national budget, has left lecture halls dilapidated, laboratories obsolete, and libraries understocked (Opunne,, 2023). Employers frequently lament the mismatch between graduates' skills and labor market demands, reflecting outdated curricula and weak industry-university collaboration. Governance challenges, including political interference and limited autonomy, further exacerbate the crisis. Nigeria's case illustrates how expansion without sustainable financing and governance reforms perpetuates instability, offering direct parallels

to Cameroon's SYNES strikes and underfunded universities, and underscoring the need for systemic, rather than piecemeal, reforms across African higher education.

### **3.2 South Africa**

South Africa's university crisis has been shaped by financial pressures, inequality, and demands for curriculum transformation, most visibly through the #FeesMustFall movement (2015–2017). Beginning at the University of the Witwatersrand and spreading nationwide, the protests demanded free higher education and the decolonization of curricula, exposing deep inequities in access and governance. Ndlovu (2017) and Habib (2019) show how the movement forced government concessions, including increased subsidies and tuition adjustments, yet also revealed the fragility of university governance under social justice pressures. More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic intensified these challenges, as universities struggled to transition to online learning amidst severe digital divides, highlighting inequalities in access to technology and infrastructure (Kele, 2021). South Africa's case demonstrates how financial constraints, student activism, and governance challenges intersect to produce systemic instability. For Cameroon, the South African experience underscores the importance of addressing equity and access alongside governance reforms, since reforms that ignore social justice demands risk triggering further unrest and undermining institutional stability.

### **3.3 Ghana**

Ghana's universities have increasingly faced crises rooted in governance disputes, financial instability, and the pressures of massification. A notable example occurred in 2019 at the University of Education, Winneba, where governance conflicts between management and faculty escalated into violent student protests and temporary closure of the institution. Alabi (2016) argues that Ghana's higher education system is at a crossroads, struggling to balance rapid expansion with quality assurance and financial sustainability. Enrollment growth has outpaced infrastructure investment, leading to overcrowded lecture halls, inadequate facilities, and strained resources. Ntim, (2016) highlights how massification has undermined teaching quality and research output, while lecturers have staged protests over promotions, working conditions, and delayed allowances. The National Council for Tertiary Education has repeatedly warned of underfunding and governance weaknesses, noting that universities rely heavily on government subventions with limited diversification of funding sources. Ghana's case demonstrates how governance disputes and financial instability can escalate into institutional crises, resonating with Cameroon's challenges of balancing expansion with sustainability, and underscoring the need for reforms that prioritize both quality and accountability in higher education.

### **3.4 Chad**

Chad's universities have increasingly been destabilized by governance fragility, politicized reforms, and inadequate student welfare services. A major crisis unfolded in 2025 when reforms aimed at decentralizing the National Centre for University Works (CNOU) the body responsible for student housing, food, and welfare sparked political disputes between the Ministry of Higher Education and university stakeholders. By early 2026, these tensions culminated in the resignation of the Minister of Higher Education, underscoring the politicization of reform efforts and the fragility of governance structures (Sanodji, 2026). Reports from Chadian universities highlight how poor student services, overcrowded facilities, and limited funding have fueled unrest, with students staging repeated protests over deteriorating living conditions. Scholars argue that Chad's higher education crisis reflects broader governance weaknesses, where reforms are often driven by political agendas rather than institutional needs. The Chadian case illustrates how reforms, if poorly managed or politicized, can exacerbate rather than resolve crises, offering a cautionary lesson for Cameroon's contested reform processes, where similar tensions between government policy and university autonomy persist.

### **3.5 Congo (DRC)**

The Democratic Republic of Congo's universities operate in a context of chronic instability, weak governance, and socioeconomic fragility, making higher education particularly vulnerable to national crises. Tshibangu (2022) documents how civil unrest, political interference, and resource mismanagement have undermined the functioning of institutions such as the University of Kinshasa, where recurrent strikes by lecturers and students over unpaid salaries and tuition hikes have led to prolonged closures. In 2023, the University of Kinshasa faced a major shutdown after staff wages went unpaid for months, highlighting the precarious financial situation of Congolese universities. Scholars argue that the crisis is compounded by infrastructural decay, overcrowded classrooms, and limited international support, which leave institutions unable to deliver quality education or sustain research output (Tshibanda, 2022). The Congolese case demonstrates how higher education crises are deeply intertwined with broader governance challenges, reinforcing the argument that reforms in Cameroon must address systemic governance weaknesses if they are to succeed in stabilizing universities and ensuring sustainable development.

The comparative analysis of Nigeria, South Africa, Ghana, Chad, and Congo (DRC) reveals that university crises across Africa share common drivers underfunding, governance fragility, infrastructural decay, and social justice demands yet manifest differently depending on national contexts. Nigeria's recurrent ASUU strikes highlight the destabilizing effects of unresolved financial

disputes, while South Africa's #FeesMustFall protests underscore the centrality of equity and curriculum transformation. Ghana's governance disputes and massification pressures illustrate the tension between expansion and quality, Chad's politicized reforms demonstrate the risks of political interference, and Congo's instability shows how higher education is deeply intertwined with national governance crises. Cameroon's experience resonates with each of these cases, particularly in its struggles with strikes, underfunding, and contested reforms. The conclusion drawn from these case studies is clear: piecemeal reforms are insufficient. Sustainable solutions require systemic governance reforms, diversified financing, and policies that balance access, equity, and quality. By embedding Cameroon's crisis within the continental narrative, the study underscores that higher education reform in Africa must be holistic, depoliticized, and aligned with continental frameworks such as the African Union's Agenda 2063 and CESA 2016–2025, if universities are to fulfill their role as engines of development and social transformation.

#### **4. Theoretical framework**

This study is anchored on two complementary framework (Systems Theory and Conflict Theory), that provide analytical depth for understanding the persistence of university crises in Cameroon and illuminate both the structural and sociopolitical dimensions of higher education crises.

##### **4.1 Systems theory**

Systems Theory, pioneered by Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1969), views organizations as complex, interdependent structures in which different components must function harmoniously for stability and sustainability. Katz and Kahn (1978) extended this perspective to social organizations, and Scott (2003) further developed the view of organizations as rational, natural, and open systems shaped by their environment, emphasizing that universities, like other institutions, are open systems that interact with their environment. Applied to higher education, universities are seen as systems composed of subsystems administration, faculty, students, infrastructure, and government oversight that interact dynamically. A disruption in one subsystem, such as delayed payment of research allowances or inadequate infrastructure, reverberates across the entire system, producing instability.

In Cameroon, recurrent SYNES strikes illustrate how breakdowns in the financial and governance subsystems destabilize the academic calendar, erode student confidence, and weaken the university's developmental role. Scholars such as Scott (2003) argue that universities must be understood as adaptive systems, constantly negotiating external pressures (economic, political) and internal demands (academic freedom, quality assurance). Systems Theory thus highlights the need for holistic, coordinated reforms that address structural weaknesses across all subsystems rather than piecemeal interventions. For this study, Systems Theory is relevant because it explains why government reforms that target isolated issues such as infrastructure or allowances fail to resolve the broader crisis: the dysfunction is systemic.

##### **4.2 Conflict theory**

Conflict Theory, rooted in the work of Karl Marx, emphasizes power struggles, resource allocation, and competing interests within social institutions. Randall Collins (1975) advanced this perspective by showing how education systems reproduce inequalities and become arenas of contestation. In the context of higher education, Conflict Theory explains how universities become battlegrounds between lecturers, students, and the state. In Cameroon, SYNES strikes reflect conflicts over resource distribution, working conditions, and autonomy. Students' protests, such as those at the University of Buea in 2005–2006, further illustrate how inequities in governance and resource allocation generate resistance and confrontation (Konings, 2009).

Other scholars reinforce this view. Collins (1975) framed conflict as an inherent feature of organizational life driven by competition over resources and status, while Dahrendorf (1959) argued that conflict is inherent in all institutions because authority and subordination generate tensions. Applied to universities, this means that governance structures that centralize power in the state inevitably provoke resistance from academic staff and students. More recent analyses, such as Ndlovu (2017) on South Africa's #FeesMustFall movement, show that higher education crises are deeply political, reflecting broader struggles over equity, access, and legitimacy. Conflict Theory is therefore highly relevant to this study because it situates Cameroon's university crisis not as a technical failure but as a manifestation of contested power relations between the state, lecturers, and students.

Together, Systems Theory and Conflict Theory provide a comprehensive lens for analyzing Cameroon's university crises. Systems Theory emphasizes the interdependence of institutional components and the need for coordinated reforms, while Conflict Theory foregrounds the role of power struggles and inequities in perpetuating instability. By integrating these perspectives, this study situates Cameroon's university crisis within both structural and sociopolitical dimensions, offering a nuanced understanding of why reforms have remained ineffective and why crises persist despite repeated interventions. This dual framework is particularly relevant because it aligns with African policy debates—such as those advanced by CODESRIA and the African Union—which stress both systemic reform and the need to address inequities in governance and resource distribution.

## 5. Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach combining a structured online questionnaire with documentary analysis and the researcher's reflective insider perspective to examine the persistence of university crises in Cameroon and the government's policy responses (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2025). Data collection was primarily conducted through an online questionnaire administered to 72 academic staff from graduate teaching assistants to professors (Table2). The questionnaire was designed to capture perceptions of the university crisis manifested in recurrent strikes, governance weaknesses, and resource constraints as well as views on government reforms intended to address these challenges. The sample of 72 is small and should be read as indicative rather than statistically representative. It was chosen for depth, since academic staff are among the primary actors in university governance and policy implementation, and their perspectives provide informed insights into both the causes of crises and the effectiveness of reforms. Respondents came from several state universities but 61.11% were affiliated with the University of Maroua and Buea ( Table3), so the findings are indicative of staff perceptions.

The researcher's personal experience as a lecturer within the Cameroonian university system was systematically integrated into the study. Reflexivity was employed to acknowledge positionality and ensure that personal insights were critically examined and contextualized rather than treated as anecdotal evidence (Finlay, 2002). This insider perspective enriched the analysis by grounding stakeholder responses in lived realities of academic staff and by highlighting the everyday manifestations of systemic dysfunction. Furthermore, the study drew upon documentary sources, including books, scholarly articles, and official policy documents such as Cameroon's Higher Education Law No. 005 of 2001, the University Governance Reform Framework (2005), and the Strategic Vision for Higher Education 2035. These documents, alongside continental frameworks from the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), the Association of African Universities (AAU), and the African Union (AU), provided historical and policy context, enabling the research to situate Cameroon's university crisis within broader national and continental debates on autonomy, governance, and financing.

Questionnaire responses were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages); where an item allowed several answers, respondents selecting more than one option are reported in a single "More than one" category. Documentary sources were analysed thematically and together with the researcher's reflective account were used to interpret the results through Systems Theory and Conflict Theory. This dual theoretical lens allowed the study to interpret crises both as systemic dysfunctions and as manifestations of contested power relations. Triangulation across questionnaires, personal experience, and documentary evidence was used to crosscheck and contextualize the findings, while reflexivity ensured transparency in the researcher's role. Overall, this design provides an exploratory perception-based framework for examining the persistence of university crises in Cameroon and for assessing the adequacy of government policy responses.

## 6. Findings

### 6.1 Demographics

Gender

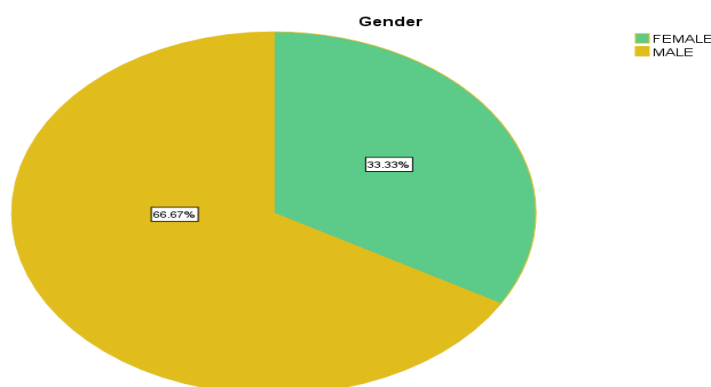
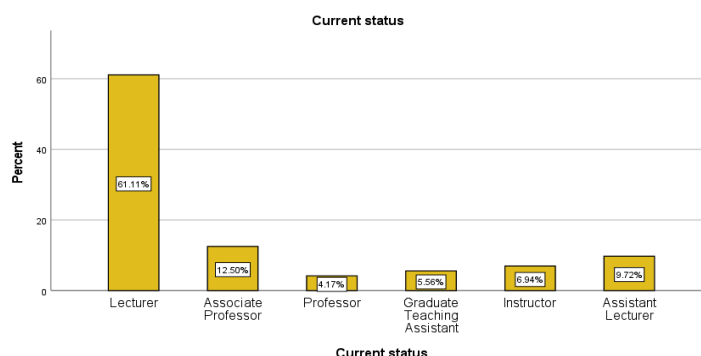


Table 1: Gender Distribution of Respondents

| Category | Frequency (n) | Percent (%) |
|----------|---------------|-------------|
| Female   | 24            | 33.33       |
| Male     | 48            | 66.67       |
| Total    | 72            | 100.00      |

The sample was skewed toward male respondents (66.67%, n=48) compared to female respondents (33.33%, n=24), a pattern consistent with the broader gender composition of academic staff in Cameroonian public universities. This imbalance should be borne in mind when generalizing the findings, since women's experiences of crisis and reform may be under-represented.

#### Current working Status

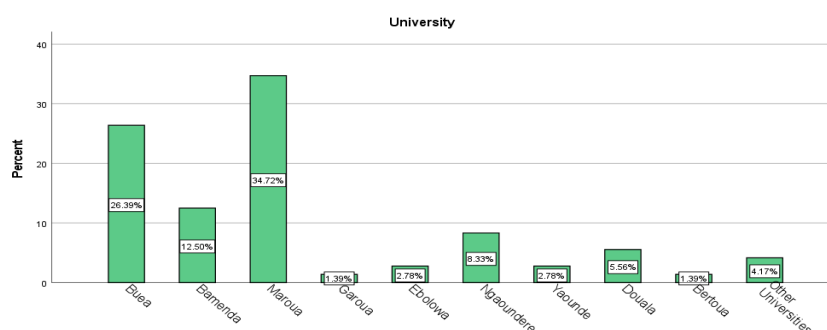


*Table 2: Current Working Status of Respondents*

| Category                    | Frequency (n) | Percent (%) |
|-----------------------------|---------------|-------------|
| Lecturer                    | 44            | 61.11       |
| Associate Professor         | 9             | 12.50       |
| Professor                   | 3             | 4.17        |
| Graduate Teaching Assistant | 4             | 5.56        |
| Instructor                  | 5             | 6.94        |
| Assistant Lecturer          | 7             | 9.72        |
| Total                       | 72            | 100.00      |

Lecturers made up the majority of respondents (61.11%, n=44), with Associate Professors (12.50%, n=9) and Assistant Lecturers (9.72%, n=7) forming the next largest groups; full Professors were the least represented (4.17%, n=3). This distribution mirrors the pyramid structure typical of Cameroonian university staffing and means the findings mainly capture the perspectives of early- and mid-career academics — the staff most directly exposed to the day-to-day effects of institutional crisis.

#### University Affiliation



*Table 3: University Affiliation of Respondents*

| Category   | Frequency (n) | Percent (%) |
|------------|---------------|-------------|
| Buea       | 19            | 26.39       |
| Bamenda    | 9             | 12.50       |
| Maroua     | 25            | 34.72       |
| Garoua     | 1             | 1.39        |
| Ebolowa    | 2             | 2.78        |
| Ngaoundéré | 6             | 8.33        |

| Category           | Frequency (n) | Percent (%) |
|--------------------|---------------|-------------|
| Yaoundé            | 2             | 2.78        |
| Douala             | 4             | 5.56        |
| Bertoua            | 1             | 1.39        |
| Other Universities | 3             | 4.17        |
| Total              | 72            | 100.00      |

Respondents were concentrated in the University of Maroua (34.72%, n=25) and the University of Buea (26.39%, n=19), with smaller numbers from Bamenda, Ngaoundéré, Douala and other state universities. While the sample spans multiple institutions, this concentration means the findings speak most directly to conditions at Maroua and Buea, both of which have experienced well-documented disruptions in recent years, and should be generalized to other campuses with some caution.

## 6.2 Experiences of university crisis

what type of crisis affected your University?

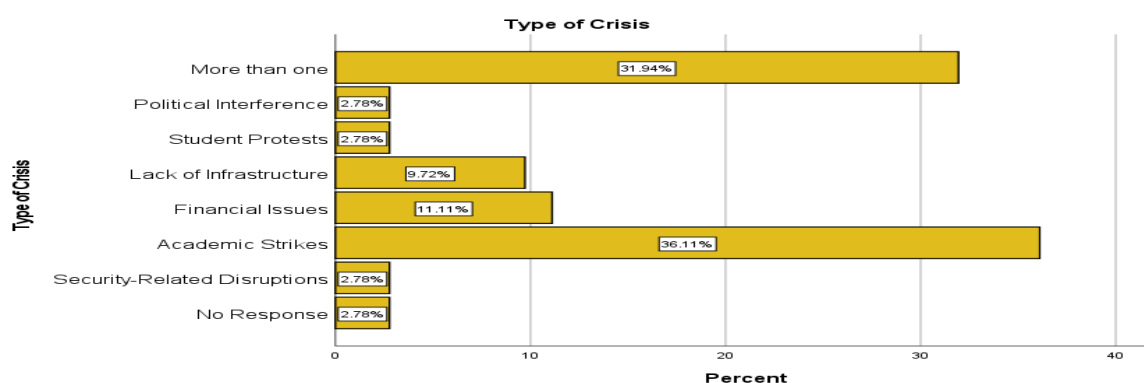


Table 4: Type of University Crisis Experienced

| Category                     | Frequency (n) | Percent (%) |
|------------------------------|---------------|-------------|
| More than one type           | 23            | 31.94       |
| Political Interference       | 2             | 2.78        |
| Student Protests             | 2             | 2.78        |
| Lack of Infrastructure       | 7             | 9.72        |
| Financial Issues             | 8             | 11.11       |
| Academic Strikes             | 26            | 36.11       |
| Security-Related Disruptions | 2             | 2.78        |
| No Response                  | 2             | 2.78        |
| Total                        | 72            | 100.00      |

Among respondents who had experienced disruption, Academic Strikes were the most frequently cited crisis type (36.11%, n=26), followed by those reporting more than one concurrent form of crisis (31.94%, n=23) and Financial Issues (11.11%, n=8); political interference and student protests were comparatively rare (2.78% each). This pattern supports the study's first objective by showing that university crisis in Cameroon is not a single, isolated event but a layered phenomenon combining labour disputes, resource constraints, and infrastructural deficits.

## Main Consequences of the Crisis

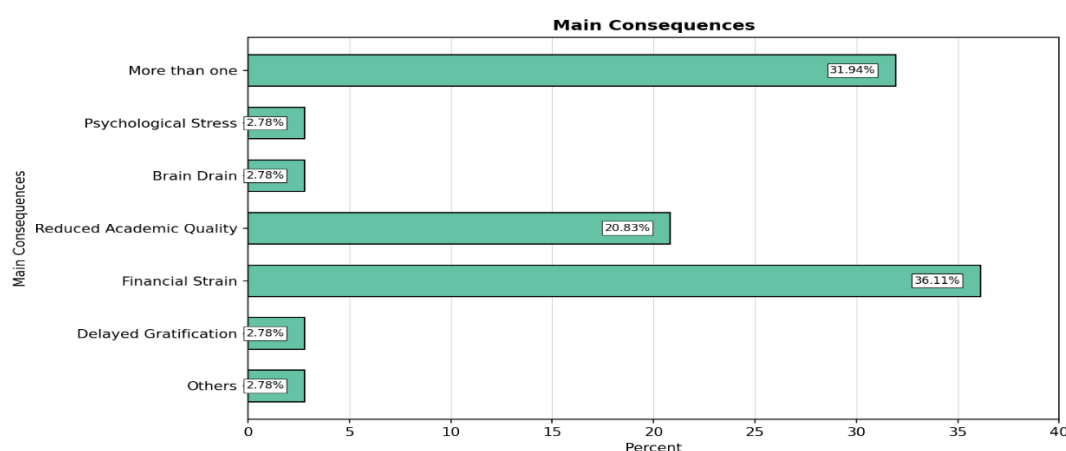


Table 5: Main Consequences of University Crisis

| Category                 | Frequency (n) | Percent (%) |
|--------------------------|---------------|-------------|
| More than one            | 23            | 31.94       |
| Psychological Stress     | 2             | 2.78        |
| Brain Drain              | 2             | 2.78        |
| Reduced Academic Quality | 15            | 20.83       |
| Financial Strain         | 26            | 36.11       |
| Delayed Graduation       | 2             | 2.78        |
| Others                   | 2             | 2.78        |
| Total                    | 72            | 100.00      |

Financial Strain (36.11%, n=26) and the experience of multiple simultaneous consequences (31.94%, n=23) were the most commonly reported outcomes, with Reduced Academic Quality cited by a further 20.83% (n=15); psychological stress, brain drain, delayed graduation and other effects were each mentioned by only a small minority. Together, these results indicate that the costs of persistent crisis are primarily financial and academic rather than narrowly individual, strengthening the case for reforms that target structural and funding issues rather than isolated grievances.

### 6.3 Causes of persistent crisis

In your opinion, main causes of persistent crisis in Cameroon

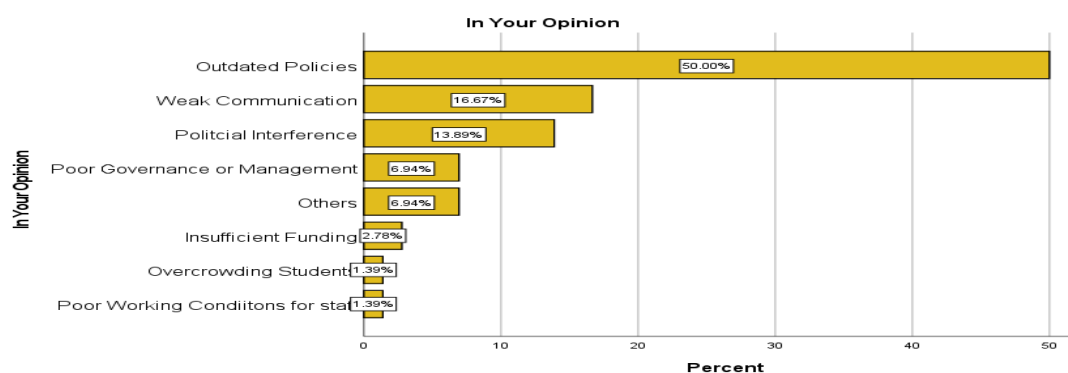


Table 6: Perceived Main Causes of Persistent Crisis

| Category                      | Frequency (n) | Percent (%) |
|-------------------------------|---------------|-------------|
| Outdated Policies             | 36            | 50.00       |
| Weak Communication            | 12            | 16.67       |
| Political Interference        | 10            | 13.89       |
| Poor Governance or Management | 5             | 6.94        |

| Category                          | Frequency (n) | Percent (%) |
|-----------------------------------|---------------|-------------|
| Others                            | 5             | 6.94        |
| Insufficient Funding              | 2             | 2.78        |
| Overcrowding of Students          | 1             | 1.39        |
| Poor Working Conditions for Staff | 1             | 1.39        |
| Total                             | 72            | 100.00      |

Half of all respondents (50.00%, n=36) identified Outdated Policies as a main cause of persistent crisis, well ahead of Weak Communication (16.67%, n=12) and Political Interference (13.89%, n=10); insufficient funding, overcrowding and poor working conditions were each cited by very few respondents. This concentration of opinion around outdated policy frameworks, rather than funding alone, is significant for the study's second objective: it implies that policy modernization, not resource injection on its own is central to resolving Cameroon's university crisis.

#### 6.4 Government reforms and their effectiveness

Awareness of government reforms

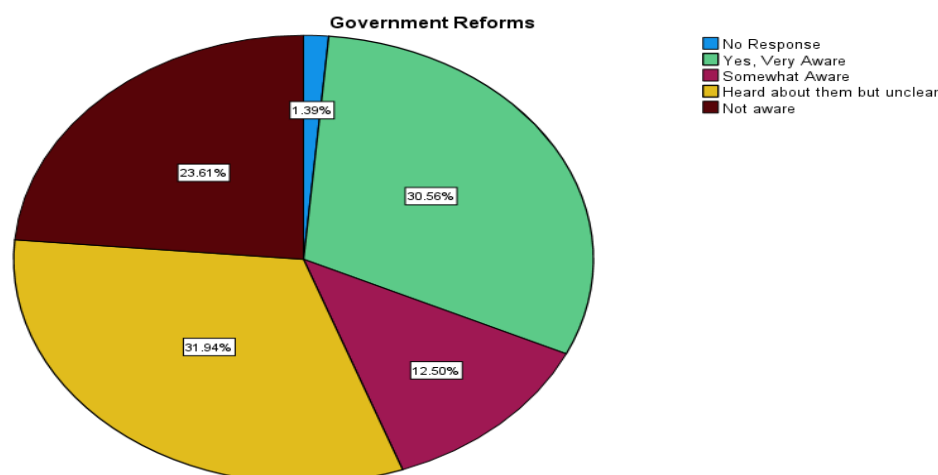
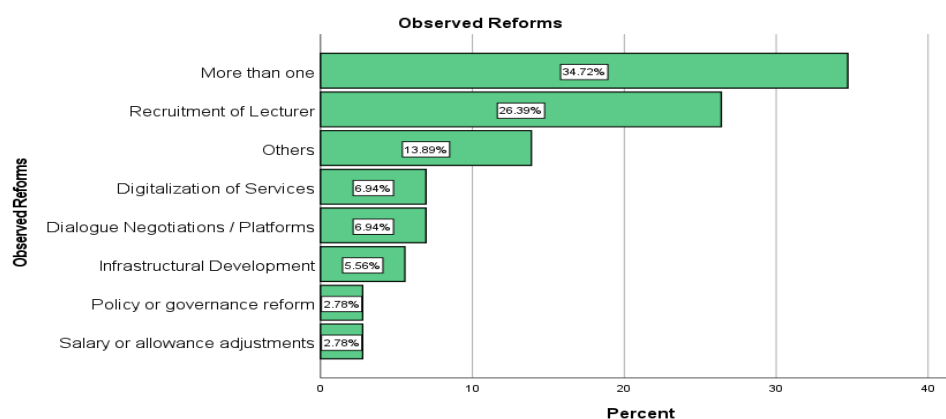


Table 7: Awareness of Government Reforms

| Category                     | Frequency (n) | Percent (%) |
|------------------------------|---------------|-------------|
| No Response                  | 1             | 1.39        |
| Yes, Very Aware              | 22            | 30.56       |
| Somewhat Aware               | 9             | 12.50       |
| Heard About Them but Unclear | 23            | 31.94       |
| Not Aware                    | 17            | 23.61       |
| Total                        | 72            | 100.00      |

Awareness of government reforms was mixed: 30.56% (n=22) reported being very aware and 12.50% (n=9) somewhat aware, but a combined 55.55% had either only heard about reforms without understanding them (31.94%, n=23) or were not aware of them at all (23.61%, n=17). This limited and uneven awareness is itself an important finding for the study's second objective, since reforms cannot be fairly judged effective by their intended beneficiaries if most staff are not clearly informed about what those reforms actually involve.

Which reforms have you observed?

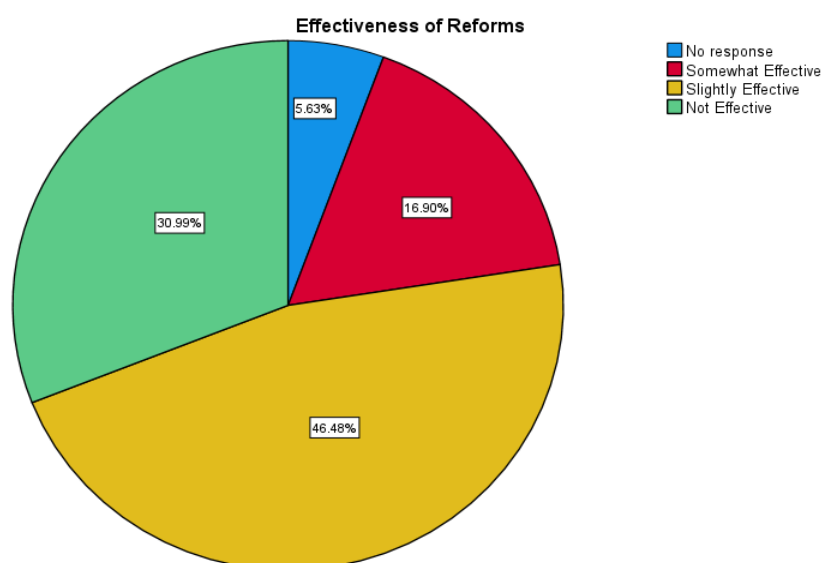


*Table 8: Reforms Observed by Respondents*

| Category                        | Frequency (n) | Percent (%) |
|---------------------------------|---------------|-------------|
| More than one                   | 25            | 34.72       |
| Recruitment of Lecturers        | 19            | 26.39       |
| Others                          | 10            | 13.89       |
| Dialogue Negotiations/Platforms | 5             | 6.94        |
| Digitalization of Services      | 5             | 6.94        |
| Infrastructural Development     | 4             | 5.56        |
| Policy or Governance Reform     | 2             | 2.78        |
| Salary or Allowance Adjustments | 2             | 2.78        |
| Total                           | 72            | 100.00      |

Where reforms were observed, Recruitment of Lecturers was the most commonly cited single measure (26.39%, n=19), while 34.72% (n=25) noted more than one reform simultaneously; structural measures such as infrastructural development (5.56%), policy or governance reform (2.78%), and salary adjustments (2.78%) were far less commonly observed. Read alongside Table 6, this points to a mismatch between what respondents see government actually doing, largely staffing-focused and what they believe is the deeper cause of crisis, namely outdated policy and governance structures. This mismatch helps explain the effectiveness ratings reported next.

How effective have government reforms been in reducing university crises?/ Quelle a été l'efficacité des réformes gouvernementales pour réduire les crises universitaires ?

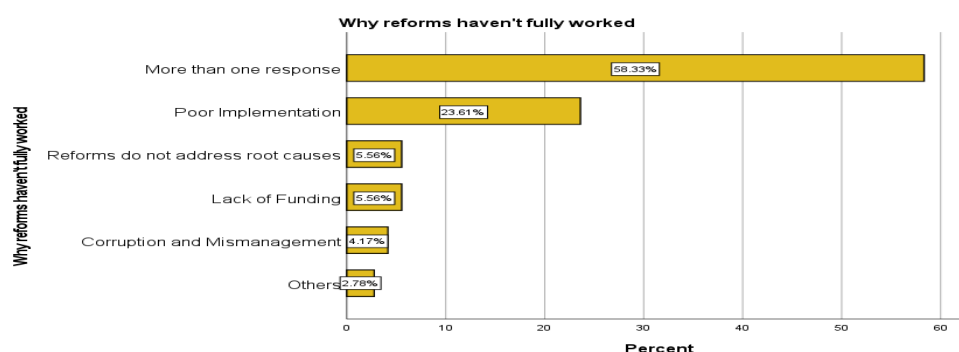


*Table 9: Perceived Effectiveness of Government Reforms*

| Category           | Frequency (n) | Percent (%) |
|--------------------|---------------|-------------|
| Slightly Effective | 33            | 45.83       |
| Not Effective      | 22            | 30.55       |
| Somewhat Effective | 12            | 16.66       |
| No response        | 5             | 6.94        |
| Total              | 72            | 100         |

Of the 72 responses 45.83% (n=33) of respondents rated the reforms as only Slightly Effective and 30.55% (n=22) as Not Effective, compared to just 16.66% (n=12) who considered them Somewhat Effective; 6.94% (n=5) gave no response and notably, no respondent selected "Very Effective." Among the 67 who gave a rating, Scoring the scale numerically (Not Effective = 1 to Very Effective = 4), the mean effectiveness rating was 1.85 (SD = 0.70, n = 67), confirming statistically that the average perception of government reforms leans toward ineffectiveness. This result speaks directly to the study's second objective, providing descriptive evidence that current reforms are widely regarded as inadequate by the staff they are meant to benefit.

Why do you think some reforms have not fully resolved the crises?/ Pourquoi pensez-vous que certaines réformes n'ont pas pleinement résolu les crises ?



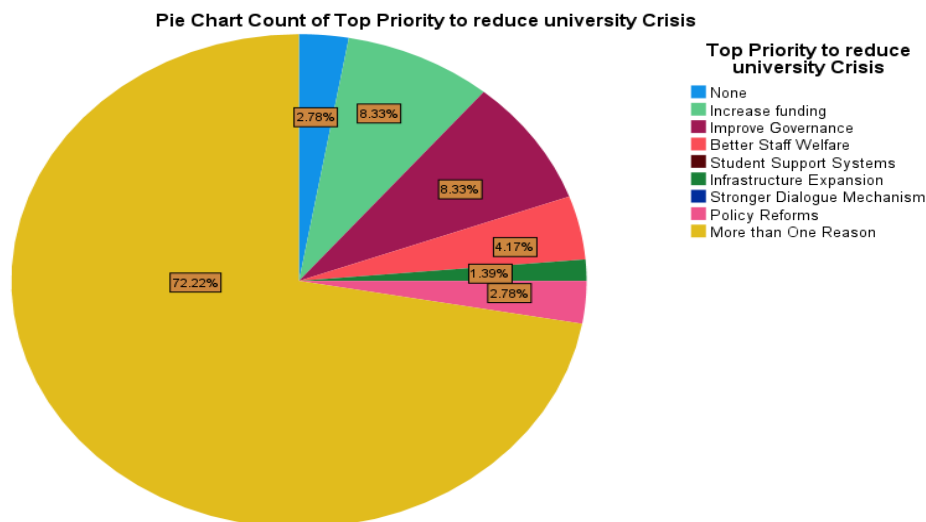
*Table 10: Reasons Why Reforms Have Not Fully Resolved the Crisis*

| Category                           | Frequency (n) | Percent (%) |
|------------------------------------|---------------|-------------|
| More than one response             | 42            | 58.33       |
| Poor Implementation                | 17            | 23.61       |
| Reforms Do Not Address Root Causes | 4             | 5.56        |
| Lack of Funding                    | 4             | 5.56        |

| Category                     | Frequency (n) | Percent (%) |
|------------------------------|---------------|-------------|
| Corruption and Mismanagement | 3             | 4.17        |
| Others                       | 2             | 2.78        |
| Total                        | 72            | 100.00      |

Asked why reforms have not fully resolved the crisis, 58.33% (n=42) of respondents cited more than one contributing factor, while Poor Implementation was the single most frequently named specific cause (23.61%, n=17), well ahead of lack of funding, failure to address root causes, and corruption or mismanagement (each under 6%). This suggests the core problem lies less in the design of reforms and more in how they are executed on the ground — a distinction with direct implications for the recommendations that follow.

What should be the TOP priority to reduce university crises?



*Table 11: Top Priority to Reduce University Crises*

| Category                 | Frequency (n) | Percent (%) |
|--------------------------|---------------|-------------|
| More than one reason     | 52            | 72.22       |
| Increase Funding         | 6             | 8.33        |
| Improve Governance       | 6             | 8.33        |
| Better Staff Welfare     | 3             | 4.17        |
| None                     | 2             | 2.78        |
| Policy Reforms           | 2             | 2.78        |
| Infrastructure Expansion | 1             | 1.39        |
| Total                    | 72            | 100.00      |

An overwhelming 72.22% (n=52) of respondents selected more than one priority rather than a single fix, underscoring that stakeholders view the crisis as multidimensional rather than solvable through any one measure. Among single priorities, Increasing Funding and Improving Governance were tied as the most cited (8.33% each, n=6), followed by Better Staff Welfare (4.17%, n=3). This reinforces the pattern already visible in the causes and consequences data: no single lever — funding, governance, or welfare — is seen as sufficient on its own.

Who should play the biggest role in preventing future crises? / Qui devrait jouer le rôle principal dans la prévention des crises futures?

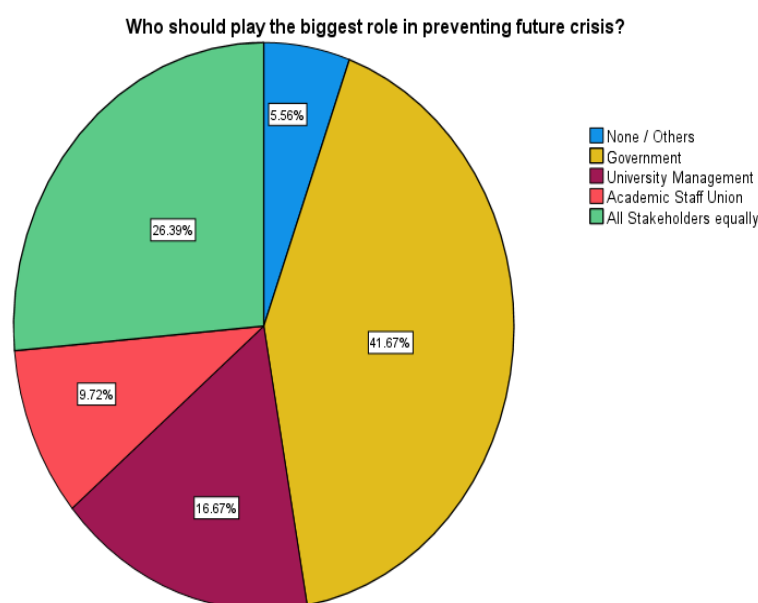


Table 12: Actor Perceived to Play the Biggest Role in Preventing Future Crises

| Category                 | Frequency (n) | Percent (%) |
|--------------------------|---------------|-------------|
| Government               | 30            | 41.67       |
| All Stakeholders Equally | 19            | 26.39       |
| University Management    | 12            | 16.67       |
| Academic Staff Union     | 7             | 9.72        |
| None/Others              | 4             | 5.56        |
| Total                    | 72            | 100.00      |

A plurality of respondents (41.67%, n=30) believe Government should play the biggest role in preventing future crises, while a further 26.39% (n=19) favoured shared responsibility among All Stakeholders; University Management (16.67%, n=12) and the Academic Staff Union (9.72%, n=7) were seen as comparatively less central. This distribution of expectations reflects the extent to which respondents view the crisis as fundamentally a governance and policy issue requiring state-level action, rounding off the findings before the discussion turns to interpreting them against the wider literature.

## 7. Discussion

The two theoretical lenses introduced earlier, Systems Theory and Conflict Theory are applied below first to the comparative regional evidence and then, concretely, to the survey findings reported in this study, so that Cameroon's own data can be read against both the wider continental pattern and the theoretical framework guiding this research.

From a systems theory lens, universities are complex organizations embedded within broader political, economic, and social systems. Crises in Nigeria, South Africa, Ghana, Chad, Congo, and Cameroon reveal how dysfunction in one subsystem (e.g., funding, governance, student welfare) destabilizes the entire higher education system. For instance, Nigeria's recurrent ASUU strikes demonstrate how unresolved financial disputes between government and lecturers disrupt the academic calendar, erode student confidence, and weaken institutional credibility. South Africa's #FeesMustFall protests highlight how inequities in tuition and access reverberate across the system, forcing government concessions but leaving unresolved tensions. Systems theory emphasizes that reforms must be holistic: piecemeal interventions such as tuition adjustments in South Africa or decentralization reforms in Chad, fail because they do not address the interdependence of governance, financing, infrastructure, and social justice. Cameroon's case, with its repeated SYNES strikes and contested reforms, exemplifies how weak linkages between policy design and implementation perpetuate instability across the system. This is borne out empirically in the present study: while 50.00% of respondents identified outdated policies and governance structures as the primary cause of persistent crisis (Table 6), the reforms most commonly observed were concentrated in the recruitment of lecturers (26.39%, Table 8) rather than policy or governance reform (2.78%). This mismatch between the subsystem respondents identify as dysfunctional policy and governance and the

subsystem government has prioritized for intervention (staffing) is precisely the kind of piecemeal, non-holistic reform that systems theory predicts will fail to stabilize the wider system, consistent with the low mean effectiveness rating reported by respondents ( $M = 1.85$  out of 4, Table 9).

### **7.1 Conflict theory perspective**

Conflict theory provides another lens, emphasizing the role of power struggles, resource allocation, and competing interests in shaping university crises. In Nigeria, the conflict between ASUU and government reflects deeper struggles over autonomy, resource distribution, and recognition of academic labor. South Africa's student protests illustrate how marginalized groups contest structural inequalities in access and curriculum, framing higher education as a site of social justice struggle. Ghana's governance disputes at the University of Education, Winneba, reveal how institutional conflicts between management and faculty escalate into broader crises. Chad's politicized reforms and ministerial resignation underscore how political elites use higher education reforms as instruments of control, often at the expense of student welfare. In Congo, strikes and closures reflect broader societal conflicts, where instability in governance and resource mismanagement spills into the university system. Cameroon's crisis similarly reflects conflict between government policy and university autonomy, with lecturers and students contesting reforms that fail to address systemic inequities. The survey data lend further support to this reading: a combined 55.55% of respondents reported being either unaware of government reforms or only vaguely informed about them (Table 7), suggesting that reform processes have not been negotiated inclusively with the academic staff they affect a pattern conflict theory would predict breeds resistance and perceived illegitimacy. Consistent with this, when asked who should play the biggest role in preventing future crises, respondents most frequently named Government itself (41.67%, Table 12) rather than University Management (16.67%) or the Academic Staff Union (9.72%), suggesting that authority over reform is seen as concentrated at the state level even as staff remain largely excluded from its design. Conflict theory thus explains why reforms often trigger resistance: they redistribute power and resources in ways that stakeholders perceive as unjust or inadequate.

Taken together, systems theory and conflict theory reveal that African university crises persist because reforms are fragmented and contested. Systems theory underscores the need for holistic, integrated reforms that strengthen governance, financing, and infrastructure simultaneously. Conflict theory highlights the importance of addressing power imbalances and ensuring that reforms are negotiated inclusively with stakeholders. For Cameroon, the comparative evidence suggests that sustainable solutions must combine systemic restructuring with conflict-sensitive approaches, ensuring that reforms are not only technically sound but also socially legitimate. Aligning reforms with continental frameworks such as the African Union's Agenda 2063 and CESA 2016-2025 provides a pathway toward stabilizing universities and enabling them to fulfill their role as engines of national and continental development. This is reflected in Cameroon's own respondents' priorities: when asked what should be the single top priority for reducing university crisis, 72.22% named more than one reason rather than a single fix (Table 11), directly echoing the conclusion that neither a purely systemic nor a purely conflict-based remedy will suffice on its own.

## **8. Conclusion**

This study set out to examine two related questions: why university crisis in Cameroon has persisted despite successive waves of institutional expansion and reform, and how effective government reforms have actually been in addressing that crisis, as judged by academic staff who live with its consequences. On the first question, the evidence is consistent across the survey: crisis is not a single event but a layered condition. Academic strikes were the most commonly experienced form of disruption (36.11%), consequences are felt most acutely as financial strain and reduced academic quality (36.11% and 20.83% respectively), and half of all respondents (50.00%) trace the root cause to outdated policies rather than to funding or infrastructure alone. On the second question, the findings are similarly consistent, and less encouraging: awareness of government reforms is limited (a combined 55.55% of respondents were either unaware of reforms or only vaguely informed about them), the reforms that are visible have concentrated on staff recruitment rather than the policy and governance changes respondents say are most needed, and the reforms are perceived as largely ineffective, with a mean effectiveness score of 1.85 out of a possible 4.

Read through the theoretical lenses adopted in this study, these findings tell a coherent story. Systems theory suggests that reforms limited to one subsystem, staffing cannot resolve a crisis rooted in another (governance and policy) and the low effectiveness ratings bear this out. Conflict theory suggests that reforms designed and implemented without meaningfully involving those affected by them will be perceived as illegitimate and will struggle to generate buy-in, and the low awareness levels and the concentration of expectation on Government rather than on negotiated, multi-stakeholder processes bear this out as well. The study therefore concludes that the persistence of university crisis in Cameroon is best understood not as a failure to reform, but as a pattern of reform that has been narrow in scope, poorly communicated, and disconnected from the causes staff themselves identify as central.

## 9. Recommendations

The recommendations below are informed by, but extend beyond, respondents' own stated priorities (Tables 11-12), incorporating the study's theoretical analysis of why prior reforms have fallen short.

- Rebalance reform priorities toward governance and policy: given that outdated policies were the most cited cause of persistent crisis (50.00%) while observed reforms have concentrated on staff recruitment (26.39%), government should prioritize modernizing the policy and governance frameworks that respondents identify as the root problem, not staffing alone.
- Improve communication and transparency around reforms: with 55.55% of respondents unaware or only vaguely informed of existing reforms, government and university administrations should establish regular, direct channels, briefings, bulletins, or digital platforms, to ensure staff are informed of reform content and rationale as a precondition for those reforms being seen as legitimate.
- Institutionalize inclusive dialogue mechanisms: consistent with the conflict-theory finding that top-down reform breeds resistance, government should establish standing negotiation platforms with SYNES and other staff representatives so that reforms are co-designed rather than imposed.
- Strengthen implementation capacity: poor implementation was the single most cited specific reason reforms have not resolved the crisis (23.61%), ahead of funding shortfalls or root-cause neglect, indicating that monitoring and accountability mechanisms for reform execution deserve as much attention as reform design.
- Pursue combined rather than single-lever interventions: 72.22% of respondents identified more than one priority as necessary, and funding and governance improvements were equally prioritized (8.33% each) where a single priority was named; this suggests reform packages, rather than isolated measures, are more likely to be seen as adequate.
- Align national reforms with continental frameworks: embedding Cameroon-specific reforms within the African Union's Agenda 2063 and the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA 2016-2025) can provide external benchmarks and sustained pressure for the holistic, accountable reforms the data suggest are currently missing.

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