



STATE OF SOCIAL GOVERNANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN CAMEROON

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Abstract:

Cameroonian higher education institutions (HEIs) face the challenge of ensuring robust social governance – the system of roles, practices, and processes that govern social interactions and welfare within universities. This study transforms a 2025 presentation on Cameroon’s higher education social governance into a comprehensive scholarly analysis. It examines current institutional frameworks and policies in Cameroon that embed social responsibility and stakeholder engagement in HEIs, assesses the implementation of social governance initiatives, and identifies key challenges such as resource constraints, centralized decision-making, stakeholder diversity, and socio-economic pressures. A comparative perspective is incorporated, drawing on examples from neighbouring African countries and global benchmarks to contextualize Cameroon’s situation. The research is based on a qualitative review of policy documents, recent scholarly literature, and international frameworks (including UNESCO, the World Bank, and African Union strategies). Findings indicate that while Cameroon has established a foundational framework for social governance – including regulatory oversight, community engagement programs, and inclusive governance structures – significant gaps remain in areas like student housing, healthcare, counselling services, transportation, and overall student welfare. Comparatively, similar challenges in student welfare are observed in other African countries, underscoring a regional need for improved investment and innovation in social support systems for students. The Results highlight both achievements (e.g. student representation in governance, community service initiatives) and persistent deficiencies (e.g. insufficient dormitory capacity, limited healthcare facilities).

Keywords: social governance; higher education; student welfare; Cameroon; stakeholder engagement

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1. Introduction

Higher education plays a pivotal role in national development, not only through teaching and research but also by fostering social wellbeing and inclusive participation within the academic community. Social governance in higher education refers to how universities manage their social responsibilities, stakeholder relationships, and the welfare of students and staff. In the Cameroonian context, social governance encompasses the policies and practices that promote social cohesion, equity, and community engagement on campus. Put simply, it is the dimension of university governance concerned with living conditions, support systems, and inclusion for all members of the academic community (Ruse, 2015). Effective social governance ensures that universities are not ivory towers isolated from societal needs, but rather responsive institutions that provide a supportive and inclusive environment conducive to learning and personal development.

In Cameroon, as in many countries, the push for improved governance in higher education gained momentum in the 1990s. Reforms in 1993 expanded the university system and aimed to grant greater autonomy to institutions, while also emphasizing new governance paradigms. The Ministry of Higher Education's New University Governance Policy (NUGP) introduced in 2009 outlined multiple dimensions of governance – academic, managerial, financial, digital, and social – to holistically transform the higher education sector (Ruse, 2015). Social governance, in particular, was defined in policy as focusing on the living conditions and support systems for students and staff, highlighting that the mission of universities extends beyond academics to include student welfare and societal engagement (Ruse, 2015). This recognition aligns with global trends that call for a “social dimension” in higher education, whereby universities strive to reflect and address the needs of the society they serve, ensuring equitable access and success for students of all backgrounds. It also resonates with international frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals – especially SDG 4, which urges countries to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all, including at the tertiary level.

Cameroon's higher education sector has grown significantly in the past few decades. From a single university at independence, the country now boasts eleven state universities – the original six created by the 1993 reforms (Yaoundé I & II, Buea, Douala, Dschang, Ngaoundéré) plus newer ones such as Maroua (2008), Bamenda (2010), and the most recent in Garoua, Bertoua, and Ebolowa (established in 2022). In addition, there are hundreds of private institutions; by 2017, Cameroon had 8 public universities and over 200 private HEIs, collectively enrolling roughly 500,000 students (UNESCO IICBA, 2024). This rapid expansion has been driven by policies to increase access to higher education and produce skilled graduates for development. However, it has also placed strains on infrastructure and student services, raising concerns about the quality of the student experience outside the classroom. Gross enrolment in tertiary education remains relatively low (around 15% of college-age youth as of 2018), and those who do enter university often confront significant challenges related to accommodation, health

services, financial support, and campus life. Ensuring that this growing student population is adequately supported has become a pressing issue for policymakers and university leaders.

The concept of social governance in higher education in Cameroon thus emerges from the need to balance expansion with inclusion and support. Good social governance means that universities proactively address issues such as student housing shortages, limited health and counselling services, insufficient student representation in decision-making, and the general campus environment that affects student welfare. These issues are not unique to Cameroon – many African higher education systems face similar or even more acute challenges. For example, Nigeria’s booming university sector struggles with a severe student housing deficit, with major institutions like the University of Lagos able to accommodate less than 15% of its ~60,000 students in on-campus hostels (Gbonegun, 2025). The majority are left to find housing off campus, often in overcrowded and unsafe conditions that can jeopardize their welfare and academic performance (Gbonegun, 2025). Such comparative insights underscore that Cameroon’s efforts toward social governance in universities are part of a broader regional context in which resource constraints and policy gaps have tangible impacts on student lives.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Governance in Higher Education

Governance in higher education traditionally encompasses the structures and processes for academic and financial management of universities. However, scholars and international organizations have increasingly highlighted the “social dimension” of higher education governance – which focuses on equity, inclusion, and the well-being of students and staff (African Union, 2016). This shift reflects a more holistic view that includes student welfare and support systems as key indicators of an HEI’s success. Cameroon’s policy framework aligns with these objectives. The 2009 NUGP formally acknowledged that issues like student housing, healthcare, and campus life are not peripheral, but central to the governance and quality of higher education (Ruse, 2015). Researchers such as Ruse (2015) have analysed this policy and found emphasis on improving student services and support.

2.2 Student Housing

Student accommodation is a persistent challenge. A study of student housing in sub-Saharan Africa (Cross & Ndofirepi, 2015) noted that the ratio of available dormitory beds to students is woefully low in most countries. In Cameroon, public-private partnerships (PPPs) have begun to address this. For example, a planned 12,500-bed furnished residence at the University of Yaoundé II is under development through a PPP, illustrating government recognition of the housing crisis. However, many residences remain overcrowded or under construction [17][18]. Journalistic reports emphasize this strain: fewer than 9,000 campus beds are available for tens of thousands of students at

the University of Buea, for instance, a gap that has prompted new hostel projects (Cameroon Tribune, 2020).

2.3 Student Support Services

The literature shows that in many African HEIs, student support services (healthcare, counselling) are minimal. Julius, Putteeraj, and Somanah (2024) note that few African universities have comprehensive mental health policies or readily accessible counselling. In Cameroon, each public university is supposed to have a *Centre Médical Social (CMS)* on campus [21]. These centres provide basic healthcare – typically a general practitioner or nurse offers consultations – but are often not equipped as full clinics or for serious health crises. Mental health services are limited; dedicated psychological counsellors are few or non-existent in most campuses. Studies on student counselling in Africa (Kitzrow, 2009) suggest that a lack of counselling resources can lead to unmet student needs and increased stress.

2.4 Community Engagement and Inclusivity

Community service is also part of the social governance literature. Many universities incorporate community engagement through extension programs. Some institutions require or encourage students to undertake community service or internships (Ngcongco & Cedras, 2018). After student strikes in the 2000s, Cameroon established a Tripartite Committee for dialogue with students (CTS-Étudiants) [27], providing a platform where student leaders, university officials, and ministry representatives discuss grievances and suggestions. Faculty and staff are similarly consulted through unions and associations (like the Cameroon Teachers' Trade Union), which are intended to play a role in welfare matters.

International organizations emphasize inclusion as well. The African Union's Continental Education Strategy (CESA 16-25) calls for investment in student living conditions and inclusive access to tertiary education (African Union, 2016). UNESCO promotes inclusive and equitable access to higher learning and support systems for disadvantaged students. Global benchmarks show a need for diversity and support programs. In Cameroon, programs like need-based aid, scholarships, and academic excellence awards target economically disadvantaged students. However, policies specifically promoting cultural diversity (gender, regional, and disability) remain underdeveloped [57]. This gap suggests a need for clear diversity and inclusion policies at universities.

In sum, the literature indicates that many of the challenges facing Cameroonian HEIs – limited housing, inadequate health services, and insufficient inclusive policies – are part of wider patterns across the region. The comparative literature underscores that strong policy frameworks are important but need effective implementation. Lessons from countries like Ghana and South Africa, which have developed special funding mechanisms for education infrastructure and student services (e.g. Ghana's GETFund, Nigeria's TETFund), highlight possible strategies for improvement.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design based on document analysis and comparative case review. The approach is primarily descriptive and analytical, suitable for exploring policy implementation and governance practices. The data for the study were gathered from multiple sources:

3.1 Policy and Official Documents

Key Cameroonian policy documents, such as the 2001 Higher Education Orientation Law and the 2009 NUGP (as referenced in ministry publications), were reviewed to understand the formal institutional framework for social governance. Although full texts of some documents were not directly accessible, relevant provisions (e.g., Article 5 of the 2001 Law) were obtained from secondary sources (e.g. Ruse, 2015). Government or university records (e.g., memoranda of understanding for public-private partnerships in student housing) were also examined. For instance, records of the 2020 MoU for constructing 12,500 student hostels at Yaoundé II informed this analysis (Cameroon Tribune, 2020).

3.2 Literature Review

A broad range of scholarly literature was consulted, including journal articles, dissertations, and reports focusing on higher education governance, student welfare services, and related topics in Cameroon and sub-Saharan Africa. Notably, Ruse's (2015) doctoral dissertation provided an in-depth look at Cameroonian higher education reforms and the inclusion of social governance goals. A 2024 systematic review on student mental health in Africa (Julius et al., 2024) offered current data and emphasized the paucity of services in the region. These and other academic sources were analysed to extract findings relevant to social governance themes (institutional governance structures, housing, health, inclusivity, etc.). The literature review not only informed the background understanding but also served to triangulate information found in official documents.

3.3 International and Comparative Sources

Recognizing the importance of a comparative perspective, the methodology included reviewing higher education reports from international bodies. For example, UNESCO's *Cameroon Education Country Brief* (2024) was used to obtain recent statistics (such as tertiary enrolment rates and gender disparities) and to identify ongoing challenges in equity and inclusion (UNESCO IICBA, 2024). The African Union's strategy documents (CESA) were examined to contextualize Cameroon's efforts within continental priorities (African Union, 2016). Furthermore, news articles and case studies from other countries – especially within Africa – were gathered to compare specific aspects. For instance, Gbonegun (2025) reported on Nigeria's student housing crisis, serving as a cautionary benchmark.

3.4 Case Examples and Data

Concrete case studies and examples from Cameroonian universities were sought to illustrate key points. This included using media reports and university communications. Data on the University of Buea's hostel capacity versus enrollment were gleaned from local news sources, which reported fewer than 9,000 campus beds for tens of thousands of students (Cameroon Tribune, 2020). Information about student protests or demands (such as those during the 2016 Anglophone crisis, where students pressed for payment of excellence awards) was obtained from newspaper accounts (Cameroon Tribune, 2017). These cases provide insight into the lived experiences of stakeholders, which formal documents alone might not capture.

The analysis involved content analysis of these texts to identify recurring themes and specific details about social governance. Pre-defined themes (institutional frameworks, policy initiatives, community engagement, inclusive governance, challenges, and areas for improvement) guided the extraction of information. The data from Cameroon were continuously compared with those from other contexts (comparative analysis) to highlight similarities and differences. For example, when noting Cameroon's challenge in student housing, data from Nigeria's university housing capacity were juxtaposed to show it as a regional issue (Gbonegun, 2025). This comparative method strengthens the analysis by providing a broader lens and avoiding an isolated examination of Cameroon.

It is important to note that this study is not based on primary field data (such as interviews or surveys) due to its nature as a secondary data synthesis. However, the use of diverse and credible sources – ranging from academic studies and official reports to journalistic accounts – provides a triangulated and well-rounded understanding. Discrepancies or biases in one source type (for instance, government documents might be optimistic while media might sensationalize issues) were balanced by others. If contradictory information was encountered (e.g., differing statistics on student numbers), preference was given to the most recent and authoritative source (e.g. UNESCO or official data).

4. Results

4.1 Institutional Framework and Policy Initiatives

4.1.1 Governance Structure

Cameroon's higher education system operates under a framework where the central government, through the Ministry of Higher Education (MINESUP), provides oversight and regulations for universities. Analysis shows that Cameroon has established a formal institutional framework to integrate social governance into higher education management. MINESUP's Department of Student Assistance and Welfare is explicitly tasked with student social affairs, indicating a dedicated bureaucratic node for these issues. At the national level, the National Commission for Private Higher Education serves a parallel role for private institutions, ensuring they also adhere to standards of social responsibility and student support. This dual oversight structure (public and

private) is significant given the large number of private institutes; it implies a recognition that social governance principles (like anti-discrimination policies, minimum service provision) need to be upheld across the board.

4.1.2 Policy Initiatives

The analysis identified several key policy initiatives and documents:

- **Higher Education Orientation Law (2001):** This law enshrines principles of equitable access and promotes educational unity, implicitly supporting the social dimension by asserting the State's role in fostering opportunity through higher education.
- **Higher Education Policy Framework (Vision 2035, Education Sector Strategy):** National development plans emphasize social responsibility and community engagement. Cameroonian higher education policy places value on community service, ethical citizenship, and the development relevance of university programs (Cameroon Development Strategy, 2020/2030). For example, the national development strategy lists education as a priority sector and calls for improvements in educational infrastructure and governance to drive social and economic development.
- **New University Governance Policy (2009):** As detailed earlier, NUGP is a cornerstone policy. In practice, it encouraged universities to set up units (like quality assurance and student affairs units) and to produce strategic plans aligned with a multi-dimensional governance model. A tangible outcome is that most public universities now have offices or vice-rectorates that cover aspects of student life. For instance, the University of Yaoundé I has a Vice-Rectorate for Internal Control and Evaluation that also oversees student services, and the University of Buea has a Student Affairs Division. These bodies handle scholarship allocation, disciplinary issues, campus social facilities, etc., reflecting institutionalization of social governance concerns.

Another positive result within the institutional framework is the inclusion of stakeholder representatives in governance bodies. All state universities in Cameroon have a Council or Board of Directors, typically chaired by a prominent external person (often a minister or appointee) and comprising members from various ministries, the private sector, faculty, and crucially, one or two student representatives and one representative of non-teaching staff. For example, the University of Buea's Council includes the President of the Student Union as a member. This practice ensures that at the highest decision-making level of each university, the student voice is formally present. Similarly, faculty senates or academic boards usually include elected representatives of different faculties and occasionally student observers. The existence of staff unions (for faculty and administrative personnel) also underscores the intent of participatory governance.

However, the effectiveness of these inclusive structures is mixed. The findings show that while frameworks exist, the actual influence of these representatives can be limited. Student representatives often play a largely observational role. In some instances,

student union activities have been curtailed by university authorities fearing politicization – for example, a few universities temporarily suspended student union elections in the late 2010s due to unrest. Nonetheless, there have been cases of productive collaboration: the Tripartite Committee (CTS-Étudiants), instituted after nationwide student strikes in 2005, has periodically met to address student grievances (such as the timely payment of excellence grants and improvements in campus security). For example, in 2017, during the Anglophone university crisis, dialogue through CTS-Étudiants led to the disbursement of pending student excellence awards and cancellation of a punitive fee policy at the University of Buea, appeasing student protesters (Cameroon Tribune, 2017). This demonstrates that inclusive governance mechanisms, when genuinely utilized, can lead to responsive solutions.

4.1.3 Community Engagement Policies

The results indicate that community engagement is a celebrated aspect of social governance in Cameroon's HEIs, though its implementation depth varies. Many universities have instituted Community Service or Extension Programs. For instance, some have made community service a requirement for graduation or part of coursework (e.g., education students at the University of Buea have at times been required to teach in local primary schools as service). The Work-Study Program (WSP) mentioned earlier is a nationwide scheme enabling students (especially those with financial need) to work part-time within their university (library assistants, lab attendants, campus maintenance, etc.) in exchange for a modest stipend. According to ministry reports, hundreds of students benefit from WSP annually across public universities – this not only helps them financially but also instills a work ethic and sense of responsibility. The Holiday Job Program is similar: during vacations, students can apply for short-term employment facilitated by the university in collaboration with local businesses or government projects. Such programs strengthen university-community linkages by sending students into workplaces, effectively positioning students to contribute to society while gaining practical experience.

Another form of community engagement in Cameroon is university partnerships with local councils and industries. For example, the University of Dschang hosts an annual agro-pastoral show and works with local farmers, fostering knowledge transfer. The University of Douala, located in an industrial city, has partnerships with companies in the Bonaberi industrial zone to give students internships and jointly solve industry problems. These initiatives, while primarily academic or industry-focused, have a social component: they position the university as a community asset and provide students with real-life problem-solving opportunities that benefit society.

4.1.4 Inclusivity Initiatives

Inclusivity in social governance covers both socio-economic inclusion (supporting poor or disadvantaged students) and cultural inclusion (embracing diversity in gender, region, language, and disability). The results show that Cameroon has some programs aimed at helping disadvantaged students. Government scholarships and financial aid exist; each

year the state allocates scholarships (including bilateral scholarships with partner countries) and a number of merit awards called “prime d’excellence” for top-performing students (e.g., first-class honours recipients in each faculty). For instance, during the 2016–2017 period, as part of calming unrest, the President ordered the payment of all pending excellence awards to students (Cameroon Tribune, 2017) – symbolic in amount but important in gesture. Additionally, some need-based aid is provided: universities may waive tuition for students with extreme hardships (for example, orphans or children of deceased public servants), and some partner with NGOs or foundations that sponsor students. There has also been a rise in private grants; for example, some Members of Parliament or local leaders create small scholarship funds for needy students.

However, support is still limited in scope. Direct cash aid to students for housing or food is rare. Unlike some countries with student loan funds, Cameroon has not yet established a broad student loan program or mandatory grants. The research also revealed gaps in support for diversity: for example, there are few formal programs for students with disabilities, limited childcare for student parents, and no explicit targets for increasing the enrolment of underrepresented groups. Although universities express commitment to fairness, the results highlight that inclusivity policies in practice are underdeveloped.

5. Discussion

The findings reveal a clear dichotomy between policy intent and actual conditions in Cameroonian higher education’s social governance. Cameroon has demonstrated strong awareness of social governance needs in its higher education policies. Frameworks like the NUGP 2009 and the establishment of administrative bodies indicate that, on paper, the country understands that universities must manage social responsibilities and foster an inclusive environment (Ruse, 2015). The question then arises: why, despite this awareness, do significant shortfalls persist in areas such as housing, health, and student support? The results point to several interrelated factors:

5.1 Resource Limitations and Competing Priorities

Funding is a central issue. With finite resources, policymakers often face a choice between expanding access (building new universities, admitting more students) and improving conditions at existing institutions. In recent decades, Cameroon prioritized expansion to accommodate surging demand (e.g., increase from one to eleven universities). This massification achieved greater access (an equity win at the national level), but without proportional budget increases per student, it inevitably strained facilities and lowered quality. Public spending on higher education has hovered around 3% of the national budget, which is modest given other pressing needs. Within this limited budget, academic needs (hiring lecturers, building classrooms) took precedence; student services were seen as ancillary and thus underfunded. This reflects a mindset common in many systems: academic output is measured as primary success, whereas student welfare is sometimes treated as the students’ personal responsibility or a luxury.

5.2 Governance and Accountability Issues

Centralization, while intended to maintain control and standardization, may diffuse accountability. If a dormitory is in disrepair, university management might blame slow government disbursements, while the government expects universities to manage within allocations. This can create a loop of inaction. Additionally, a lack of robust data and monitoring can hide the severity of problems until they become acute. For example, until student protests highlight issues, there may be no system of regular audits for how many students are in unsafe off-campus housing or how many drop out due to financial hardship. Thus, even though governance bodies include student representatives, if those inputs do not translate into policy changes, the mechanism isn't functioning fully. In practice, the presence of student reps is valuable but sometimes only symbolic.

5.3 Cultural Factors in Governance

There is also a cultural dimension. In Cameroon (and several African contexts), a traditionally hierarchical approach in university governance (inherited from colonial models) persists – students are often expected to be recipients of decisions, not co-creators. Though changing, some administrators may undervalue student feedback, considering student unrest as a discipline issue rather than a symptom of governance shortcomings. This can lead to a reactive rather than proactive approach to social governance: problems are addressed when they explode (through strikes or crises) rather than through steady, anticipatory policy. The Anglophone crisis provides an example: student demands (for excellence awards payments and fee penalties removal) were known issues, but were only resolved amid larger unrest. A culture of open dialogue and continuous improvement (hallmarks of good governance) needs strengthening.

5.3 External Economic and Political Context

Cameroon's broader economic and political challenges directly affect higher education. During economic constraints, social sectors often suffer budget cuts. Politically, higher education policy may focus more on visible expansion (e.g., creating universities in new regions) rather than investing in student welfare, which is less visible in the short term. Because universities rely heavily on the state, they are susceptible to inefficiencies or delays in public funding (indeed, late budget releases have plagued university projects). These external factors compound governance issues within HEIs.

5.4 Consequences of the Current State

The state of social governance has several implications:

- **Student Outcomes:** Poor social conditions likely correlate with student performance. If students live in overcrowded, ill-lit rooms, skip meals due to cost, or endure untreated illnesses or stress, their academic success can suffer. Cameroonian universities already face challenges with timely graduation (many students take longer than the official program length), often due to having to retake courses or take breaks. Some of this is academic, but some stems from life hardships. Increased dropout rates or extended study periods have societal costs

- fewer graduates produced per time, and individuals failing to reach their potential, which ultimately affects the country's human capital development.
- **Equity and Inclusion:** Inadequate social support disproportionately hurts disadvantaged students. Wealthier or urban students can cope (affording private housing, transport, and healthcare), while talented but poor or rural students might end up in crammed hostels or unable to afford books. This undermines equity: without support, the university playing field tilts toward the already privileged, reproducing inequality. This is contrary to higher education's aim as a social elevator. For example, female students – especially on campuses with few secure hostels – may feel less safe, potentially impeding gender parity goals.
- **University Reputation and Stakeholder Trust:** Social governance also affects a university's image. Alumni and external stakeholders assess universities not only by rankings but also by student experience. If conditions are notoriously poor, a university may become less attractive to prospective students or partners. Internally, student unrest over welfare issues can cause political headaches and erode trust in administration. Cameroon has seen violent student protests in the past (e.g., Yaoundé unrest in the early 1990s contributed to reforms). Continued neglect of student welfare risks rekindling such tensions. Conversely, visibly improving campus life can boost morale, unify the campus community, and build goodwill between students and administration.
- **Alignment with Global Goals:** Internationally, Cameroon is signatory to agendas like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4.3 addresses equal access to affordable quality tertiary education). The current state of social governance suggests Cameroon struggles to meet the “affordable” and “quality” parts of that goal. The World Bank's Human Capital Index data note that a child in Cameroon will achieve only 40% of their potential productivity, partly due to educational shortfalls. Improving the higher education environment is part of raising that figure by ensuring students can fully capitalize on their education. In an interconnected world, neglecting these aspects could leave Cameroon's universities trailing behind global standards in producing well-rounded graduates.

5.5 Comparative Insights

The comparative overview suggests strategies used elsewhere that could inform Cameroon:

- **Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs):** PPPs emerge as a pragmatic solution for infrastructure (especially housing). The Elite Trends Group investment at Yaoundé II, if successfully executed, would nearly eliminate that campus's housing shortage (Cameroon Tribune, 2020). The government's involvement (the Minister was present at the MoU signing) shows political will. The question is: can this model be scaled? Likely yes, if incentives are right. Private investors need a return; in student housing, that means charging rent. The government's role could be to subsidize or guarantee part of rents, so they remain affordable. Nigeria's case

shows that purely market-driven student housing becomes too expensive for average students, so a balance is needed: PPP hostels could offer tiered pricing, or government vouchers for needy students. The risk of not involving private capital is continued stagnation due to public budget limits.

- **Dedicated Funding Mechanisms:** Some countries have special education funds (like Ghana's GETFund, Nigeria's TETFund). Cameroon currently funds HEIs through the general budget. The discussion could consider whether a similar earmarked approach would help. For example, Cameroon could allocate a small percentage of a telecom tax or natural resource revenue specifically for university infrastructure and student services. Earmarked funds often protect education from competing needs, though they must be well-managed to avoid misuse.
- **Student Financial Aid and Support:** Expanding or systematizing student aid can directly improve social governance outcomes. If more students have stipends or loans, they can afford housing and food, reducing hardship. One option is creating a student loan program (with government backing) for living expenses – though careful management is needed to avoid defaults. Alternatively, direct scholarships for disadvantaged groups (e.g., a quota per region for low-income students) can promote equity. Cameroon has some scholarship schemes but could consider scaling them. Notably, in 2018, the government provided each university student with a free laptop ("One Student One Laptop" initiative) – a social support measure aimed at digital access. While this helped with technology, critics pointed out that more pressing needs like housing and internet connectivity were not addressed by a laptop alone. Targeting funding to urgent welfare needs (housing, healthcare, nutrition) would likely yield more tangible benefits.
- **Strengthening Student Services Professionally:** Other universities suggest professionalization is key. Cameroon might develop training or exchange programs for its welfare officers, nurses, counsellors, etc. UNESCO and the International Association of Student Affairs and Services (IASAS) have guidelines for student services. Adopting such guidelines could improve service delivery. For example, establishing a recommended ratio of counsellors to students and planning to meet it, or instituting regular student satisfaction surveys to inform improvements, would embed a culture of continuous improvement. Many South African and Western universities make data-driven decisions in student affairs; Cameroon could do likewise.
- **Community and Alumni Engagement:** In some countries, alumni and community philanthropists contribute significantly to universities (endowments, sponsored facilities). This culture is less developed in Cameroon, where universities historically rely on the state. Cultivating alumni networks could be a game-changer: engaged alumni (especially successful ones) might sponsor scholarships, donate to build a hostel block named after them, etc. Universities could promote an alumni giving culture as part of social governance – alumni should care about current students' conditions.

- **Actionable Solutions:** Combining these insights leads to an overarching understanding: Cameroon's higher education system is at a point where maintaining the status quo of social governance is not viable if the country wants quality and equity. Action is needed on multiple fronts to break the cycle of under-serviced student populations. The government and universities have initiated some responses (like PPPs and ad-hoc improvements), but a more systemic approach is required. The final part of this discussion naturally transitions into recommendations. These will include calls for increased funding for student welfare, decentralizing certain decisions for quicker local action, capacity building for student services staff, expanding partnerships (with private sector, NGOs, alumni), and establishing clear monitoring and evaluation for social governance indicators (e.g., annual reporting of hostel-bed-to-student ratios or counselor-to-student ratios with improvement targets). Importantly, students should be partners in these solutions – universities should institutionalize regular consultation forums and Student Welfare Committees so students can voice concerns and co-create solutions with management.

6. Conclusion

Social governance in higher education is both a mirror and a determinant of the broader quality and equity of the education system. In Cameroon, the state of social governance – the effectiveness with which universities manage social responsibilities, student welfare, and inclusivity – has been shown to be at a crossroads. This study's transformation of a 2025 presentation into a scholarly examination has shed light on the multifaceted nature of this issue, highlighting commendable frameworks and initiatives as well as critical deficiencies that demand attention.

Cameroon's higher education institutions operate in a complex and changing environment. They are challenged to accommodate more students than ever before, adapt to socio-economic shifts, and meet international expectations of quality – all while ensuring that the university experience is supportive and inclusive. The analysis confirms that Cameroon has laid important groundwork: policies exist that recognize social governance as a key pillar, there are administrative structures focusing on student welfare, and initiatives in community engagement and inclusive decision-making have been launched. These provide a solid foundation upon which to build.

However, much remains to be done to translate policy into reality. From crumbling student hostels and inadequate health services to insufficient student voice in decision-making, the gaps in implementation have real consequences. If left unaddressed, these issues risk undermining academic achievements, exacerbating inequalities, and igniting student unrest – outcomes detrimental to Cameroon's development trajectory and social cohesion. On the other hand, addressing these issues can yield significant benefits: improved student well-being correlates with better academic success and graduate preparedness; inclusive campuses tend to produce more

socially conscious graduates; and well-governed universities can become hubs of innovation and community development.

In line with these findings, actionable recommendations for improving social governance in Cameroonian higher education institutions include:

6.1 Increase Targeted Investment in Student Welfare

There is no substitute for greater funding if tangible improvements are to occur. It is recommended that the government earmark a dedicated budget for upgrading student facilities (hostels, medical centres, canteens, sports facilities) across all state universities. This could be structured as a special “Higher Education Social Infrastructure Fund,” possibly supported by donors or specific state revenues. Investments should be data-informed – for example, aiming to raise hostel bed capacity by a certain percentage each year, or ensuring each campus medical centre meets minimum equipment standards. Alongside infrastructure, budgets for operating costs of student services (hiring counsellors, maintaining facilities) must be increased. The return on such investment is substantial: better-supported students are more likely to succeed academically and contribute positively to society (Julius et al., 2024). The African Union has called for improving student living conditions as part of strengthening higher education (African Union, 2016); Cameroon can demonstrate leadership by acting on this.

6.2 Leverage Public-Private Partnerships and Innovation

The private sector and innovative financing can play a crucial role in bridging resource gaps. The successful initiation of a PPP for a 12,500-bed student housing project at Yaoundé II (Cameroon Tribune, 2020) should be replicated at other universities. The Ministry of Higher Education can facilitate a national PPP framework for student accommodation, inviting investors to develop hostels under agreed affordability criteria. Similar models could apply to other needs: contracting private providers to run campus cafeterias or transport services under subsidy arrangements, or telecom companies to provide campus-wide internet at discounted rates as part of their corporate social responsibility. Additionally, technology and entrepreneurship should be harnessed; for instance, supporting student-led start-ups that provide solutions like carpooling for students, meal-sharing programs, or low-cost tutoring could improve aspects of student life and empower students as part of the solution.

6.3 Enhance Decentralization and Autonomy in Social Governance

To allow responsive, context-specific solutions, universities should be granted more decision-making autonomy in matters related to student welfare. Within a broad national policy, each university could have flexibility to allocate funds or generate income for student services without excessive red tape. For example, if a university wants to use part of its internally generated revenue (from evening programs or consultancies) to renovate a dormitory, it should be able to do so expediently. Administrative bottlenecks that delay hiring essential personnel like doctors or counsellors need to be removed – a special fast-track mechanism for filling student service positions could help. With greater autonomy,

however, must come accountability: universities should regularly report on the state of their social governance (hostel conditions, student satisfaction, etc.), and those reports should be made public. This transparency can motivate continuous improvement and enable the Ministry and stakeholders to monitor progress.

6.4 Strengthen Student and Stakeholder Engagement

Inclusive governance must be deepened. Universities should institutionalize regular consultation forums where students can voice concerns and co-create solutions with management. The Tripartite Committee model can be localized: each university could have a “Student Welfare Committee” comprising student leaders, staff reps, and administrators that meets monthly to discuss issues ranging from cafeteria menus to library hours to security. Many problems can be pre-emptively resolved at this level. Furthermore, involving stakeholders like alumni and community leaders on advisory boards for student affairs can bring in fresh perspectives and resources. Alumni associations, in particular, could be encouraged to adopt specific projects (like furnishing a library or funding a scholarship fund). International partners (such as UNESCO or the World Bank) might also be invited to provide technical assistance or grants for capacity-building – for example, training workshops for university staff on counselling, campus health management, or diversity and inclusion practices. Ultimately, a culture of shared responsibility should be nurtured: as the original presentation concluded, a “new paradigm” requires combined action of students, staff, administration, and society. Everyone has a role in improving social governance, and harnessing that collective effort is powerful.

6.5 Focus on Inclusivity and Support for Vulnerable Groups

Specific measures are needed to ensure that higher education is inclusive of all segments of society. The government and universities should formulate clear policies on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) within HEIs. This might include setting enrollment targets or providing extra support for underrepresented groups (e.g., scholarships for students from very low-income families or remote areas, facilities for students with disabilities such as assistive technology and accessible classrooms, mentorship programs for first-generation college students, etc.). Gender inclusion should remain a priority: initiatives like anti-sexual harassment units, women’s leadership programs, and childcare support for student mothers can make campuses safer and more accommodating. The presentation noted that universities have “limited clarity regarding policies aimed at promoting diversity and inclusion” – addressing this by developing comprehensive DEI strategies will improve the social climate on campuses and ensure that social governance is truly inclusive, not one-size-fits-all.

6.6 Monitor, Evaluate, and Sustain

It is recommended that the Ministry of Higher Education implement a system of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) for social governance improvements. Key indicators might include student housing capacity ratios, student-to-counsellor ratios, incidence of

student health issues, retention and graduation rates disaggregated by gender and socio-economic background, and student satisfaction survey results. By tracking these annually (with input from independent audits or student feedback), policymakers can identify what interventions are working and where more effort is needed. Sustaining improvements will also require safeguarding funding – once new hostels or centres are built, maintenance budgets must be allocated so they don't fall into disrepair again. A long-term outlook is crucial: Cameroon's population is young and growing, meaning demand for higher education (and thus the need for robust social governance in HE) will continue to rise. Planning must therefore be forward-looking, anticipating future needs like digital infrastructure for online/blended learning (as highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic) or enhanced psychological support in times of crisis.

In closing, social governance in Cameroonian higher education is at the heart of achieving a sustainable and equitable university system. It concerns nothing less than the quality of the country's future intellectual capital and the values those future leaders carry. The study affirms that Cameroon has made meaningful strides – the consciousness and foundational elements are in place – and with renewed commitment and strategic action, the country can improve the lived reality of its university students. Doing so will not only enhance academic outcomes but also contribute to national objectives of poverty reduction, social cohesion, and democratic consolidation, as well-governed universities tend to produce active, responsible citizens. The challenge of social governance is complex, but it is surmountable. Cameroonian universities, supported by government and society, can evolve from a paradigm of reactive problem-solving to one of proactive, student-centered governance. This means rethinking social responsibility at the strategic level of institutions – as the presentation wisely noted, making it an agenda that engages all stakeholders and is aligned with sustainable development. With the actionable recommendations outlined and lessons drawn from peers, Cameroonian higher education can indeed move toward a future where progress is measured not only by the number of graduates or research outputs, but also by how well those institutions care for and empower the people within them. In achieving that, the universities will be living up to their fullest mandate: to nurture human potential in an environment of excellence, inclusion, and social responsibility.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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