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## **Mentorship as a Tool for Quality Assurance in Higher Education: The Case of Cameroon**

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### **Abstract**

The rapid proliferation of Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) in Sub-Saharan Africa has necessitated decentralized Quality Assurance (QA) mechanisms. In Cameroon, the state mandated the *Tutelle Académique* (Mentorship) policy, requiring all PHEIs to operate under the academic supervision of established state universities. While theoretically designed to ensure pedagogic standards, the empirical efficacy of this model remains contested. Anchored in Agency Theory and Neo-Institutional Theory, this study utilizes a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design to investigate the operational dynamics of this mentorship framework. Quantitative survey data from 312 lecturers and students across ten PHEIs revealed significant deficits in Mentorship Visibility (Mean = 2.45) and Assessment Integrity (Mean = 2.80). Multiple regression analysis demonstrated that while Assessment Integrity ( $\beta = 0.435$ ) and Curriculum Alignment ( $\beta = 0.380$ ) are robust predictors of perceived academic quality, their practical implementation is fundamentally failing. Thematic analysis of 12 in-depth interviews with academic stakeholders revealed that systemic capacity overloads and profound financial conflicts of interest have reduced the mentorship framework to an administrative tax. State universities, financially incentivized by lucrative mentorship fees, are disincentivized from enforcing rigorous oversight, leading to institutional decoupling and the emergence of "paper partnerships." The study concludes that the commercialization of QA under academic capitalism undermines educational rigor. It recommends the digitalization of auditing and the financial decoupling of mentorship transactions to restore academic integrity.

### **Keywords:**

*Quality Assurance, Higher Education, Academic Mentorship, Academic Capitalism, Neo-Institutional Theory, Sub-Saharan Africa, Cameroon.*

### **1. Introduction**

Globally, the massification of higher education has necessitated rigorous Quality Assurance (QA) mechanisms to safeguard academic standards and ensure that graduates meet labor market demands (Materu, 2007; Teferra & Altbach, 2004). In Sub-Saharan Africa, this expansion has been largely driven by the liberalization of the education sector, leading to a rapid proliferation

of Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs). These private institutions emerged primarily to absorb the excess demographic demand that underfunded public universities could no longer accommodate (Varghese, 2004; Levy, 2006).

The landscape of Higher Education in Cameroon mirrors this regional trend, uniquely characterized by its bi-jural and bilingual heritage merging both Anglo-Saxon and Francophone educational traditions (MacOjong, 2008). Following the landmark 1993 university reforms and the pivotal 2001 Orientation Law on Higher Education, Cameroon transitioned from a state-monopolized system to a diversified environment incorporating private educational actors (Fonkeng, 2007). While this liberalization significantly democratized access to tertiary education, it simultaneously raised critical concerns regarding the pedagogic quality and administrative capacity of newly established PHEIs. Furthermore, the integration of the LMD (Licence, Master, Doctorat) system mandated across the Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC) introduced complex curriculum requirements that many private institutions struggled to implement independently (Tchameni Ngamo, 2012).

To mitigate these pedagogical risks and standardize academic integrity, the Ministry of Higher Education (MINESUP) instituted a mandatory institutional supervisory framework known as the "Mentorship" system, or *Tutelle Académique* (MINESUP, 2001). Under this statutory framework, any newly established PHEI must formalize a mentorship agreement with a designated state university. The state university assumes the role of an institutional mentor, tasked with overseeing curriculum design, moderating continuous assessments and final examinations, validating degrees, and monitoring the general academic administration of the private institution until it demonstrates the capacity for full academic autonomy (Endeley, 2014; Nsamenang & Tchombe, 2011).

## 1.1 The Problem Context

While the *Tutelle Académique* was structurally conceived as a robust framework to guarantee QA, empirical observations suggest profound operational discrepancies between policy intent and institutional practice. There is growing evidence that the mentorship model has systematically devolved into a mere administrative formality and a lucrative financial transaction (Endeley, 2014). State universities in Cameroon, historically underfunded and grappling with the severe consequences of massification (Mohamedbhai, 2008), often lack the logistical and human resource capacities required to effectively monitor the sheer volume of PHEIs assigned to them.

This capacity deficit has given rise to "paper partnerships" (Teferra & Altbach, 2004)—arrangements maintained primarily to satisfy statutory compliance and to generate institutional revenue through mentorship fees, rather than to foster genuine pedagogic excellence. This commercialization echoes broader trends of academic capitalism (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004) and has led to critical compromises in QA, including sporadic pedagogic supervision, misaligned curricula, and compromised examination standards. The cascading effect is the graduation of students whose academic credentials do not accurately reflect their competencies, exacerbating the skills mismatch in the Cameroonian labor market (Yende, 2019).

## 1.2 Study Objectives and Significance

The primary objective of this study is to critically investigate the effectiveness of the mentorship framework as a tool for QA in Cameroon. Specifically, the study seeks to: (1)

evaluate the impact of state university mentorship on pedagogic standards, curriculum delivery, and assessment integrity in PHEIs; and (2) identify the systemic, financial, and administrative challenges hindering effective implementation. By providing empirical evidence on the operational loopholes within the current QA frameworks, this research contributes to the scarce literature on institutional mentorship in Sub-Saharan Africa and offers actionable insights for policymakers to redefine academic partnerships.

## 2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 Theoretical Framework

To rigorously analyze the governance dynamics between MINESUP, State Universities, and PHEIs, this study is anchored in two complementary theoretical paradigms: **Agency Theory** and **Neo-Institutional Theory**.

**Agency Theory (Principal-Agent Theory):** Originally conceptualized by Jensen and Meckling (1976), Agency Theory examines delegation mechanisms. MINESUP and the mentoring State Universities act as "Principals," delegating the provision of higher education to PHEIs, the "Agents" (Lane, 2013). While Principals prioritize QA, Agents (private founders) often prioritize profit-maximization (Kivistö, 2008). This divergence creates "moral hazards," where PHEIs might exploit information asymmetries to appear compliant while subverting actual standards. The mentorship framework is designed to reduce these agency costs, but its effectiveness is contingent upon the Principal's capacity and willingness to monitor the Agent rigorously.

**Neo-Institutional Theory:** Advanced by Meyer and Rowan (1977), this theory elucidates how organizations adopt structures to secure external legitimacy rather than efficiency. The mentorship mandate acts as a form of *coercive isomorphism*—PHEIs are compelled to adopt formal partnerships to legally operate (Scott, 2014). Critically, this theory introduces the concept of *decoupling*. Decoupling occurs when organizations formally adopt a mandated structure to satisfy external stakeholders but buffer their actual internal operations from these policies (Wiseman et al., 2014). This perfectly conceptualizes the "paper partnerships" phenomenon, where a PHEI possesses a legitimate mentorship document to satisfy regulators while classroom practices remain detached from QA standards.

### 2.2 Quality Assurance and Academic Capitalism

The discourse surrounding QA highlights a contrast between global north self-regulation and global south state-centric, bureaucratic mandates (Martin & Stella, 2007). In developing nations, QA frameworks overwhelmingly prioritize bureaucratic compliance over actual teaching enhancement (Harvey & Newton, 2004). Institutions learn to "play the game" of compliance—producing perfectly formatted reports—while the classroom experience remains unregulated (Hayward, 2006).

Furthermore, the proliferation of private higher education initiated a shift toward "academic capitalism" (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Within Cameroon, the practical implementation of the mentorship policy has generated severe governance conflicts. Because mentee institutions pay substantial statutory fees to their mentor universities for supervision and degree validation, a profound conflict of interest emerges (Endeley, 2014). State universities become financially

disincentivized from rigorously auditing or failing their mentees, as doing so jeopardizes a lucrative revenue stream.

### 3. Methodology

This study is epistemologically grounded in the Pragmatist Paradigm and adopts a **Sequential Explanatory Mixed-Methods Design** (QUAN  $\rightarrow$  qual) (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

**Sampling and Participants:** The study focused on major university hubs in Cameroon (Yaoundé, Douala, Buea, and Bamenda). For the quantitative phase, Stratified Random Sampling was employed to select lecturers and final-year students within mentored PHEIs. A total of 350 questionnaires were distributed, yielding 312 valid responses. For the qualitative phase, Purposive Sampling was utilized to select 12 key informants, including MINESUP officials, Deans of State Mentor Universities, and PHEI Founders.

**Data Collection Instruments:** Quantitative data was collected via structured, 5-point Likert scale questionnaires measuring *Curriculum Alignment*, *Assessment Integrity*, *Mentorship Visibility*, and *Perceived Academic Quality*. Qualitative data was obtained through semi-structured in-depth interviews focusing on the structural efficacy and financial dynamics of the *Tutelle Académique*.

**Data Analysis:** Quantitative data was processed using SPSS (Version 28). Analysis included descriptive statistics to profile responses and Multiple Regression Analysis to test the predictive impact of mentorship variables. Qualitative transcripts were analyzed using Thematic Analysis via NVivo (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Internal consistency for the survey was confirmed using Cronbach's Alpha ( $\alpha \geq 0.70$ ).

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Quantitative Results

#### 4.1.1 Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive statistics highlight a stark reality regarding the operationalization of the mentorship framework.

- **Mentorship Visibility (Mean = 2.45, SD = 1.12):** The sub-3.0 mean indicates that the mentorship is largely invisible on campus. Respondents rarely observed officials from mentor universities engaging in active supervision.
- **Assessment Integrity (Mean = 2.80, SD = 1.05):** Responses reveal significant skepticism regarding the rigor of examinations, indicating that joint moderation is sporadic rather than systematic.
- **Perceived Academic Quality (Mean = 2.95, SD = 1.10):** The sample exhibited a neutral to slightly negative perception of how the mentorship model directly elevates educational quality.
- **Curriculum Alignment (Mean = 3.10, SD = 0.98):** Respondents indicated a moderate gap between official, approved documentation and actual classroom delivery.

#### 4.1.2 Multiple Regression Analysis

A multiple linear regression was conducted to predict *Perceived Academic Quality* (DV) based on *Mentorship Visibility*, *Curriculum Alignment*, and *Assessment Integrity* (IVs). The model was statistically significant ( $R^2 = 0.468$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), explaining 46.8% of the variance in academic quality.

**Table 1: Multiple Regression Output**

Model Variables	Standardized Beta ( $\beta$ )	Sig. (p)
Mentorship Visibility	0.185	.002
Curriculum Alignment	0.380	.000
Assessment Integrity	0.435	.000

All variables significantly predicted academic quality. **Assessment Integrity** ( $\beta = 0.435$ ) emerged as the strongest positive predictor, followed by **Curriculum Alignment** ( $\beta = 0.380$ ).

#### 4.2 Qualitative Results

Thematic analysis of the interviews explained the quantitative deficits, yielding three dominant themes:

**Theme 1: The "Paper Partnership"** Interviewees consistently described the mentorship agreements as tools for external legitimacy rather than internal academic enhancement.

*"We sign the Tutelle mostly to satisfy MINESUP and get the authorization to operate. Once the papers are signed, we rarely see the state university officials until it is time to pay the annual supervision fees..."* — (PHEI Founder)

**Theme 2: Financial Commercialization of Mentorship** Data revealed a profound conflict of interest driven by financial motives. Mentor universities rely on the substantial fees charged to PHEIs.

*"State universities are underfunded. The mentorship fees paid by private institutes are a massive revenue stream... It is very difficult for a mentor university to strictly penalize a non-compliant private institute, because you would be cutting off your own funding."* — (State University Dean)

**Theme 3: Systemic Capacity Overload** State universities lack the human and logistical resources to supervise dozens of PHEIs effectively, explaining the low Mentorship Visibility scores.

*"I am a Head of Department handling 800 students of my own. I am also assigned to supervise four different private institutes... It is humanly impossible."* — (State University Lecturer)

## 5. Discussion

The empirical findings from this study corroborate the underlying apprehension that the *Tutelle Académique* in Cameroon functions primarily as a bureaucratic mechanism rather than an active pedagogical enhancer. This discussion interprets the mixed-methods data through the dual theoretical lenses of Agency Theory and Neo-Institutional Theory, contextualizing the results within the broader literature on academic capitalism.

### 5.1 The "Paper Partnership" as Institutional Decoupling

The descriptive findings revealed low scores in both Mentorship Visibility and Assessment Integrity. These quantitative deficits were profoundly contextualized by the qualitative data, which highlighted that state university officials are rarely present for active supervision. This dynamic provides robust empirical validation for Neo-Institutional Theory (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Consistent with the findings of Wiseman et al. (2014), PHEIs engage in "decoupling"—they fulfill the coercive isomorphic mandate of MINESUP by securing a signed mentorship agreement to gain external legitimacy, yet entirely buffer their internal classroom operations from the stringent oversight dictated by that agreement. Consequently, the mentorship remains a façade, or a "paper partnership," confirming Fonkeng's (2007) earlier critiques.

### 5.2 Academic Capitalism and the Agency Problem

Perhaps the most critical finding was the profound financial conflict of interest embedded in the mentorship model. Private institutes pay substantial mentorship fees directly to state universities. Through the lens of Agency Theory (Jensen & Meckling, 1976), this establishes a toxic dynamic. The Principal (the State University) is financially incentivized to ignore the moral hazards of the Agent (the PHEI). As Kivistö (2008) argues, effective agency regulation requires an independent auditor. However, as echoed by Endeley (2014), because state universities heavily rely on these fees to subsidize underfunded operations, they are disincentivized from strictly penalizing non-compliant PHEIs. This commercialization of quality assurance is a classic manifestation of academic capitalism (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004), where educational rigor is sacrificed for institutional revenue.

### 5.3 Systemic Capacity Deficits

The regression analysis demonstrated that Assessment Integrity ( $\beta = 0.435$ ) and Curriculum Alignment ( $\beta = 0.380$ ) are the strongest predictors of perceived academic quality. Despite their importance, they are failing in practice due to systemic overload. This finding aligns perfectly with the literature on African higher education massification (Mohamedbhai, 2008). State universities, already grappling with massive student populations of their own, lack the logistical and human resource capacity to extend meaningful pedagogic support to dozens of private institutes. Thus, the mentorship model practically fails because the state-centric auditing apparatus lacks the structural capacity to execute its mandate (Hayward, 2006).

## 6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The empirical evidence unequivocally demonstrates that while the *Tutelle Académique* policy is theoretically sound as a Quality Assurance mechanism, it suffers from severe operational implementation gaps. The quantitative analysis proves that rigorous assessment and curriculum

alignment are crucial for high-quality education. However, the qualitative insights reveal that capacity overloads and financial conflicts of interest have reduced the mentorship framework to an administrative tax, resulting in superficial partnerships that fail to safeguard academic standards.

To reform the system and achieve authentic quality assurance, the following policy interventions are recommended:

1. **Digitalize Quality Assurance Auditing:** MINESUP should implement a centralized digital platform where PHEIs must upload continuous assessment scores, lecturer credentials, and syllabus coverage in real-time, reducing the logistical burden on state university supervisors.
2. **Decouple Financial Transactions from Academic Supervision:** To eliminate the agency problem and conflict of interest, the mentorship fees paid by PHEIs should be remitted directly to an independent quality assurance body or a central MINESUP fund, rather than directly to the mentoring state university faculty.
3. **Cap Mentorship Assignments:** State universities should be subjected to a strict statutory limit on the number of PHEIs they can mentor, based on their existing lecturer-to-student ratios, to prevent capacity overload and ensure meaningful pedagogic engagement.

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