

Challenges Impeding Community Engagement in Higher Education in Cameroon

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores key institutional barriers that hinder meaningful community engagement within Cameroonian universities. Following a qualitative approach, it employs two methods of data collection namely semi-structured online interviews and document analysis to obtain valuable insights on these challenges and identify strategies to overcome them. The study found that the most pertinent challenge to community engagement is the lack of institutional support and recognition. Community engagement in higher education in Cameroon is not seen as a core function of universities but as a peripheral or voluntary activity and thereby lacks adequate funding and enabling structures. Most community engagement initiatives are not sustainable as they are led by students or lecturers who are usually constrained by tight budgets and lack knowledge, experience and resources to implement meaningful community projects. Additionally, factors such as time constraints, lack of motivation and interest and curricular rigidities limit participation and the integration of community engagement into university curriculum. To overcome these challenges, concerted effort is needed from academic institutions, policymakers, and community stakeholders. Effective community engagement and participation will require leadership commitment at all levels, adequate training, engagement incentives, curricular integration and strong partnerships between universities and external stakeholders. The paper concludes with recommendations for future research.

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KEYWORDS: *community engagement; institutional challenges, Higher Education; Cameroon.*

INTRODUCTION

Community engagement refers to the collaboration between higher education institutions and their surrounding communities for the mutual exchange of knowledge and resources (Johnson, 2017). It is considered as the third mission of higher education; the first being teaching and learning and the second, research. Vital to societal development and the formation of responsible citizens, community engagement serves as an all-round endeavor in higher education. In Cameroon, higher education institutions play a crucial role to national development and are uniquely positioned to foster community engagement among youths (Mbah & Fonchingong, 2019). Through student-community engagement activities, events and initiatives, universities have the potential to provide Cameroonian youths with the necessary skills,

knowledge and attitudes to become active and engaged members of their communities. Community-based projects create opportunities for students to actively engage in the community and as a result gain invaluable skills in communication, problem-solving and critical thinking and a sense of civic responsibility, which are essential for their personal and professional growth (Farnell, 2020; Kisambira et al., 2024). Such engagement requires collaborative relationships between universities and their surrounding communities leading to productive partnerships that yield mutually beneficial outcomes, such as improvements in the community, while allowing for students to gain practical experiences (Bidandi et al., 2021).

Debates on universities contribution to socio-economic development in Africa have been centered on concerns that current higher education in the region does not suit the development challenges the masses face, questioning its relevance (Nchu, 2024). These development challenges include issues of poverty, infrastructure, sustainability, conflict and security, food crises arising from the complex interaction of many social, political and technological elements. Farnell (2020) contends that although university makes different contributions to society development through its functions of teaching, research and engaging external partners (such as the government, the industry, and the community), the level of engagement varies among countries in the region and is influenced by national policy priorities.

In Cameroon, community engagement in higher education faces major challenges due to the absence of policies that guide and/or push for its integration into the budgets, teaching and learning, and research activities of universities. Community engagement is still largely considered to be an individual endeavor with very few higher education institutions having community-based programs that attempt to engage students within the community (Nyoh, 2018). This paper explores the challenges impeding community engagement in the Cameroonian higher education context. It a) examines pertinent institutional constraints to implementing effective community engagement initiatives and also limitations to student and faculty participation and b) identifies strategies to overcome these limitations. The study is significant in that it contributes to existing body of knowledge and can inform policy decisions and program enhancements for community engagement within the higher education sphere.

CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

Cameroon is officially called the Republic of Cameroon. It is a triangular shape covering an area of 475,650 km on the armpit of the map of Africa, between West and Central Africa. It is bordered in the West by Nigeria, in the North East by Chad and in the East by the Central African Republic, to the South by three countries: Equatorial Guinea, Gabon and the Republic of Congo (see map of Africa). Currently, Cameroon has a population of approximately 27,900,000 inhabitants with an annual population growth rate of 2.59 per cent (2022 Census; United Nations Population Fund, UNFPA). The country is divided into 10 regions, eight and two of which are respectively French and English-speaking. Cameroon has constantly been termed “Africa in Miniature” for several reasons. It exemplifies the diverse African cultures and affiliations. It is characterized by the peaceful coexistence of Christians and Moslems. As a

former French and British colony, it runs a bicultural Francophone and Anglo-Saxon educational and administrative systems. It is a bilingual country; its official languages being French and English. Due to these bilingual and bicultural characteristics, Cameroon is a member of two of the world’s largest socio-cultural and linguistic communities, the Francophonie and the British Commonwealth. Cameroon operates within an economic and monetary zone of six countries¹, the Economic Community of Central African States (CEMAC²).

The higher education system in Cameroon presents a ‘unitary’ structure (Doh, 2007, p.20). Although each higher education institution has a significant degree of autonomy, they are administered centrally by the Ministry of Higher Education (MINESUP) to which they are accountable. Higher education is considered a national priority, organized and controlled by the state. There exist has two kinds of institutions of higher education in Cameroon - structural education offered by the university and professional/technical education offered by specialized institutes or schools (Basung, 2002). Some of these schools are still within the universities but operate independently. As of 2014, the Cameroon higher education system comprises of 8 state owned universities³ and over 163 institutions operated by the private sector of (MINESUP portal of private higher education institutions in Cameroon). In 2018, the student population was approximately 692,000 with an annual gross enrollment rate of 14.3%. According Guiake (2019), private higher education constitutes only about 15 per cent of the entire student and staff population in Cameroon higher education. These students pay the full cost of their education through tuition fees, which may be as much as 5 to 20 times of what their counterparts in the public sector pay.

In Cameroon, the terms “volunteerism”, “civic engagement” and “social responsibility” are also used to refer to community engagement. It is mostly seen as an individual or voluntary endeavor and thereby not prioritized in higher education policies. Characterized by two subsystems of education (French and English), education policies in Cameroon have mainly been directed towards the structure of the educational system, access and equity, and the relevance of higher education to the labor market with little focus on universities’ engagement with the community. These

¹ This includes Cameroon, Chad, Republic of Congo, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea and Central African Republic.

² Communauté Economique et Monétaire d’Afrique Centrale (CEMAC).

³ State universities are owned and predominantly funded by the state.

policies were put in place due to challenges the higher education system was facing due to cultural diversity, massification of higher education, graduate unemployment and underemployment, and graduate skill irrelevance (Doh, 2015; Nyoh, 2018). The government of Cameroon, through the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Civic education, has however acknowledged the importance of community engagement among the youth by establishing of the National Volunteering Program (NVP). The program is aimed at promoting community service among youths aged between 17 and 35 years and also beyond 35 years through the mobilization, citizenship participation and skills development of all social classes, for purposes of development, national integration and social cohesion (MINJEC, 2017). Though no clear collaborations have been made with educational institutions through the program, young people have created alternative ways of engagement through associational life where their aspirations, anxieties and ideas of civic involvement are developed and articulated (Kylian, 2021).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Community Engagement in Higher Education: Definition and Importance

Community engagement is part of what is regarded as the third mission of universities. It is a concept with complexity of meaning, approaches and application which apparently have been influenced by the histories, cultures, and community contexts of different universities that have formulated them (Fongwa & Mtawa, 2022). Countries have different higher education policies and resource endowments for third-mission activities. As such various authors have attempted to define UCE based on institutional logic, circumstances and purposes (Preece, 2017). This results in broad, general definitions and overlapping terms such as “civic engagement,” “public engagement,” “community outreach,” “community–university partnerships,” “scholarship of engagement,” and “community–university collaborations” (Koekkoek et al., 2021).

Fitzgerald et al. (2012) define university-community engagement as “The partnership of university knowledge and resources with those of the public and private sectors to enrich scholarship, research, and creative activity; enhance curriculum, teaching, and learning; prepare educated, engaged citizens; strengthen democratic values and civic responsibility; address critical societal issues; and contribute to the public good.” University-community engagement emphasizes on partnership which in this regard can be local, regional, national, or international. This relationship has the potential to enrich the university’s

core functions (teaching, learning and research) whilst contributing to the well-being of all partners involved.

Due to the wide range of definitions, a number of activities can be considered a form of university–community engagement: for example, lifelong learning, service-based learning, volunteerism among staff and students, knowledge exchange, participatory research, cultural and educational events, and allowing access to universities’ facilities (e.g., art groups who rent a space for their classes) (Frimpong et al., 2024). Community Engagement, according to Benneworth (2018) is intrinsically diverse. This diversity occurs as a result of the diversity of universities and their environments which justifies and enables the adoption of a variety of community engagement methods and tools, determined by the profile, size, external expectations, resources, and so on (Málovics et al., 2024).



Figure 1: Community Engagement Continuum (RUFORUM, 2017)

Community engagement is important in that it enriches the quality of education as students become more aware and involved citizens, apply learning, gain valuable experience, and contribute to society (Hok-ka et al., 2016; Mtawa & Nkhoma, 2020). Additionally, it can promote student retention and success by fostering a sense of connection and belonging to the academic institution (Reed et al., 2015; Robinson et al., 2020). Students are integral to their local communities as they aid in framing its culture and have comprehensive social connections. They experience community issues firsthand, often placing them at the forefront of activism and various initiatives to help address these issues. Community engagement programs organized by universities provides students with opportunities to make relevant contributions to the development of their communities thereby developing their sense of civic responsibility and making them feel more connected to their communities (D’Agostino, 2010).

Community Engagement Approaches at Cameroonian Universities

In recent years, more and more universities in Cameroon are acknowledging their role in the formation of active citizens through academic curricula, community initiatives and extracurricular activities. They involve students and faculty in peace building activities, public health initiatives, social and environmental issues often with the aim of exposing students to real life challenges while at the same time fulfilling their social responsibilities. These activities occur in the form of service learning and volunteerism programs, student associations, and community outreach and research initiatives. Through such initiatives, universities are able to guide students in creating meaningful connections with their communities which fosters their sense of civic duty.

A. Service-based Learning

Though service-learning is not widely known within Cameroon's higher education system, a few universities like the Catholic University Institute of Buea (CUIB) have recognized its importance in fostering civic engagement and developing socially responsible graduates. By combining academic instruction with community service, students can apply theoretical knowledge to real-world problems while developing empathy and critical thinking skills. This approach not only enriches students' education but also strengthens their commitment to social change. CUIB achieves this through its Volunteer Network Program (VNP) (CUIB, 2018). With the VNP, students get to engage in service learning activities in and out of the university campus. Service activities include but not limited to volunteering at campus/church events, office work, clean-up initiatives, animation and community service.

B. Student Associations

Student associations are the most common form of community engagement at Cameroonian universities. They exist for the purpose of bringing students together, helping them acclimate to life at the university, connecting them to other students, as well as alumni, and can help students develop transferable skills (Ebede, 2015; Vieira, 2019). Student associations play a vital role in community engagement through the organization of various outreach activities, addressing social issues, promoting awareness campaigns, and mobilizing resources for community projects. Most university students in Cameroon belong in student associations or organizations that aim at complementing their learning experience providing them with skills and knowledge that they normally will not get in the classroom. It is through these associations that students get exposure to real-life and societal issues.

C. Community Outreach and Partnership Initiatives

Universities in Cameroon engage in community outreach and research through various activities including peace building initiatives, health education, home healthcare, disaster risk reduction workshops, and supporting local organizations, with a focus on empowering communities and addressing social issues. For example in 2017, students and staff at the University of Buea in Cameroon ran two outreach workshops with local communities of Ndu and Bafut in the North West Region of the country (PERIPERI, 2017). These workshops aimed to present the findings of studies carried out by disaster risk students pertaining to the possible impact of climate change on food and water security and bring about discussions and debate on possible strategies to mitigate or reduce their impact and vulnerability. Universities also partner with local communities to engender indigenous knowledge which is pivotal in aiding social developmental drives (Che & Mbah, 2022).

Challenges to Community Engagement in Higher Education

Successful implementation of community engagement initiatives in higher education institutions face several major challenges that can limit their effectiveness and sustainability. The challenges are multifaceted and complex (Nchu, 2024). Several scholars have identified these challenges to include lack of a shared definition and understanding of community engagement, lack of institutional support and funding, heavy workload and time constraints, building trust between partners and evaluating the impact of community engagement.

A. Lack of a Common Definition and Understanding

A major limitation to community engagement is the absence of a shared understanding among academics and community members as concerning the concept (Preece, 2017). The lack of clarity and shared understanding is expressed by different terms associated with community engagement and no accepted language – and even in cases where the same terms are used, different perceptions are evident (Johnson, 2020). Nchu (2024) argues that community engagement initiatives are sometimes not considered to be knowledge-production activities, causing confusion and that the meaning of community engagement is usually not fully understood by academics, and universities often do not have well-articulated incentive and reward systems for these initiatives. Johnson (2020) in a study found that people assume the focus of community engagement to be on research, in poor or impoverished communities or non-governmental type work, and thereby the term

“community” in community engagement is omitted and the term “engaged scholarship” is used. According to Benneworth (2018), fostering a clear understanding of the concept of community engagement within universities is crucial for harnessing the potential of these initiatives that benefits not only students and communities but also higher education institutions.

B. Lack of Institutional Support and Funding

One of the main challenges to community engagement is the lack of support and recognition from higher education institutions, which may result in inadequate funding, insufficient resources, and limited opportunities for faculty and students to engage in community-based activities (Muwanguzi et al., 2023). Higher education institutions are most concerned about preparing students for the future; graduates who are well prepared to enter the job market and contribute to society (Preece, 2017). As such, community engagement in general is often not considered a priority thereby receiving less institutional support. Additionally, most community engagement projects and initiatives present compelling financial constraints for higher education institutions. Projects conducted off-campus require the transportation of students to project sites which is usually costly. Given increasing enrolments, higher education institutions in Africa tend to prioritize their limited funding and resources towards more pressing needs such as staff remuneration, infrastructure and operational expenses (Saidi, 2021).

Moreover, socio-economic challenges may hinder community projects. Many African universities serve underprivileged communities and students who come from such communities and who may not have sufficient means to make meaningful contributions to community engagement initiatives. Consequently, academics frequently tend to seek external support and resources for these projects, often competing for a small pool of highly sought-after grants from international funding agencies (Nchu, 2024). This can be a particularly challenging for early-career academics who tend to focus more on classroom teaching and assessments as they often lack the necessary experience, networks, and partners for such processes.

C. Heavy Workload and Time Constraints

Bringle and Hatcher (2012) note that community engagement often requires significant time and effort in planning and coordination, which can be daunting for academic institutions and also community partners. Establishing suitable projects and partners that align with students' curricula can take substantial length of time (sometimes months or even years)

(Bringle & Hatcher, 2012; Nchu, 2024). Academic staff in African higher education institutions are often faced with heavy workloads, made more challenging by increasing student enrolments, extensive assessment responsibilities, and the preparation of comprehensive learning materials and activities. Additionally, they are charged with administrative duties and at the same time are expected to carry out impactful research, leaving little room for engagement initiatives. Schutte (2024) in a study found that the absence of support staff, such as tutors or administrative assistants limits faculty's capacity to participate in or develop community initiatives. Also, some administrators view community engagement as an added pressure to the already scarce resources of the university. This issue is further compounded by the absence of adequate workload management and incentive system that efficiently takes into account academic contributions and outcomes and associates performance to rewards (Nchu, 2024; Schutte, 2024).

D. Power Imbalances and Distrust

Beyond the broader conceptual issues with community engagement, the on the ground enactment of its associated principles may be complicated by power imbalances and distrust. Johnson and Hoba (2015) note that universities are often seen as an arm of the government, with whom many local communities, groups, and organizations have complex histories riddled with conflict, imprisonment, displacement, or disenfranchisement. Community partners may feel like they have less control or influence over the process engagement. Within this context, community engagement may be viewed with skepticism, indicative of the pervasive notion that the university somehow exists separately from the community within which it is located, commonly treated as an “ivory tower” (Johnson, 2017). Additionally, there exist a common conception that universities engage with communities solely to improve public image and gain recognition for social responsibility, rather than for genuine partnerships. Conversely, academics involved in community engagement may show concerns about the lack of commitment on the part of community members, as projects are often discontinued once faculty and students withdraw (Goddard, 2018; Nchu, 2024).

METHODOLOGY

This study follows a qualitative approach, employing an interpretivism paradigm. By interpretivism process, the research aims involve attempting to understand the meanings and interpretations that people assign to their experiences. The research problem is being studied in its natural setting rather than in a laboratory (Creswell & Poth, 2017). This allows for information

to be gathered from multiple sources to understand the phenomenon through the participants. The study uses two methods of data collection; online interviews and document analysis.

A detailed semi-structured online interview was conducted among forty-two participants including thirty-six students and six academic staff of six public universities. Participants were drawn into the study using snowballing techniques in which students' and colleagues served as referrals to disseminate the information and recruit students into the study. To obtain in-depth, meaningful responses, the interview questions were open-ended, using conversational prompts rather than a rigid interview script to gain meaning-rich responses (Englander, 2018). The prompts centered on: how community engagement is understood in the context of university; what are regarded as the limitations to student-community engagement; how community engagement can be strengthened institutionally; and what role higher education institutions and the government have to play.

Document analysis included higher education policy documents, university strategic plans, institutional websites and grey literature obtained from internet sources. Policy documents included the 2023-2030 Education-Training Sector Strategy and the 2010-2020 Growth and employment strategy paper. In addition, the researcher used Google scholar to search for grey literature. The search was deepened by documentary analysis to cover work published between 2005 and 2025.

Ethical clearance was sought and obtained in advance of undertaking empirical data collection. All the participants gave informed consented. The interviews were recorded, and thematic analysis was used as it, according to Nowell et al. (2017), allows for the contents of interviews to be captured clearly and concisely. Thematic analysis is concerned with searching through a data set to identify, analyze, and report recurrent patterns (Clarke & Braun, 2013). Themes related to the main objective of this study were identified through careful reading of the interview transcripts. It is a form of pattern recognition within the data, where emerging themes become the categories for analysis (Fereday, 2006).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Challenges to Community Engagement in Higher Education

A. Lack of Funding

One of the major challenges to implementing community engagement at Cameroonian universities is the lack of institutional support and funding. Universities do not have structured community

engagement programs and analysis of strategic plans indicate that universities do not recognize community engagement as a core function besides teaching, learning and research and as such not prioritized for funding. Community engagement is not integrated within institution's mission and vision. It is rather considered to be voluntary and as such given little attention. One respondent said:

"Universities are aware of the importance of community engagement but the main issue we have is implementation. We lack the necessary structures to make it happen. Most faculties are focused on teaching and research. They have not undergone the necessary training for effective community engagement initiatives... And most importantly financial constraints is a major hindrance. Community engagement programs require funding yet there's no budget for that. So we can only do so much".

Nchu (2024), reiterates this emphasizing that most universities in Africa do not prioritize funding for community engagement due to limited resources and as such are unable to mobilize the necessary resources for sustainable community engagement projects. In addition, logistical issues also limit community engagement initiatives. The study found that academics shy away from off-campus engagement projects given that they have limited resources for transporting students to project sight. One participant contended that:

"Community engagement can't operate properly without funding. Let's take for example we want to organize a health sensitization campaign within the Buea municipality. We will have to move from one 'quartier' to another. Who will cover the transportation cost? And maybe we will need to hand out some kits or materials. Those cost money".

Another participant highlighted that:

"I sometimes don't participate in community activities because of transportation issues. My allowance can only cover my fare to school and back home. I can't afford the extra expenditure. I would love to participate but being able to transport myself to school to attend my classes is more important".

In Cameroon, state funding is channeled mainly to teaching, learning, and research. Badat (2013) asserts that financial constraints cause community engagement to be a sensitive issue, often seen as a luxury, and even when integrated into academic functions, it is still perceived as diverting resources away from core functions of teaching and research.

Additionally, even if in cases where funding were accessible, the higher education system structure and culture is geared towards individual competitiveness as individual achievements are rewarded rather than collaborative efforts.

B. Time Constraints and Lack of Motivation

Community engagement requires time and effort. Analysis of findings indicate that students and faculty are often more preoccupied by academic workload. Students reported that the demands of community engagement sometimes overlapped with key academic deadlines, leading to stress and difficulty managing both responsibilities. Those involved in extracurricular activities, such as student government or sports, faced additional scheduling conflicts, limiting their ability to commit fully to community service projects.

"I already have too many academic commitments; assignments, group projects and exams are already around the corner. I most often don't have to engage in community activities or initiatives. To me my studies are more important".

"I am part of the university football club. Training is usually very intense, plus there's school work. I struggle to keep up with both. Adding community work to that will be too much for me to handle".

"Most lecturers are overworked. They usually have tight teaching schedules and some perform administrative duties. Also they have hundreds of assignments to grade given large student numbers. This limits the time they can have for community engagement initiatives".

Johnson (2020) asserts that academics are often unable to attend community engagement training due to teaching workloads as their participation in capacity building initiatives is usually based on their availability. Moreover, while community engagement provides experiential learning benefits, students do not receive academic credit or formal recognition for their participation. Some students feel demotivated because their service contributions are not factored into their grades, making it seem like an extra burden rather than an integrated part of their learning (Johnson, 2017).

"Community engagement is considered to be voluntary and since it is not integrated into school curriculum it is not graded. I think if credits were awarded for students' participation in community service, more students would be involved. They are just not motivated because of lack of recognition".

Faculty members also face similar disincentives, as promotion and recognition structures in most Cameroonian universities are heavily weighted toward research publications rather than community impact or service.

C. Curricular Rigidity

One of the most significant institutional barriers to effective student-community engagement in higher education in Cameroon is the rigidity of the academic curriculum. According to Nkemleke (2024), Cameroon's higher education curriculum is outdated and fails to align with evolving societal needs, leaving students ill-prepared for the demands of the modern world. Most universities and higher institutes in the country continue to follow traditional, discipline-based curricula that prioritize theoretical instruction and standardized assessments over experiential and community-based learning. As a result, there is limited flexibility to incorporate service-learning or community engagement activities into the academic calendar or course content.

"University education, not just university education, best to say education at all levels in Cameroon is in need of curricular reform. We are still using the same approaches to teaching and learning as decades ago. But the world is ever-changing and evolving, we need to adopt better ways of teaching and learning and experiential learning is one of them. The current system is no longer working. Yet even though lecturers or faculty are aware of this pertinent issue, they can't do anything about it because change needs leadership and government".

Additionally, the lack of interdisciplinary approaches in curriculum design further compounds the problem. Educational practitioners in Cameroon lack the necessary skills and knowledge needed for planning and designing interdisciplinary education programs (Guiake & Tianxue, 2019; Nkemleke, 2024). Effective community engagement often requires collaboration across fields such as public health, education, social work, and engineering. However, academic silos within universities in Cameroon limit opportunities for such interdisciplinary initiatives. Students are generally confined to their departments, with few platforms to collaborate on real-world community issues that require diverse perspectives and solutions.

Another aspect of curricular rigidity is the minimal inclusion of civic education, community development principles, and participatory research methods within academic programs. Civic education is being taught as a course subject at public universities in Cameroon, however, lessons are limited within the classroom without any meaningful interaction with the outside

world. As such many students graduate without a strong understanding of the value of civic responsibility or the tools needed to conduct ethical, inclusive, and impactful community engagement. This gap undermines both the quality and sustainability of student-led initiatives.

D. Sustainability Constraints

A major challenge identified is the lack of sustainability of community engagement initiatives. In many cases, community projects are initiated by students or faculty without adequate planning and support. Analysis of the findings indicate that students who have participated in community engagement activities did so through the student association they belonged through. These activities were solely organized by students themselves with little or no faculty support. One participant mentioned that:

“Most of the activities we engage in are organized by the student body. They identify community issues that fit our interests or major of study. Sometimes it is issues concerning campus life. We do not receive any form of funding from the university, so organizing activities can be challenging since the money comes from our own pockets.”

Many student-led initiatives are constrained by tight budgets, limited access to necessary tools or materials, and logistical challenges. These constraints can severely limit the scope and scale of projects, making it difficult to achieve meaningful, long-term impact. In addition, student-led initiatives depend on the skills, time and energy of a small group of leaders, limiting the size and scope of their projects. Angwaomaodoko (2024) notes that students often encounter difficulties with engaging in complex issues due to limited experience or expertise in areas such as project management or advocacy. Resistance from various stakeholders including school administrators, community members, or fellow students, can also hinder the progress of student-led initiatives. This opposition may occur as a result of conflicting ideologies, making establishing consensus and common goals difficult.

In addition, community engagement projects often lack coordinated collaboration between universities and community stakeholders. In many cases, community projects are initiated without adequate consultation or involvement of community members in the planning and implementation stages. This top-down approach can lead to misalignment between the goals of the academic institution and the actual needs of the community, resulting in low participation, mistrust, and unsustainable outcomes. Moreover, a

lack of knowledge or interest can prevent programs from recruiting volunteers, mobilizing support, or attracting funding for this community engagement initiatives. One participant highlighted:

“Getting other students to participate in events is a hassle, worse is getting support from faculty. They usually tell us to manage by ourselves or they are too busy. Also most students are just not interested and do not see the need for their participation”.

Strategies for Enhancing Community Engagement in Higher Education

The most prevalent challenge to community engagement at Cameroonian universities is the lack of institutional support and funding. To enhance community engagement, the higher education system needs to move away from the concept of considering it an extra-curricular and voluntary initiative and push towards integration as a core function of universities. Doing so allows for community engagement to have the same priority for funding as teaching, learning and research. In the case of lack of government funding, universities can also seek for external donors for community engagement projects. However, without leadership commitment community engagement policies and initiatives would be futile. Leadership at all levels needs to demonstrate commitment to CE (Johnson, 2020). One participant believed that

“Leadership is key, starting with the Vice Chancellor. It shapes the mission and vision of the university. The Vice chancellor should show support for community engagement by encouraging deans of faculties to initiate engagement initiatives with heads of departments who will in turn get lecturers involved. Without leadership, community engagement will continue to be an orphan mission of universities”.

Institutional involvement would ensure the sustainability of community projects as compared to student-led initiatives. Additionally, for community engagement to develop and become institutionalized, enabling structures need to be developed driven by leadership. Academics need to be given the necessary training for effective community engagement implementation. Bisaso, (2023) emphasizes the importance of embedding context

in enhancing leadership capacities due to the changing nature of the higher education landscape in Sub-Saharan Africa. Universities should put in place an enabling environment and establish collaborative leadership training programs that provide practical and experiential learning on a continuous basis.

The findings of the study also indicate that proper motivation is needed for students and academics to actively engage in community service. To encourage faculty to become involved and support community engagement, universities in Cameroon could include community participation or service as criteria for staff promotions, besides teaching and research. A similar approach can be used for students as a participant highlighted:

“The university only considers GPA during selections for scholarship awards, reason why most students are only focused on their academics and would consider community engagement a distraction. But if community engagement were to be included as a criteria, students would not only be motivated to be involved but will also recognized the importance of exposure to real-world or community issues and impact of engagement on their professional development”.

Another participant highlighted:

“Participation in extra-curricular activities should be rewarded by granting extra credit for example, and if that can't be done then certificates of participation can be awarded. These certificates can later be used when applying for scholarships, student leadership or assistant positions etc. This is a system that can work”.

Moreover, there is pressing need for curricular reform within Cameroon's higher education system to be more flexible, interdisciplinary, and socially responsive. This could include a shift from traditional classroom learning to include experiential learning approaches. Components of community-based learning could be included into existing courses offering elective modules focused on community development, and creating project-based learning opportunities that allow students to earn credit while engaging with real-world issues. Such reforms will not only enhance student learning outcomes but also strengthen the role of higher education as drivers of community development in Cameroon.

Lastly, effective student-community engagement in higher education requires more than individual effort from students or faculty. It thrives on strong, strategic, and sustained partnerships between universities and external stakeholders (Fongwa & Mtawa, 2022; Mbah, 2016). In Cameroon, where institutional and resource limitations often hinder university-community engagement efforts, building robust partnerships with community-based organizations, local authorities, non-governmental

organizations (NGOs), and private sector actors is essential for long-term impact. Strengthening partnerships begins with cultivating mutual respect and trust. Higher education institutions must move from a model of knowledge transfer to one of knowledge co-creation, where communities are recognized as equal partners who contribute valuable local knowledge, experience, and insight. Moreover, effective partnerships can provide critical resources for example, technical expertise, funding, logistical support, and networks—that universities may lack internally.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Student-community engagement in higher education presents a unique opportunity to bridge academic knowledge with real-world impact. In Cameroon, this approach is increasingly recognized as a critical pathway for national development, civic participation, and the holistic formation of students. However, as identified in this study, a number of major challenges hinder the effective implementation and sustainability of student-community engagement initiatives. These challenges, stemming from lack of institutional support and recognition, range from inadequate funding and lack of enabling structures, time and curricular constraints, sustainability issues and weak partnership structures. Overcoming these complexities requires concerted effort from academic institutions, policymakers, and community stakeholders. By enhancing institutional support and funding, integrating community engagement into university curricular, providing enabling structures for engagement, providing incentives for participation, and fostering strategic partnership, higher education institutions in Cameroon can play a transformative role in promoting sustainable development. When properly implemented, community engagement can transform the student learning experience, improve institutional relevance, and contribute meaningfully to addressing local development challenges.

This study serves as a foundation for further exploration and policy development aimed at harnessing the potential of academic institutions to drive community development. Future research should continue to explore innovative strategies contributing to a more inclusive and socially responsible educational landscape. Additionally, this study only identifies the institutional constraints to community engagement. Future research could highlight socio-economic, political and cultural barriers that affect the practice of community engagement in higher education in Cameroon. Comparative case studies examining best practices, nationally and

internationally, could also provide valuable insights. Moreover, there is need for studies capturing the perspectives of faculty, staff and community members involved in community engagement initiatives in Cameroon given that existing studies are mostly student-focused.

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