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Beyond Degrees: Diagnosing the Structural and Substantive Disconnect in Cameroon's Private University LMD Reform

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Abstract

Nearly two decades after Cameroon adopted the Licence, Master, Doctorat (LMD) reform, its rapidly expanding private university sector continues to issue Bologna-labelled degrees whose substance rarely matches the reform's original ambitions. This paper diagnoses the gap between structural and substantive adoption of Bologna-style reform in Cameroon's private universities and proposes a pathway toward deeper implementation. It adopts a qualitative, policy-analytic design, a critical policy review and conceptual synthesis of national legislation, regional directives, and existing scholarship on LMD implementation in Cameroon. The analysis finds that private universities have adopted the structural vocabulary of Bologna reform, three-cycle degrees and credit labels among them, without commensurate progress on quality assurance, mobility, and recognition. This gap is reflected in graduate employability outcomes and in persistent non-recognition of qualifications, with roughly two-thirds of surveyed respondents in one study reporting that their qualifications went unrecognised elsewhere. Fragmented regulatory enforcement and revenue-driven institutional incentives help explain why reform has remained largely symbolic rather than substantive. Existing scholarship examines Bologna/LMD adoption in Cameroon nationally or within public universities, leaving private-sector implementation under-examined despite the sector's scale. The paper addresses that gap and draws implications for policy borrowing theory, institutional isomorphism, and credentialism theory.

Keywords: Cameroon, Bologna Process, LMD Reform, Private Higher Education, Policy Borrowing, Graduate Employability.

Introduction

In 2018, a group of Cameroonians holding doctoral degrees gathered outside government offices in Yaoundé to protest their inability to find work commensurate with their qualifications (Nkafu Policy Institute, 2026). The image of unemployed PhD holders is a striking site of

credential failure, since doctoral study sits at the top of the credential hierarchy education systems promise to reward. The Nkafu Policy Institute situates this protest within a wider mismatch: roughly 86.6 per cent of Cameroon's total employment now sits in the informal sector, and young people, over half the national labour force, remain the group most affected by unemployment and underemployment regardless of the credential they hold (Nkafu Policy Institute, 2026). This is the downstream evidence of what Dore (1976) termed the "diploma disease" and what Collins (1979) reframed as supply-driven credential inflation, in which expanding the number of degree holders does not create more real value but instead requires ever more credentials to signal the same underlying worth. Against this backdrop, Cameroon's higher education sector has, over the past two decades, undergone one of its most consequential reforms: the adoption of the Licence, Master, Doctorat (LMD) system, Cameroon's version of the Bologna Process (Eta, 2015).

Cameroon's private higher education sector has grown substantially since LMD's introduction, and MINESUP (2023) now regulates a private sector considerably larger, in institutional count, than the eleven public universities under its direct administration (Devex, n.d.). The imbalance is stark in institutional terms and more modest in demographic terms. In 2018, just under 85 per cent of the roughly 320,000 students enrolled in Cameroonian higher education attended public providers, leaving about 15 per cent, or approximately 48,000 students, in the 245 private and hybrid institutions then operating (Higher Education Strategy Associates, 2022). Private institutions therefore make up the great majority of the country's higher education providers while enrolling a substantial minority of its students, a minority large enough to make the question of how genuinely they have implemented Bologna-style reform a matter of national consequence. Yet the scholarship that has most rigorously interrogated LMD's implementation in Cameroon, principally the Eta corpus (Eta, 2015, 2018; Eta and Vubo, 2016) and the recent two-decade retrospective (Degreume, 2025), has examined the reform at the level of national policy or within public institutions. Where private universities appear at all, they tend to appear as an aside rather than the primary unit of analysis, an omission this paper treats as its starting point.

Cameroon's higher education system inherited a dual structure from its colonial history, part French, part British, that left the country administering two largely incompatible sets of degree titles, credit logics, and academic calendars within a single national system (Eta and Vubo, 2016). The push toward LMD did not originate in Cameroon alone. The 2005 Libreville Declaration and the subsequent 2006 CEMAC directive committed member states of the Central African Economic and Monetary Community to harmonising their higher education systems along Bologna-style lines (Université de Lomé, 2024), and Cameroon formally introduced LMD in 2007 and 2008 (Eta, 2015; Feudjio, 2009). Eta (2015) documents a dual justification: LMD was framed publicly as a vehicle for convergence with European standards of degree comparability, but it also carried an unintended domestic benefit, harmonising Cameroon's French and Anglo-Saxon systems under a single three-cycle architecture, a goal Doh (2007) shows had been sought independently of any European pressure. A purely external account of policy borrowing, of the kind Steiner-Khamsi (2004) associates with governments seeking legitimacy through foreign models, would miss the genuinely domestic problem LMD happened to solve; a purely domestic account would miss why this specific architecture was the vehicle chosen.

Two decades on, the available evidence suggests Cameroon's private universities have absorbed the vocabulary of this reform considerably faster than they have absorbed its substance. The 2025 retrospective finds that LMD has, nationally, successfully standardised degree structures and introduced credit-based curricula on paper (Degreume, 2025), yet Mounton Njoya and Maba Kengne (2022), working from interviews and document analysis at major Cameroonian universities, find that LMD's objectives remain unclear more than a decade after introduction, with 65.33 per cent of respondents

reporting their qualifications were not recognised as such elsewhere. This tension is not necessarily a contradiction; it is closer to what Meyer and Rowan (1977) call decoupling, in which the formal structure changes while the substantive, day-to-day practice it is meant to govern remains only loosely tied to it. Whether this decoupling is more pronounced in the private sector than the public sector Eta and the 2025 retrospective examine is the open question this paper treats as a gap to be diagnosed. The theoretical framework developed later, and the propositions that follow, are designed to interrogate that gap directly.

This paper pursues three objectives. First, it diagnoses where and how the gap between structural and substantive Bologna-style implementation manifests in Cameroon's private university sector. Second, it argues why closing that gap, rather than treating structural adoption as sufficient, should be a priority for policymakers and institutional leaders. Third, it proposes a pathway by which private universities might move from symbolic to substantive implementation. The stakes extend beyond individual institutions: genuine reform bears on graduate employability (Eta, 2018; Ntemngweh, 2025), on regional and international degree recognition (Business in Cameroon, 2021), on institutional competitiveness, and on alignment with CEMAC-level and continental higher education policy (HAQAA Initiative, 2023; African Union, n.d.).

The scope of this paper is deliberately bounded. It examines private universities only, drawing on public-sector evidence solely for comparative purposes, for example the Université de Dschang case discussed under Fragmented Quality Assurance (Charles-Robert, 2014). Within the private sector, it focuses on four pillars of Bologna-style reform that recur across the literature on LMD implementation in Cameroon: credit-equivalent structures, the three-cycle degree architecture, quality assurance mechanisms, and mobility and recognition arrangements. Each pillar recurs throughout the sections that follow: first in the account of what has actually happened in Cameroon's private higher education sector, then in the review of existing scholarship, then in the theoretical framework, and finally in the paper's findings.

Context: LMD Implementation in Cameroon's Private Higher Education Sector

Before turning to the scholarship that has interpreted LMD's adoption in Cameroon, it is worth narrating what has actually happened on the ground, since the policy documents and institutional record tell a somewhat different story from the one implied by degree titles alone. The Ministry of Higher Education (MINESUP) is the sole regulatory authority for both public and private higher education in Cameroon, a mandate confirmed by Law No. 2023/007 of 25 July 2023, which supersedes earlier ministerial texts from the 1999 to 2008 period still occasionally cited in secondary literature (MINESUP, 2023). MINESUP's role is not limited to policy-setting; Devex (n.d.) confirms the ministry issues accreditations, controls the educational level of private higher education establishments, and monitors both state and private university activity directly, making it, at least on paper.

Registration itself is a defined administrative process. Kinsmen Advocates Law Firm (2024) sets out the procedural requirements a private university must satisfy before MINESUP will grant an operating licence, including curriculum submission, faculty credential verification, and periodic institutional review. These are, in principle, exactly the mechanisms through which MINESUP could enforce substantive rather than cosmetic compliance with Bologna-style credit and outcome standards. Whether they are used this way in practice is a separate question, and the available evidence on enforcement is mixed. MINESUP has, on documented occasions, taken action against private institutions found not to meet accreditation standards, which demonstrates the regulatory apparatus is not purely nominal. At the close of the 30th session of the National Commission on Private Higher Education (CNESP) on 28

August 2024, for example, a communiqué signed by the Minister of Higher Education sanctioned nine private institutes for offences that included opening licence, master's and doctoral cycles without authorisation, misleading advertising, and issuing or relying on falsified diplomas and transcripts; the measures ranged from warnings and the closure of unauthorised programmes to the suspension of promoters and, in one case, closure for three years (Cameroon Tribune, 2024). At the same time, the sector's scale, now roughly two hundred private institutions against the eleven public universities under MINESUP's direct administration, raises an obvious capacity question: a ministry that must monitor curriculum content, faculty credentials, and assessment practice across two hundred institutions cannot verify each one with the depth genuine Bologna-style quality assurance would require. This capacity gap is arguably the more consequential structural feature of the sector: the nine institutions sanctioned in that single session represent a small fraction of a sector of well over two hundred institutions.

Regional harmonisation has moved in parallel with, but has not resolved, this domestic capacity problem. In 2021, higher education ministers across CEMAC formally validated a course credit transfer and academic mobility system, a decision explicitly traced back to the founding 2005 Libreville Declaration (Business in Cameroon, 2021). That this validation was still being negotiated in 2021, sixteen years after the original declaration, is itself informative: credit transfer and mobility, two pillars this paper treats as core to genuine Bologna-style reform, remained unresolved regionally for well over a decade after LMD was first introduced domestically (Eta, 2015). A private university operating within this environment inherits an incomplete regional infrastructure regardless of how faithfully it implements LMD internally.

In sum, the context sketched here suggests a sector heavily regulated on paper, procedurally structured for accreditation, and nominally tied into a regional harmonisation architecture, yet operating under a capacity-constrained regulator and an incomplete regional mobility system. This is the environment against which the literature reviewed next, and the findings presented later, should be read.

Literature Review

The Bologna Process: Origins and Pillars

The Bologna Declaration of 19 June 1999 is the founding text against which every later "Bologna-style" reform, Cameroon's LMD included, is ultimately measured. Twenty-nine European ministers committed their systems to six shared undertakings: comparable degrees, a multi-cycle system, a shared credit system, mobility, cooperation on quality assurance, and a European dimension in curricula (Bologna Process, 1999). Crosier and Parveva (2013) trace the process from its 1998 Sorbonne precursor through the 2010 formal launch of the European Higher Education Area, and treat "Bologna beyond Europe" as its own analytical category, discussing the process's diffusion into regional harmonisation efforts outside Europe, including West Africa. Study.eu (2024) supplies the technical mechanics: sixty ECTS credits per academic year, feeding into a three-cycle bachelor, master, doctorate architecture designed to make degrees comparable across the European Higher Education Area.

It would be a mistake, however, to treat Bologna as a uniformly successful template simply because it originated in Europe. WENR (2014) is candid that the reform's own mobility ambitions fell well short of their targets even within Europe: after fifteen years, only around 4 per cent of European undergraduates actually participated in mobility programmes, hampered by grant portability, housing costs, and credit transfer friction. Adelman (2009) goes further, arguing ECTS credits were meant to combine three elements, student workload, learning outcomes, and grades, but that in practice workload alone came to dominate while learning outcomes and quality were diluted. If Bologna's own home region experienced a hollowing-out of substance behind a preserved formal structure, then Cameroon's

comparable gap cannot be explained solely as an African implementation failure; it may instead be a more general property of Bologna-style reform when scaled and transplanted, a point this paper returns to in the Discussion and Implications section.

Policy Borrowing and Transfer in Comparative Education

Phillips and Ochs (2003) supply the single most important theoretical device in this literature: a four-stage cycle of cross-national attraction, decision, implementation, and internalisation or indigenisation, describing how far a borrowed policy travels from nominal adoption to genuine absorption. Ochs and Phillips (2002) trace the earlier development of the "cross-national attraction" concept that became stage one of this later model. Phillips and Ochs (2004) turn to methodology, addressing the difficulty of demonstrating a policy was actually borrowed rather than independently arrived at, arguing for triangulation between document analysis and interview evidence, a caution directly relevant to this paper's own document-analytic design (see the Methodology section).

Steiner-Khamsi (2004) offers a more overtly political reading, arguing policy borrowing is often driven by domestic legitimacy needs rather than genuine attraction to the foreign model: governments may "scandalize" domestic failures while "glorifying" the foreign model as political cover for unrelated goals. Steiner-Khamsi and Waldow (2012) extend this into a comparative volume, situating cases such as South Africa's outcomes-based education import alongside other examples. Dolowitz and Marsh (2000) contribute a complementary typology, distinguishing voluntary from coercive transfer and degrees of transfer from direct copying through emulation, hybridisation, and inspiration. Applied to Cameroon, LMD adoption reads as a mixed case: part CEMAC-coerced through the 2005 Libreville Declaration and 2006 directive, part voluntarily embraced for the domestic legitimacy and harmonisation reasons Eta (2015) and Steiner-Khamsi (2004) each help explain.

Bologna-Style and LMD Reform in Francophone Africa

Bologna's diffusion into Francophone Africa followed a distinct regional pathway from the CEMAC-specific mechanism relevant to Cameroon. Emerald Publishing (2019) credits combined UNESCO and African Union efforts, together with the West African Economic and Monetary Union's Council of Ministers, for introducing LMD reform across Benin, Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, and Togo, with the Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie sponsoring regional discussions on degree reform, joint degrees, quality assurance, research capacity, and mobility since 2002. Université de Lomé (2024) documents that sixteen Francophone African countries within CAMES adopted a 2006 Libreville resolution committing to LMD structuring, alongside REESAO, a cooperative network of sixteen universities across seven countries. This demonstrates Cameroon's own CEMAC-level 2006 directive was part of a considerably broader, near-simultaneous wave of regional LMD resolutions, not an isolated national initiative.

Senegal offers the sharpest comparator case available in this literature. ARUA (n.d.) documents Senegal's LMD implementation since 2005, three years ahead of Cameroon, its harmonisation with the West African Economic and Monetary Union, and its membership in both the Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie and CAMES's quality assurance system, while candidly noting ongoing PhD funding and training challenges of its own. Sencampus (2016) supplies the structural architecture behind this integration: a Licence at 180 credits over six semesters, a Master at 300 credits over ten semesters, and a Doctorat spanning sixteen semesters, designed to facilitate international recognition. Kpodo (2020) provides a sector-specific comparator from Togo, an opinion-survey study of medical school faculty roughly a decade after LMD's introduction there, finding a mixed picture of strengths and weaknesses

even within a single professional programme, which resonates with this paper's later discussion of Cameroon's own medical education reforms. Taken together, these cases suggest that even Francophone Africa's earlier and more integrated LMD adopters have not achieved frictionless implementation, which tempers any reading of Cameroon's gaps as a uniquely Cameroonian failing.

Cameroon's Higher Education Landscape Specifically

The Eta corpus anchors this sub-section, and deserves sustained engagement. Eta (2015), using the Phillips and Ochs policy borrowing cycle as an analytical lens, examines text documents to explain why CEMAC and Cameroon adopted Bologna Process ideas through LMD, finding the adoption justified primarily through CEMAC-regional degree harmonisation and global convergence, with an unintended benefit of also harmonising Cameroon's separate French and Anglo-Saxon degree structures. Eta and Vubo (2016) extend this by comparing how Cameroon's Anglophone and Francophone sub-systems adapted the Bologna degree structure and credit system differently, with direct implications for this paper's later discussion of linguistic and systemic inequities as an implementation barrier. Eta (2018) turns from adoption to outcomes, investigating whether LMD's professionalisation goals translated into improved graduate employability, a question this paper's findings on employability mismatch (see the Findings section) build on rather than duplicate.

The 2025 two-decade retrospective is the most recent and most comprehensive source in this cluster, and merits treatment as a synthesis point (Degreume, 2025). Using policy transfer theory and qualitative analysis of policy documents, academic literature, and institutional reports, the study finds LMD has successfully standardised degree structures, introduced credit-based curricula, and improved quality assurance on paper, while simultaneously identifying systemic obstacles: political centralisation, linguistic inequities between Anglophone and Francophone regions, socio-economic disparities, and institutional resistance. Most significant for this paper's theoretical framework, the study frames the core tension as one between policy imitation and local adaptation, and identifies neo-colonial dynamics in how LMD is perceived, a framing this paper returns to in the counterarguments of the Discussion and Implications section.

Earlier and more localised sources round out this picture. Feudjio (2009), writing close to the moment of LMD's actual introduction, captures the stakes, constraints, and prospects of adoption as they appeared contemporaneously, a useful corrective against reading current findings back into the reform's original expectations. Mounton Njoya and Maba Kengne (2022), drawing on document analysis, observation, and interviews with academics at major Cameroonian universities, find LMD's objectives remain unclear and inadequately aligned with local realities more than a decade after the 2008 introduction, with 65.33 per cent of respondents reporting their qualifications were not recognised as such elsewhere, a statistic this paper treats as its strongest quantitative anchor for the mobility and recognition deficit discussed in the Findings section. Bomda, Fozing, Mgbwa, and Tchamabé (2022), working from a mixed-methods sample of 168 subjects including supervisors, graduate employees, and higher education heads, find LMD and BMD implementation producing diverse and controversial outcomes across faculties, with the predominantly informal nature of the Cameroonian economy limiting meaningful university-labour market interaction even as universities continue training primarily for civil service and formal wage employment. Charles-Robert (2014) offers a single-faculty case study of professionalisation at the University of Dschang, a public institution, useful as a comparator against which this paper's own private-sector evidence can be read. Doh (2007) is cited widely by later scholars, Eta included, for the argument that Bologna Process adoption helped resolve Cameroon's dual-system harmonisation challenge independently of any European pressure. Alberta

Government (n.d.), a Canadian credential-assessment guide, is used here sparingly and only for descriptive, non-evaluative structural claims about the LMD cycle system, since it is not a scholarly source.

The Gap This Paper Fills

Reading this literature as a whole, a clear pattern emerges: the studies that most rigorously interrogate LMD's substantive implementation in Cameroon, Eta (2015, 2018), Eta and Vubo (2016), Mounton Njoya and Maba Kengne (2022), Bomda et al. (2022), and the 2025 retrospective, examine the reform either nationally or within public universities. Where private institutions surface, they do so incidentally rather than as the primary object of analysis. This is a striking omission given that Cameroon's private sector now encompasses roughly two hundred institutions against eleven public universities (MINESUP, 2023), meaning the sub-sector least examined is also the one that makes up the overwhelming majority of the country's institutions and enrols a substantial minority of its students (Higher Education Strategy Associates, 2022). This paper's originality claim rests on diagnosing implementation within this specific, under-examined private-sector case.

Theoretical Framework

Policy Borrowing and Translation

This paper's primary lens for explaining why and how LMD was adopted in Cameroon is the four-stage policy borrowing cycle developed by Phillips and Ochs (2003): cross-national attraction, decision, implementation, and internalisation or indigenisation. Eta (2015) has already applied a version of this framework to Cameroon's national-level LMD adoption, finding the process driven jointly by CEMAC-regional attraction and a domestic harmonisation motive. This paper adopts the same lens but applies it specifically to private universities, treating the distinction between "implementation" and "internalisation" as the analytical hinge on which its central argument turns: Cameroon's private universities have, as a sector, moved into Phillips and Ochs's implementation stage but have rarely progressed into internalisation. Steiner-Khamsi's (2004) account of legitimacy-driven borrowing supplies a complementary explanation for why implementation might stall: if LMD adoption serves institutions' need for accreditation legitimacy as much as genuine pedagogical conviction, there is limited internal pressure to progress further once the legitimacy benefit has already been secured.

Institutional Isomorphism

The paper's second theoretical pillar explains why this implementation has tended to remain symbolic rather than substantive. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) argue that organisations within a shared field compete not only for resources but for legitimacy, producing isomorphism through three mechanisms: coercive isomorphism, pressure from regulation, directly applicable to MINESUP's accreditation requirements (MINESUP, 2023); mimetic isomorphism, organisations copying peers under uncertainty, applicable to private universities adopting LMD vocabulary because competitors have done so; and normative isomorphism, pressure transmitted through professionalisation among administrators and faculty. Meyer and Rowan (1977), whose work precedes and directly inspired DiMaggio and Powell, supply a precise term for what this paper alleges is happening: decoupling, in which formal structures function as legitimating ceremony aimed at external audiences while day-to-day operating procedures remain only loosely tied to those structures. Wherever this paper uses "symbolic" or "cosmetic" in relation to LMD implementation, it invokes Meyer and Rowan's decoupling concept specifically.

Human Capital, Signaling, and Credentialism

The paper's third lens explains the downstream labour-market consequences of symbolic implementation. Human capital theory, in its classical form (Becker, 1964; Schultz, 1961), treats education as an investment that produces measurable returns in productivity and earnings; this is the optimistic baseline against which this paper's more critical argument is set. Spence (1973) supplies the crucial counter-model: education may function primarily as a costly signal separating higher-ability from lower-ability candidates rather than as a direct producer of skill, and, when credentials become easier to obtain, the informational value of the signal declines, forcing employers to seek additional signals or distrust degrees generally. This is precisely the mechanism Dore (1976) documents empirically in his study of Sri Lanka and Japan, arguing that in late-developing economies, credentials become the dominant selection mechanism earlier and more intensely than in early-industrialising economies, producing a self-reinforcing "diploma disease" in which credential value degrades as it proliferates. Collins (1979) formalises this sociologically, arguing the process is supply-driven rather than demand-driven: more credential-holders does not create more real value, it simply requires more credentials to signal the same underlying worth. Collins (2002) later applies this thesis specifically to universities as institutions, a connection this paper draws on directly in its discussion of institutional incentives (see the Institutional Incentives Problem discussion in the Findings section). Tomlinson (2008) and Chevalier and Conlon (2003) supply complementary empirical grounding: Tomlinson's interview-based study finds students increasingly treat the degree as necessary but insufficient, requiring further differentiation through internships and extracurriculars, while Chevalier and Conlon find labour markets pay wage premiums differently by institutional prestige even among graduates with nominally identical degree classifications.

Synthesis

These three lenses are not competing explanations for the same phenomenon; they explain three different links in a single causal chain. Policy borrowing theory (Phillips and Ochs, 2003; Steiner-Khamsi, 2004) explains the decision to adopt Bologna-style reform, and why that decision carried both an external, CEMAC-driven logic and an internal harmonisation logic simultaneously. Institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Meyer and Rowan, 1977) explains why implementation tended to stall at the level of formal, decoupled structure rather than progressing into Phillips and Ochs's internalisation stage: coercive pressure from MINESUP secured formal compliance, while mimetic and normative pressures secured adoption of LMD vocabulary, but neither compelled the substantive pedagogical and assessment change the vocabulary implied. Credentialism theory (Dore, 1976; Collins, 1979, 2002; Spence, 1973) then explains the downstream labour-market consequence: because the credential's formal label changed without its underlying substance changing to match, the signal graduates carry into the labour market has degraded in ways human capital theory alone cannot account for. Read together, these three lenses generate a single narrative arc, from adoption through symbolic implementation to credential inflation and employability mismatch, that structures the findings presented in the Findings section.

Research Propositions

The propositions below follow directly from the theoretical framework presented in the Theoretical Framework section. Because this paper is document-and-policy-analytic rather than interview-based, it frames these as guiding propositions rather than empirical research questions. The propositions serve as an analytical framework for evaluating the available regulatory and institutional documentation, and

each is assessed against that documentary record in the Findings and Discussion and Implications sections.

P1. Cameroon's private universities have adopted the structural elements of Bologna-style reform, credit systems and three-cycle degree titles among them, more fully than they have adopted its substantive elements: learning outcomes, quality assurance, and mobility.

P2. This gap between structural and substantive adoption is explained jointly by MINESUP's regulatory capacity constraints relative to sector size (see the Context section), by mimetic and normative isomorphic pressure across the private sector (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), and by the market-legitimacy incentives private institutions face as revenue-dependent organisations (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004; Provini, 2019).

P3. This gap manifests concretely in graduate employability outcomes and in the persistent non-recognition of private university qualifications across institutions and, in some cases, across borders (Mounton Njoya and Maba Kengne, 2022; Eta, 2018; Ntemngweh, 2025).

P4. A credible reform pathway toward substantive Bologna-style implementation in Cameroon's private universities requires phased regulatory enforcement, regional accreditation partnerships, and monitoring mechanisms calibrated to the sector's actual scale, rather than reforms modelled solely on public-university capacity.

Methodology

Research Design

This paper adopts a qualitative, policy-analytic research design, following Creswell's (2009, p. 5) description of qualitative inquiry as a process of understanding a social problem through a complex, holistic picture built from documentary and textual evidence rather than numerical measurement alone. More specifically, the study is a critical policy review and conceptual synthesis: it collects no primary data and samples no individual institutions, and it synthesises published national legislation, regional directives, and empirical literature.

Data Sources

The data sources are published and publicly accessible. They comprise MINESUP's 2023 governing law and associated regulatory instruments (MINESUP, 2023), CEMAC and CAMES directives on credit transfer and regional harmonisation (Business in Cameroon, 2021; Université de Lomé, 2024), the accreditation procedures documented by Kinsmen Advocates Law Firm (2024), and MINESUP's published sanctions decisions as reported in the national press (Cameroon Tribune, 2024). These are triangulated against the existing scholarship on LMD implementation in Cameroon reviewed in the Literature Review section, principally the Eta corpus, Mounton Njoya and Maba Kengne (2022), Bomda et al. (2022), and Degreume (2025).

Source Selection

Sources were selected against three explicit criteria. The first is authority: national legislation, official regional directives, and peer-reviewed scholarship were preferred, with non-scholarly sources used only for descriptive or procedural claims. The second is relevance: a direct bearing on one or more of the four Bologna pillars examined in this paper, in Cameroon or in comparable Francophone and CEMAC contexts. The third is recency: for empirical evidence on LMD implementation, priority was given to sources published since LMD's introduction in 2007 and 2008. Sources meeting these criteria were retained for analysis, and no individual institution was sampled.

Analytical Approach

The primary analytical technique is document and policy analysis. Each source was read against the four Bologna pillars and the three theoretical lenses set out in the Theoretical Framework section, and recurring patterns were grouped into the five thematic findings presented in the Findings section. The analysis is an interpretive synthesis of published material rather than a coding of primary data.

Limitations of the Approach

Two limitations bear directly on this paper's findings and should be read alongside them. First, published information on roughly two hundred private higher education institutions in Cameroon is necessarily uneven; this paper cannot claim comprehensive coverage, and its findings should be read as diagnostic of sector-wide patterns rather than as a census. Second, self-reported curriculum and assessment documentation is difficult to verify independently absent primary interview or observational data, a limitation this paper shares with, though does not fully resolve, Eta and Vubo's (2016) combined document-and-interview design.

Findings

Cameroon's private universities present a pattern that recurs across each of the four Bologna pillars examined in this paper: formal, credit- and cycle-based compliance sits alongside far weaker evidence of substantive change in pedagogy, assessment, quality assurance, and mobility outcomes. The five findings below document this pattern, drawing on the theoretical framework established in the Theoretical Framework section to interpret, rather than merely list, the evidence.

Credential Inflation Without Structural Reform

The clearest evidence of decoupling (Meyer and Rowan, 1977) in Cameroon's private higher education sector lies in the gap between formal degree standardisation and the credential's actual labour-market and cross-institutional value. The 2025 retrospective finds LMD has, at the national level, successfully standardised degree structures and introduced credit-based curricula on paper (Degreume, 2025). Yet Mounton Njoya and Maba Kengne (2022) find that 65.33 per cent of their respondents reported their qualifications were not recognised as such at other universities or in other countries, a finding difficult to reconcile with genuine standardisation unless the standardisation in question is understood as formal rather than substantive. Read through Dore's (1976) diploma disease thesis, this is precisely the pattern late-developing economies with credential-driven occupational selection tend to exhibit: rapid expansion of degree-granting institutions, credential proliferation, and a persistent disconnect between formal qualification and either genuine competency or labour-market absorption. Collins (1979) supplies an independent, sociologically distinct route to the same conclusion, arguing credential inflation is supply-driven rather than tracking any genuine rise in job-skill demands, which strengthens rather than merely repeats Dore's claim, since two scholars working from different empirical traditions, Dore from comparative fieldwork, Collins from historical sociology, converge on a compatible mechanism.

Fragmented Quality Assurance

MINESUP holds formal authority over both accreditation and ongoing monitoring of private universities (Devex, n.d.; MINESUP, 2023), and Kinsmen Advocates Law Firm (2024) confirms the procedural mechanisms, curriculum submission, faculty verification, and licensing review, through which that authority could, in principle, enforce substantive Bologna-style compliance. Yet Bomda et

al.'s (2022) mixed-methods findings, drawn from 168 subjects across supervisors, graduate employees, and higher education heads, document diverse and controversial implementation practices across different faculties and institutions, a pattern inconsistent with uniformly enforced quality assurance. This is best read as coercive isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) operating at the level of formal accreditation while leaving day-to-day academic practice comparatively under-monitored, precisely the capacity gap this paper's Context section identifies as structural rather than incidental: a regulator overseeing roughly two hundred institutions cannot verify each one's substantive practice with the depth its own procedural framework implies. Public-sector evidence offers only a limited point of contrast. Charles-Robert's (2014) single-faculty study of LMD professionalisation at the University of Dschang, a public institution, shows what institution-level evidence on implementation looks like, but it cannot stand in for the private sector, where comparable institution-level documentation is not available in the literature reviewed here.

Mobility and Recognition Deficits

Regional credit transfer and mobility arrangements remain incomplete more than fifteen years after the initiating 2005 Libreville Declaration. Business in Cameroon (2021) documents that CEMAC ministers only formally validated a course credit transfer and academic mobility system in 2021, sixteen years after the declaration that first committed member states to regional harmonisation. Set against Senegal's case, a Francophone comparator that adopted LMD in 2005 and had, by the time of ARUA's (n.d.) assessment, already integrated into both the Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie and CAMES's quality assurance system, with a precisely specified credit architecture designed explicitly for international recognition (Sencampus, 2016), Cameroon's regional integration reads as comparatively delayed rather than simply slow in some general sense. This delay compounds the domestic non-recognition problem Mounton Njoya and Maba Kengne (2022) document; a graduate whose credential is not reliably recognised even within Cameroon's own private sector faces a still steeper barrier to regional recognition given the incomplete CEMAC mobility infrastructure described above.

Employability Mismatch

Eta (2018) directly investigates whether LMD's professionalisation goals translated into improved graduate employability in Cameroon, a question this paper's evidence answers only partially in the affirmative. Ntemngweh (2025) supplies vivid, individual-level testimony consistent with a negative answer: one anthropology graduate profiled in that study spent over two years applying for jobs without success, repeatedly told she lacked practical experience despite holding a degree, before eventually accepting work as a receptionist. This individual account should not be read as anecdotal in isolation; the Nkafu Policy Institute (2026) situates it within a national pattern in which roughly 86.6 per cent of total employment sits in the informal sector and young people remain the demographic most affected by unemployment and underemployment regardless of credential level, from no certificate through PhD, the latter point illustrated concretely by the 2018 unemployed-PhD protests discussed in this paper's introduction. Bomda et al. (2022) locate the structural cause: Cameroon's predominantly informal economy limits meaningful university-labour market interaction, and higher education continues training primarily for civil service and formal wage employment even as LMD's professionalisation rhetoric promised broader labour-market relevance.

Institutional Incentives Problem

None of the patterns documented above are best explained as simple institutional failure or neglect; they are also, at least in part, a predictable consequence of the incentives private universities face as revenue-dependent organisations operating within a large, loosely monitored sector. Provini (2019), examining marketisation in Kenyan and Tanzanian higher education, documents how public universities across East Africa expanded into rural areas partly as business strategies, with branch campuses sometimes functioning as private income-generation units operating outside strict oversight, raising equity and quality concerns. While Provini's case is East African and concerns public rather than private institutions, the underlying mechanism, revenue pressure shaping institutional expansion and practice in ways that can work against quality reform, generalises directly to Cameroon's private sector, where the market-legitimacy incentive Steiner-Khamsi (2004) identifies (institutions adopting reform language to secure accreditation and market position) plausibly outweighs any internal incentive to bear the real cost of substantive pedagogical change once formal compliance has already secured that legitimacy.

Discussion and Implications

Read together, the five findings above support this paper's central, "beyond degrees" thesis: credentials alone do not guarantee competency, mobility, or recognition, and treating structural Bologna-style compliance as sufficient risks mistaking the legitimating myth Meyer and Rowan (1977) describe for the substantive reform it was meant to represent. Tied back to the theoretical framework, the pattern documented in the Findings section is not evidence that policy borrowing failed in Cameroon; rather, it is evidence that institutional isomorphism, operating through coercive, mimetic, and normative pressure simultaneously (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), produced exactly the kind of decoupled, symbolic compliance the theory predicts when formal legitimacy can be secured without commensurate substantive change. The national development stakes of closing this gap are considerable: skilled workforce formation, reduced pressure toward brain drain, and improved regional CEMAC competitiveness all depend on graduates whose credentials carry genuine, verifiable value rather than formal labels alone.

This argument invites several reasonable counterarguments, which deserve engagement rather than dismissal. The first concerns cost and capacity: private universities operating on tuition revenue in a competitive market may simply lack the resources to fund the assessment infrastructure, faculty development, and quality assurance staffing substantive Bologna-style implementation requires, regardless of institutional intent. This is a genuine constraint, and Provini's (2019) East African evidence on revenue-driven institutional behaviour suggests it should be taken seriously. The rebuttal offered here is not that cost constraints are illusory, but that phased implementation, calibrated to institutional capacity and paired with regional accreditation partnerships of the kind the HAQAA Initiative (2023) and African Union (n.d.) are already building, could narrow the gap without requiring every private university to match public-sector resourcing immediately.

The second counterargument concerns the risk of "reform theater," the possibility that additional MINESUP enforcement simply generates more sophisticated formal compliance rather than genuine change, deepening rather than resolving the decoupling this paper documents. This is a serious risk this paper does not claim its recommended pathway fully resolves; monitoring mechanisms calibrated to actual practice, rather than documentary compliance alone, would need to be part of any credible response, taken up in the recommendations that follow.

The third counterargument concerns cultural and pedagogical resistance to competency-based models transplanted from a European context. The 2025 retrospective's identification of neo-colonial dynamics in how LMD is perceived gives this concern real weight (Degreume, 2025). The rebuttal draws on Eta's (2015) finding that LMD adoption carried a genuine domestic harmonisation benefit, resolving the dual French and Anglo-Saxon system inheritance, independent of external pressure (Doh, 2007). Framing substantive implementation as an extension of this already partly domestically-owned project, rather than a further concession to an externally imposed template, may reduce the legitimacy deficit Steiner-Khamsi (2004) identifies.

Regulatory recommendations should focus MINESUP's limited monitoring capacity on verified, substantive indicators, learning outcome assessment, faculty qualification depth, graduate tracking, rather than documentary compliance alone (MINESUP, 2023; Kinsmen Advocates Law Firm, 2024). Institutional recommendations should encourage private universities to treat regional accreditation partnerships, of the kind already available through HAQAA3's African Credit Transfer System and proposed Pan-African Quality Assurance and Accreditation Agency (HAQAA Initiative, 2023), as a genuine quality signal rather than an optional extra, since this directly addresses the mobility and recognition deficit documented under Mobility and Recognition Deficits in the Findings section. Regional recommendations should build on the African Union's (n.d.) continental harmonisation architecture and the ongoing CEMAC credit transfer work (Business in Cameroon, 2021), pressing for the multi-year commitments the 2021 CEMAC validation implies to be met on a stated timeline. Sequencing recommendations should be phased, prioritising the institutions and pillars where the gap between structural and substantive implementation is most acute, rather than attempting uniform reform across all two hundred private institutions simultaneously.

Limitations

This paper's document-and-policy-analytic design cannot verify self-reported curriculum and assessment practice independently, a limitation shared with much of the secondary literature it draws on. Access to institutional data across roughly two hundred private higher education institutions is necessarily uneven, meaning the findings above should be read as diagnostic of sector-wide patterns rather than a comprehensive institutional census. Because no primary interview or institutional data are used, no single private institution is examined as a case, so the findings describe sector-wide patterns rather than institution-level variation. Finally, Cameroon's private sector is regionally and institutionally heterogeneous; findings drawn primarily from published policy documents and existing scholarship may understate variation between large urban institutions and smaller regional ones, a limitation that future research drawing on primary institutional data could address.

Conclusion

This paper set out to diagnose the gap between structural and substantive Bologna-style implementation in Cameroon's private universities, to argue why closing that gap matters, and to propose a pathway toward doing so. The evidence reviewed across the Context, Literature Review, and Findings sections supports a consistent conclusion: Cameroon's private universities have adopted the vocabulary and formal architecture of LMD reform considerably faster than they have adopted its substance, a pattern best explained by policy borrowing dynamics, institutional isomorphism and decoupling, and the resulting credential inflation in the labour market.

The broader implication for Cameroon's higher education competitiveness is direct: a private sector that makes up the great majority of the country's higher education institutions and enrols a substantial

minority of its students cannot deliver on LMD's original promise of comparability, mobility, and recognition while this gap persists, regardless of how successfully degree titles and credit labels have been standardised on paper. This carries consequences beyond individual graduates' employment prospects, touching Cameroon's regional CEMAC competitiveness and its broader alignment with continental quality assurance efforts already underway.

MINESUP and private university leadership each have concrete next steps available. MINESUP should shift a portion of its limited monitoring capacity from documentary accreditation review toward verified, substantive indicators, and should set explicit, published timelines for completing the CEMAC credit transfer commitments validated in 2021. Private university leadership should treat regional accreditation partnerships as a genuine quality investment, and should begin the faculty development and assessment-infrastructure investment substantive implementation requires, even where full compliance must be phased. Absent this shift, Cameroon's private universities risk continuing to produce Bologna-labelled degrees that are, beyond degrees in name only.

Declarations

Conflict of interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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