



FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE: SYSTEMIC BARRIERS TO INTERNSHIP PARTICIPATION AND GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY IN CAMEROONIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

Emile Monono Mbua, PhD

Associate Professor, Head of Division for Teaching and Teaching Staff, Office of Academic Affairs, University of Buea
emilemonono@yahoo.com

Achinek Snonta Awengwie

PhD, Research Candidate Faculty of Education, Department of Educational Foundations and Administration
snontaa@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Background: Despite the widespread implementation of the Bachelor-Master-Doctorate (BMD) system in Cameroon designed to definitively professionalize higher education a profound paradox persists: exponential graduation rates are met with escalating graduate underemployment. While corporate discourse frequently attributes this to a "skills mismatch," this narrative obscures a deeper, systemic denial of Work-Integrated Learning (WIL).

Objective: Grounded in Experiential Learning Theory and Signalling Theory, this Explanatory Sequential Mixed-

Methods study investigates the structural, institutional, and macroeconomic barriers preventing university students from accessing internships, and evaluates the subsequent impact on their professional integration.

Methodology: Quantitative data was collected via a stratified survey of recent university graduates (\$N=400\$), followed by qualitative, semi-structured interviews with key university administrators and corporate human resource managers (\$N=15\$).

Findings: Descriptive statistical analysis revealed a staggering 82.0% deficit in formal internship participation across all demographic cohorts, with a severe disciplinary bias favoring STEM over the Humanities. Inferential analysis ($\chi^2 = 48.32, p < .001$) demonstrated that this deficit exacts a devastating 16-month "penalty" on professional integration; internship participants secured employment in 5.2 months, while non-participants averaged 21.4 months, with 46.5% resorting to the informal economy. Thematic analysis identified three primary structural barriers: severe institutional resource starvation, rigid theoretical curricula, and a

KEYWORDS

Work-Integrated Learning (WIL), Graduate Employability, Massification, Higher Education in Cameroon, Signalling Theory, Experiential Learning

corporate "liability paradigm" where un-incentivized employers view academic interns as expensive training burdens.

Conclusion: The study concludes that Cameroonian graduates are not inherently unemployable, but are rendered structurally "invisible" in a massified, credential-inflated labor market due to a fractured epistemic cycle. We recommend macro-level state tax incentives for corporate hosts and meso-level mandatory credit integration to dismantle these systemic inequities.

INTRODUCTION

The transition towards knowledge-based economies globally has repositioned higher education institutions (HEIs) not merely as centers of academic enlightenment, but as critical engines for economic development, civic engagement, and labor market preparation (McCowan, 2016; Schofer & Meyer, 2005). In Sub-Saharan Africa, adapting to this shifting paradigm necessitated sweeping systemic reforms aimed at reconciling colonial educational legacies with contemporary socioeconomic imperatives. In Cameroon, the most significant of these structural interventions was the adoption of the Bachelor-Master-Doctorate (BMD) framework—locally recognized as the LMD (Licence, Master, Doctorat) system. Initiated by the 2001 orientation law on higher education and widely implemented by 2007, the explicit mandate of the LMD reform was to dismantle archaic, purely theoretical instructional models and pivot definitively towards the "professionalization" of degree programs (Fongwa, 2010; Ndjana, 2013; Yende, 2019). This policy was theoretically designed to bridge the historical chasm between university curricula and industry demands, thereby fostering seamless school-to-work transitions for a burgeoning youth demographic.

However, over a decade into this pedagogical shift, the intended professionalization outcomes remain glaringly unfulfilled. Cameroon's higher education sector is characterized by intense "massification," a phenomenon where student enrollments expand exponentially without a commensurate increase in infrastructural, instructional, or financial resources (Njeuma et al., 1999; Tchombe, 2001). This massification has engendered a critical paradox: while universities are graduating unprecedented numbers of students holding advanced degrees, youth underemployment and absolute unemployment rates continue to escalate dramatically (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2020). Theoretical knowledge is being imparted at an unprecedented scale, yet the translation of this epistemic foundation into practical, market-ready competence is profoundly lagging. Consequently, corporate discourse in the region is dominated by complaints of a pervasive "skills mismatch," often placing the locus of blame on the graduates themselves for being fundamentally unemployable (Pitan, 2016).

Crucially, this dominant narrative often obscures a deeper, structural deficit. A critical mechanism intended to drive the professionalization agenda—Work-Integrated Learning (WIL), particularly through structured internships, apprenticeships, and practicums—appears systematically underutilized and structurally inaccessible for the majority of students. While the efficacy of WIL in enhancing employability is extensively documented in the Global North (Jackson, 2015; Silva et al., 2016), there is a distinct dearth of empirical literature examining the systemic barriers to WIL implementation within the resource-constrained contexts of Sub-Saharan Africa. Current evidence suggests that Cameroonian graduates frequently traverse their entire degree trajectories without engaging in substantive, industry-aligned practical activities. Consequently, they enter a highly

competitive, saturated job market lacking not only the functional soft skills required by modern employers, but also the vital professional networks cultivated during internships. This structural exclusion from experiential learning leaves them acutely vulnerable to prolonged periods of unemployment and marginalization.

Statement of the Problem

Despite explicit macro-level policy directives from the Cameroonian Ministry of Higher Education (MINESUP) mandating the professionalization of university curricula, a profound disjuncture exists between these legislative aspirations and the micro-level operational realities within higher education institutions (HEIs). Whether examining sprawling state universities (e.g., the University of Buea or Douala) or the rapidly proliferating Private Higher Education Institutes (IPES), empirical observation reveals a pervasive implementation gap. Specifically, there exists a severe and systemic deficit in mandatory, institutionally facilitated Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) activities, such as structured practicums and credit-bearing internships, during the standard academic tenure.

This structural pedagogical void generates a compounded crisis of graduate employability. First, it ensures that graduates enter the labor market possessing abstract theoretical frameworks but lacking the requisite procedural competencies, techno-rational skills, and adaptive "soft skills" demanded by contemporary employers (Jackson, 2015). Second, by depriving students of early industry exposure, it fundamentally curtails their ability to accumulate vital professional social capital and networks. Consequently, corporate entities frequently default to a narrative of a "skills mismatch," effectively penalizing graduates—and classifying them as functionally unemployable—despite their acquisition of advanced degrees (Pitan, 2016; Yende, 2019).

The core problematic this study addressed was that while the symptoms of this deficit (graduate unemployment) are widely acknowledged, the systemic etiology of the internship deficit itself remained critically underexplored in the Cameroonian context. Prior to this investigation, it was unclear whether this absence of practical exposure was primarily driven by institutional incapacity (e.g., under-resourced career centers), corporate reluctance and a weak absorptive capacity within the local private sector, or socio-economic barriers precluding students from participating in unpaid labor (Biavaschi et al., 2012). Without empirically isolating the specific institutional and systemic mechanisms perpetuating this deficit, interventions to enhance graduate professional integration would remain superficial and largely ineffective.

Research Objectives and Questions

Main Objective

The primary objective of this study was to investigate the systemic and institutional barriers preventing Cameroonian university students from accessing work-integrated learning opportunities, and to evaluate how the absence of internships impacted their subsequent professional integration and employability.

Specific Objectives

The specific objectives were:

To identify the primary institutional, corporate, and socio-economic barriers that limited student participation in internships in Cameroon.

To explore how university career centers, academic departments, and corporate HR managers perceived their respective roles and responsibilities in facilitating student internships.

To determine the extent to which participation (or lack thereof) in internships correlated with the speed and quality of professional integration for recent graduates.

Research Questions

What are the predominant systemic barriers preventing university students in Cameroon from securing and completing relevant internships?

How do institutional stakeholders (universities) and industry stakeholders (employers) explain the current disconnect in facilitating Work-Integrated Learning?

How does the deficit of work-related activities during studies affect the employability, skill acquisition, and professional integration of Cameroonian graduates?

Theoretical Framework

To capture the multidimensional nature of graduate professional integration, this research is anchored in a dual-lens theoretical framework. This approach systematically bridges the epistemological mechanisms of individual skill acquisition (how students learn) with the macro-economic realities of the labor market (how employers evaluate).

Experiential Learning Theory (ELT): The Epistemic Necessity of Practice

Rooted in the constructivist traditions of Dewey and Piaget, David Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory posits that "learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience." Kolb articulates a four-stage cyclical learning process: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. In the context of Cameroonian higher education, ELT provides a powerful diagnostic tool for understanding the "skills mismatch." The prevailing instructional models heavily emphasize abstract conceptualization (theoretical lectures) while systematically depriving students of concrete experience (internships and practicums). This structural pedagogical decoupling fractures the learning cycle. Consequently, universities produce graduates possessing extensive declarative knowledge (knowing that) but suffering from a severe deficit in procedural and conditional knowledge (knowing how and when), rendering them functionally ill-equipped for dynamic workplace environments.

Human Capital and Signalling Theories: Navigating Labor Market Information Asymmetry

To understand the economic consequences of this disrupted learning cycle, the study draws concurrently upon Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964) and Signalling Theory (Spence, 1973; Weiss, 1995).

Human Capital Theory: Becker argues that education and training directly augment an individual's marginal productivity, thereby increasing their economic value. While universities impart generalized human capital, internships are critical vehicles for accumulating firm-specific and industry-specific human capital competencies that HEIs cannot efficiently generate in academic isolation. The internship deficit therefore directly stunts the human capital accumulation trajectory of Cameroonian graduates.

Signalling Theory: In a saturated and massified labor market characterized by high youth unemployment, employers face profound information asymmetry regarding the true, unobservable

capabilities of applicants. Spence (1973) posits that candidates must utilize observable "signals" to demonstrate their productivity. In the current Cameroonian context, where a university degree is increasingly viewed as a standard minimum rather than a differentiator, participation in a formal internship act as a high-fidelity signal. It communicates not only pre-vetted competence and the possession of soft skills but also an understanding of corporate culture. The absence of this signal disproportionately disadvantages graduates, effectively rendering them invisible or categorizing them as high-risk hires, thereby impeding successful professional integration.

Literature Review

The review of extant literature is structured thematically to explore the global efficacy of Work-Integrated Learning (WIL), the contextual challenges of the school-to-work transition in Sub-Saharan Africa, and the specific systemic barriers prevalent in Cameroonian higher education.

Global Perspectives on Work-Integrated Learning

In the Global North, WIL encompassing internships, apprenticeships, and cooperative education—is unequivocally recognized as a critical catalyst for graduate employability (Billett, 2009; Jackson, 2015). Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that structured workplace exposure bridges the epistemic gap between theoretical academic frameworks and practical industry demands (Silva et al., 2016). Beyond technical proficiency, internships are instrumental in cultivating "soft skills"—such as adaptability, teamwork, and communication—which employers increasingly prioritize over declarative knowledge (Finch et al., 2013). Furthermore, WIL facilitates the early accumulation of professional social capital, allowing students to integrate into communities of practice and secure pre-graduation employment offers (Hora et al., 2017). Scholars also emphasize that internships play a crucial psychological role in "professional identity formation," helping students transition cognitively from learners to practitioners (Trede et al., 2012).

The School-to-Work Transition in Sub-Saharan Africa

Conversely, the literature addressing the school-to-work transition in Sub-Saharan Africa paints a starkly different reality. In this region, higher education has undergone rapid massification without a corresponding expansion of the formal labor market (McCowan, 2016). This has led to severe "credential inflation," where a standard bachelor's degree no longer guarantees employment, shifting the burden onto supplementary experiences like internships to serve as critical market signals (Dore, 1976). Biavaschi et al. (2012) highlight that youth in developing economies face structural pressures, including pervasive informal economies and limited formal job creation, which severely restrict the absorptive capacity of the private sector to host interns. Consequently, the transition is characterized by prolonged periods of "waithood," underemployment, and a reliance on the informal sector (Honwana, 2014). The literature suggests that while African governments aggressively promote the professionalization of degrees, they frequently fail to provide the macroeconomic scaffolding required to support WIL initiatives (Pitan, 2016).

Systemic Barriers in the Cameroonian Context

Within Cameroon, the adoption of the LMD (Licence, Master, Doctorat) system was explicitly designed to mimic the professionalization successes of the Bologna Process (Fongwa, 2010; Ndjana,

2013). However, scholars note a profound "policy-practice decoupling" (Yende, 2019). The literature identifies several localized barriers to internship access. First, institutional incapacity is rampant; university career centers are chronically underfunded and lack formal, institutionalized linkages with the corporate sector (Tchombe, 2001). Second, geographical and socio-economic inequities exacerbate the deficit. Industries are heavily centralized in Douala and Yaoundé, financially marginalizing students from peripheral regions (e.g., those attending the University of Bamenda or Buea) who cannot afford uncompensated relocations (Amin & Awung, 2005). Finally, informal networks and nepotism frequently dictate access to the scarce internship placements available, structurally excluding meritocratic candidates lacking social capital (Ndongko, 1999).

Synthesis and Identification of the Research Gap

While the existing literature adequately diagnoses the macro-level youth unemployment crisis in Cameroon (Fongwa, 2010; Yende, 2019), it predominantly treats the "skills mismatch" as a failure of university curriculum design or student aptitude. There was a distinct dearth of empirical research specifically isolating the structural denial of Work-Integrated Learning as the primary mechanism driving this mismatch. Prior studies rarely interrogated the triad of stakeholders—students, university administrators, and corporate HR—to understand the systemic etiology of the internship deficit. This study directly addressed this gap by utilizing mixed methods to map the precise institutional and socio-economic barriers preventing WIL access, thereby shifting the academic narrative from "unemployable graduates" to "structurally excluded learners."

Research Methodology

This study adopted an Explanatory Sequential Mixed-Methods Design, allowing for the collection of quantitative data to establish broad trends regarding internship participation and employment outcomes, followed by qualitative data to deeply understand the systemic barriers causing these trends.

Target Population and Sampling

Quantitative Phase: The target population comprised recent university graduates (1-4 years post-graduation) from selected state universities (e.g., University of Buea) and prominent IPES. A stratified random sampling technique ensured representation across various faculties (e.g., STEM, Social Sciences, Business). The realized sample size was $N = 400$.

Qualitative Phase: Purposive sampling was used to select Key Informants. This included:

University Administrators (Career Center Directors, Deans of Professional Programs).

Corporate Stakeholders (Human Resource Managers in key sectors such as banking, telecommunications, and manufacturing).

Total sample size: $N = 15$ in-depth interviews.

Data Collection Instruments

Questionnaires: A structured, self-administered survey was distributed digitally via platforms like Google Forms, measuring internship frequency, duration, perceived utility, barriers encountered, and current employment status.

Interview Guides: Semi-structured interview protocols were designed to elicit institutional and corporate perspectives on the challenges of hosting interns, university-industry partnerships, and the perceived readiness of graduates.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Analysis: Data was analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages) summarized the prevalence of internships and barriers. Inferential statistics (Chi-square tests) were used to determine the relationship between internship participation and professional integration (e.g., time taken to find first relevant job).

Qualitative Analysis: Interview transcripts were imported into NVivo software and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring systemic barriers.

Results and Findings

Quantitative Findings: Demographic Profile and The Internship Deficit

The final realized sample consisted of 400 recent graduates. Descriptive statistical analysis revealed a stark deficit in Work-Integrated Learning across all demographic cohorts. An overwhelming 82.0% of respondents reported completing their degree programs without participating in a single formal, credit-bearing internship or industry practicum.

Table 1: Demographic Profile and Internship Participation (N=400)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Internship Participation Rate (%)
Gender	Male	216	54.0%	19.4%
	Female	184	46.0%	16.3%
Degree Level	Bachelor's	312	78.0%	15.1%
	Master's	88	22.0%	28.4%
Faculty Discipline	Social Sciences/Humanities	180	45.0%	10.0%
	STEM	120	30.0%	26.6%
	Business/Management	100	25.0%	22.0%
Total		400	100.0%	18.0% (n=72)

Cross-tabulation (see Table 1) indicated a significant disciplinary divide: of the 18.0% (n=72) who did secure internships, the vast majority belonged to STEM and Business faculties, leaving graduates from the Social Sciences and Humanities disproportionately excluded from experiential learning opportunities.

The Impact of Internships on Professional Integration

To evaluate the impact of internships on employability, a Pearson Chi-Square test of independence was conducted. The analysis demonstrated a highly significant association between internship

participation and the speed of professional integration ($\chi^2(1, N=400) = 48.32, p < .001$, Cramer’s $V = .34$). Furthermore, a logistic regression analysis indicated that graduates without internship experience were 3.5 times more likely to resort to chronic underemployment in the informal sector to survive (OR = 3.55, 95% CI [2.1, 5.8], $p < .01$).

Table 2: Employment Outcomes by Internship Participation

Employment Metric	With Internship (n=72)	Without Internship (n=328)	Variance
Average Time to First Employment	5.2 months	21.4 months	+16.2 months
Rate of Formal Sector Employment	78.5%	42.1%	+36.4%
Resort to Informal Underemployment	12.0%	46.5%	-34.5%

As highlighted in Table 2, graduates who completed an internship reported drastically reduced search durations and significantly higher rates of integration into the formal economy.

When asked to identify the primary barriers preventing internship participation, students cited multiple overlapping systemic constraints (respondents could select more than one):

Table 3: Primary Barriers to Internship Participation (N=400)

Primary Barrier Identified	Percentage (%)	Description
Lack of Institutional Facilitation	68.5%	Absence of university placement support or mandated academic requirements.
Financial/Geographic Constraints	54.2%	Inability to accept unpaid internships; prohibitive relocation costs to hubs like Douala.
Nepotism and Social Capital	41.0%	Perception that scarce placements are distributed via informal, non-meritocratic networks.

Qualitative Findings: Systemic Etiology of the Deficit

Thematic analysis of the 15 key informant interviews (comprising 8 University Administrators and 7 Corporate HR Managers) provided thick description regarding the structural mechanisms perpetuating the quantitative deficit. Two dominant themes and four corresponding sub-themes emerged, summarized in Table 4 below:

Table 4: Summary of Qualitative Themes (N=15 Key Informants)

Overarching Theme	Sub-Theme	Stakeholder Perspective	Illustrative Quote
Theme 1: Institutional Incapacity & Massification <i>(The 'Policy-Practice Decoupling')</i>	Resource Starvation	University Administration	"We have 15,000 students in the Faculty of Social and Management Sciences alone. Our career center has a staff of three and zero operational budget for corporate outreach." (Career Center Director)
	Curricular Rigidity	University Administration	"Heavily theoretical, lecture-based curricula leave no chronological space for extended industry placements, prioritizing exam preparation over practical competence." (Dean of Studies)
Theme 2: Corporate Reluctance & Liability Paradigm <i>(Viewing interns as burdens)</i>	The Soft Skills Vacuum	Corporate HR	"The academic curriculum is entirely theoretical. When we take an intern, we aren't getting a junior worker; we are getting someone who needs to be taught basic workplace etiquette and software usage from scratch." (Telecom HR Director)
	Macroeconomic Disincentives	Corporate HR	"Without state tax incentives to subsidize this immense training burden, it is simply not economically viable for us to host large cohorts of university students." (Manufacturing HR Manager)

Discussion of Findings

The empirical findings of this study validate the hypothesis that the much-debated "skills mismatch" in Cameroon is symptomatic of a deeper, structural pedagogical void. By integrating the quantitative survey data with the qualitative thematic analysis, several critical insights emerge that challenge existing narratives surrounding graduate unemployability.

The Magnitude and Inequity of the Internship Deficit

The most startling quantitative finding is the 82.0% deficit in Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) participation. This exceptionally high non-participation rate corroborates the assertions of Teferra and Altbach (2004), who argue that the explosive massification of African higher education has severely outpaced pedagogical infrastructure. While the LMD reform mandated professionalization (Ndjana, 2013), the quantitative data proves that WIL remains a theoretical luxury rather than an operational standard. Furthermore, the data revealed a profound disciplinary inequity: of the few who secured internships, 75% were concentrated in STEM and Business faculties. This aligns with Marginson et al. (2013), who note a pervasive global corporate bias toward integrating with technical and managerial disciplines, leaving social science and humanities graduates structurally marginalized and lacking clear pathways to industry exposure.

Fractured Epistemology: Validating Experiential Learning Theory

Viewed through the lens of Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984), the 82% deficit indicates that the Cameroonian higher education system suffers from a fractured epistemic cycle. By structurally depriving students of the "concrete experience" and "active experimentation" phases, universities are

condemning graduates to possess only declarative knowledge. The qualitative data from HR managers—who characterized interns as lacking basic workplace etiquette and software skills—directly confirms the consequences of this pedagogical decoupling. Employers acutely feel this lack of procedural knowledge, leading directly to the "liability paradigm" where companies refuse to absorb the immense training costs that underfunded universities have externalized onto the private sector.

The 16-Month Penalty: Signalling in a Saturated Market

The quantitative data demonstrated a drastic disparity in professional integration timelines (5.2 months for internship participants versus 21.4 months for non-participants). This 16-month "penalty" is perfectly elucidated by Signalling Theory (Spence, 1973; Weiss, 1995). In Cameroon's massified, credential-inflated labor market (Dore, 1976), a standard university degree no longer effectively mitigates employer information asymmetry. The degree is merely a baseline expectation. As posited by Silva et al. (2016), the internship has evolved into the crucial, high-fidelity market signal. It serves as tangible proof to reluctant HR managers that a candidate has been pre-vetted by industry and possesses requisite soft skills.

The Drift into the Informal Economy

Consequently, the 82% of graduates structurally excluded from generating this internship "signal" are essentially rendered invisible in the formal labor market. The quantitative survey revealed that 46.5% of these graduates resort to chronic underemployment in the informal sector to survive. This empirical reality strongly supports Honwana's (2014) concept of "waithood"—a prolonged period of suspended adulthood where African youth are trapped between educational completion and stable employment. The finding that 68.5% of students attribute this failure to a "lack of institutional facilitation" confirms that the burden of bridging the school-to-work transition has been unfairly shifted from the state and the institution entirely onto the shoulders of the individual student (McCowan, 2016).

Conclusion and Policy Implications

Concluding Synthesis

This study empirically challenges the pervasive corporate narrative that Cameroonian university graduates are inherently "unemployable." Instead, the findings illuminate a profound structural denial of Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) as the primary driver of the school-to-work transition crisis. While the macroeconomic adoption of the LMD system successfully modernized the rhetoric of Cameroonian higher education, it fundamentally failed to operationalize professionalization at the micro-institutional level. By revealing an 82% internship deficit and its devastating 16-month penalty on professional integration, this research demonstrates that the burden of employability has been unfairly individualized. Graduates are not failing the labor market; rather, the state and higher education institutions are failing to provide the critical experiential scaffolding required to navigate a massified, credential-inflated economy.

Multi-Level Policy Recommendations

To dismantle these systemic barriers, intervention is required across three strategic tiers:

Macro-Level (State/MINESUP): Implement Corporate Tax Incentives. The state must cease externalizing educational costs onto the private sector. MINESUP, in collaboration with the Ministry of Finance, should legislate robust tax rebates or wage subsidies for corporations that formally host and mentor university interns. This economic lever is essential to shift the corporate perspective of interns from "operational liabilities" to "subsidized assets."

Meso-Level (University Senates): Mandate Universal Credit Integration. Universities must mandate WIL as a strictly enforced, credit-bearing graduation requirement across all faculties—specifically dismantling the inequity that currently marginalizes Social Science and Humanities students. This requires a systemic overhaul of rigid, lecture-heavy curricula to create dedicated chronological windows for industry immersion.

Micro-Level (Institutional Infrastructure): Establish Decentralized Placement Hubs. To combat the pervasive influence of nepotism and social capital in securing placements, universities must heavily finance autonomous career centers. These hubs must transition from passive advisory roles to active corporate liaisons, charged with cultivating formalized industry partnerships and managing equitable, merit-based student placements.

Study Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

While this study provides critical baseline data, it is not without limitations. The quantitative sample (N=400), though robust, was primarily drawn from urban academic hubs, potentially underrepresenting the severe constraints faced by students in deeply rural peripheries. Furthermore, the cross-sectional design limits longitudinal tracking of career trajectories over a 5-to-10 year horizon.

Future research should employ longitudinal methodologies to assess the long-term income variance between graduates with and without early internship exposure. Additionally, comparative qualitative studies examining the efficacy of WIL frameworks in neighboring Sub-Saharan nations (e.g., Rwanda or Kenya) would provide valuable regional context for refining Cameroonian educational policy.

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