

Academics' Professional Identity: Conflicting Personal Values of Academics and Institutional Culture

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Abstract: Higher education is driven by the objective of establishing an educational setting in which academics and students collaboratively construct and convey scientific knowledge and values that can be utilised in the future. Academics' professional identity focuses on their professional interests, values, and commitments to important work duties. Consequently, academics' professional identity may encounter obstacles when faced with conflicting misalignment between their values and university culture. This paper utilises a qualitative case study with an interpretive paradigm to investigate how academic identity is constructed through the conflicts that arise from the discrepancy between individual values and institutional culture. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine academics purposively selected from an English-speaking university in Cameroon to gain insight into the phenomenon. The gathered data were coded and analysed thematically. The findings reveal the existence of conflict between academics' personal values and institutional culture in the study context. It was found that there is a lack of integrity and ethics within the academic environment,

particularly regarding financial transactions and the exploitation of educational practices by some leaders, academic staff, and students. Additionally, issues such as insufficient remuneration, delayed payment, and fear of physical and professional reprisal within the university impact academics' professional identity and self-worth. To address these challenges, it is crucial to tackle delayed wages, foster a supportive environment, align academic values with university beliefs, and promote political neutrality in the study context.

Keywords: Academics' professional identity, higher education, institutional culture, personal values.

1. Introduction

Higher education is driven by the objective of establishing an educational setting in which academics and students collaboratively construct and convey scientific knowledge and values that can be utilised in the future. In the Cameroonian context, Bouba (2016) posited that lecturers are often believed to have significant control over course content, structure, references, teaching methods, and assessment modes, earning them the metaphorical "yam and the knife" in students' academic lives at Cameroonian universities. In the process of cultivating knowledge, academics at these universities construct their professional identity through teaching, research, and community engagement or outreach (Folabit et al., 2023; Clarke, 2015; Schamp, 2018; Tülübaş & Göktürk, 2023).

Erdem (2023) defined academic identity as a comprehensive and multidimensional concept that encompasses the qualifications and characteristics of scholars who conduct their studies based on scientific methods. Academics with well-defined identities are adept at teaching, critically analysing phenomena, maintaining an open-minded approach, and challenging biases through academic discourse (Erdem, 2023). This means that academics' identity embodies a dedication to scientific rigour and intellectual curiosity while also defending the principles of science against dogmatic beliefs and biases.

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Similarly, Winter (2009) contended that academics' professional identity is a fusion of their professional and personal selves, which are often shaped by interpersonal interactions within their work environment. Academic identity is not constructed in isolation, as values play a role in the process of developing this identity. According to Vähäsantanen et al. (2020), professional identity focuses on the individual's present professional interests, ambitions, values, commitments, and judgments of important work duties, future orientations, and goals. It encompasses parts of the individual's history, present, and future.

Research suggests that challenges faced by academics at Cameroonian universities extend beyond government and political intervention, encompassing the role such interference plays in fostering corruption (Fombad, 2000; Guerrero-Dib et al., 2020; Kah, 2010; Ngenge, 2020). Corruption is perpetuated by a lack of integrity within the education system. Guerrero-Dib et al. (2020) argued that professionals within the education system must integrate integrity and ethical behaviour into their personal values to imbue the university's endeavours with ethical significance. The absence of a culture of integrity in these institutions may lead to conflicts between academics' personal values and institutional culture, influencing how they navigate their roles and responsibilities. Therefore, this study aims to explore how conflicts between academics' personal values and institutional culture influence their professional identities at a Cameroonian university. The present paper intends to respond to one research question: How do conflicting personal values and institutional culture influence academics' professional identity?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Personal values

Academics at Cameroonian University grapple with ethical conduct, intellectual freedom, and the pursuit of knowledge, particularly in light of the ongoing socio-political crisis in the English regions of the country (Biradzem, 2021). While academics naturally uphold their values upon appointment to a faculty position at the university, the institution also has its own set of norms and standards. Moreover, cultural attributes vary significantly across institutions, ranging from a strong emphasis on academic freedom, diversity, and inclusivity to more hierarchical or traditional structures. According to Sagiv et al. (2017), personal values are the encompassing objectives that inspire an individual's actions and serve as guiding principles in their life. In the educational context, these values reflect individuals' perceptions and declarations about themselves, given their subjective nature. They possess subjectivity and play a crucial role in influencing human behaviour. The academic context is characterised by a multitude of intricate complexities that serve as a framework within which the values, beliefs, and professional roles of academics converge and interact. One of the numerous factors that influence an academic's identity is the interplay between personal values and institutional culture.

According to Ertosun and Adiguzel (2018), values define the culture of an organisation and have an impact on the behaviour and judgement of its staff. This is because values can be seen as enduring frameworks of experiences that shape and affect an individual's overall conduct (Ertosun & Adiguzel, 2018). Given that academics possess their own distinct established values, which may have been derived from experiences that impact how they construct their professional identity, understanding academic identity requires an exploration of the intricate transformations occurring within higher education (Folabit, 2022). These transformations encompass various elements, including the working conditions of academics, the curriculum, the profiles of students, and the influence of leadership on the personal and professional lives of academics (Folabit, 2022). Furthermore, Folabit (2022) added that if institutional dynamics (cultures) do not align with the values and beliefs of academics, this misalignment can potentially affect the development of their academic identity. Consequently, this study aims to contribute to the existing body of knowledge in the context of a Cameroonian university within the framework of this contention.

Austin (1990) highlighted five core values that form the foundation of the academic profession in higher education. The first value is the *pursuit of knowledge, truth, and understanding* through research, writing, publication, and instruction. *Autonomy and academic freedom* are valued for maintaining quality and safeguarding creative ideas through peer review processes and tenure. *Intellectual honesty* and fairness are also crucial, with faculty expected to avoid plagiarism or falsification. Collegiality is emphasised as the ideal framework for faculty interactions and institutional decision-making, with the belief that universities are communities of scholars working together to govern the institution. Finally, the *academic profession* is committed to serving society, as faculty members not only produce knowledge but also transmit culture.

2.2 Institutional culture

While a universally accepted definition of institutional culture remains elusive (Niemann, 2010), Tierney (2008) argues that this concept has become integral to research in higher education and organisational studies. Institutional culture encompasses the norms, values, and ideologies that shape and sustain an organisation. Interpreting institutional culture is subjective and varies among individuals, leading to the introduction and propagation of diverse perspectives and concepts (Tierney & Lanford, 2018). Niemann (2010) emphasises the need for universities to establish a positive culture, particularly in interpersonal interactions, to counteract adverse sentiments like discrimination. Unfortunately, institutional culture in universities receives insufficient attention in terms of understanding and improvement (Niemann, 2010). Tierney and Lanford (2018) further state that individuals transitioning to different universities may encounter significant differences in dynamics with leaders and expectations related to teaching, research, and community engagement. Organisational culture encompasses various components such as mission, leadership, environment, information, strategy, and socialisation (Tierney, 2008). Institutional culture, as defined by Vieira et al. (2014), refers to prevalent patterns of expressed values that are considered legitimate due to collective experiences and problem-solving. Moreover, academics construct their professional identity and navigate the demands of a multifaceted occupation influenced by stress based on their alignment with institutional cultures. Conflicting work ideologies can lead to divisions in academic identity, particularly when individual agency is compromised by strategies emphasising group effort and institutional independence (Vieira et al., 2014).

In Cameroon, the higher education system, particularly public universities, exhibits complexity due to its interconnectedness with the country's linguistic diversity, diverse ethnic population, and historical legacy of British and French colonial influences (Biradzem, 2021). Biradzem (2021) argues that this multifaceted diversity is overshadowed by socio-political factors. Notably, the political nature of these institutions, characterised by government intervention, significantly shapes the academic landscape and institutional autonomy (Appiagyei-Atua et al., 2015). This influence stems from the fact that public universities are established by the state, thus granting the government control over key aspects such as curriculum content, professionalisation roles, mission, and institutional culture (including leadership appointment) (Appiagyei-Atua et al., 2015; Folabit et al., 2023). These external interventions, combined with challenges related to limited resources, impact the quality of educational infrastructure and the overall culture within these universities. As a result, academics in this context must navigate a range of experiences, challenges, and influences.

Given the political culture of these institutions and their need to adapt to policy changes affecting academic teaching, research activities, and other facets of academic life, academics often find themselves torn between an academic identity that prioritises scholarship (Ching, 2021) and one that focuses on the development of their professional identity. The exploration of external factors that influence the development of academics' professional identities has prompted empirical investigations (Whitchurch & Gordon, 2010) into this phenomenon. While studies have examined the impact of personal values on academics' research self-efficacy (Ndiango et al., 2023), the tension

between personal values and institutional culture among academics (Vieira et al., 2014), and the complexities surrounding personal values in the formation of academic professional identities shaped by institutional components (Clarke et al., 2013), the influence of conflicting personal values and institutional culture on the professional identities of academics in the Cameroonian context has been largely overlooked. This study seeks to address this research gap.

3. Methodology

This research paper examines the impact of conflicts arising from the discrepancy between personal values and institutional culture on the identity of academics. The data obtained from participants was analysed within the framework of the interpretivist paradigm. According to Thanh and Thanh (2015), the interpretive paradigm allows researchers to understand the world from the participants' perspectives as they utilise their experiences to formulate and interpret their understanding based on the collected data. Therefore, researchers who adopt interpretivism focus on obtaining subjective knowledge through methodologies such as observation and in-depth discussions with individuals or small groups. This aligns with the broader qualitative analysis framework, where a more comprehensive set of data is sought from a limited number of participants through interviews. As a result, this study conducted interviews with nine participants in order to establish significance.

The study employed a qualitative approach, using a case study design and an interpretive paradigm. According to Tuffour (2017), qualitative research aims to understand and clarify the significance individuals attach to their own experiences. Furthermore, Tuffour (2017) argues that qualitative research not only reveals the essence of the social world but also explores human experiences. Cropley (2019) emphasises that qualitative research focuses on how individuals interpret real-life experiences using their language and how these interpretations are analysed within the context of the behavioural sciences. Thus, the use of qualitative research in this study is justified, as it aims to investigate the formation of academic identity among academics in relation to the interaction between their personal values and the cultural influence of the institution. Case study research, as explained by Hays (2003), involves a thorough examination of individuals, subjects, concerns, or programmes. Case study researchers aim to generate new knowledge by exploring interactions, occurrences, explanations, interpretations, and cause-and-effect relationships. Cohen et al. (2013) argue that case studies delve into underlying issues and explore the experiences that contribute to the existence of the individual or phenomenon under investigation. In this paper, the case being studied is academics at a university in Cameroon.

The participants for the study were selected using a purposive method, with nine academics chosen based on their prior knowledge. It should be noted that these participants do not represent the entire population. The decision to include only nine participants was motivated by the study's primary focus on their life experiences, which required a comprehensive understanding of the details within the paper. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather data. These interviews allowed for the capture of the full range of the participants' experiences. A total of nine interviews were conducted, with each interview lasting between thirty and forty minutes. Research ethics were upheld by obtaining a letter of authorisation from the research unit, with protocol number HSSREC/00003429/2021, to include academics in the study. Participants also provided their consent through consent forms and were made aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any time.

To protect participant anonymity, pseudonyms were assigned to the nine participants during the interviews. The titles "Mr." and "Ms." were used before their chosen pseudonyms to indicate gender distinction. Male participants were represented by pseudonyms such as Paper, Same, Pen, Wood, and Bottle, while pseudonyms including Myth, Calve, Pressure, and Fair represented female participants. These participants were from diverse cultures and backgrounds and were selected to add credibility by providing different perspectives. Ethical clearance was obtained from the university to involve its lecturers in the research.

The data gathered through interviews underwent coding using Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework of thematic analysis. After transcribing and becoming familiar with the data, an inductive approach was used to generate initial codes by identifying key concepts through a process of reading and re-reading. These initial codes were then organised into coherent categories by the researchers, identifying recurring themes across the datasets. These themes were thoroughly reviewed and refined to ensure accuracy. Ultimately, three distinct themes emerged, which were then discussed in relation to relevant literature.

4. Presentation of Results

This section presents the findings regarding the influence of conflicting personal values and institutional culture on the professional identity of academics at a university in Cameroon. To analyse the findings, relevant excerpts from the coded data were categorised to highlight instances where participants provided the strongest evidence. Including excerpts from participants who possess valuable insight into the specific claims enhances the credibility of the study (Rockmann & Vough, 2023). In order to maintain credibility, the participants' narratives are presented exactly as they were narrated. The findings are organised into three main themes: inadequate financial motivation and institutional support, political climate and academic freedom, and integrity.

4.1 Unsatisfactory financial motivation and institutional support

Unsatisfactory financial motivation and institutional support can lead academics to invest less effort into their work. The timely receipt of wages has a direct impact on work performance in a professional environment. How academics fulfil their responsibilities within the higher education setting is influenced by the potential consequences of delayed payment, which can result in reduced performance. The study revealed that participants feel undervalued for their work either because they are not paid or because they experience delays in payment. Supporting this, one participant mentioned that:

"My dues should be given when they are due, and this doesn't happen very often" (Mr. Paper).

Academics warrant equitable treatment based on their diligent endeavours, particularly given their extensive responsibilities. Striving to attain a harmonious equilibrium represents a perpetual pursuit, which varies among individual academic personnel, owing to their distinct aspirations and personal inclinations pertaining to their vocational trajectory. The university bears the responsibility of cultivating and recognising the value of their work-life balance by adequately remunerating these academics. Their assiduous exertions ought to be incentivised whilst affording them the due reverence and esteem. In this regard, participants voiced the following sentiments:

"When people are not taken care of, when hard work does not pay, and when excellence is not valued, you are bound to feel like the underdogs in society. Sometimes, this can make me feel low esteem as an academic, which may influence the way I identify as an academic." (Mr Same).

"Sometimes, you have benefits that you are supposed to get from the institution from files that are supposed to be paid or you are supposed to be paid for and you don't get them." (Ms Myth)

"When you think that the dean probably should be able to address your need and then he channels the resources maybe to another need that you are not involved in, probably paying for contractors rather than giving the remuneration to the academic staff that are under his control." (Ms Calve).

*“When you are expecting your pay and they don’t come, it becomes a problem, or if they delay ... that is one of the things that could bring me into conflict with hierarchy.” (Mr Pen).
“In terms of getting what you are supposed to at the right time, it has also affected planning. I would have loved to go to a conference, but I do not have the money to go because these are the kinds of finances that we use to travel. So, when it is not paid, you are not sure of when you will have that money. It affects your planning; it affects my academic research because I don’t know when maybe finances will trickle in.” (Ms Pressure).*

The statements provided by these five participants collectively underscore the challenges and dissatisfaction they face within their institution. The lack of alignment between hard work and rewards is a significant concern. These participants highlighted the prevailing obstacles encountered within their institution. For example, the recurring themes of delayed recognition, inadequate compensation, and issues with resource allocation paint a collective picture of an environment where diligent efforts and exceptional performance may not be promptly acknowledged, potentially impacting the development of their academic identity and self-esteem. Consequently, the narratives of these participants demonstrate the need for institutions to address these challenges in order to foster a supportive and equitable environment for academic staff, recognising the significance of timely recognition and fair compensation in cultivating a positive academic culture.

4.2 Political climate and academic freedom

In any organisation, employees typically demonstrate commitment and engagement in their work environment when they feel a sense of connection to the organisational culture. A healthy institutional culture may contribute to satisfaction and a sense of value among academics, thereby positively influencing professional development. Conversely, participating academics who value the ability to express themselves freely felt that political interference had created a fear of retaliation and a lack of academic freedom within the study context, which is not indicative of a supportive work environment. In this regard, Ms. Fair stated:

“as I look at our political and social environment, I don’t believe that there are some issues where I can freely express my own opinions without fear of reprisals.”

In relation to the articulation of personal viewpoints, the investigation revealed a distinct absence of freedom of expression within the prevailing study environment. Participants attested to their inability to voice dissenting opinions due to apprehension of potential consequences. This attests to a cautious disposition toward the capacity to openly express oneself. Institutions of higher education ought to be devoid of any overt external pressures, given their designated role as centres of knowledge generation and dissemination. Scholars should be empowered to engage in pedagogical practices that they deem suitable for facilitating student comprehension, devoid of any concerns regarding retribution. Another participant expressed the following sentiment:

“So, as a young academic, my teaching suffers because of some form of reprisal; if you try to challenge the status quo or bring about a different orientation to how things are, you may face physical reprisal. So, to avoid being sanctioned for speaking the truth, all of us just have to be careful in doing what we love doing – our job.” (Mr Bottle).

Academic freedom is a crucial aspect that must be upheld and implemented in the realms of teaching, research, and community engagement. The fundamental goal of a university is to facilitate an environment that encourages autonomous intellectual exploration, thereby nurturing academic brilliance. As stated by Mr. Wood:

“[i]t is forbidden for you to express your views, especially about administration because they will try to make you fall because you are not permitted to express your views.”

The political environment of the study context restricts academics from freely sharing their views, especially those critical of the institution's administration. This is because, mostly, the university may actively limit their ability to express themselves by creating boundaries that could hamper their career. This highlights limitations on academic freedom and freedom of expression, particularly when it comes to politically sensitive topics. The following participants noted:

"I can't criticise government actions, decisions or projects, even if it involves raising intellectual criticism, because they will nail my career." (Ms Pressure).

"There is a conflict between your political values and those of the university administration. I have no choice but to conform to the political values of the administration and see how I can work within them." (Ms Calve).

As per the participants' narratives, this study found a pervasive climate of fear, political restrictions, and self-censorship within the academic setting that influenced their identity as academics. They expressed concerns about both physical and professional reprisals in the context of trying to challenge the status quo or expressing dissenting political views. The participants described their university as a system where political affiliations strongly influence academic freedom, limiting their ability to voice opposition-like statements or critique government actions. The fear of consequences, such as negative reports that might affect their academic profession, leads to self-censorship and careful navigation of their political values within the institution. The study further revealed a challenging environment where expressing independent political ideologies is seen as a threat, impacting both the professional conduct of academics and their ability to freely impart knowledge in areas with sensitive political implications. The fear of intimidation and its repercussions create a complex dynamic that affects teaching and research, career choices, and personal values within the university.

4.3 Integrity

Integrity represents the attribute of being truthful and demonstrating an unwavering commitment to moral and ethical principles and values. Mr Bottle expressed his view of integrity by stating that,

"I just love it when people play fair, being honest, you know, that level of integrity that is essential because of our background, you know. But when you are in a system where lack of integrity is a normal thing, it's discouraging; I wasn't raised like that."

Higher education institutions function as complex systems in which individuals from diverse backgrounds and with different values come together, often leading to a lack of alignment with institutional cultures. The data revealed that the integrity and moral values of the participants clashed with the prevailing culture of dishonesty within their university. The participants expressed concerns about integrity and ethical dilemmas in the academic environment. They raised issues related to administrative processes and pedagogy, specifically regarding financial transactions and the exploitation of educational practices, thus emphasising the need for integrity and ethical behaviour among certain university leaders, lecturers, and students. The following interview excerpts provide valuable insights into the participants' firsthand experiences.

"I do not believe that I need to give a financial token or pay for services that are not supposed to be paid for and this sometimes gets me offended, especially when those who are supposed to treat your document require you to give them a little tip and all that for them to carry your file around for the boss to sign and all that." (Ms Fair).

"The problem is not the institution but the people who work within the institution. Of course, the culture of a university will not encourage dishonesty. Let me tell you, if you try to show

morality (laughs), you will hear things like, 'What do you want to show people?' So, you see, you just have to mind your business and just do your job." (Mr Wood).

The individuals operating within the given context have a significant impact on the integrity and ethical standards of the institution. The lack of integrity is typically demonstrated by individuals who perceive their actions as ordinary, as their authority goes unquestioned. This is particularly evident in the case of leaders holding positions of power within the institution. Being at the helm of the organisation, these leaders have the freedom to act according to their own preferences. Moreover, due to the prevailing culture of intimidation mentioned by the participants earlier, the fear of facing negative consequences already exists. Consequently, individuals are unwilling to jeopardise their careers. The issue of demanding money from students in exchange for grades or engaging in unethical practices such as "sex for grades" is a prevalent problem in many higher education institutions in Africa, which was also brought to light in this study. While such incidents are commonly associated with interactions between students and teachers, this study reveals that some leaders are also implicated based on the claims made by the participants. As mentioned by Ms. Pressure:

"I should call it integrity or ethics, but let me go with the word integrity. Yes, if I'm teaching students, for example, I am not supposed to use that, uh, teaching-learning transaction for other purposes apart from that which allows me to nurture them to gain knowledge and skills to attain a qualification. But I found out that some of the university leaders here who are supposed to be role models take advantage of the teaching-learning process, be it in classroom teaching or research supervision for personal aggrandisement, they get financial rewards from it; they get – how do I put this? – they get other material benefits from it and it's sad to say, they get sexual benefits from it. So, I'm finding it difficult to answer this question – What is the role of a teacher? Is it to teach specific content, is it to transfer knowledge, or is it to groom the student or the learner holistically?"

Another participant added that:

"When you look at them (leaders) from a distance perspective, your expectations or your perception is ok, because they are leaders at this level; this is who they should be, this is who they are. But when you get closer to them, you find the contrary and you are worried about the future of the students; you are worried about the future of the university; you are worried about the future of the country, because you know the society is highly criticised by intellectuals because of such things." (Mr Same).

As it is often said, looks can be deceiving. This study has found that there is a discrepancy between perceptions of leaders and the actual reality when individuals interact with them more closely. According to the narratives provided by participants, leaders are initially viewed positively and are expected to possess the qualities associated with effective leadership when observed from a distance. However, upon closer interaction, participants claim that there is a contradiction between their initial positive expectations and the leaders' actual behaviour. This inconsistency causes concern for the participants, as they believe that the leaders' behaviour could have a negative impact on the future of students, the university, and society as a whole. For the participants, these contradictions not only contribute to criticism of their own intellectual abilities, but also that of the institution.

5. Discussions of Findings

The conflict between an academic's values and the prevailing institutional culture can significantly impact their overall experiences and professional identity. An institution's culture is shaped by shared values derived from collective experiences. Academics in these institutions develop and navigate their professional identity, as well as manage stress, following the institutional culture (Vieira et al., 2014). Personal values encompass objectives that inspire an individual's actions and

function as guiding principles in their life within the educational context, given their subjective nature (Sagiv et al., 2017). However, this study found that conflicting work ideologies and values of academics lead to divisions in academic identity, especially when individual agency is compromised by strategies not favouring group effort and institutional independence (Vieira et al., 2014). For instance, this study found that there is unsatisfactory financial motivation and a lack of institutional support. It appears that participants are not only undervalued despite the work they put in; they also experience a delay in their wages, which affects their academic identity and self-worth. Issues such as lack of institutional support, insufficient remuneration, and resource allocation were major concerns. These issues emphasise the need for institutions to address these challenges to foster a supportive and fair environment for academic staff. This is why Niemann (2010) asserted that universities must establish a positive culture, particularly in terms of interpersonal interactions, to mitigate the occurrence of adverse sentiments such as discrimination.

Public universities in Cameroon are established by the state; as such, the government influences the pedagogical content, mission, professionalisation roles, and institutional culture (leadership appointments) of these institutions (Appiagyei-Atua et al., 2015; Folabit et al., 2023). This means that the political nature of these institutions, marked by government political intervention, plays a significant role in shaping the academic landscape and institutional autonomy (Appiagyei-Atua et al., 2015). For instance, the study found that the political climate on academic freedom and commitment indicates an unhealthy institutional culture that may not foster satisfaction, value, and professional development. This political interference instils fear of physical and professional reprisal, preventing academics from expressing concerns or challenging the status quo. Participants described their university as a system where political affiliations strongly influence academic freedom, limiting their ability to voice opposition or critique government actions. The fear of negative reports that might affect their academic profession leads to self-censorship and careful navigation of their political values within the institution, creating a complex dynamic affecting teaching and research, career choices, and personal values within the university.

Austin (1990) highlighted five key values forming the foundation of the academic profession in higher education. However, her explanations of these values do not align with the findings of the study. Austin (1990) argued that the following are all fundamental values: (1) the pursuit of knowledge, truth, and understanding through research, writing, publication, and instruction; (2) autonomy and academic freedom are valued for maintaining quality and protecting creative ideas through peer review processes and tenure; (3) intellectual honesty and fairness; (4) collegiality emphasises the ideal framework for faculty interactions and institutional decision-making, with the belief that universities are communities of scholars working together to govern the institution; and (5) the academic profession is committed to service to society, as faculty not only produce knowledge but also transmit culture. However, the challenging environment where the expression of independent political ideologies is seen as a threat impacts both the professional conduct of academics and their ability to freely impart knowledge in areas with sensitive political implications.

Tierney and Lanford (2018) argued that the interpretation of institutional culture by individuals is primarily subject to their understanding, which in turn may lead to the introduction and propagation of new viewpoints and concepts derived from said subjectivity (Tierney & Lanford, 2018). This is because culture may materialise when individuals transcend their original cultural background and acknowledge that their values, attitudes, and behaviours may clash with the principles of a new cultural milieu. Suppose an academician transitions to a different university after an extended tenure at a previous institution, it is highly probable that the dynamics between them and leaders, as well as the expectations about teaching, research, and community engagement, will differ significantly (Tierney & Lanford, 2018). For instance, this study also found a lack of integrity among academics, students, and leaders at the study context. Integrity and demonstration of commitment to moral and ethical principles are crucial. However, when a lack of integrity is the norm, it can be discouraging.

Higher education institutions are complex systems where individuals with diverse backgrounds and values often clash with institutional culture. Academic's integrity and moral values may clash with the prevailing culture of a lack of integrity within their university. The study found that there is a contestation between the perceptions of leaders and the observed reality upon closer interaction. Participants had a positive image and expectations of these leaders, believing that they embody the qualities of what leadership entails. However, upon closer interaction, there was a contradiction between their initial positive expectations and the observed behaviour of the leaders. This dissonance contributes to the criticism of not only their intellectual capability but also that of the institution. These findings align with Folabit's (2022) claim that if institutional dynamics (cultures) fail to align with the values and beliefs of academics, this misalignment can potentially affect the development of their academic identity. Arvaja (2018) concurred that the establishment of academics' professional identity may encounter obstacles when confronted with persistent and unaddressed conflicts, as well as a lack of alignment between academics and the expectations of the organisation.

6. Conclusion and Recommendation

Public universities in Cameroon have been and continue to be affected by government and political interference. This interference has resulted in conflicts between the personal values of academics and the institutional cultures, which significantly impacts their professional identity within the study context. Government intervention not only influences the university's mission, leadership appointments, and pedagogical content but also affects what is taught and how it is delivered in the classroom. This study examines concerns regarding integrity and ethical dilemmas within the academic environment, particularly regarding financial transactions and the exploitation of educational practices by certain leaders, academic staff, and students. The findings of this study argue that the problem lies not in the institutional culture itself but rather in the individuals operating within the given context. The absence of integrity is often exhibited by individuals who perceive their actions as normal, as their authority goes unquestioned. This is particularly evident in the case of leaders holding positions of power within the institution, as well as academics who have significant control over course content, structure, references, teaching methods, and assessment modes, and who are the driving force behind students' academic experiences at the university. It is crucial to have alignment between the personal values of academics and the culture of the university, as an institutional culture is rendered useless if it conflicts with the values of the academics.

Therefore, due to the lack of institutional support, insufficient remuneration, limited academic freedom, and the prevailing lack of integrity identified in this study, this paper provides several recommendations. Firstly, to foster a flexible and supportive environment, the study context should address issues of undervaluation, delayed wage payments, and lack of support. Secondly, higher education stakeholders should create an environment that promotes a positive institutional culture that aligns with academics' values. Thirdly, to ensure a harmonious environment that supports the professional development of academics, university leaders must ensure that academics' values and beliefs are in line with those of the institution. Fourthly, all stakeholders in higher education should develop diverse strategies to address conflicting work ideologies and values in order to promote a consistent academic environment. Finally, universities should strive for political neutrality by minimising political interference that instils fear and intimidation and limits academic freedom. The recommendations provided in this study can inform policies and practices in higher education institutions worldwide. Despite its contributions, this study has certain limitations. It is limited to a single English-speaking university, and further research should include French-speaking universities both within Cameroon and internationally. Additionally, a comparative study could be conducted to gain a deeper understanding of this phenomenon.

7. Declarations

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