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## Academics' Perspectives on the Nature and Tradition of Appointments of University Leaders at a Cameroonian University

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**Abstract.** The appointment of leaders at Cameroonian universities is a tradition that has dominated the operations and autonomy of the institutions since the establishment of state universities under the 1993 reforms. This gave authority to the government to decide the pedagogical and academic activities of these universities and to appoint and dismiss their leaders without accountability. Based on a larger study, this qualitative single-case study employed semi-structured interviews and reflective practices in the form of reflective journals. The perspectives of 11 purposively selected academics were explored regarding their perspective on the appointment process of leaders at a Cameroonian university and its implication on their professional identities. Distributed leadership theory and the force field model for teacher development were the theoretical frameworks used for data generation and analysis. Data were thematically analyzed, with analysis indicating that the two-step commission process at the university and Ministry of Higher Education, designed to appoint qualified individuals, is often bypassed. Some individuals secure leadership positions through political, economic, and tribal connections. Individuals appointed based on affinities often lack the necessary skills and competence, sometimes displaying limited knowledge of the system's functioning. Conversely, qualified candidates without such affiliations are often overlooked, primarily due to their apolitical stance, resulting in their files frequently being left unassessed for appointments.

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It is recommended that policymakers, university leaders, and other stakeholders collaborate to establish transparent, merit-based appointment processes, while maintaining the autonomy of the institutions.

**Keywords:** academics; appointments; higher education; leadership; professional identity

## 1. Introduction

Academics' professional identities represent a blend of their professional and personal selves, which are often shaped by interpersonal work-related interactions (Caza & Creary, 2016). For the purposes of this paper, academics' professional identity is defined as encompassing teaching, research, and community outreach (Schamp, 2018). Given the pivotal role that leadership in higher education plays and its potential influence on the performance and development of academics' professional identities, the process of appointing these leaders is important, as their effectiveness in guiding and inspiring the academic community may be dependent on their skills in these roles. Rowe (2007) defined leadership as the ability to elicit extraordinary performance from ordinary people by motivating followers to collaborate with one another, regardless of the socio-dynamic context. This definition underscores the role of leadership in eliciting exceptional efforts and cooperation from team members (academics) without any form of bias or discrimination.

African universities, as socially dynamic institutions, have faced a plethora of post-independence challenges identified in the context of curriculum structure, leadership, massification, the pressure on academics to publish or perish, and academics' mandatory community engagement. Frantz et al. (2022) argued that these complexities are in part due to the colonial history that is deeply rooted in most of these institutions. Bakuwa and Mouton (2015) and Hanson and Léautier (2011) espoused that African universities require committed leaders who can take on the task of fostering institutional leadership that translates leadership competencies into strategic assets to solve these problems. What these authors may mean is that to respond to challenges, higher education institutions (HEIs) need leaders with the capability to stimulate significant competencies from their followers to mitigate these challenges.

However, studies have shown that HEIs in Africa and Cameroon, in particular, lack a model type of institutional leadership capable of responding to the challenges that these institutions face (Sall & Oanda, 2014). According to Cetin and Kinik (2015), African (Cameroonian) university leaders lack basic leadership skills, and the selection process sometimes relies on their reputations for brilliance in research or other fields of competence, which does not necessarily equate to successful academic leadership abilities. It seems that the challenge lies in identifying suitable candidates with leadership qualities for the university context. This lack of leadership abilities may be indicative of the nature of the appointments of university leaders. Sebola (2023) argued that although universities need visionary leaders with the ability to plan and target achievable

strategic objectives, government and political-party interference has tempered the autonomy and independence of these universities. Despite South Africa's democratic stance, some university leaders have been appointed because of their political affiliations (Sebola, 2023). These political appointments speak to the nature and tradition of the appointment of university leaders at Cameroonian universities.

The nature and tradition of appointing university leaders have been an ongoing debate within the educational sector. According to Mbah (2016), this has been so due to the intricate power dynamics within African universities, primarily influenced by the state's tradition of political appointments. Some scholars have contended that appointments should maintain the very nature of a merit-based, well-defined selection process characterized by years of post-professorial qualification, academic and administrative qualifications, and diverse experiences (Oladimeji & Oladejo, 2023). Conversely, others have argued that these appointments have shifted towards a tradition of political favoritism by the state (Ogunode & Sarkinfada, 2023). This has thus led to instances where universities find themselves under the sway of governmental influence and control, especially in matters concerning recruitment, appointments, and, at times, research and publication (Mbah, 2016).

While debates on university leader appointments persist, there is a dearth of research on the subject from academics' perspectives, especially regarding its impact on their professional identities in the context of Cameroon. As university leaders bear the responsibility of guiding their teams of lecturers to achieve educational objectives (Oladimeji & Oladejo, 2023), this paper aims to explore academics' perspectives regarding the nature and tradition of university leader appointments at a Cameroonian university and how these appointments impact their professional identities. Therefore, the present paper attempts to answer three critical questions:

1. What are academics' perspectives on the nature of the appointments of university leaders at a Cameroonian university?
2. What are academics' perspectives on the tradition of appointments of university leaders?
3. What are academics' perspectives on the implications of the nature and tradition of the appointments of these leaders on their professional identities?

## **2. Contextual Understanding of the Appointments of University Leaders in Cameroon**

Cameroon is a country in West-Central Africa. It is bordered by Nigeria on the west and north; Chad on the northeast; Central African Republic on the east; and Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, and the Republic of the Congo on the south. Its coastline is on the Bight of Biafra, which is part of the Gulf of Guinea and the Atlantic Ocean. The country has been classified as belonging to both camps due to its strategic location at the crossroads of West and Central Africa. Its nearly 27 million inhabitants speak 250 native languages. Cameroon was handed over to Britain (West Cameroon) and France (East Cameroon) as League of Nations-

mandated territories in June 1916. In 1972, the two Cameroons merged to form the Federal Republic of Cameroon. Thus, two educational subsystems exist: the Anglophone subsystem and the Francophone subsystem (Alobwede, 2020; Eposi & Ewange, 2021). The first tertiary institution was established with the assistance of France in 1962. This institution was the National Institute for University Studies, which is now known as the University of Yaoundé (Schamp, 2018). By September 1962, the university had 600 students enrolled in the faculties of arts and social sciences, science, law, and economics (Samfoga-Doh, 2009). Given that this university was Cameroon's only tertiary institution between 1962 and 1993 (Eta et al., 2018), the government established schools in provincial centers as branches of the mother university in 1977 in response to increased enrolment and demand for higher education in applied sciences (Schamp, 2018). Following the 1993 reforms, these institutions were transformed into established universities (Nyoh, 2018).

The 1993 reforms put in place a new leadership structure that governs these universities, which includes the rectors, chancellors (university presidents), and all faculty deans, all appointed directly by the head of state (Ngenge, 2020). It is argued that these universities are primarily political and then professional institutions because they are government-created (Ngenge, 2020). The political nature of universities, then, influences the mission, staff constitution, and professionalization rules of these institutions (Ngenge, 2020). The government's decisions in these universities are communicated through a hierarchical chain, starting with the minister, to the pro-chancellor, deputy chancellor, and vice chancellor. The vice chancellor then communicates rules and regulations to administrative personnel, academic personnel, and students (Ngenge, 2020).

Ultimately, according to Law No. 005 of April 16, 2001, which governs higher education in Cameroon, the government has overall control over universities' academic and pedagogical activities (Guiake & Tianxue, 2019). It appears that the university leaders have limited autonomy over the functioning of these public universities, even though one of the objectives of the 1993 reforms was to "*grant universities more academic and management autonomy*" (Njeuma et al., 1999, p. 9). It is claimed that the government has the power to appoint and dismiss public officials without having to account to the public, whose taxes fund these sectors (Ngenge, 2020). Given this authority, the government gets to select leaders to lead these universities. It is alleged that, often, those appointed are either party loyalists or people from the same ethnic group (Beti or Bulu) as the government officials in charge of the appointment (Awah, 2018; Fombad, 2000). These appointments are so undefined that junior civil servants from different ministries or primary schools have been appointed as leaders despite having no knowledge or working experience of the operations of higher education (Fombad, 2000).

Furthermore, some scholars have purported that since most of those appointed are generally appointed for political reasons or allegiance, these political processes exhibit great wealth and status. Those appointed are driven around in flashy cars, protected by security officers, and receive other benefits such as

mansions, cars, medical care, and travel and sitting allowances (Djeudo, 2013). In light thereof, Kah (2010) contended that the *“culture of appointment in Cameroon breeds arrogance and consumption of the state’s resources without any conscience from the state functionaries”* (p. 23). He added that these appointments are frequently anticipated because individuals are anxious to transfer allegiance from the ousted to the new person so that they may continue to parade in the halls of power. Djeudo (2013) affirmed that creating clientelistic and patrimonialistic networks is the quickest route to the *“national cake”* or *“state cake”*, and as a result, *“Cameroonians have diverted their energies away from labours of love to create these clientelistic networks, which have a negative impact on the economy”* (p. 7).

In their study, *Endemic corruption in Cameroon: Insights on consequences and control*, Fombad (2000) argued that those who are appointed in leadership positions in government institutions and attempt to criticize the regime have been *“purged and replaced by pliable political sycophants, with little regard for their experience, competence, or merits”* (p. 244). What Fombad (2000) may have meant here is that appointed leaders in these public universities cannot have contrary opinions to the government’s actions. Apparently, they have to support the government’s decisions, even if these decisions do not align with their own beliefs, leading to possible spillover in the public universities due to political meddling. Fombad (2000) claimed that corruption has always been a feature of Cameroonian politics and has been used as a means of acquiring and maintaining political power such that political appointments infiltrate all the public services. Moreover, the appointees are accountable only to the one who appoints them and to the ruling party (Kah, 2010). This, therefore, leads to political bickering not only within the ruling Cameroon Peoples Democratic Movement (CPDM) but also between regions (Kah, 2010) of the country. This appears to be due to the competition among political servants to succeed one another as the most loyal and dependable servant (Kah, 2010).

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

The principles of Samuel’s (2008) force field model (FFM) for teacher development and Spillane’s (2006) distributed leadership theory were used as lenses to understand academics’ perspectives on the nature and tradition of the appointment of university leaders. According to Samuel’s (2008) FFM, four interconnected forces, namely biographical, contextual, grammatical, and institutional forces, shape the identity of teachers in a school system. Samuel (2008) considered the biographical forces as internal forces because they comprise components of an individual’s culture and background. He argued that teachers are different, and in their diversity, *“no two teachers are identical in their experiences, personalities, training, and interpretations of their role as members of a community involved in the practice of teaching and learning”* (p. 8). Samuel (2008) argued that although teachers are required to be accountable to the larger system, the learners, and the discipline or curriculum at the same time, they can have autonomy and excel in their profession, provided they grasp the push and pull forces that encroach on their professional identity. Contextual forces, on the other hand, are macro-social, political, and cultural contexts in which academics work. Given that external contextual forces, such as government funding,

changing policies, technology, and political parties, can influence teachers, Romylos (2018) argued that teachers may sometimes rely on their personal beliefs about what they believe the learner should know and how courses can be implemented. Third, institutional forces are those “*distinctive values, visions, stated missions, and theoretical underpinnings that influence the role and identity of the members belonging to that institutional community*” (Samuel, 2008, p. 13). Lastly, programmatic forces, also known as curriculum intervention forces, control and direct the sequence of a curriculum’s teaching and learning content in an institution (Samuel, 2008). To Samuel (2008), the post-apartheid era is rich not only with educational policies that are believed to have influenced and brought about certain changes in the South African educational environment but also with political ideals imbedded in the system, which impacts teachers’ evolution. This stance is consistent with the 1993 reforms, which resulted in new pedagogical improvements in Cameroon’s higher education as well as the manner in which university heads are appointed through the government’s constant interference in those universities’ pedagogical activities.

Spillane (2006) posited that distributed leadership is the interaction between leaders, followers, and their situations. Wan (2014) defined distributed leadership as comprehensive task and social interaction sharing. Unlike other leadership theories, which assume that leadership is a vertical process that separates leaders from followers and is influenced by roles and duties (Spillane, 2006; van Ameijde et al., 2009), distributed leadership as a framework considers the practice of division of leadership (Gronn, 2002). The interpretation of distributed leadership varies and it has gained popularity over the years (Harris & Spillane, 2008) in both practitioner and academic literature in several practice-based social sciences, business, and health. Nonetheless, it has received less attention in higher education. Bolden et al. (2009) stated that even the processes and practices of distributed leadership and the implications for leadership practice and development are neglected in universities. Concerns have been raised about the concept, which is seen as part of a linguistic maneuver by universities to avoid consulting their staff and students (Thorpe et al., 2011). Notwithstanding, Timperley (2013) argued that the hierarchical leadership style, which involves a horizontal process of top-down decision-making, no longer appeals. Both theories are relevant in that they focus on understanding academic perspectives and experiences in the context of university leadership appointments. While the FFM focuses on the forces that shape academics’ professional identities, the distributed leadership theory addresses their interactions with leaders and the decision-making process. Together, these frameworks provide an in-depth examination of the complex dynamics involved in the appointment of university leaders. Thus, in this study, data were generated and analyzed in accordance with Samuel’s FFM and Spillane’s distributed leadership theory, as explained in the methodology section.

#### **4. Research Methodology**

This study is a qualitative case study framed from a larger study that sought to explore how university leaders are appointed in the context of a Cameroonian university. As a qualitative study, the participants gave their perspectives on the

implications of the nature and tradition of the appointment of the university leaders on their professional identities. According to Creswell and Creswell (2017), qualitative research provides an understanding of the significance that individuals or groups assign to a social or human problem. In defining the study's sample, our primary objective was to identify academics who had demonstrated effectiveness in their roles as teachers, researchers, and community service providers. Since it was not feasible to access the entire population, Malterud et al. (2016) suggested that a purposive sample of six to ten participants with diverse experiences can provide sufficient information about the phenomenon. Consequently, we purposively selected eleven lecturers, comprising nine males and two females, employed for over a year, representing various academic departments, disciplines, and ranks, and with experience in leadership appointments and their impact on their professional identities, in order to understand how the reality (Hesse-Biber, 2010) of leaders' appointments fits into this study's context. Participant demographics are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Demographic information of participants**

No.	Gender	Age group (years)	Rank	Faculty / Department	Experience as an academic
1	Male	35-40	Lecturer	Education/ Educational Leadership	2-5 years
2	Male	40-45	Associate professor	Arts / Literature and Philosophy in History	12-15 years
3	Male	35-40	Instructor	Agriculture and Veterinary Medicine / Fisheries and Applied Aquaculture	6-10 years
4	Male	30-35	Assistant lecturer	Education / Educational Psychology	2-5 years
5	Male	30-35	Lecturer	Education / Educational Psychology	6-10 years
6	Male	35-40	Assistant lecturer	Social and Management Sciences / Economics and Accounting	2-5 years
7	Male	35-40	Lecturer	Sciences/Environmental Sciences / Occupational Health and Safety	5-10 years
8	Male	50-55	Associate professor	Arts / History and African Civilisation	Above 15 years
9	Male	30-35	Assistant lecturer	Law and Political Sciences / English Law	4-5 years
10	Female	35-40	Lecturer	Agriculture and Veterinary Medicine / Agricultural Economics and Agribusiness	5-10 years
11	Female	30-35	Assistant lecturer	Social and Management Sciences / Geography	2-5 years

Table 1 shows that most participants fell within the 35–40 and 30–35 age groups. In addition, the majority were males (9, 82%) and the minority females (2, 18%) females. Participants' level of experience varied, spanning 2–5 years, 5–10 years, 6–10 years, 12–15 years, and 15 years or more. Ten participants held PhDs, while one was actively pursuing a PhD. Given the challenge that comes with conducting cross-border research, we used snowball sampling to recruit the participants. Semi-structured interviews spanning between 25 minutes and 2 hours were conducted via Zoom and WhatsApp platforms. To gain more understanding of the reality of how the participants' truth was experienced, they were further asked to reflect and give their perspective on how the university leaders were appointed to their positions. In this regard, we asked that participants review, reconsider, process, and clarify an earlier discussion during the interview into a reflective journal (Billups, 2021).

Subsequently, data collection was carried out from December 2021 to March 2022. The data generated were then transcribed and coded. Inductive and deductive coding were used in the data analysis procedure. To begin, we used inductive coding to interpret the raw data. We extensively evaluated the data and developed early codes describing its core principles using open coding. Following that, we deduced patterns among these codes and organized them into themes. These themes were then matched to current theories and literature. Subsequently, we created an analytical framework by subdividing these themes and assigned applicable codes to associated data sections. Finally, the data were analyzed using thematic analysis to investigate the interconnectedness of the themes.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the interview questions, we subjected the interview schedule to peer review, where it underwent scrutiny, recommendations for modifications, and validation of the tool. Subsequently, we revisited the questions and incorporated the necessary corrections based on the feedback received. Ethical considerations influenced the study procedure, which included seeking and securing the gatekeeper's authorization from authorities who control access to research. Authorization to conduct the research was obtained from the research site's deputy vice chancellor. An informed consent form was also distributed to the participants, which they had to read and understand and then sign. This was done to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Participants preferred numeric pseudonyms over names and were therefore assigned numbers from 1 to 11 sequentially during interviews.

## **5. Presentation of the Findings**

The data that were generated through semi-structured interviews and participants' reflections in their reflective journals are presented and discussed in this section. The themes generated and discussed are 1) academics' perspectives on the nature of the appointment of university leaders, 2) academics' perspectives on the tradition of the appointment of university leaders, and 3) academics' perspectives on the implications of the appointment of university leaders on their professional identities. These themes are significant

because they constitute the foundation for the appointment of university leaders in Cameroon's higher education context.

### 5.1 Academics' Perspectives on the Nature of the Appointment of University Leaders

Universities the world over have procedures and criteria in place to appoint their leaders. The findings of the study reveal that there are steps that should be adhered to when appointing university leaders. Elaborating on this, Participant 3 stated that:

*"there are four or five major criteria. First, appointments go by rank – maybe your qualifications or academic background; secondly, the number of years of teaching; thirdly, which is very important, your publications; fourthly, the number of students you have supervised; and number five, if you have grants that you've won that you've brought to the university that have contributed academically."*

Although these criteria are standard, how the appointment is done is at the discretion of the government and the minister of higher education. Whether the leaders are qualified or not is determined by these two authorities. Participant 1 confirmed this by explaining that *"the appointment of university leaders is done either by the minister of higher education or the benevolence president of the republic, which is different from other countries that I know"*.

According to Participant 7,

*"because in our country we have a centralized system, the pro-chancellor, vice chancellor, deputy vice-chancellors, registrars, deans are appointed through a presidential decree, while heads of departments and the unit heads are appointed through a prime ministerial decree."*

Furthermore, although there are two committees that oversee these appointments, some individuals who do not meet the stated criteria have used their connections to be appointed as leaders at these universities. Emphasizing this, Participant 5 claimed that:

*"there are two commissions guiding the appointment of leaders at public HEIs in Cameroon; those who have connections with the commission that sits and deliberates on the files submitted for appointment have been appointed to leadership positions at universities in Cameroon."*

It appears that public universities in Cameroon are led by individuals who might not be qualified for the position, but because they have people who help push their agenda, they end up occupying these positions. Attesting to this, Participant 4 stated that:

*"there is a commission that sits at the level of the university to validate the candidatures of individual staff to permit them to move to higher levels. If you know the members of that commission when they're sitting and you can push your way through them, then you can move."*

Participant 4 further validated this point by arguing that:

*“There are two things involved: people who have a genuine background who are duly selected at the level of the university and then sent to the CCIU (Consultative Committee of University Institutions) in Yaoundé; and then you have people who are unduly selected at the university level because of political, economic, and other influences and sent to Yaoundé, where that same mechanism takes place. And then there are people who follow these due processes; their documents are clean, everything about them is good, and then they are selected at the university level and CCIU in Yaoundé.”*

The data also reveal instances where appointments have originated directly from the National Assembly, which is not in accordance with the designated process, as only the president of the republic and the minister of higher education are authorized to make such appointments. Participant 4 alluded that:

*“Even without going to the minister, there is a case that we had that was in the faculty somewhere, let me put it this way, and it seems that case was handed to the Ministry of Higher Education from the National Assembly, which means this particular candidate had someone in the National Assembly, and this someone was close to the Speaker of the National Assembly. The Speaker of the National Assembly handed the candidate to the minister, but the department and the faculty had a competent candidate they had selected for that position, which they were going to send to the university to send to the minister. But now the minister has received a case from the Speaker of the National Assembly, who is like his boss. What he does now is to hand down that file to the vice chancellor with instructions and the vice chancellor in turn sends it to the dean of faculty with instructions, and that candidate is instituted.”*

As per participants' claims, it appears that the appointment of some qualified individuals is only possible if the two commissions that sit to critically examine and validate the files of the candidates presented by the university do so without any form of bias. However, given that the final decision of whoever is appointed is dependent mostly on how influential the committee members are and their connections with people of interest, the decision regarding appointment may be tampered with. Studies have found that the government has the power to appoint and dismiss public officials without having to account to the public, whose taxes fund these sectors (Ngenge, 2020). As such, the government and minister have appointed individuals based on political affinities with the state political party and other forms of connections. It appears that certain people have a leadership monopoly because of their connections, such that those with qualifications but no political affiliations sometimes do not secure appointments at the university. This finding contradicts the principles of distributed leadership, which consider the practice of division of leadership (Gronn, 2002). This aspect of power concentrated in the hands of political affiliates may be the reason Thorpe et al. (2011) raised concerns about the absence of distributed

leadership in HEIs, especially because it is seen as part of a linguistic maneuver by universities to avoid consulting their staff and students.

## 5.2 Academics' Perspectives on the Tradition of the Appointment of University Leaders

Appointments have been made without respecting the standard process, as mentioned by participants in this study. Although there are processes guiding the appointment of university leaders mentioned, these are not possible, according to participants, because of political affinities such as "patron-client" or "godfatherism", where *"people have to pay some due somewhere in order to earn their appointment"* (Participant 8). Participant 3 explained that, *"[i]f you don't have a godfather, it limits your potential to excel."* Therefore, having the required qualification in the study context is no guarantee for appointment or promotion if the applicant does not have a "godfather". For instance, Participant 9 claimed that: *"It is a common tendency in our country that if you are not part of the ruling party or you know somebody who is in the ruling party, you'll be unable to benefit from some of these appointment opportunities."*

According to some participants, people are rewarded for their "good deeds" within the state political party, and, as such, they are appointed because *"you have fought for the party. You are an associate professor; let's give you this position"* (Participant 5) and not because they have earned that position. The participant continued that, with these types of political appointments, *"they (appointed university leaders) do any kind of thing there without thinking about the growth of the institution."* In addition, Participant 9 noted that, *"so far as you are in the CPDM and you can sing their song, you would be appointed."* Participant 5 further explained that:

*"If you are not part of the political system, be it in the ruling party or you know somebody who is in the ruling party, I'm not sure you'll be able to benefit from some of these appointment opportunities."*

According to the participants' accounts, the appointment of university leaders seems to be influenced by their affiliation with state political parties. Consequently, individuals not aligned with the ruling party might face limited prospects of being selected for such positions. However, this study also found that ethnic-tribal background also informs the tradition of appointment of university leaders. In this regard, Participant 4 noted:

*"There is also the tribal factor. If you have to do a statistics of appointments that are carried out, you see the tendency that there is a number of people from a particular tribe who have the upper hand, specifically within the university context and within the higher education framework in the entire country."*

Political and tribal affinities seem to dominate the tradition of the appointment of university leaders, and these affinities serve as a barrier to other individuals who do not belong to either of these strands. This resonates with literature indicating that appointments have shifted towards a tradition of political favoritism by the state (Ogunode & Sarkinfada, 2023). Studies have also found that Cameroonian universities, being state-created, are primarily political and

then professional institutions, such that the political nature of these universities may influence the mission, staff constitution, and professionalization rules of the institutions (Ngenge, 2020). Consequently, those who are politically committed and have shown their unflinching support for the ruling party are appointed to leadership positions, which may result in tensions within the institutions. This finding aligns with Samuel's (2008) notion of macro-contextual forces, which emphasizes that forces such as government funding, changing policies, and political parties exert influence on teachers' identities.

### 5.3 Academics' Perspectives on the Implications of the Appointment of University Leaders on Their Professional Identities

This was the third theme that emerged from the data as a way of addressing the implications of the nature and tradition of the appointment of university leaders on participants' professional identities. The relationships that university leaders build with their followers will determine how academics will construct their professional identities. However, if there are tension and conflict because of rancor from previous experiences, there will be no collaborative decisions, leading to lack of productivity. Accentuating this, one of the participants stated that:

*"You are in the department, then you see decisions being taken without your consultation, and when you are productive in the international world because of your feasibility, but somebody does not just like your face because he thought that the previous HOD was your own friend. 'Now it is our time' ... that thing is very common. 'Now it is our time.' So you can get those types of statements; how do you expect productivity to come from 'now is our time'?" (Participant 8)*

It seems that the arrogance of some of these leaders is linked to their political appointment. This finding aligns with literature showing that *"the culture of appointment in Cameroon breeds arrogance and consumption of the state's resources without any conscience from the state functionaries"* (Kah, 2010, p. 23). This culture of political appointments intensifies political bickering within the ruling CPDM and also within and between regions. This is because they are competing to be the most loyal and dependable servant (Kah, 2010).

In the context of the study, it appears that certain leaders lack the capability to inspire exceptional performance from average individuals due to their inability to motivate followers to engage in collaborative efforts, irrespective of the social and dynamic circumstances (Rowe, 2007). Leadership entails being able to implement one's own skills for the advancement of an organization. However, data in this study show contrary findings, as it emerged that some of the leaders that are appointed do not have the ability to lead HEIs. Attesting to this, Participant 5 noted that:

*"... you are not appointed to come and start learning the system; you are appointed to implement. There will be no collaboration, because those that have the capacity to build the institution won't collaborate with you, because you find yourself getting confused with the whole process."*

Having no skills as a leader poses a collaboration challenge with the followers, because these followers expect a leader who can lead them and not one who has no skills. Elaborating on this, Participant 2 stated that:

*"You cannot bring somebody who has never governed, somebody who has never taught in the university, to come and head the university or to come and head the faculty. It becomes problematic, because such a person will not even know what to do."*

This lack of competence is largely because there are no training programs for leaders at universities. Agreeing to this, Participant 8 observed that, *"these leaders have not received mentoring, and when leadership is not given by experience and by qualification, how do you expect somebody to give out what the person does not know?"* According to Participant 5, this lack of skills is also because the leaders have been appointed in sectors other than higher education.

*"the tendency of appointing unqualified persons to lead the university, especially the fact that some of those appointed by the minister of higher education are primary school teachers or secondary school teachers to head a position in a university, has a lot of implications not just on research, outreach, and professional development, but it shapes the mind set of lecturers."*

The lack of a consistent succession practice of leadership also emerged in the findings. Participant 1 noted that universities do not *"practice a static or a fixed leadership configuration where you can actually say [that] after this person, this person will be next, like in some universities where they look at longevity in service, experience, and maybe rank"*.

The apparent nonexistence of practical knowledge of how higher education functions means that these appointed leaders, especially those from different sectors, struggle to make informed decisions and to understand the complexities of higher education governance. The role of the state in deciding and appointing people based on their political affinities creates a self-governing void, *"which affects creative and innovative academics,"* according to participants 11 and 6. Universities require committed leaders who can take on the task of fostering institutional leadership that translates leadership competencies into strategic assets to solve institutional problems (Bakuwa & Mouton, 2015; Hanson & Léautier, 2011). These leaders should have a deep understanding of the unique challenges and opportunities within the sector and have the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively navigate them. However, this study found that the study context lacks a model type of institutional leadership capable of responding to the challenges that these institutions face (Sall & Oanda, 2014). This, according to the participants, is because most of these newly appointed university leaders lack the grooming and mentoring that come with years of experience in academia. This might be because there are no programs meant to train university leaders with leadership skills. These findings show that participants have an understanding of the political forces that encroach on the internal activities of institutions. This therefore resonates with Samuel's (2008) FFM. The model espouses that even though academics are required to be accountable to the larger system, the learners, and the discipline or curriculum at

the same time, they can have autonomy and excel in their profession, provided they grasp the push and pull forces that encroach on their professional identity construction.

## 6. Discussion

Literature has found that African universities require leaders who have the ability to elicit extraordinary performance from ordinary people by motivating followers to collaborate with one another, regardless of the socio-dynamic context (Rowe, 2007). However, as evidenced in Sall and Oanda's (2014) study, it appears that these universities lack a model type of institutional leadership capable of responding to the challenges that they face. This is evident in the case of Cameroon's universities, where political ideologies overshadow professional academic activities due to their government-established nature. Consequently, the political nature and tradition of these universities then influence the mission, staff constitution, leadership, and professionalization rules (Ngeenge, 2020).

The 1993 reforms that put in place the leadership structure that governs these newly created public universities in Cameroon, although they promised "*to grant universities more academic and management autonomy*" (Njeuma et al., 1999, p. 9), paradoxically granted full control of these institutions to the government, thereby restricting leaders' decision-making autonomy. Consequently, since the implementation of the 1993 reforms, the head of state has possessed the authority to appoint and dismiss university leaders without any accountability or justification to the public, who financially support these institutions through their taxes (Ngeenge, 2020). The newly appointed university leaders, as reported by the participants, demonstrated the same actions and attitudes upon assuming their positions. Their superiority is evident in their refusal to consult certain senior colleagues regarding pedagogic matters simply because these individuals were previously associated with the same positions. Consequently, they solely report to the appointing authority (the government) and the ruling party (Kah, 2010).

This paper highlights the highly complex nature of appointments within the context under investigation. It appears that the standard process of appointment is neglected as individuals, in order to be appointed to leadership positions, have created clientelistic and patrimonialistic networks, which they perceive as the most expedient means to access benefits and privileges (Djeudo, 2013). As a result, unqualified and incompetent individuals have bypassed the established channels and relied on their connections to facilitate their appointments, disadvantaging qualified and competent individuals who lack such connections. Consequently, this nature and tradition of appointment may trigger political disputes not only within the ruling CPDM but also within and between regions, driven by the desire by leaders to succeed as the most loyal and dependable servant (Kah, 2010). From the perspective of the FFM, the grip of external contextual forces, particularly government and political parties' control, is evident. This grip exerts influence and pulls various other forces in different directions within the institution, thereby influencing academics' professional identities as they navigate leadership appointment strands.

Power dominance undermines power sharing and eliminates equality, which sheds light on the absence of leadership succession in the studied context. The neglect of processes and practices related to distributed leadership and their implications for leadership and development in Cameroon is evident in this study (Bolden et al., 2009). The findings indicate that leadership succession is dictated by political, tribal, and financial affinities, thereby deviating from the principles of distributed leadership that advocate shared leadership. It appears that political affinities are deeply rooted in the public universities of Cameroon, with Fombad (2000) highlighting their prevalent presence in every public sector. It seems that belonging to a specific tribe in Cameroon acts as either a barrier or a route to professional advancement. Studies have found that people from certain tribes, such as Beti and Bulu (Awah, 2018; Fombad, 2000), or political affiliations, such as the CPDM (Kah, 2010), are likely to be appointed to lead public universities in Cameroon. As a result, one can argue that universities are viewed as a battleground for political and tribal dominance, which has a negative impact on academics' professional identities in the study context.

## **7. Conclusion**

This study offered a comprehensive exploration of the appointment process for university leaders at a Cameroonian university and its far-reaching implications on academic professional identities. It illuminated the complex interplay of political, tribal, and financial influences that significantly affect leadership appointments in the country. The findings reveal that the traditional appointment process often prioritizes political and tribal connections over qualifications, experience, and academic excellence, leading to leaders who may lack the necessary skills for effective university leadership. The study also underscored the consequences of these appointments, which extend beyond the leaders themselves, influencing the professional identities of academics. When leaders are appointed based on political or tribal considerations, tensions, conflicts, and a lack of collaboration may arise. This, in turn, can lead to decreased productivity, a lack of decision-making transparency, and a failure to effectively address the unique challenges and opportunities within the higher education context. Additionally, the study has highlighted the challenges to the principles of distributed leadership, as external political forces and affiliations have the power to exert control and influence over the leadership selection process. This dominance threatens to stifle the adoption of shared leadership models and succession planning within HEIs, thereby hindering their growth and development. The study recommends that policymakers enhance university leadership appointment processes by prioritizing transparency and merit-based criteria while ensuring autonomous HEIs. Leaders should establish clear selection criteria, introduce leadership programs, and promote collaboration, while other stakeholders should provide funding and supervise research focusing on transparent leadership appointment processes in universities. The study's limitations include a single-university focus in Cameroon, a limited sample size affecting generalizability, and potential language and cultural barriers in capturing nuances within French-speaking universities. Future research should include English- and French-speaking universities and

comparative and longitudinal studies on leadership appointment evolution and its implications for higher education.

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