



## Enhancing Quality Education through Partnerships: Why It Matters in Higher Education in Cameroon

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### Abstract

Higher education is tasked with developing quality workers and increasing the quality of life of its recipients. Achieving these goals requires high-quality education. Quality education allows people to break the cycle of poverty and improves their well-being. It enables the attainment of other Sustainable Development Goals. Yet, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Cameroon do not seem to provide adequate opportunities for sustainable development in light of the challenges of high enrolment, inadequate infrastructure and unemployment. One way to minimize these challenges is through partnerships. HEIs have been involved in many partnerships yet the benefits are not significant which may be a consequence of the procedure for establishing the partnerships. The study investigates the gaps in the procedures for engaging in partnerships to develop a model for partnerships in HEIs in Cameroon. A concurrent mixed method design was employed. The sample included 68 participants (25 personnel in HEIs and 43 personnel in partner institutions). The purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used. Documentary analysis, an interview guide and questionnaires were used to collect data. Quantitative data was analysed using SPSS version 25.0 for frequency counts and percentages while the qualitative data was analysed thematically. Based on the challenges of partnerships identified, a model was developed to guide partnerships in HEIs in Cameroon.

Keywords: Quality education, Partnerships, Higher education, SDGs, Cameroon

### Introduction

Higher education is mandated to improve on the labour force which has a multiplier effect on the quality of life of its recipients. Achieving these goals requires high-quality education, which includes good teachers, students, courses, planning and management, facilities, resources, teaching, and evaluation systems (UNESCO, 2004). Quality education allows people to break the cycle of poverty, resulting in the eradication of hunger and the improvement of health and well-being and enabling the attainment of other Sustainable Development Goals. Yet, graduates from Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Cameroon do not seem to have acquired relevant skills for sustainable development (Etomes, 2021; Endeley 2014; Fonkeng and Ntembe, 2009). This is so as many graduates are unable to find decent jobs and as a result, poverty rates remain high, hunger persists and wellbeing is compromised which threatens peace, stability and sustainable development. Furthermore, Higher Education faces challenges of high student enrolment without a corresponding increase in human resource, material resource and infrastructure, thus

minimizing access to Higher Education. These, together with the insufficient pedagogic skills of teachers (UNESCO, 2003) threaten quality education.

One way to minimize these challenges is through partnerships where local, national or international organizations invest resources in the development of educational tools and facilities (United Nations, 2018) so as to enhance quality education and improve access to educational resources and employability, needed for the attainment of other SDGs. This is why ensuring quality education through partnerships matters, targets that have been well captured by SDG 4 and 7. According to United Nations (2019), quality education (SDG4) enables the attainment of the other SDGs such as health and well-being, gender equality, decent work, responsible consumption and growth and climate change mitigation. In addition, access to quality education ensures social mobility, mitigates the inequality gap and allows people to break the cycle of poverty resulting in the eradication of hunger. This is more linked with higher education, which is considered an investment in human capital. In order to enhance quality education, partnerships are critical.

HEIs in Cameroon have a long history of partnerships, although the benefits of these collaborations do not appear to have improved education quality considerably, since these institutions still have constraints in attaining quality education. This suggests that there may be issues with the procedure for establishing partnerships. Thus, the study investigates the gaps in the procedure for engaging into partnerships so as to propose a model for cooperation that can make a significant difference in the quality of higher education and attain sustainable development goals in Cameroon.

Quality education is a complex and multidimensional concept. However, UNESCO (2004) agrees on three broad principles that guide the description of quality education. These broad principles include relevance, equity and human rights. Notwithstanding this complexity, UNESCO (2016) defines quality education as one that is meaningful, relevant and responsive to the needs of individuals and the society as a whole. Jain and Prasad (2018) further described quality education as one that includes the whole system of education, that is, teaching, policies and the learning environment; the quality of what is provided to students which includes curriculum, teaching quality and learning process. Quality education is one that provides all learners with capabilities they require to become economically productive, develop sustainable livelihoods, contribute to peaceful and democratic societies and enhance individual well-being. However, the learning outcomes at each level of education differ even by context, for instance, at the end of the basic education cycle outcomes must include threshold levels of literacy and numeracy. Capacity development to improve the quality of teachers and other education stakeholders is crucial throughout this process. Quality education enhances equity, contextualization and relevance, child-centred teaching, sustainability and a balanced approach.

Equity in education means that personal and social circumstances such as gender, ethnic origin or family background are not obstacles to achieving educational potential and that all individuals reach at least a basic minimum level of skills. Quality education cannot be based on a blueprint that is applicable in all situations. Solutions and adaptations of education systems must be based

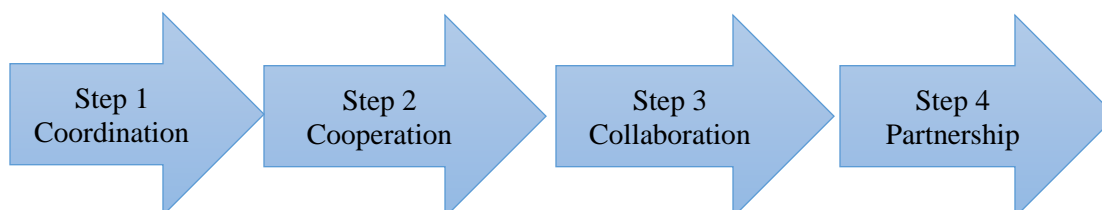
on the real needs of a country and/or community. It puts the child in the centre and helps him/her to reach his or her full potential through active participation. Quality education aims at developing a balanced set of capabilities of learners that they require to become economically productive, develop sustainable livelihoods, contribute to peaceful and democratic societies and enhance individual well-being.

Educational partnership, on the other hand, is a form of unification, support and assistance for formal education to ensure quality education (Vrasmas, 2002 as cited in Gurlui, 2015). Collaboration of educational agents in education partnership is the top priority of educational policies aimed at increasing the quality of education. Educational partnership requires actions carried out between school institutions and local associations, social workers, schools, companies, etc., which means that the student's education becomes everyone's problem and require the mobilization of all energies of educational stakeholders (Cristea, 2000). Educational partnership manifests itself as a social phenomenon and pedagogical approach involving curricular approach to education, focused on respecting and valuing diversity, multiculturalism and uniqueness of each human being. School represents an institution that functions in a community build up from many educational items like: family, authorities, governmental or non-governmental institutions, and church, police and health units.

Adelman and Taylor (2006) argue that the working together of schools, homes and communities can promote inclusive and quality education in schools. Schools can be efficient and effective if they form an integral part of the community. In the interests of revitalizing African higher education, many universities and HEIs from the global North have engaged in a process of partnership with universities from the global South. Within the context of higher education development cooperation, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU, 2018), described partnerships as one operating at both local and global levels and encompassing personal, social, political and cultural dimensions; organizational structures and systems; quality assurance and quality enhancement strategies and procedures; government policies and funding programmes; and a wide range of practices and opportunities that enhances quality education. Similarly, Eddy (2010), further described higher education partnerships as joint venture initiatives between institutions, through departmental alliances across institution or within university programmes that pair with business organizations and other community agencies.

AASCU (2018) identified three major types of university partnerships which include community relationships; educational institutions and public and private partnerships. These partnerships usually ranging from low-risk and less prominent to high-risk and high-profile partnerships. School-community partnership is based on the notion of working together to solve some of the challenges that the schools and the community are facing. Partnerships could be formal, less formal or temporary, but all partnerships are equally important and valuable to the educational process and build upon each other. Higher education partnerships can solve some of the underlying challenges in HEIs and consequently enhance quality education. For instance, Aloysius et al. (2018), revealed that university's collaboration with the industry enhances the acquisition of employability skills for students on the one hand, and on the other hand, improves on the productivity of the industry to meet up with the demands of the society.

For partnerships to be successful, the process is important. Partnerships involve a process, and though the contingency theory of coordination, cooperation and collaboration have dominantly been used in business management, it can offer a guide to the activities that should guide the development of university partnerships. An analysis of the literature (Isaeva et al, 2021; Castañer and Oliveira, 2020; Ashkenas, 2015) posits a continuum of steps that result in a partnership; it often starts with coordination, progresses to cooperation and collaboration, and ultimately results in partnerships as seen in figure 1.



**Figure 1: Partnership Processes**

Every step is important and worth pursuing; for instance, at the coordination stage, institutions learn about the services and clients served by partner institution or organizations. This step includes an exchange of information and learning about each other's reasons or motivations for wanting to engage in partnership. Cooperation involves an increased understanding of partners' motivations to participate in a partnership, greater appreciation of resources and skills that the partnership can bring and emergence of joint strategies. The collaboration stage involves increased recognition of the values of each institution, trust, respect, a clear understanding of the benefits for each partner. A common problem is identified and innovative ideas are presented to solve the problem. At the point of collaboration, a letter of collaboration is established to formalise the process. Finally, partnership, with a high level of trust and communication, roles and responsibilities of each partner can be well defined and developed. This must be accompanied by the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) involving all authorities concerned.

There are many factors that affect the partnership process. Such factors need attention; for instance, lack of collaborative planning time and insufficient collaboration between the partners in identifying relevant needs, establishing plans, and clarifying roles are the most frequently mentioned causes for ineffective partnerships in Higher Education in Africa, which also apply to Cameroon. Lack of reciprocal engagement during the planning or execution phase appears to have resulted in a lack of trust and an inability to overcome cultural gaps. Other issues include limited time and resources to hold face-to-face planning meetings during the proposal writing or early implementation stages (USAID, 2004).

According to Wannan et al. (2010), many funding sources do not cover the costs of worker time. While this may help keep proposal expenses down, it substantially limits the initiatives' effectiveness. As a result of this condition, partnerships appear to have times of high production just before and during certain phases of partnership projects. However, owing to the time restrictions faced by people involved in project implementation, they can often go inactive. Partner

institutions may find cooperation frustrating due to resource imbalances. For instance, while in the UK, access to technology (e.g computers) is taken for granted, in Africa, however, this can be a stumbling block and a severe constraint for many institutions (AUCC, 2003). Furthermore, while there are a variety of funding initiatives explicitly geared to enhance capacity, these are frequently temporary solutions. Given that capacity-building is a long-term process, this is an issue. Another issue is the long-term viability of partnerships. In many cases, financing is provided to 'start' the collaboration and offer some finance for projects, but no long-term support is provided. Many funding schemes do not give funds to evaluate project outcomes.

According to USAID (2004), the keys to sustainable partnerships most often cited are the following:

- a. Increasing trust between individuals and institutions. This is aided by the development of strong personal bonds between faculty members on both sides of the relationship.
- b. Devoting the time and effort required to establish trust prior to creating and implementing programs. This is especially true for institutions who have had little or no prior experience working together. Cultural sensitivity and learning about each other's customs and practices are closely tied before attempting to collaborate on project activities.
- c. Agendas that are shared and mutually productive (i.e., clear benefits for all partners engaging in the partnership).
- d. A strong contributing factor is obtaining high level university support. This type of visibility and support was mentioned as important to achieving the partnership results, but most critical for future sustainability.

### **Educational Partnerships in Higher Education in Cameroon**

Some of the HEIs in Cameroon have been engaged in multiple partnerships. With regard to North–south partnerships, academic collaboration between Cameroon and German universities is the most active and partially regulated compared to other international countries. It is governed by agreements on economic and technological cooperation that date back to 1962 and were expanded and revised in 1978. Given the enormous increase of the cultural component, this agreement is accompanied with customized application methods that should ensure the long-term viability of this collaboration. Academic and cultural collaboration between Germany and Cameroon, on the other hand, is governed by specific agreements between university institutes. Both parties signed together conventions setting the terms of their partnership. Likewise, the state of inter-university cooperation with the DAAD (German university exchange office), the Goethe-Institut, ERASMUS and many other non-states or para-public organizations (Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES), Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) Thyssen Stiftung etc) is satisfactory, but remains fairly modest. A few other partnerships with public and private HEIs in Cameroon and the areas of interest are listed below (table 1):

**Table 1: Some North-South Partnerships with HEIs in Cameroon**

<b>Cameroon HEI</b>	<b>Partner Institution</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Area of Partnership</b>
Catholic University of Cameroon Bamenda (CATUC)	University of Osnabrück	Germany	Psychology
Evangelical University of Cameroon Bandjoun	University of Hamburg	Germany	General pedagogy and didactics
University of Buea	University of Bayreuth	Germany	BA-MA-Doctorate-Post-Doc Cultural and African Studies among others
	University of Arizona	United States of America	Health Sciences
	Center for Tropical Forest Science, USA	United States of America	Plant and Environmental Science
	Howard University	United States of America	Technology and Engineering
	University of Leipzig	Germany	Scientific research in general
University of Yaoundé I	University of Bayreuth	Germany	
	Ludwig Maximilians Universität München (LMU)	Germany	
	University of Paderborn	Germany	
	University of Bremen	Germany	
	University of Bielefeld	Germany	All disciplines
University of Yaoundé II	University of Paderborn	Germany	
	University of Bayreuth	Germany	
	University of Leipzig	Germany	
	University of Bremen	Germany	Mathematics and Economics
University of Ngaoundéré	University of Cologne	Germany	Medicine and biomedical sciences
	Wolfenbüttel Higher School of Applied Sciences	Germany	Engineering Sciences / Agronomy

University of Douala	Technical University of Ingolstadt	Germany	Informatics, electrical engineering and engineering sciences
Catholic University of Central Africa (UCAC)	Technical University of Cologne	Germany	Economics

Source: University Research and Cooperation Units in Cameroon (CATUC, UB, UYDE1& II UCAC, Dschang, Douala, Ngaoundere, Banjoun)

At the national level Universities have partnerships with all ministries including the Ministries of Secondary and Basic Education, just to name a few as well as industry where students are sent for internship to acquire employability skills. Another partnership mostly undertaken by HEIs is to mentor younger institutions. University of Buea, for instance, is a mentor to over five institutions, some of which include: Biaka university Institute; Catholic University Institute of Buea; National Polytechnic University Institute of Bamenda; Cameroon Christian University of Bali and Chitechma higher Institute Buea. The mentorship agreement between these mentor and mentee institutions are geared towards quality assurance. In addition to these, partnerships also include joint research activities and visits, amongst others.

Therefore, HEIs in Cameroon have been engaged in many partnerships or cooperation agreements both nationally and internationally. These range from funding to capacity building, research, teaching, infrastructure and more. Yet, in each of the universities which have benefitted from this cooperation, there are still issues of quality education. In the case of Cameroon, higher education challenges threaten quality education; for instance, unsteady economic growth, an expanding youth population, and rising elementary and secondary enrolment have increased enrolment at the tertiary level. While this rapid growth succeeded in expanding access to higher education, by international standards, access remains restricted for there is no correlation between increased enrolment rate and infrastructural development, which threatens equality of access to educational resources. Therefore, with regard to quality education, much is still desired. Classrooms still remain overcrowded limiting access to school and resources (Etomes, 2021). A report submitted by the government of Cameroon to the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights in 2020, noted that Cameroonian universities had seats for a maximum of 295,128 students, well below the 450,000 students hoping to be admitted. This is in line with an earlier statistic from the Ministry of Higher Education in Cameroon (2015-2017), indicating that the capacity of students required for the 1079 infrastructures (classrooms, laboratories and workshops) is 29,840, but as of the 2017 academic year, student enrolment was at 209,374. The situation has worsened as it has been observed that while the students' population increases at an exponential rate, infrastructural development has remained relatively the same over the years. Overall numbers also hide stark disparities in access by location and socioeconomic status. While 28 % of college-age Cameroonians from the richest quintile attended a higher education institution in 2018, less than 3% from the three poorest quintiles did. These situations are similar as in other

places, for instance, Fallwickl et al. (2021), in a world news reported that around 15% of college-age individuals living in cities pursued higher education, but just 2% of residents from rural communities did so.

The quality of graduates is yet to improve significantly with unemployment still at its peak and the greater percentage of graduates not picking up decent jobs. Many are petty traders, taxi drivers, hairdressers and engaged in other low paying jobs. Many of these graduates, having come from a low socio-economic background are expected to become the bread-winners of the family, yet they cannot find jobs. The circle of poverty and hunger remains and every other aspect of human life is affected. Evidence from research, posit that graduates from Cameroon HEIs have not acquired relevant skills for sustainable development. For instance, Etomes (2021) examined skills acquisition and labor market opportunities for 79 graduates from public universities and 29 employers in Cameroon and found a mismatch between the supply of skills by HEIs and the demand for skills by the labor market with graduates' unemployment rate of 69.6%. Part of the explanation for unemployment lies in the quality of education received at universities, as the university system has been criticized as inadequately preparing students for the job market (Endeley 2014; Fonkeng and Ntembe, 2009). A 1998 World Bank report noted that Cameroon's higher education system, "initially designed to produce personnel for the civil service, no longer conforms to the economy's needs in the era of shrinking public services, nor to international best practices" (Cameroon, 2015). This shows that the numerous partnerships Cameroon HEIs have indulged in have not yielded significant fruits. Amongst other factors that may account for this situation is the procedure of establishing partnerships in HEIs in Cameroon. This procedure may emerge as a model to be followed by Cameroon HEIs in developing fruitful partnerships.

Thus, the study aims at investigating the gaps in the procedures for engaging in partnerships in order to develop a model for partnerships in HEIs in Cameroon and beyond. This model is based on an empirical analysis guided by the following questions:

1. What is the nature of partnerships in HEIs in Cameroon?
2. What are the procedures for establishing partnerships in HEIs in Cameroon?
3. What are the benefits of these partnerships?
4. What are the challenges of these partnerships?

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

The mixed method concurrent design was employed in which quantitative and qualitative data was collected in a single phase and analysed independently. Mixed method concurrent design is a mixed method approach in which both types of data is collected at the same time (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Consequently, findings from the qualitative and quantitative data were both used



at the interpretation phase to support and detail on key aspects of interest. This approach was employed as we sought to obtain different but complementary data that will help us to understand the nature, procedures, benefits and challenges of partnerships in HEIs and their partner institutions in Cameroon.

### **Sample**

The sample was drawn from 5 state (public) universities in Cameroon (including; University of Buea, University of Douala, University of Yaounde I, University of Bamenda and University of Ngaoundere) that represented the HEIs and 5 partner institutions (including; SONARA, BIAKA University, Open Dreams, CDC and MTN Cameroon). The choice of these partners was that one of them (for example; Open Dreams, MTN Cameroon) are independently partnering with more than one public HEI in Cameroon. The total sample included 68 participants (25 personnel in HEIs and 43 personnel in partner institutions). A total of 11 participants were interviewed (6 in HEIs and 5 in partner institutions) and 57 participants filled out a self-administered questionnaire (19 HEIs and 38 in partner institutions). HEI participants included Deputy Vice-Chancellors in charge of Research and Cooperation as well as Deans and Directors of schools. Partner institutions included the heads or directors of the organisation, heads of services or departments. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used to select participants for the study as they were specific to a position or role within HEIs or partner institutions considered relevant for the study.

### **Instrument**

The study included the use of interviews, self-constructed questionnaire and documentary analysis. The interview guide used consisted of 3 key questions that captured a description of the reasons for partnerships; procedure of establishing partnerships and the challenges faced in partnerships. On the other hand, two separate questionnaires were served to participants from HEIs and partner institutions. Both questionnaires included 3 sections that solicited for demographic information; objectives and needs of partnerships; procedures involved and partnership outcomes. The questionnaire mainly consisted of open and closed ended questions. The close ended questions were a 4-point Likert scale quantitative instrument. Documentary analysis included a list of existing partnerships from research and cooperation units in the participating HEIs as well as policy documents stating the vision, mission and goals of the institution.

### **Data Analysis**

Qualitative data was analysed thematically as responses from interviews were transcribed into text and categorised to develop categories. These categories were grouped and re-grouped to develop sub-themes that were later grouped in to themes and described. Along with groundings, these themes were presented in a theme-grounded-quotation table. A similar approach was used to analyse open-ended responses from the questionnaire; however, close-ended responses were analysed descriptively using frequency counts and percentages.

## Findings

Based on the analysis of responses from 68 participants including HEIs and their partner institutions, findings are presented in 4 broad sections including the nature of partnerships; procedure for partnerships; benefits and challenges of partnerships.

### Section A: Nature of Partnerships in HEIs in Cameroon

In analysing the nature of partnerships in HEIs in Cameroon, we focused on the types of partnerships; objectives and needs of partnerships from HEIs and their partner institutions. Documentary analysis as well as an analysis of the responses from interviews and questionnaire revealed the following about the types of partnerships in HEIs in Cameroon as seen on table 2.

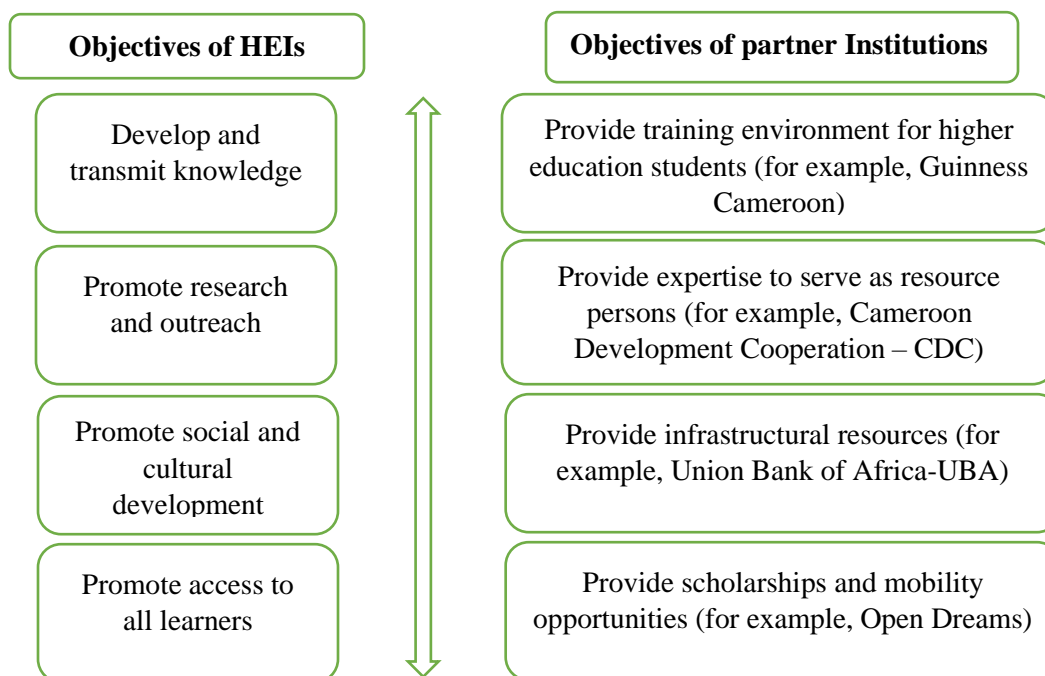
**Table 2: Types of Partnerships in HEIs in Cameroon**

S/n	Universities	Partnership			
		Academic Institutions		Business and Corporate Institutions	
		Local	International	Local	International
1	University of Bamenda	15	11	01	02
2	University of Douala	07	04	04	02
3	University of Yaounde 1	08	03	13	12
4	University of Ngoundere	04	02	01	02
5	University of Buea	30	66	105	15
<b>Total = 05</b>		<b>64</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>124</b>	<b>33</b>

Source: Partnership documents from Research and Cooperation Department in the various state universities

Table 2 indicates that partnerships in HEIs in Cameroon are divided into two broad categories including academic institutions and business /corporate institutions. Each of these broad categories includes local or national and international partnerships. However, findings showed that there are more partnerships with the business and corporate institutions, 157 (51%) compared to the academic institutions, 150 (49%). Similarly, there are more local partnerships, 188 (61%) than international partnerships, 119 (39%).

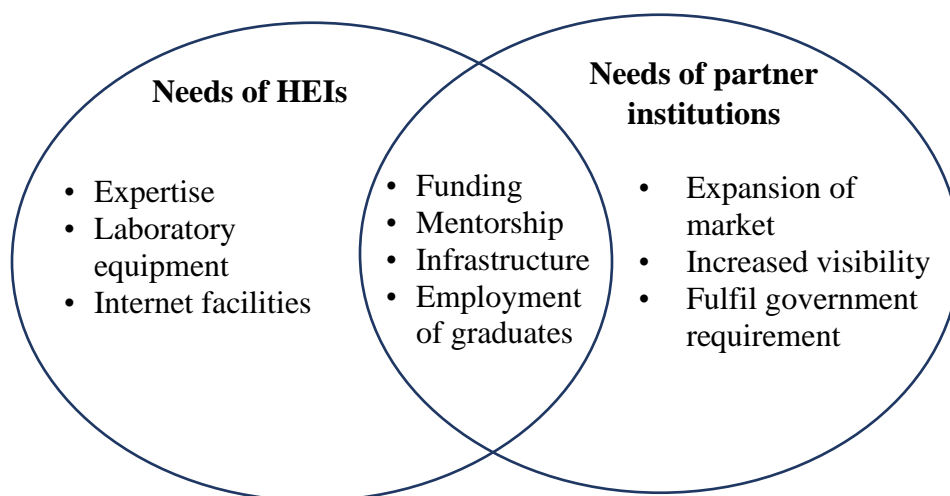
Based on documentary analysis of the mission, goal and objectives of public HEIs in Cameroon, findings indicated that there are several objectives of HEIs stated at the level of departments; faculties and schools; and at the university level. However, irrespective of the level, most public HEIs have 4 broad objectives. Similarly, we focused on the objectives of partner institutions that relate to HEIs and they can also be characterised in to 4 broad categories as seen in figure 2;



**Figure 2: Objectives of HEIs and partner**

There are several objectives of HEIs and partner institutions with regards to partnership and quality education as seen in figure 2. While most HEIs seek to transmit knowledge, promote research, culture and access to all learners, partner institutions complement these objectives by providing practice environments for internships and other visits as well as resources to support the objectives of HEIs.

However, in partnership, both institutions (HEIs and partner institutions) must benefit so we sought to find out the needs of these institutions. An analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data revealed the following as seen in figure 3.



### Figure 3: Dominant Needs of HEIs and Partner Institutions in Cameroon

The relationship between HEIs and partner institutions are characterised by several needs as seen in figure 3. However, while there are slight differences in the needs of HEIs and partner institutions, they both intersect on the need of funding, mentorship, infrastructure and employment of graduates. For instance, funding was one of the most cited by participants in HEIs as they indicated that this was essential in paying supervisors (internal and external) during internship exercises. Funding was also indicated as an essential need for purchasing equipment required to run several programs as indicated in the following quote by an HEI director; *“Our training programs require equipment such as quantum magnetic resonance body analyser, audiometer, etc., to fully equip students with the necessary skills and knowledge”*.

Similarly, another participant, a head of service in HEI indicated the following; *“We need expertise but adequate funding to bring them from other countries”*.

These participants ascertain that funding is a major need of HEIs. However, beyond funding, other dominant needs include mentorship, laboratory equipment, infrastructure, internet facilities and employment opportunities. On the other hand, the needs of partner institutions dominantly revolve around expanding their market niche, increasing the consumption of their products, promoting visibility and fulfilling government requirements. For instance, one of the directors in a partner institution indicated the following; *“Regulatorily, to be accredited as a private higher education institution in Cameroon, one must be mentored by a public higher education institution”*.

These findings were complemented by quantitative data, however, a slight difference was found as majority 67 (99%) of the participants from both HEIs and partner institutions indicated need for infrastructure; 66 (97%) for funding; 63 (93%) for expertise; 62 (91%) for mentorship and so on.

### Procedure of Partnerships in HEIs in Cameroon

In an attempt to understand the procedure of partnerships, interview analysis revealed that procedures were operational and varied depending on the type, form and level of partnerships. Partnerships can be initiated by either an individual within a higher education institution or partner institution (bottom-top) as well as broadly by the institution or Ministry of Higher Education (Top-bottom). Partnerships initiated by individuals come as a result of the individual projects of staff as expressed in the following quote: *“Staff mostly initiate these partnerships through their grant request or research but the institution can also receive request proposed to the ministry”*.

In the case where individuals are initiating a partnership, they have the responsibility of evaluating the intended organisation and submitting the required documentations for signature by the official signatories of the university (which usually includes heads of services in the research and cooperation unit; deputy vice chancellor in charge of the unit and vice chancellor) as expressed in this quote: *“External partners fund research for staff and in this case the staff must follow all administrative procedures for documentation”*.

Another participant indicated: *“The staff submits the request file for approval and it is transmitted for signature”*.

Apart from staff-initiated partnerships, the Ministry of Higher Education equally accepts certain partnerships on behalf of the university. Similarly, the central system of the university equally accepts some general partnerships on behalf of faculties and schools. In most cases, partner institutions initiate the request for partnerships and the request is accepted by the central body directly in cases where the partnership is general to the university body or all faculties, however, if the partnership request is specific to a particular faculty, then the central body, forwards the request to that specific faculty. The faculty studies the program and transmits their decision back to hierarchy as expressed in this quote: *“When we receive a partnership request, we do a cost/benefit analysis and if it will add value, we submit our interest to hierarchy but all administrative procedure is done with hierarchy”*.

This quote indicates that there is some studying of the file; and studying usually entails only a reading of the document submitted by intended partners as expressed in the following quotes: *“We study the file by reading the request and documents attached by the intended partner institutions”*.

*“Well, it depends on the type, if it’s a grant, we sign”*.

Similarly, another participant indicated the following: *“As long as the partnership is beneficial whether to the individual or institution, it is approved”*.

These quotes underscore a limited priority of an investigation of partner institutions and their interest and highlight that there is no clear-cut approach for establishing partnerships beyond statutory approvals.

### **Benefits of Partnerships in HEIs in Cameroon**

Interviews with participants in HEIs about the benefits are discussed using themes, descriptions and sample quotations. The benefits were examined in terms of quality of access and outcomes considered as key indicators of quality education and the findings revealed the following themes:

**Table 3: Partnership and Quality of Access**

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Theme Description</b>	<b>Grounding</b>	<b>Sample Quotations</b>
Financial support to students and staff	Some partnership agreements provide scholarship to students in the form of tuition fee and research grants to staff	17	“Some of our grants covers students’ fees or part of the fees for those that are eligible”, “Some partnership projects sponsor research projects for academic staff and students”.

Students' mobility	Partnership enables collaboration between the University and other institutions at home and abroad	16	<p>"Partnership enable students to get full scholarship for their thesis"</p> <p>"Students are opportune to have exchange programmes within the country and out of the country".</p> <p>"Students have the opportunity to work with students from different institutions and countries which improves on skills acquisition",</p>
Networking	Access to other human resources such as lecturers and researchers from industries and other institution in and out of the country	20	<p>"Students have the opportunity to work with their teachers and other experts in their field who are not part of the institution".</p> <p>"Students and teachers have the opportunity to carry out research activities with experts form other institutions and industries"</p>
Internship sites	Collaboration with industry give students the opportunity to gain industrial and field experience	24	<p>"Partnership with industries enable students to carry out internship programme",</p> <p>"collaboration industries give students the opportunity for industrial training in their field of study", "collaboration with industries and other institutions provides opportunity for staff and students to carry out impactful projects",</p> <p>"Students have the opportunity to go for internship programmes out of the country"</p>
Instructional materials	Partnership enables departments and faculties to purchase didactic materials and laboratory equipment	20	<p>"Partnership provides materials resources that facilitates the teaching-learning process".</p> <p>"Students and teachers are able to co-publish with partners".</p> <p>"Encourages co-supervision of students with member of the partner institutions"</p>
Mentorship	Provide mentorship to start ups especially private HEIs	25	<p>"Some staff assist in building and setting up laboratory for partner</p>

institutions which brings income to the individuals and the department”.

“We mentor the programmes of private universities that brings income to the faculty”.

An analysis of the benefits of partnerships to access was captured using six broad themes including: Financial support to students and staff; students’ mobility; networking; internship; instructional materials and mentorship as seen in table 3. Access was mostly conceived from the support that staff and students received through partnerships. As seen in table 3, a majority of the respondents indicated that quality of access is mostly fostered through internship and mentorship opportunities.

This data was complemented by quantitative data from partner institutions as majority 41 (95%) agreed that partnerships with universities encourage collaborative research activities with partner institutions and among teachers. Similarly, 37 (86%) also agreed that partnerships also provides the partner institutions with manpower; encourages infrastructural development in the universities 31 (72%); financial support to faculties for projects 26 (60%); and to students through tuition fees 25 (58%);

When the benefits of partnership to employability was considered, findings revealed the following as seen in table 4:

**Table 4: Partnership and the Fostering of Employability Skills**

Themes	Themes Description	Grounding	Sample Quotations
Group activities	Collaborative skills are acquired as students work together in a project, work with other students and experts in their field of study.	23	“students’ are able to develop collaborative skills as the work together”, “In working together, students learn to assist one another which enable timely completion of work and team spirit”. “Students are assigned to independent research activities but they are compelled to work and understand each other’s research work which encourage collaboration”.
Project presentation	Students develop skills in public speaking and leadership	21	“Students have seminars each month during the project where they present their work”.

Networking	Communication skills	19	<p>“Most at time, the teacher is a facilitator, the students are able to assign duties to one another and coordinate projects to the end”,</p> <p>“Students form social groups such as WhatsApp where they associate and communicate on project activities which enable them to meet deadlines”.</p> <p>“students’ are able to carry out field work and bring back positive report”.</p> <p>“During projects, students are able to liaise with our partners effectively on the progress of work”.</p>
Mentorship	Students with different abilities work together and mentor their mates from other universities as well as partner institutions	18	<p>“They work with companies and farmers in rural areas</p> <p>“The more experienced students are usually paired with the less experienced ones”.</p> <p>“Some students are recommended to mentor their mates from other universities in project activities”,</p> <p>“Some students mentor farmers in the field on how to improve on crop yields”.</p>
Use of technology	Students prepare conference reports, analyse and present data Attend zoom meetings and conferences		<p>“Students are obliged to present their reports on projects very regularly using power point projections which improve on their computer skills”.</p> <p>“Students are trained on how to analyse and present data, report writing”,</p>
Hands on activities	Application of theory to practice	16	<p>“students’ are able to carry out relevant practical training in their area of study and related areas which improve on their know how”,” provide hands-on-skills to students”.</p>

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An analysis of the extent to which partnerships foster the acquisition of employability skills was captured in six broad themes: group activities, project presentation, networking, mentorship, use of technology and hands-on activities which enables students to gain skills in collaboration, public speaking and leadership, communication, mentorship, ICT and practical skills respectively. According to the participants, partnerships required certain activities that fostered several of these skills amongst staff and students as seen on table 4.

An analysis of the quantitative data revealed a similar trend as majority of the respondents 41 (95%) agreed that partnership with HEIs enable students to develop essential skills within their area of specialty;enables students work with external experts which build their technical, conceptual and interpersonal skills, and also the development of leadership skills such as public speaking, interpersonal relationship and the ability to take up initiatives and companies to recruit highly skilled manpower 40 (93%).

### Challenges of Partnerships in HEIs in Cameroon

Interviews with participants in HEIs and partner institutions indicated several challenges.A focus on the challenges faced by HEIs in partnerships indicated the following as presented in table5:

**Table 5: Challenges of Partnerships in HEIs**

Themes	Themes Description	Grounding	Sample Quotations
Inadequate funding	HEIs and partner institutions provide inadequate funds to foster partnerships	29	“Large proportions of students cannot benefit due to inadequate funds to pay for their expenses especially in exchange programs”, “We are unable to pay supervisors at internship sites so most turn to refuse our request for partnership”.
Limited opportunities for infrastructural development	Partner institutions usually tend down request for infrastructures	23	“Most partnerships refuse to fund infrastructural facilities which are the most urgent needs of faculty establishments”. “Very minimal funding is slated for infrastructure even in research grants”,
Unfavourable immigration policies	Some immigration policies prevent students from benefitting from international mobility opportunities	20	“Some students are not given visas when they have been awarded scholarship opportunities through partnerships”.

Armed conflict	Current armed conflict in the South West and North West regions of Cameroon limits partnerships	19	“Partners do not support us in securing visas for travel”. “We are unable to carry out research in risky areas so our grants are nullified”. “Many partners fear living in Cameroon due to the crisis”,
Limited priority of needs	North-South partnerships especially, do not prioritise the needs of HEIs in Cameroon	19	“There is need for more South-South partnerships because North-South do not prioritise our needs”. “Need for more local partnerships”,
Unscalable	Most partnerships can include only a few students or staff.	18	“In our department with 92 students, only 10 could receive a scholarship making it difficult to fund the activities of the others” “Partnerships mostly benefit only a few and personally”

Regardless of the benefits of partnerships with regards to access, policies and employability, the challenges of partnerships in HEIs in Cameroon are enormous as seen in table 5. These challenges were captured in six broad themes including; inadequate funding; limited opportunities for infrastructural development; unfavourable immigration policies; armed conflict; limited priority of institutional needs; and unscalable. Participants mostly agreed that inadequate funding is one of the dominant challenges as it prevented HEIs from expanding their internship needs. Supervisors (from these internship sites and institution) within the country require finances to run minimal cost such as travel and communication essential in supervision but this is very challenging for the institution. On the other hand, while partnerships provide staff and students with exchange opportunities, it is difficult for the institutions to support these staff and students with funding for travel and others.

Interestingly, partner institutions view these challenges slightly different as indicated on table 6:

**Table 6: Challenges Faced by Partner Institutions**

Themes	Groundings	Quotations/Responses
Finance	10	“Finance and time for activities”. “Financial challenges as well as time to coordinate daily activities”. “The number of internships demanded by the institution each year is generally greater than our

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		means. So, we are forced to select students for internship through some selection criteria which is even doubtful”. “Financial obligation”. “Finance”.
No respecting of agreement terms	1	“At times, the terms of the partnership are not respected by the partner institution”.
Inadequate supervision of student on internship	1	“Most of the higher institutions failed to carry out proper supervision of the students they send on internship”.
Short duration of internship	1	“Short term internship programmes”.
Delay in programmes approval	1	“Waiting for approval for other programmes”
No granting of full autonomy	1	“Mentoring the university for so long without providing full autonomy is a major challenge”.
Lack of motivation	1	“Lack of motivation”.
Policy disparities	1	“Policy disparity which results to policy clashes that should be harmonized accordingly”.
Vetting of exams	1	“Vetting of exams usually poses some difficulties”.

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Based on challenges faced by organizations in partnership with HEIs, many of the participants in partner institutions complained of lack of finance while other challenges are no respect of agreement terms, inadequate supervision of student on internship by HEIs, short duration of internship, delay in programmes approval, lack of motivation, disparities in policies, difficulty in vetting exams and the fact that some organization has not been giving full autonomy by the higher education institution they partner with.

### Discussion of Findings

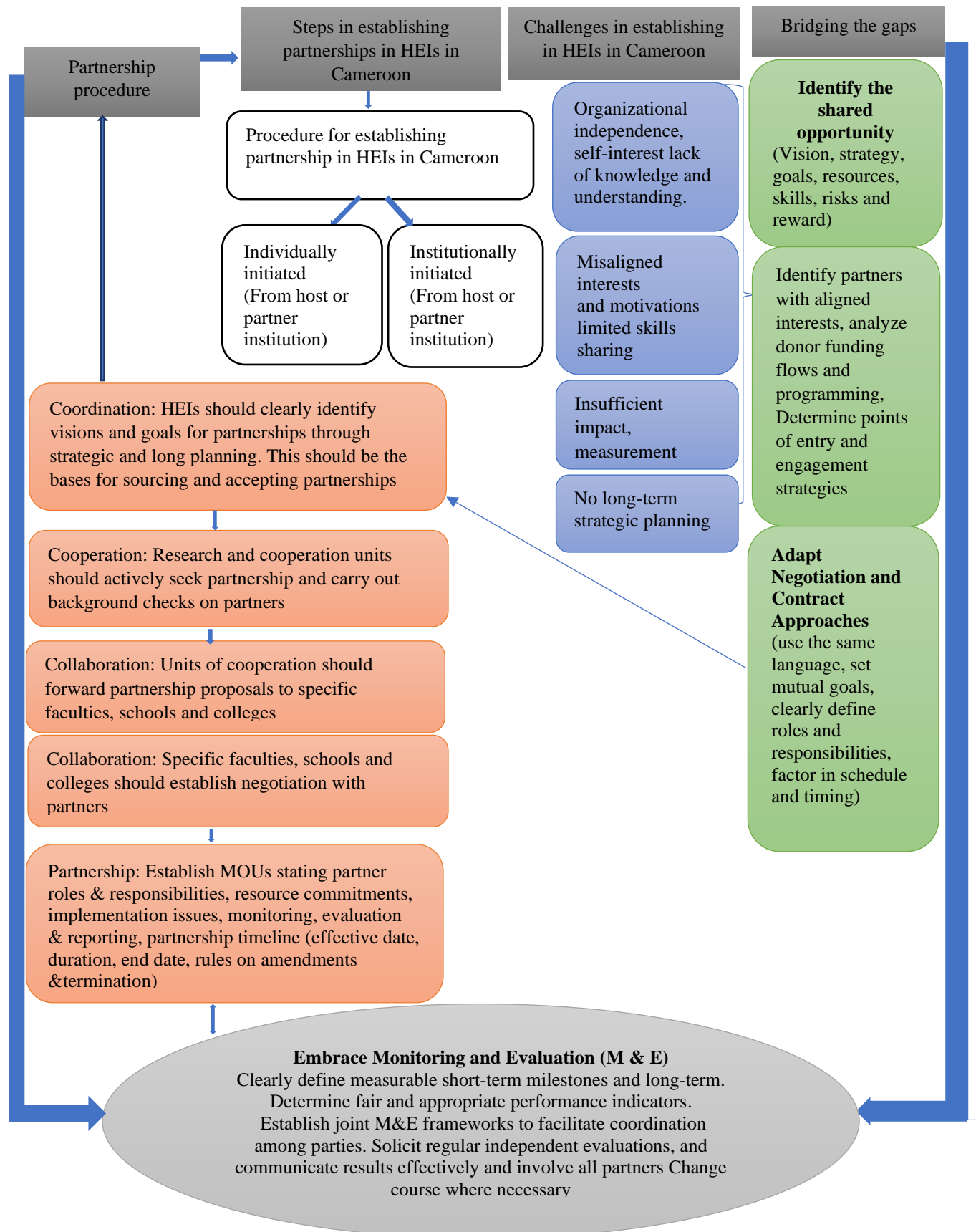
With global outcry to reduce poverty and enhance individual freedom by 2030, quality education is central to achieving all other sustainable development goals. With regards to the nature of partnerships in HEIs in Cameroon, findings indicated that HEIs have both academic and cooperate partnerships. Academic partnerships dominantly provide mentorship. Business and corporate partnerships are hosted by local or national partners and international partners. Local business and corporate partnerships dominate higher education partnerships in Cameroon.

Interestingly, most of the needs of these local partnerships are similar to those of HEIs which is expected as they are in the same environment with similar challenges. While this may be beneficial for exchanges and networking as evident in the work of Adelman and Tylor (2006), they do not suffice to meet the priority needs of funding, infrastructure and availability of equipment which is necessary to ensure access to all students and guarantee job acquisition upon graduation. It is therefore essential that the HEIs prioritize institutions that can readily satisfy their most pressing needs.

The procedures for establishing partnerships in HEIs in Cameroon are unclear or standard so HEIs engage in any partnerships that are offered to them with little or no background check beyond tendered files submitted by individuals or organisations seeking for partnerships. Therefore, there is no doubt that while there is a host of partnerships and a history of them, the benefits are not scalable as the priority needs and shared values are given a limited place in the procedure for establishing partnerships. HEIs in Cameroon need a clear and standard process of establishing partnerships. Regardless of this, there are some benefits of partnerships that enhance quality education through access and employability. At the top of the list is training grounds as HEIs benefit from partner institutions who serve as training grounds for their students. This is essential in meeting one of the goals of higher education which is the training of youths. On one hand these partnerships enhance access and employment of graduates as they select the best students reward them with scholarships, bursaries or jobs. This is in line with the views of Aloysius et al. (2018). However, on the other hand, it is also challenging as many of these training institutions can receive only a few students due to their own funding challenges. This limits and restricts the number of students who can benefit from such opportunities, again hindering access and employability at a scalable rate.

It is also worth noting that while these partner institutions are only aiming to strive, HEIs have a more integral mission of impacting the lives of individuals and any errors made will be detrimental to the society. Partnerships in HEIs are beneficial with regards to equality of access and outcome but they are plagued with several challenges. These challenges are integral in all the processes of partnership including coordination, cooperation, collaboration and partnerships. This calls for more global partnerships and cooperation for sustainable quality of HEIs. In curbing these challenges and enhancing the quality of education through partnerships, we propose the following model as seen in figure 4:

## Why It Matters



#### Figure 4: Proposed Model for Partnerships in HEIs

In figure 4, we advise for clear stages in the process of partnerships that incorporates; identifying and clearly defining the partnership needs of specific HEIs guided by institutional vision, mission, goals and objectives. This will include strategic and long-term goals of partnership formed well ahead of partnership sourcing. These needs will guide the sourcing and acceptance of partnerships initiated by HEIs (staff, institution, ministry) or partner institutions. These intended partnerships must be well verified before continuing to collaboration. At all stages faculties should be included but it is only when institutions are sure of the benefits, can they sign MOUs and establish full partnerships.

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