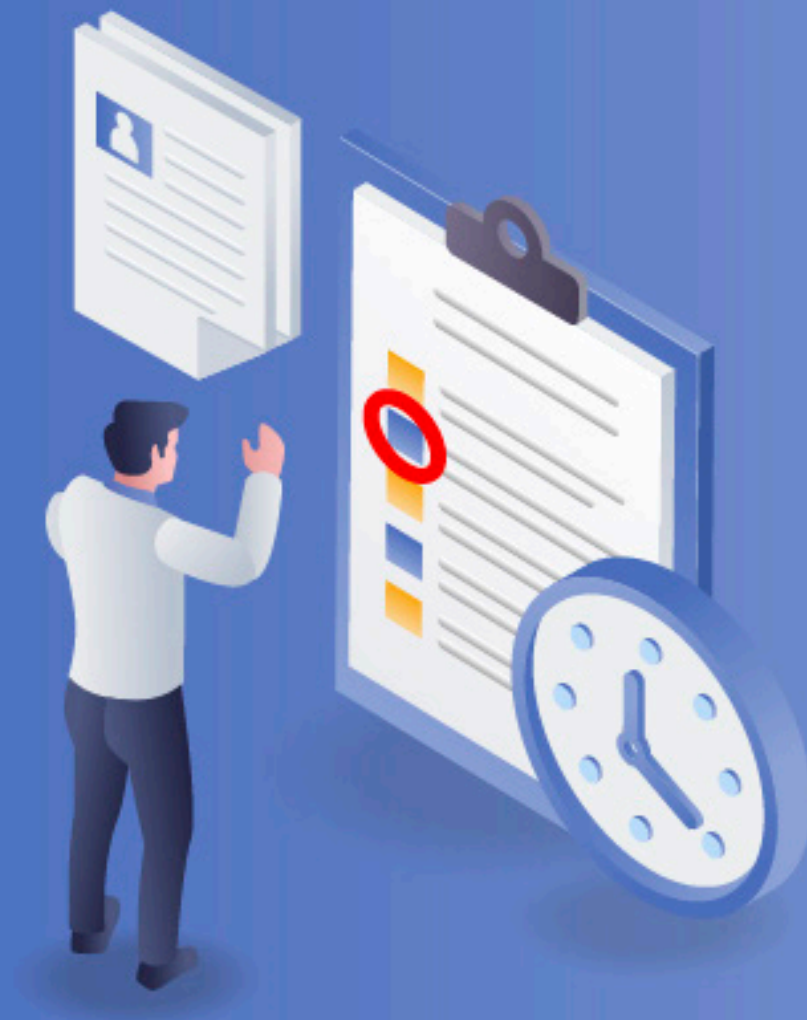




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## From Policy to Practice: The Attitude–Behaviour Gap in University Sustainability and its Implications for SDGs in Cameroon

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### ABSTRACT

This article interrogates the persistent gap between policy declarations in favour of sustainable development in Cameroonian higher education and the effective behaviours of students. By crossing empirical data gathered from 200 students at the University of Yaounde 1 with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 4, 7, 12 and 13), the study reveals that university policies, organizational cultures and daily practices do not significantly predict student behavioural competencies, whereas management strategies and knowledge devices do. This analysis suggests that Cameroon's progress towards SDGs depends on closing a "governance bottleneck" separating normative declaration from structured action. The article argues for systemic integration of sustainability objectives into university governance as a necessary condition for transforming individual intentions into national contributions for 2030 and 2035 agendas.

### INTRODUCTION

The promise of SDG 4, 7, 12 and 13 ensures all learners acquire knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development in most African state universities. In UN global charters and governance framework, there is a dissociation between normative text and institutional routines. In Cameroon public universities, the National Development Strategy 2020-2030 and Law No. 005 of 16 April 2016 set the orientations for higher education without operationally integrating sustainability principles into the governance mechanisms. This disconnection generates a sustainable behaviour calls an attitude-behaviour gap: students display favourable dispositions toward sustainable development without actually adopting effective conservation, recycling, or civic engagement behaviours. The central problem of this article is to determine how university governance can serve as a lever to close this gap and, by extension, accelerate Cameroon's contribution to SDGs 4, 7, 12, and 13. The objective is threefold: to diagnose the relative effect of five governance dimensions on student competencies; to identify institutional bottlenecks that block the translation of attitudes into behaviours; and to formulate recommendations aligned with the national development strategy. The empirical corpus rests on a quantitative survey conducted among 200 students at the University of Yaounde 1, representative of three faculties. The method combines multilinear regression analysis with a critical reading of national strategic frameworks, in an interdisciplinary approach bridging educational management and public policy studies. The article is structured in five sections: after this introduction, the methodology is specified, results are presented, then discussed in light of public policy stakes and the SDGs.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The thematic review of literature accounts for attitude–behaviour gap, education-for-sustainable-development (ESD), competencies, curricula, public-policy research on governance as the mechanism that converts declarations into routines in a specific context of higher education.

### The Attitude–Behaviour Gap

The attitude–behaviour gap refers to the systematic discrepancy between pro-environmental attitudes and the behaviours. Kollmuss & Agyeman (2002), in their widely cited synthesis, showed that pro-environmental behaviour results from an interplay of internal factors (knowledge, values, attitudes, emotions) and external factors (infrastructure, economic incentives, social norms), and concluded that favourable attitudes are neither necessary nor a sufficient condition for action. Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behaviour locates the missing link in perceived behavioural control: individuals act on their intentions only when they believe the action is feasible within their material and institutional environment. Translating the theory in to campus setting, a student may value recycling yet never recycle if no bins, no collection system, and no institutional routine make the behaviour possible. Recent cohort studies confirm persistence of the gap among consumers, whose sustainability-framed discourse outruns their actual consumption practices (D'Acunto, 2025; Salonen, 2024). This literature suggests that interventions targeting information alone, awareness campaigns, posters, pledges address the internal factors while leaving the external, institutional factors untouched.

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## Education for Sustainable Development and SDG Agenda

ESD scholars criticised the reduction of sustainability education to knowledge transmission. Wiek, Withycombe, and Redman (2011) defined a set of key sustainability competencies: systems thinking, anticipatory, normative, strategic, and interpersonal competencies and argued that academic programmes must be redesigned so that learners practice these competencies rather than merely memorising sustainability content. Similarly, UNESCO's learning objectives for SDGs lay emphasis on cognitive, socio-emotional, and behavioural learning (UNESCO, 2017), while global monitoring of ESD repeatedly notes that policy adoption has outpaced pedagogical transformation (Leicht, Heiss, & Byun, 2018). Likewise, the 2023 UNESCO Recommendation on education for peace, human rights and sustainable development extends this requirement to whole-institution approaches, in which governance, campus operations, and community engagement carry the same educational weight as the curriculum. For SDG 4,7, 12 & 13 to be met, universities must therefore be assessed not on their declarations but on the behavioural competencies their graduates actually demonstrate as assessment that presupposes governance mechanisms capable of structuring, monitoring, and rewarding such behaviours.

## University Governance as the Configurator of Sustainability

Lozano & al. (2013) documented the proliferation of international declarations for sustainability in higher education and opine that signing declarations often substitutes mechanism of changing governance structures, leadership styles, and campus operations. Their subsequent worldwide survey (Lozano *et al.*, 2015) confirmed a systematic commitment–implementation gap: institutions report high commitment while implementation lags in curriculum, research, campus management, and stakeholder engagement. Sterling (2004) attributes this to the dominance of “sustainability-as-add-on” over systemic learning, arguing that transformation requires changes to the institution's own operating logic. Parallel diagnosis by Meadowcroft (1997) showed that sustainable development becomes operative only when it is embedded in routines of planning, budgeting, and accountability, while Spangenberg (2002) demonstrated that sustainability must be translated into institutional indicators to escape the realm of rhetoric. Governance on this view, is the prism through which normative objectives are refracted into observable practices, a configuration of policies, cultures, daily practices, knowledge devices, and management strategies rather than any single instrument.

## Higher Education Reform and Sustainability

In Cameroon, Fonkeng (2008) assessed the post-1993 university reforms as ambivalent: they expanded access and professionalised programmes but left institutional governance, funding, and management capacity. These

weaknesses analysed, connect to the country's wider governance deficits (Ngege & Tazoacha, 2023). For example, Law No. 98/004 of 14 April 1998 on the orientation of education and Law No. 005 of 16 April 2016 on the orientation of higher education invoke social development and employability without prescribing mechanisms for sustainability in curricula or campus operations, and the National Development Strategy 2020-2030 treats universities primarily as instruments of human-capital formation. Empirical work in Cameroonian state universities finds that sustainability knowledge circulates mainly through isolated courses and student initiatives rather than through structured governance arrangements (Ngowa Sokpa, 2026). No study to date has systematically tested which governance dimensions predict student sustainability competencies in this context. The convergence of these literatures suggests that the five governance dimensions examined here should not be expected to operate uniformly. Declaratory dimensions—policies, symbolic culture, sporadic practices—are precisely those the research identifies as weakly coupled to outcomes (Lozano *et al.*, 2013, 2015), whereas configuring dimensions—management strategies and knowledge devices—create the opportunity structures.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study mobilises a cross-sectional quantitative design. A structured questionnaire was administered to 200 students selected through stratified random sampling in three faculties of the University of Yaounde I. The instrument measures five sustainability governance dimensions (policy, culture, practices, knowledge, management strategy) and a dependent variable composed of three indicators: knowledge of sustainable development, pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours. Data were analysed through multilinear regression in SPSS. In parallel, documentary analysis was conducted on Cameroonian legislative texts (Law No. 98/004 of 14 April 1998, Law No. 005 of 16 April 2016, National Development Strategy Document 2020-2030) to evaluate the coherence between sustainability objectives and university governance arrangements. The article therefore tests three null hypotheses stated as: H01, formal policies, organisational culture, and daily practices exert no significant effect on student sustainability competencies; H02, knowledge devices and management strategies exert no significant positive effect; and H03, when taken as a systemic configuration, governance exerts no significant global effect on competencies, consistent with the whole-institution perspective.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Results

Descriptive statistics shows that students display a globally favourable attitudes: 78% consider environmental protection a priority and 82% recognise the role of education as essential in poverty reduction. However,

only 34% declare regular recycling, 28% participate in environmental volunteering, and 19% engage in student sustainability organisations. This dissociation between beliefs and actions confirms the attitude–behaviour gap. Likewise, regression analyses show that: policy ( $p = 0.241$ ), cultural ( $p = 0.312$ ), and practices ( $p = 0.487$ ) dimensions exert no significant effect on student competencies. In other words, the formal existence of policies, the symbolic presence of a green culture, and the sporadic nature of sustainability practices do not translate into observable competencies among students. This absence of effect constitutes the central “governance bottleneck”: intentions are displayed, but the institutional channels that operationalise them remain obstructed. Conversely, knowledge ( $p = 0.002$ ) and management strategy ( $p = 0.004$ ) significantly predict competencies. When the dimensions are aggregated, the global effect of governance becomes significant ( $p = 0.000$ ), confirming that it is the systemic configuration that matters, not the addition of isolated measures.

### Discussion

These results pose a direct challenge to Cameroonian strategic frameworks. The National Development Strategy 2020-2030 promotes structural economic transformation and human capital development without articulating how universities should govern this transition. SDG 12 (responsible consumption and production) and SDG 13 (climate action) require structured behaviours, not merely cognitive competencies. Yet the data shows that university practices: waste management, responsible procurement, energy efficiency has no predictive effect on student behaviours. This situation is explained by the declaratory nature of Cameroonian policies. Law No. 005 of 16 April 2016 affirms the need to professionalise higher education to respond to labour market needs, but prescribes no internal governance mechanisms for integrating sustainability into curricula or campus operations. Similarly, Law No. 98/004 of 14 April 1998 on the orientation of education mentions social development without making it an institutional performance criterion. For Cameroon public universities to progress toward the SDGs, university governance must shift from a logic of “declaration” to a logic of “configuration”. The attitude–behaviour gap is not resolved through information alone, but through transforming governance arrangements into concrete opportunity structures. When students observe their university negotiating with eco-responsible suppliers, producing sustainability reports, or consulting student bodies on green policies, they perceive an environment where sustainable behaviours are not only possible but expected. This implies: institutionalizing sustainability committees with real decision-making powers; mandatorily integrating transversal sustainability modules into all curricula, in accordance with SDG 4, 7, 12 and 13, establishing performance indicators linked to student behaviours and not merely to knowledge; creating inter-sectoral partnerships between universities,

local authorities, and enterprises to anchor practices in territorial ecosystems.

### CONCLUSION

This article establishes that the attitude–behaviour gap regarding sustainability in Cameroonian universities is fuelled by a deficit of governance configuration. Existing policies are declaratory; cultures and practices are invisible or inconsistent. Consequently, students accumulate knowledge and attitudes without translating them into actions. The scientific contribution of this analysis lies in the empirical connection between university governance mechanisms and national trajectories for achieving SDGs. Limitations include the single-centre nature of the study and the absence of longitudinal data on behavioural evolution. Future research should evaluate the impact of targeted governance reforms on student behaviours, using quasi-experimental designs. For now, it appears that Cameroon’s 2035 emergence vision will necessarily pass through a redesign of university governance, making sustainability not a decorative add-on but a structuring principle of education.

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