Understanding secondary school students' agentic negotiation strategies in accessing higher education in Cameroon

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This article investigates students' post-secondary education transition processes in Cameroon through the lens of agency. Situated in a country where the higher education participation rate is fairly low, our article explores how students agentically negotiate access to higher education within structural constraints of socio-economic status and gender. Semi-structured interviews with 25 students from two secondary schools in Yaoundé, Cameroon were conducted. The findings reveal that students enacted the four modes of reflexives (Archer, 2003) dynamically and discursively, with specific manifestations of agency relevant to gendered and classed structures in Cameroonian society. In this paper, we propose a person-centred, empowering approach to supporting students in higher education participation. We further confirm the importance of non-universal, contextually-situated employment of Archer's (2003) typology of four reflexive modes.

Keywords: Agency, higher education participation, gender, Cameroon, reflexivity

Introduction

The benefits of widening participation for those from underrepresented groups in higher education (HE) are well established in the academic literature, as a means of tackling educational and wider social inequalities (Chowdry et al., 2013; Wilkins & Burke, 2015). Meanwhile, socioeconomic status (SES) and gender remain influential in young people's accessibility to HE, particularly in less developed countries (Croll & Attwood, 2013; Berrington et al., 2016; Grim et al., 2019). In Cameroon, the overall gross enrolment ratio for HE was 14% in 2018, much lower than that of high-income countries such as the UK (61%) (UNESCO, 2021). Additionally, a gender gap is noted, with more male (15%) than female (13%) students attending HE institutions (HEI) in

2018 (World Bank, 2021). Acknowledging that those structural gaps need to be addressed in the first place, this article presents how final-year secondary school students in Cameroon agentically negotiate access to higher education within structural constraints of SES and gender.

Studies in the Sub-Saharan African contexts of HE predominantly focus on the structural outcomes of HE participation (see Odhiambo, 2016; Oketch, 2021; Aisoli-Orake et al., 2022), few have explored how students respond to those structural barriers and negotiate access to HE. By adopting an agency lens to understand students' personal experiences, our article addresses this research gap and presents the manifestations of SES and gender issues specific to the research context. More importantly, the article depicts how individual agency is socially constructed in relation to SES and gender structures in Cameroon; providing insight into person-centred approaches that empower individual students in access to HE. Two research questions are addressed in this paper:

(1) How do secondary school students understand the structural processes of SES and gender that influence their access to higher education?

(2) What agentic strategies are adopted by those students in negotiating access within the structural constraints?

The article begins by introducing the classed and gendered structures in the education system in Cameroon, which constrains individuals' higher education participation. It then introduces the theoretical lens of agency employed in this paper, particularly a framework of four reflexive modes developed by Archer (2003). After detailing the methodological design and process, the paper presents how participant students in this study enacted the four modes of reflexives, demonstrating their internal processes of

mediating agency and structure in the Cameroonian contexts. The article concludes by offering insight into how to support widening HE participation among Cameroonian secondary school students.

Higher education participation in Cameroon

Participation in the Cameroonian higher education system reflects important structural factors in that context. Two most influential factors as shown in (limited) existing empirical data are socioeconomic status (SES) and gender (Mefire et al., 2017; Zhao & Xu, 2023). We have reported elsewhere that the SES influence on secondary students' attitudes towards and access to HE is less about their family backgrounds; rather, it relates more to institutional factors such as the types of secondary school students attend (Zhao & Xu, 2023). This is because students who reach the final stage of secondary schooling have already enjoyed certain family SES privileges in Cameroon. Therefore, in this current article, we present how the SES-segregated education system in Cameroon shapes higher education participation.

Cameroon was simultaneously colonised by Britain and France before 1961 and is now an officially bilingual and multi-party state. The education system has been shaped by the country's colonial past and the contemporary political landscape. Inheriting the bilingual system, there are Anglophone and Francophone schools/universities in Cameroon, along with the distinction between public and private sectors. Higher education is further divided into university education and higher professional education programmes (professional schools) (DoHE, 2010). Consequently, students graduating from different types of secondary schools have different accessibility to the various types of HEIs - public or private, Anglophone or Francophone, universities or professional schools (Zhao & Xu, 2023).

The education system and entry requirements to different types of HEIs reflect SES structures in Cameroon. First, the bilingual divisions of Anglophone and Francophone institutions mean that students follow differing pathways into higher education. Mirroring education systems in the UK and France, students seeking admissions to Anglophone universities take GCE A/L [1] whereas those attending Francophone institutions need to obtain Baccalauréat[2]. Although the nation is officially bilingual, eight out of ten provinces are French-speaking regions and Anglophones were somewhat 'marginalised' (Kouega, 2018). Yet, evidence shows that there is a rush in demand for English-medium education in contemporary urban Cameroon, which results in a 'stiff competition' between families scrambling for places for their children in Anglophone schools (Fonyuy, 2010; Enongene, 2013). Receiving English-medium education in Francophone regions can be an expensive choice, hence, Francophone students in Anglophone schools usually come from better SES families (Fonyuy, 2010; Zhao, 2019). Where relevant, the two pathways also have implications on whether and where students study abroad (Zhao, 2019).

Second, public and private HEIs are subject to different tuition fees. Public HEIs are run by the government and aim to train qualified professionals for the country. To meet the high demand for HE in Cameroon, public universities have considerably lower financial and academic requirements (Njeuma et al., 1999; Fonkeng & Efuetngu, 2007). The standard tuition fee for public HEIs is 50,000 Central African CFA franc (FCFA, approximately £70) per year per person, whereas for private HEIs it can be as high as 850,000 FCFA (approximately £1180) (DoHE, 2010; CUIB, 2020). Private HEIs are

[1] A school leaving qualification offered by secondary schools, sixth form colleges and further education colleges in the United Kingdom and some Commonwealth countries.
[2] A diploma in the French education system that has two special features. It marks the successful conclusion of secondary studies and opens access to higher education.

mainly profit-driven, with sufficient and better infrastructure (Fonkeng & Ntembe, 2009). From that sense, public HEIs are popular among those from lower SES backgrounds. In addition, public universities have lower academic requirements than public professional schools. To gain access to certain public professional schools, students need to take an additional competitive entrance examination - *Concour* (Njeuma et al., 1999; World Bank, 2014). Graduating from public professional schools has a high potential of getting a job within a year (Nyuyfoni, 2016). Although no empirical evidence is available, we assume that students who can attend public professional schools may come from better SES backgrounds, especially in the Francophone system. This assumption is based on historical data from France, where 80% of students in prestigious professional schools came from higher SES backgrounds (Duru-Bellat, 2000).

To summarize, although HE participation in Cameroon still follows broader patterns that low-SES students are less likely to attend HE (Berrington et al., 2016; Fischer et al., 2019; Grim et al., 2019) and those who do tend to choose low-fee and/or low-requirement institutions (Morley et al., 2007; Alon, 2009; Mijs, 2016), those patterns manifest in the Cameroonian context more as choices of than access to HE after secondary schooling - a stage when the exclusion of students from low SES backgrounds may have already happened. Previous studies have confirmed the complexity of structure and its impact on higher education participation in Cameroon, yet few have uncovered how individual students respond to the complicated structural influence on their personal educational trajectories, especially how individuals agenctically negotiate with their perceived structural constraints.

Gender is another structural factor that constrains higher education participation. Worldwide, female students are underrepresented in prestigious HEIs and are more

likely to attend less selective institutions (Mullen & Baker, 2015). The participation of females in higher education is particularly disadvantaged by male hegemony and patriarchal cultures - which prevail in African societies including Cameroon (Milligan, 2014; Jewkes et al., 2015; Munene & Wambiya, 2019). In a patriarchal society, males have power and authority over women in all aspects of their life including education (Morley et al., 2007; Omwami, 2011; Benstead, 2020). Previous empirical data has shown that fathers influence girls much more than mothers in terms of higher education access and choices in Cameroon, girls oftentimes cited their fathers' opinions as sources for shaping their own attitudes and decisions (Zhao & Xu, 2023).

There are also intersectional impacts of SES and gender in higher education participation, placing girls from poorer families as the most disadvantaged and least represented group (Johannes & Noula, 2011). With the cultural preference for boys, girls are often sacrificed for school dropouts to support the boys' education, especially in a deprived family context (Azam & Kingdon, 2013). There is limited research, however, that presents how choices of the aforementioned types of HEIs may differ by gender.

Existing literature on higher education participation in Africa has predominantly focused on presenting the outcomes and patterns of SES and gender structures (Berrington et al., 2016; Fischer et al., 2019). Additionally, the nuanced everyday experiences of students living within those structural constraints have been largely neglected. Even less has attempted to depict how individual students agentically navigate through the process of being subject to social structures. This paper employs such an agency lens in an under-researched context.

Agency in higher education participation

Agency refers to how individuals react to structures and make choices accordingly (Giddens, 1984). The structure is regarded as "rules and resources recursively implicated in social reproduction; institutionalized features of social systems have structural properties in the sense that relationships are stabilized across time and space" (Giddens, 1984, p. xxxi). Agency and structure, according to Giddens, shape and are shaped by each other in a recursive manner, referred to as the duality of structure. Structural properties of social systems are both medium and outcome of the practices that constitute those systems (Giddens & Dallmayr, 1982); whereby agency is socially constructed and further contributes to reconstructing structures (Giddens, 1984; Archer, 1995; Archer, 2000).

The duality of structure challenges a dichotomous construction of agency and structure. Nevertheless, it is criticized for conflating human agents with the system, whereby agency is constituted by the system in a 'structure' (Urry, 1982; Healy, 1998; Walther et al., 2015). To address this criticism in our paper, we employ Archer's (2003) internal conversation process that mediates between agency and structure. Archer describes internal conversations as how individuals actively exercise agency that leads to courses of action against structures. The internal conversations are produced through reflexive deliberations (Archer, 2007: 93), including four modes:

- Fractured reflexives: those whose internal conversations intensify their distress and disorientation rather than leading to purposeful courses of action.
- Communicative reflexives: those whose internal conversation requires completion and confirmation by others before resulting in course of action.
- Autonomous reflexives: those who sustain self-contained internal conversations, leading directly to action.

- Meta reflexives: those who are critically reflexive about their own internal conversations and about the impact of structure on their actions.

Existing research has proved the empirical applicability of adopting Archer's modes of reflexives in interpreting students' participation in HE, in diverse socio-cultural and political contexts - for example, young South Asian women in UK HE (Bagguley & Hussain, 2016); young Muslim women in Australian HE (AI-deen, 2019). Baker (2019) further argues that Archer's modes of reflexives are contextually situated, and are performed by individual students in discursive rather than singular ways.

This current paper explores employing the four modes to understand Cameroonian students' dynamic enactments of agency, in the aforementioned contexts of gender and SES structures. Archer's reflexivity modes enable us to make sense of how individual students agentically act against gender and SES structures in negotiating access to higher education, with a focus on their everyday life experiences as narrated by themselves. When negotiating access to HE, students may draw on a hybrid of reflexive modes.

By referring to this typology of reflective agency, we present in this paper the extent to which Cameroonian students enact their agency and explain what contributes to different levels of enactment. We regard fractured reflexives as lacking agency when confronted with gendered and classed structures; communicative reflexives as in need of external support when enacting agency, in comparison to autonomous reflexives who are more self-determined and demonstrate a higher level of agency. Lastly, meta-reflexives can further evaluate their own reflective processes. We believe that meta-reflexives are important in disrupting structures that produce inequalities, through person-centred, empowering approaches (Scambler, 2013; Goodman, 2017; Williams, 2018). Additionally, we prove that Archer's work can be relevant to a non-Western

context, meanwhile presenting its nuanced and contextually-specific manifestations regarding HE participation in Cameroon.

Methodology

This article draws on secondary school students' narratives about how they negotiated access to higher education in Cameroon, focusing on the modes of reflexives that they demonstrated. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 25 students from Yaoundé, Cameroon (the nation's capital and French-speaking region). The participant students were selected through purposive sampling, covering a public school and a private school's Anglophone sections. This ensures that students come from different SES backgrounds, as explained earlier in this paper. Both boys and girls were recruited to capture any gendered experiences. The participants' demographic information is presented in Table 1 [Table 1 near hear].

The participants are evenly distributed across genders, with an age range of 16 to 22 years old. Their parents' occupations are included as an indication of SES. Fathers tend to have various and relatively higher status occupations than mothers, representing for example civil servant, journalist, and engineer. By contrast, a number of mothers are full-time housewives, suggesting the influence of patriarchy in Cameroonian society (Zhao & Xu, 2023). It should be noted that although those students come from different SES backgrounds, their families all managed to support them to complete secondary schooling. In this regard, the participants of this study are limited to a self-selected group of students that do not include dropouts.

The interviews lasted around one hour for each participant and took place on campus in the two schools - when students were available after classes. Students were asked questions about their personal attitudes towards and strategies in HE

participation. For example, they were asked “do you want to attend higher education and if so, why?”, “has anyone influenced your choice?”, “how do you think you can manage to achieve your goal in terms of attending HE?”. The interviews were conducted in English, recorded, and then transcribed. Conducting all interviews in English is another limitation of this study, as it excluded students who have lower English communication skills in a French-speaking region - normally with relatively lower SES.

Thematic analysis was followed by the researcher (first author), and themes that emerged from deductive coding included, for example, personal attitudes towards HE, parental influences on attending HE, and strategies adopted to access HE (only those relevant to the current paper are listed). The data analysis and interpretation in this study are enabled by the researcher’s familiarity with the topic and the context, as she has spent one year and a half living and teaching in schools in Cameroon. Her ‘insider’ view allows for sensitivity to the nuances of educational experiences in the researched contexts. The study further benefits from three outsiders’ perspectives (the co-authors), who enhanced the researcher’s sense-making of the data through an inter-researcher reflexivity process (Xu et al., 2021).

This study gained ethical approval from a UK university’s research ethics committee. It was also authorised by the local government (Centre Region Delegation of Ministry of Secondary Education) in Cameroon. Ethical guidelines were followed in terms of informed consent (from school heads, parents, and students themselves) and voluntary participation. Any information that may lead to the identification of the participants was not collected or included in this paper. Pseudonyms were used when we mention participants throughout.

Findings

In this section, students' attitudes, parental influences, and agentic strategies concerning their access to HE are presented within Archer (2003)'s typology of four modes of reflexives. SES and gender structures have shaped the dynamic enactments of different reflexives among the 25 student interviewees, who generally revealed a strong willingness to participate in HE.

Fractured reflexives: "It depends on my dad"

To start with, we present two female students with fractured reflexives. They had thought about their HE participation plans, but being girls, they are subject to gendered, patriarchal structures in Cameroon (Omwami, 2011; Benstead, 2020) and their agency was depressed by such 'male power'. For example, Manga talked about how her future plans are fully dependent on her dad:

> 'My plans… well, it depends on my dad, actually. He is the one to decide on that. Send me to a private school or a public one. But I think he will like me to go to a professional school... after a few years of vocational training, when you are done, you can get a job.'
> (Manga, female, 18, private school)

A similar situation was reported by Oriana (female, 18, private school), who attended the same private school and whose father dominated in deciding on Oriana's participation in a private university. Attending a private Anglophone school in Yaoundé implies both Oriana and Manga came from relatively better SES than some of their peers (so to see by their fathers' occupations), yet it is also a strong depiction of the male power and patriarchy in their family, where their fathers have the decision-making power. With the recognition of their fathers' power, these two females choose to obey and show respect for their fathers' opinions in order to achieve the aim of attending HE,

though their preferred HEIs were compromised in the process.

No evidence from this study has shown that those girls attempted to take courses of actions to resist the patriarchal structure (Archer, 2007). In other words, they did not disrupt the gendered structures imposed on them in Cameroonian society. Our findings further suggest that both male and female students actively engaged in reproducing those structures. Truth, a male student from the private school, said:

> If I have a girlfriend now. The first question for me to think about is: am I able to afford and take care of my responsibilities? Because the girl knows you are a boy, you provide everything for her that she needs…You know, the nature of girls is to demand. I, as a boy, want to work on my own, that is, to be on my own…
> (Truth, male, 18, private school)

Although Truth was motivated by the male 'power' and 'responsibility' to participate in HE, his motivations conform to patriarchy. Another boy, Christian explained how patriarchy advantages him in gaining access to HE:

> In Cameroon, it's all about boys. The family lays more on the boys because in Africa they say a girl is born to go, she will get married and she takes the name of her husband, she will go with him while the boys will keep the name of the family.
> (Christian, male, 18, private school)

Some girls were no exception in self-policing the patriarchal structure. As Layyah mentioned:

> [If I get married], I don't want to be above him [husband], because you know, sometimes when the woman is above the man, you somehow at a point want to minimise him, I don't like that. He is the one above, and I'm the one below. I should not be superior to him. I don't want that. I think a man should be humble and respect women.
> (Layyah, female, 17, public school)

Layyah's words explained why she was not keen to become better educated than men,

particularly her future husband. This resulted in her passive attitude towards HE participation.

Acknowledging that the above participants' reflections on gendered structures can be regarded as a sign of 'meta' reflexive - because they are aware of the structures and act accordingly, we interpret it as a fractured mode of reflexive. Here we add two manifestations of fractured reflexives from Cameroonian data: 1. confirming structures that disadvantage individuals, with course of actions that challenge those structures; 2. drawing on structures to legitimate their courses of actions (to participate in HE or not), actively reproducing those structures that disadvantage others and/or oneself.

Communicative reflexives with compromised choices

A more prevalent mode of reflexive agency among participant students is communicative reflexives. Twelve students reported how they were able to come up with their own plans but made compromised decisions through communications with family members, teachers, or friends. In so doing, they managed to gain access to HE regardless of the types of institutions they will attend. Two examples of this compromise as result of communications with families are presented below:

> I personally wanted to go to a private school, but they told me that tuition fees could be 500,000 CFA (approximately £700). My parents said no because it was too expensive. So, they prefer to send me to public school.
> (Ella, female, 18, public school)
> I want to do computer science. Due to some [financial] difficulty, I might face, I have a second plan: enter the police. It's a professional school, and I will need to write the *Concour*.
> (Johan, male, 18, public school)

Financial reasons were frequently cited in making compromises and in families' influences, showing the constraints of SES. Whilst the students were not 'agentic'

enough to insist on their preferred types of universities or majors, they were able to negotiate access to HE in ways that are both (financially) feasible and supported (by families).

As we shall discuss in the upcoming section, a few students further employed the autonomous mode of reflexives when faced with family financial constraints. Without consulting with family members, they already made their compromises when talking about their plans for HE:

> My family situation, let me say it's not too bad, but not very good for me. I have seven brothers and an elder sister. I'm the last boy. The family is too large. My brothers and sisters dropped from school. I'm the last boy, I have choices. But since my family situation, I'm just looking back to the public universities… because they are cheap.
> (Eason, male, 20, private school)

Five students communicated with teachers when making decisions about HE participation:

> Our teachers encourage us to go to university. No, not only the university, going to professional schools. Because they advise us more on the advantages of professional school.
> (Eve, female, 18, private school)

Others relied on their older siblings, in the context of Cameroonian families normally having several children (Zhao, 2019). This is especially the case when the older siblings have attended universities, thus able to provide advice on the advantages and disadvantages of different types of HEIs:

> 'My sister wants me to go to professional school. Because she too, she's in one. And she says that better for me to go there. And she told me in the university, there's a lot of leisure, free time. The teacher who just come for the classes.'
> (Layyah, female, 17, public school)

Communicative reflexives were commonly employed by participants in their decision-making processes of HE participation, like in other countries (Bagguley & Hussain, 2016; AI-deen, 2019; Baker, 2019). In the Cameroonian context, this mode seems to be closely related to financial constraints, especially when parents are those who pay for their children's university tuition.

Autonomous reflexive through deferred gratification

Another group of students revealed autonomous reflexive (N=8) in confronting financial and other constraints of HE participation process, they adopted deferred gratification as a strategy to negotiate with the disabling structures. Deferred gratification refers to the ability to delay the impulse for an immediate reward and to receive a more favourable reward later (Carducci, 2009). In the current study, deferring gratification means that students delay their goals of accessing HE to a later stage when current situations do not favour it. Usually, students adopting a deferred gratification strategy are determined by their HE preferences and do not want to make compromises in terms of choices.

For instance, Paola from a big family with four siblings (including herself) decided to delay her attendance at university due to family financial burdens and caring responsibilities (she is the oldest child in her family). She planned to gain financial independence first:

> To be sincere, actually, I wish to go to university after the GCE A/L. The thing is, I'm not sure they (family) will support me financially, so I plan to, first of all, try to depend on my own, to find a job, before going to university.'
> (Paola, female, 16, public school)

It would be interesting to know if the decision will be different were Paola a male, who may not be expected to look after their younger siblings in the gendered culture of

Cameroon. Paola's schoolmate, Mandy, coming from a bricklayer's family, also planned to find a job first and save for her return to HE.

Autonomous reflexivity in the form of deferred gratification was more pronounced among the relatively lower SES students, as they have a clear perception of their family and personal status. Instead of communicating and comprising their choices, the self-determined choice is more operational and can fully reflect their personal willingness.

Additionally, deferred gratification was also evident among students who have a strong preference for HEIs types. For example, some girls mentioned that public professional schools are their preference:

> I really want to go to a professional school because, after my A/L, I want to specialise myself and make something concrete. I don't want to waste time. I have to do something that is really productive.
> (Lois, female, 17, public school)

The girls confirmed their determination to attend a public professional school, even if they might not meet the relatively higher academic requirements the first time:

> I think a professional school would be better for me. Because … most of the people will go there (public university) and they come out jobless... And I have seen that professional schools are better. If I failed, I might spend a year in university and then try again.
> (Layyah, female, 17, public school)

Meta reflexive and benefit maximisation

A further group of students (N=7) more explicitly engaged with SES structures surrounding them when negotiating access to HE. Demonstrating a meta reflexive mode, those students critically evaluated how structures impact their experiences and how they can maximize benefits within the structural constraints/conditions. To

illustrate, Sandy mentioned how she would take advantage of extended family members' support to study abroad - maximising her chance of gaining access to foreign HE usually considered luxury:

> I want to study abroad. I, for one, by the grace of God, I think I have the chance to study abroad. Because, from my father's side, all my cousins are out. I have a cousin studying in America. My elder brother is in Dubai.
> (Sandy, female, 16, public school)

Acknowledging that the high expenditure involved in studying abroad goes beyond her parents' affordability, Sandy was able to identify other support available to her from extended family members. The same strategy was revealed by Truth, who also wanted to study abroad. He believed that having connections abroad would be beneficial to achieving this goal and that his extended family members can help:

> Well, to be frank, you know your parents can try their own way to support you, to pay for your flight, your tuition fee. I also have my aunt, who is in the USA. She can help me.
> (Truth, male, 18, private school)

Having said that, both Sandy and Truth critically evaluated their chances of success in studying abroad. They knew the possibility is limited and thus also came up with backup plans that are more feasible and realistic. Sandy indicated that she will attend a professional school if studying abroad become impossible. Truth pointed out that it is important to not put all eggs in one basket:

> After A/L, I will have to write some applications, the *Concour*. While waiting, I also want to apply to study abroad because you cannot put all your eggs in one basket. So when you have different choices, the one you succeed with is the one you go to.
> (Truth, male, 18, private school)

It appears that students from relatively higher SES in this research are more likely to enact meta reflexive agency when funding sources are critical in their accessibility and affordability to/for HE. Those students showed clear awareness of available economic capitals that they can draw on, from parents, siblings, and extended family members. The below examples support this claim:

> I'm not very concerned with the economic issue, not for the moment, because my parents will give money to me. My uncle is also giving me money. So for the moment, there's no financial problem.
> (Christian, male, 18, private school)
> My family will help me to pay my tuition fee. Particularly, my brother proposed to me that if I have good grades, he will help me continue to study and sponsor me together with my family. So I will try my best to get good grades first.
> (Maia, female, 17, public school)

Those findings suggest that the mode of meta reflexives is possibly enabled/limited by SES structures in terms of HEI choices.

Discussion

This paper has presented how 25 Cameroonian secondary school students negotiate their access to HE. Employing Archer's (2003) four modes of reflexives that depict how students' agency is enacted in structural constraints, we explored the recursive relationship between structure and agency, and its manifestation in the specific social and cultural contexts of Cameroon.

Students' agency is limited by the gendered and patriarchal structures in Cameroonian society (Morley et al., 2007; Omwami, 2011; Benstead, 2020), especially for girls who had to follow their fathers' decisions and revealed fractured reflexives. Whether they attend HE depends on their fathers. There is a limited indication that participant students in this research (female and male) were agentic in challenging or

disrupting those gender structures, and some of them were even found to be conforming and reproducing the biased gender structures. In this regard, we also do not see any evidence that SES would mediate the powerful gender suppression. However, there is emerging evidence that SES enables students' agency through meta-reflexives. Whilst the overall number of students who demonstrated meta-reflexive agency is low (7 out of 25), a pattern shared by those students is that they came from relatively privileged SES backgrounds with accessible social and economic capitals identified from (extended) family members. No gender differences were observed among the very few students of meta reflexives. Finally, the majority of students in this study agentically negotiated their access to HE through communicative and/or autonomous reflexives. They either made compromises and gave up their preferred types of HEIs, to attend more affordable types; or deferred their primary options to a later stage to allow more time for negotiating resources needed. Oftentimes those participants' agency in making decisions was enabled by support from parents, teachers, and siblings.

It is worth mentioning that students have drawn upon more than one mode of reflexives when negotiating access to HE within structural constraints of SES and gender. This discursive enactment suggests that Archer's (2003) typology of four reflexive modes is not prescriptive, divided, or mutually exclusive. Rather, they only indicate possible internal processes that mediate agency and structure in dynamic ways - ways that sometimes embrace more than one mode. The dynamic enactments of different modes of reflexives further explain how agency and structure shape and co-shape each other in a recursive manner. On the one hand, some students' agency is limited by the patriarchal culture in Cameroon and by their low SES; on the other hand, some students agentically take advantage of those gendered and/or classed structures, resulting in the reproduction of unequal structures in Cameroon's context of HE

participation. Although unable to generalise to a wider population, our findings support that boys tend to benefit more from the unequal structures, with gender and SES intersecting in affecting girls' decisions of making more compromises, being more likely to defer gratification, and overall, less agentic in negotiating access to HE than boys (Lewin, 2007; Johannes & Noula, 2011; Berrington et al., 2016; Rimkute et al., 2012; Baker et al., 2014).

Conclusion and implications

This article adopts the agency lens in understanding Cameroonian students' agentic negotiations in accessing HE. It presents how agency and structure operate through individual students' internal processes of reflexives. Employing Archer's (2003) typology of reflexives, this article proves that the typology can be used to understand Cameroonian students' lived experiences of gender and SES structures. The discursive and dynamic manifestations of the four modes of reflexives situate Archer's framework in specific contexts of Cameroon, challenging a universal approach to the usage of the framework.

In this paper, we propose a person-centred, empowering approach to supporting Cameroonian students' access to HE. Instead of focusing on the outcomes of gender and SES in limiting HE participation rates, interventions should be directed at helping students understand how SES and gender structures impact on their lives, as well as exploring strategies that enable students' agency in tackling the structural constraints. Supporting students to understand and develop meta-reflexives may be one possible strategy. The other strategies and modes of reflexives demonstrated by participant students in this article can also be shared with a wider audience for empowerment, by virtue of learning from shared experiences. This is particularly important for female

students and those from low SES backgrounds, who may need strong role models to enable their agency in disrupting existing, unequal social structures.

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Table 1 Interviewees' background and future plans

Type of Secondary school	Name	Gender	Age	Father's/Mother's occupation	Modes of reflexives	Future plan
Private Anglophone	Christian	Male	18	Businessman/ Housewife	Meta	Public university
	Eason	Male	20	Farmer/ Housewife	Communicative/Autonomous	Public university
	Truth	Male	18	Car mechanic/ Chef	Meta	Professional school/ study abroad/private university
	Manga	Female	18	Teacher (cousin)/ Housewife	Fractured	Father decides
	Harry	Male	19	Passed away/ Housewife	Meta	Professional school, otherwise public university
	Tim	Male	17	Work abroad/ Retailer	Communicative	Football, otherwise professional school
	Eve	Female	18	Teacher/ Teacher	Communicative/Autonomous	Study abroad/ professional school
	Sara	Female	18	Small business (brother)/ N/A	Autonomous	Anglophone university
	Joy	Female	18	Retired soldier/ Works in a company	Communicative	Professional school
	Elena	Female	18	Agent in the army/ Teacher	Communicative	Professional school
	Oriana	Female	18	Work in national assembly(unc	Fractured	Private university (father dominants)

				le)/ Housewife		
Public Bilingual-Anglophone section	Paola	Female	16	Civil servant/ Sale assistant	Autonomous	Find money, university later
	Sandy	Female	16	Don't know/ Small business	Meta	Study abroad, otherwise professional school
	Ella	Female	18	Journalist (stepfather)/ Housewife	Communicative	Public university
	Ben	Male	19	Finance / Doctor	Autonomous/Communicative	Football, otherwise professional school
	Maren	Female	18	Medical doctor (aunt's husband)/ Medical doctor (aunt)	Communicative	Professional school
	Mandy	Female	18	Bricklayer/ Bricklayer	Autonomous/Communicative	Find a job/ Private university
	Lois	Female	17	Retired / Saler	Autonomous	Professional school
	Ander	Male	19	Late civil servant/ Housewife	Communicative	Public university
	Kaden	Male	22	Farmer/ Farmer	Autonomous	Football/ find a job
	Yokan	Male	17	(not living with father)/ Accountant (aunt)	Meta	Public university, mentioned study abroad
	Simon	Male	18	Late engineer/ Retailer	Meta	Study abroad, otherwise professional school
	Maia	Female	17	Medical doctor/ Teacher	Meta	Professional school, mentioned study abroad

	Layyah	Female	17	Don't know/ Translator	Communicative	Professional school, mentioned study abroad
	Johan	Male	18	Police commissioner / Housewife	Communicative	Public university, professional school