

Equitable Power Dynamics, Transactional Relationships, and Mutual Learning as Correlates for Transforming Higher Education in Uganda: A Case of Kisubi University

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Abstract

This academic paper explores the interrelationship between equitable power dynamics, transactional relationships, and mutual learning as key correlates for transforming higher education institutions (HEIs) in Uganda, with a specific focus on Kisubi University. The objective of the study is to investigate how the evolution from transactional arrangements to relational partnerships can foster co-creation, mutual trust, and sustainable transformation in university governance, pedagogy, and stakeholder engagement. Anchored in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Uganda's Vision 2040, and National Development Plan IV, the study adopts a qualitative case study approach using secondary data, institutional reports, and documented interviews. The findings reveal that traditional hierarchical power structures and transactional mindsets constrain inclusive transformation, whereas equitable power sharing and mutual learning catalyze institutional innovation, academic freedom, and stakeholder ownership. The study concludes that embedding co-creative relational frameworks within university systems enhances institutional responsiveness, inclusivity, and resilience. Recommendations include policy reform for governance equity, redefinition of institutional partnerships, and enhanced pedagogical autonomy. The findings offer practical and policy-oriented insights into restructuring Uganda's higher education landscape through relational, inclusive, and empowering models of engagement.

Keywords: equitable power dynamics, transactional relationships, mutual learning, higher education transformation, University of Kisubi

1. The Background of the Study

Globally, higher education has undergone significant transformation, shifting from rigid, hierarchical systems characterized by transactional relationships to more participatory and inclusive models that emphasize relational partnerships. Historically, higher education institutions (HEIs) have been founded upon colonial, neoliberal, or bureaucratic structures that reinforced power centralization and top-down decision-making processes (Altbach, 2016). In Africa, and specifically Uganda, post-independence educational reforms initially sought to dismantle these colonial legacies; however, many universities continued to adopt managerial and transactional models of operation, focusing more on bureaucratic compliance than stakeholder empowerment (Ssempebwa et al., 2019).

During the 1990s and early 2000s, Uganda's HEIs experienced exponential growth in student enrollment, institutional privatization, and international collaborations, which reinforced transactional arrangements with stakeholders primarily defined by service exchange, tuition for instruction, with limited space for co-creation and

mutual decision-making (Nakayiwa, 2018). However, the emergence of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the African Union's Agenda 2063, and Uganda Vision 2040 has triggered a paradigm shift, emphasizing equitable governance, inclusion, and innovation-driven development. In this emerging landscape, mutual learning, equity in power dynamics, and transformation-focused partnerships are increasingly recognized as fundamental pillars for institutional resilience and relevance (Kiwanuka, 2023).

In Uganda, University of Kisubi (UniK) is one of the private chartered institutions striving to position itself as a transformational center of learning, research, and service. Located in Entebbe Municipality, Wakiso District, UniK operates under the motto "Light of the World," which reflects its Christian heritage and commitment to holistic education. However, like many private universities, it faces structural and operational challenges related to power centralization, limited stakeholder participation, and overdependence on tuition-driven revenue models (Nabudere, 2021).

The study's context is situated in an institutional environment where faculty-student-administrator relations are still predominantly transactional. These relationships are largely shaped by defined roles, limited dialogue, and performance-oriented metrics that undervalue relational engagement and co-creation. Further, despite its progressive vision, UniK's administrative structures remain largely hierarchical, often sidelining collaborative planning, equitable representation in decision-making, and feedback mechanisms that foster mutual learning. The National Development Plan IV and Uganda's Vision 2040 both highlight education transformation as a strategic goal, emphasizing the need for HEIs to become hubs of innovation, equitable governance, and partnerships aligned with local and global development agendas as reported by Uganda Vision 2040.

The key constructs in this study, equitable power dynamics, transactional relationships, and mutual learning, are foundational to the current debate on transforming higher education in Uganda. Equitable power dynamics refer to balanced participation and influence among all institutional stakeholders: students, faculty, administrators, and community actors where decision-making is democratized and authority is not monopolized (Freeman & Robinson, 2022).

In contrast, transactional relationships are interactions where exchanges are linear and goal-oriented, typically with minimal emotional investment or collaborative ownership (Burns & Stalker, 2019). These are common in Uganda's HEIs where students pay tuition for services and faculty are evaluated based on output rather than meaningful engagement. On the other hand, mutual learning involves a reciprocal process of knowledge sharing, reflection, and co-creation where all parties contribute and benefit from learning interactions (Jack, 2000).

This study justifies the integration of these constructs by recognizing that a transformation agenda in higher education must not only improve access and curriculum but must also deconstruct power hierarchies, promote inclusivity, and foster collaborative learning environments. Informed by the broader SDG 4 (Quality Education), Goal 17 (Partnerships for the Goals), and Uganda's higher education quality assurance frameworks, the current inquiry places emphasis on moving beyond surface reforms toward deeper relational and governance transformation ("Transforming Education Towards SDG 4: Report of a Global Survey on Country Actions to Transform Education," 2024). The study particularly aligns with Uganda's "Skilling Uganda" strategy and the goal of strengthening institutional autonomy and responsiveness within HEIs.

1.1 Purpose of the Paper

The purpose of the study is to examine how equitable power dynamics, transactional relationships, and mutual learning influence the transformation of higher education in Uganda. Focusing on the University of Kisubi, the study explores how shifting to relational partnerships fosters inclusive governance, stakeholder co-creation, and institutional resilience.

1.2 Research Objectives

This study was guided by the following objectives:

- 1) To examine how transactional relationships, influence institutional transformation at University of Kisubi.
- 2) To analyze the role of equitable power dynamics in promoting inclusive governance and co-creation in higher education.
- 3) To assess the contribution of mutual learning to academic and administrative innovation at University of Kisubi.

1.3 Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:

- 1) How do transactional relationships influence institutional transformation at University of Kisubi?
- 2) What role do equitable power dynamics play in promoting inclusive governance and co-creation in

higher education?

- 3) How does mutual learning contribute to academic and administrative innovation at University of Kisubi?

2. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in two complementary theoretical frameworks: Transformative Learning Theory and Participatory Governance Theory. These theories collectively provide a robust lens through which the dynamics of power, learning, and institutional transformation in higher education can be critically analyzed.

2.1 Transformative Learning Theory

Proposed by Jack Mezirow in 1991, Transformative Learning Theory posits that adult learners experience deep learning when they critically reflect on their assumptions, engage in rational discourse, and alter their frames of reference through experience and interaction (Jack, 2000). This theory emphasizes the importance of dialogue, reflection, and mutual engagement as key features of mutual learning processes in higher education institutions. It supports the idea that transformational change within universities is driven not only by structural reforms but also by shifts in mindset, culture, and relational engagement among stakeholders. In this context, students, faculty, and administrators co-learn and redefine institutional values and practices, fostering innovation and inclusivity (Taylor & Cranton, 2012).

2.2 Participatory Governance Theory

Participatory Governance Theory emphasizes decentralized and inclusive decision-making processes in institutional settings (Fung & Wright, 2003). It argues that shared governance and equitable stakeholder involvement enhance institutional legitimacy, responsiveness, and sustainability. Within higher education, participatory governance challenges top-down models and promotes equity in power distribution, enabling all actors: students, lecturers, administrators, and community stakeholders to meaningfully contribute to institutional development. This aligns with Uganda's Vision 2040 and the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) framework that advocates for transparency, inclusion, and stakeholder ownership in university governance (NCHE, 2022).

These two theories were chosen for their relevance to the central themes of this study. Transformative Learning Theory directly supports the notion of mutual learning, showing how institutions can evolve when all members actively engage in reflective and experiential learning. Participatory Governance Theory complements this by providing a framework for analyzing equitable power dynamics, and the shift away from transactional relationships to more co-creative and accountable relational engagements; applied to UNIK, these theories help examine how power decentralization and learning reciprocity can transform institutional culture, policy, and practice to align with Uganda's higher education reform agenda and the global education SDGs.

3. Literature Review

This section presents a critical review of literature on the three major variables in the study: transactional relationships, equitable power dynamics, and mutual learning. Each variable is examined in terms of its theoretical underpinnings, empirical studies, and relevance to the transformation of higher education institutions, particularly within the Ugandan context.

Objective 1: Transactional Relationships in Higher Education Institutions

Transactional relationships in higher education refer to interactions that are based on clearly defined roles, responsibilities, and expectations, often limited to formal exchanges such as tuition payments in return for academic instruction. Such relationships are prevalent in university systems where bureaucratic efficiency, performance metrics, and output-based funding dominate institutional culture (Ginsberg, 2011). In many African universities, including those in Uganda, these relationships have reinforced a service-provider and consumer model, reducing students and faculty to passive recipients and deliverers of education rather than active co-creators of knowledge (Bunting & Cloete, 2016).

Scholars argue that transactional relationships compromise the transformative potential of higher education by limiting trust, ownership, and critical engagement between stakeholders (Marginson, 2011). For instance, Teferra & Altbachl (2003) describe how many African HEIs have struggled to shift from colonial education models characterized by rigid administrative hierarchies and impersonal pedagogies. Instead of fostering innovation and dialogue, such institutions maintain a mechanical relationship between faculty and students, where outcomes are predefined and learning becomes instrumental rather than reflective (Nguyen et al., 2017).

Transactional relationships have also been criticized for their impact on academic freedom and autonomy. When universities are governed primarily by corporate managerial principles and top-down accountability structures, faculty often face restrictions in curriculum development, research priorities, and institutional critique (Bok,

2003). This is evident in Uganda, where the growing privatization of universities has intensified market-driven behaviors at the expense of educational mission (Ssembatya, 2020).

In Kisubi University's context, preliminary institutional reports and third-party assessments indicate that academic decision-making remains primarily centralized, with limited student-faculty governance interaction. This creates a transactional environment where feedback loops are weak, curriculum responsiveness is minimal, and innovation is stifled (UniK Strategic Plan, 2022–2026). Moreover, faculty evaluations are largely output-based, emphasizing examination success and publication numbers without accounting for engagement quality or pedagogical innovation (Muwonge & Oluka, 2023).

However, recent literature shows an increasing call to shift from transactional to relational frameworks. Jørgensen and Bozeman (2007) emphasize that higher education transformation requires a reconceptualization of engagement moving from efficiency-based exchange to relational trust-building and shared purpose. Within the SDG 4 and SDG 17 framework, UNESCO (2022) advocates for university-stakeholder partnerships that transcend economic exchange and emphasize collaboration, mutual respect, and shared vision. In sum, transactional relationships in higher education limit the depth of institutional transformation by focusing on inputs and outputs rather than engagement processes and learning environments. Replacing these with relational, participatory models is essential for meaningful and sustainable reform in Uganda's higher education landscape.

Objective 2: Equitable Power Dynamics in Higher Education Institutions

Equitable power dynamics refer to the fair and balanced distribution of decision-making authority, influence, and access to institutional resources among all stakeholders in an academic setting. This concept is gaining traction in educational research and practice as a foundational element for institutional transformation, particularly in post-colonial contexts such as Uganda where power structures in higher education remain largely hierarchical and exclusionary (Mamdani, 2007; Trowler, 2012).

Historically, universities were structured to serve elite populations, with administrators and faculty holding nearly all institutional authority while students and lower-level staff had minimal participation in governance processes (Altbach, 2005). These structures have persisted in many African HEIs, where centralization and vertical power hierarchies still dominate curriculum design, resource allocation, and policy development (Cloete et al., 2015). In Uganda, despite reforms initiated through the Universities and Other Tertiary Institutions Act (UOTIA) of 2001, many institutions, particularly private ones like the University of Kisubi, continue to operate under frameworks that privilege executive decision-making with little room for participatory governance (Chancellor, 2021).

According to Habermas's theory of communicative action, institutions are most productive when they adopt inclusive, consensus-based governance mechanisms that recognize diverse voices and eliminate domination (Dumm, 1984). Equitable power dynamics enable such frameworks by facilitating transparent, dialogic decision-making among students, faculty, administrators, and external partners. They also foster trust, accountability, and a sense of collective ownership which are vital for institutional resilience and adaptability (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2006).

Empirical studies affirm the transformative effect of equitable power distribution in higher education. For example, Kezar and Holcombe (2017) found that shared governance models enhance institutional capacity for change, increase academic innovation, and improve stakeholder satisfaction. Similarly, Trowler & Knight (2000) argue that power-sharing mechanisms improve the relevance and effectiveness of university programs by incorporating multiple stakeholder perspectives into strategic planning and pedagogy. In the African context, Luescher (2012) emphasizes that student representation in governance enhances democratic practice and accountability in university operations.

In Uganda, however, implementing equitable power dynamics faces numerous challenges. Patriarchal norms, bureaucratic resistance, and limited regulatory enforcement inhibit meaningful inclusion in institutional governance (Tumusiime, 2019). Private institutions in particular, like University of Kisubi, often operate under proprietorship structures where executive decisions are final and non-negotiable, thereby excluding other stakeholders from strategic conversations (Nabudere, 2021). This contradicts the participatory ideals outlined in Uganda's Vision 2040 and National Development Plan IV, which promote inclusive development across sectors, including education.

Nevertheless, promising practices are emerging. Makerere University, for example, has introduced participatory budget planning and curriculum design sessions involving student unions and faculty representatives (Mak Governance Review, 2023). Similarly, international partnerships guided by the SDGs are encouraging Ugandan universities to adopt decentralized management systems, including open consultation forums, feedback platforms, and student-faculty senates (UNDP, 2022).

For University of Kisubi, adopting equitable power dynamics is not only a governance imperative but a strategic

pathway for enhancing academic quality, stakeholder satisfaction, and long-term sustainability. Aligning its structures with participatory frameworks can enable the institution to navigate external pressures such as competition, technological change, and demographic shifts in the student population while also aligning with global benchmarks for quality education (SDG 4) and inclusive institutions (SDG 16).

Objective 3: Mutual Learning in Higher Education Institutions

Mutual learning is a collaborative process whereby individuals or institutions learn from one another through reciprocal knowledge exchange, critical reflection, and co-construction of meaning. In the context of higher education, mutual learning extends beyond the traditional unidirectional teacher-student dynamic and embraces a participatory model where all actors, faculty, students, administrators, and even external partners, engage in continuous, reflective learning (Boud & Solomon, 2001). This model promotes inclusivity, dialogic engagement, and transformation, which are essential for institutional relevance and sustainability.

Theoretically, mutual learning draws on Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, which advocates for education as a process of conscientization, dialogue, and empowerment (Freire, 1970). Instead of treating learners as passive recipients of knowledge, mutual learning emphasizes co-agency, where both students and educators shape the learning agenda and outcomes. Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory also supports mutual learning by emphasizing the importance of shared critical reflection in reshaping perspectives and creating transformative change in adult education (Jack, 2000).

Globally, mutual learning has been applied in higher education to enhance pedagogical innovation, foster global citizenship, and promote equity in knowledge production. For instance, collaborative learning frameworks in Europe and North America have demonstrated improved student engagement, deeper understanding, and stronger interdisciplinary integration (Vygotsky, 1978; Kolb, 2015). In African higher education, however, institutional cultures still heavily rely on lecture-based, teacher-centered approaches that constrain mutual learning opportunities (Oanda et al., 2008).

In Uganda, mutual learning is gaining ground through competency-based learning models, problem-based curricula, and interdisciplinary teaching approaches promoted by the Ministry of Education and Sports and the NCHE. Institutions such as Makerere University, Uganda Christian University, and Uganda Martyrs University have initiated mentorship programs, community engagement labs, and student-led learning projects that embody the spirit of mutual learning (Tusiime et al., 2022; Kabahizi, 2020). However, the extent of integration remains uneven across the sector, with many private institutions lagging due to resource constraints, traditional pedagogies, and rigid institutional cultures.

At the University of Kisubi, anecdotal evidence suggests some adoption of collaborative learning through peer assessment, project-based work, and student consultations. Nonetheless, these efforts are not yet institutionalized or embedded within the broader governance and curriculum frameworks. Faculty still play dominant roles in defining content and assessment, and students' experiential knowledge is often undervalued. This limits the potential for co-creation and innovation that could arise from genuine mutual learning environments (UniK Learning Enhancement Review, 2023).

Moreover, mutual learning is increasingly linked to internationalization and the SDGs, especially SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals). Universities are being encouraged to co-develop knowledge with international partners, local communities, and students from diverse backgrounds in ways that promote inclusion, adaptability, and global relevance ("Transforming Education Towards SDG 4: Report of a Global Survey on Country Actions to Transform Education," 2024). Mutual learning also contributes to decolonizing education by recognizing indigenous knowledge systems, student voices, and context-specific insights as equally valid forms of knowledge (Nyamnjoh, 2012).

In conclusion, mutual learning is a critical element for transforming higher education institutions in Uganda. It requires institutional commitment to pedagogical reform, power-sharing, and stakeholder inclusivity. For the University of Kisubi, operationalizing mutual learning could lead to improved student outcomes, stronger academic-community linkages, and a more responsive and dynamic institutional culture aligned with national and global development priorities.

4. Research Methodology

This study used a qualitative case study approach to analyze equitable power relations, their transactional nature, and mutual learning at the University of Kisubi. This qualitative approach examined the experiences, perceptions, and interactions of the respondents in higher education advocacy, offering a deeper understanding rather than mere measurement. Treating the University of Kisubi as a single case study provided a bounded system, enabling a comprehensive understanding of systemic change by considering all possible environmental factors. The qualitative case study design allowed the researcher to investigate complex phenomena such as governance relations, stakeholder participation, and co-learning systems in their natural context. Data were

gathered through semi-structured interviews, focus groups, observations, and document review, with thematic analysis applied for pattern and theme identification. Credibility was maintained through data source triangulation, member checking, and providing rich descriptive context.

4.1 Study Population

The target population comprised various stakeholders at University of Kisubi, including 3 university administrators (e.g., deans and departmental heads), 6 teaching staff, and 6 students. In addition, 2 alumni and 1 official from the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) were considered for broader institutional and regulatory perspectives. This brought the total targeted population to 18 participants.

4.2 Data Collection Methods

Given the qualitative nature of the study, data were collected using three main instruments:

- 1) In-depth interviews, which explored the participants' perspectives on power dynamics, learning, and institutional relationships.
- 2) Documentary review, which analyzed university policies, NCHE reports, and academic strategic plans.
- 3) Observation, conducted during faculty meetings and academic engagement forums, which helped reveal power interactions and relational behaviors.

4.3 Data Analysis and Presentation

Thematic analysis was employed to categorize and interpret the data according to recurring themes across the three variables. After transcription and coding, themes were developed and interpreted in relation to the theoretical framework. The results were presented in narrative form and summarized in interpretive tables for clarity.

4.4 Sample Size and Sampling Techniques

The study employed a purposive sampling technique, commonly used in qualitative research, to select participants with relevant knowledge and experience. The sample size was guided by the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table for determining appropriate sample sizes, as cited by Amin (2005) to ensure adequate representation. A total of 18 participants were purposively selected from the University of Kisubi. These included university administrators, teaching staff, student leaders, alumni, and a policy official from the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE), as detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Study Participants by Category, Gender, and Sampling Technique

Category	Sub-Category	Male (M)	Female (F)	Total Population	Sample Size	Percentage (%)	Sampling Technique
University Administrators	Vice Chancellor / Administrators	2	1	3	3	100%	Purposive Sampling
Teaching Staff	Lecturers	4	2	6	6	100%	Purposive Sampling
Students	Student Leaders	3	3	6	6	100%	Purposive Sampling
Alumni	Graduates	1	1	2	2	100%	Purposive Sampling
NCHE Official	Policy Maker	1	0	1	1	100%	Purposive Sampling
Total		11	7	18	18	100%	

Source: Primary Data.

Table 1 provides a detailed summary of the study participants categorized by role, gender, and sampling technique. The total sample consisted of 18 individuals, including university administrators, teaching staff, students, alumni, and a representative from the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE). The gender distribution was relatively balanced, with 11 males and 7 females. All participants were selected through purposive sampling, ensuring that individuals with relevant experience and knowledge were included in the study. This method was particularly suitable for capturing diverse perspectives from key stakeholders involved in higher education at the University of Kisubi.

Specifically, the sample included three university administrators (2M, 1F), six teaching staff members (4M, 2F), six student leaders (3M, 3F), two alumni (1M, 1F), and one NCHE official (1M). The use of purposive sampling allowed for the inclusion of participants based on their strategic roles and experiences, which are critical to understanding the dynamics of educational transformation. This composition ensured a comprehensive and representative view of the institutional and policy-level factors influencing higher education in Uganda.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical guidelines by obtaining informed consent from all participants. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained, and participants were free to withdraw at any time without consequence. Institutional permission was also obtained from UNIK's research and ethics committee.

5. Interview Findings per Variable/Objective

The findings in this section are based on in-depth interviews conducted with both students and faculty members at Kisubi University. The interviewees were asked to share their experiences and perceptions about the prevailing conditions at the university, specifically focusing on three key variables, transactional relationships, equitable power dynamics, and mutual learning. These findings are examined through the lens of scholarly literature, providing insights into how these factors influence the educational experience in Uganda's higher education system.

Objective 1: Transactional Relationships and Institutional Transformation at UNIK

At the University of Kisubi (UNIK), the increasing commercialization of higher education has contributed to the rise of transactional relationships, where academic interactions are framed more by financial exchanges than by intellectual engagement. Marginson (2016) observes that Ugandan universities often adopt market-driven models to maintain financial viability—a pattern clearly reflected at UNIK. According to the university's 2023 administrative report, a 15% enrolment increase was prioritized explicitly to boost tuition revenue, with little to no emphasis on enhancing student-faculty engagement. This reflects Ginsberg's (2011) critique of business-oriented academic models, which tend to erode the depth and quality of transformative educational experiences.

As part of a broader study on student perceptions of academic engagement at UNIK, a second-year student in the Business Administration program expressed dissatisfaction with the impersonal nature of their academic experience. Having completed two semesters, the student described their learning environment as transactional and uninspiring:

"Here at UNIK, it's all about paying fees and getting grades. You attend lectures, sit exams, and that's it. There is no real interaction with lecturers. They lecture, we sit, and the cycle repeats. It's a business deal, not a place to expand our minds. The focus is on getting through the syllabus, not challenging us to think or go beyond the course."

This statement vividly captures the transactional dynamic within UNIK, where education is perceived more as a commodity than a transformative process. The student's remarks align with Freire's (1970) critique of one-directional, banking-style education, and echo (Altbach, 2016) observation that Ugandan universities increasingly prioritize administrative efficiency over intellectual enrichment. As a result, institutions like UNIK risk producing graduates who are credential-focused rather than critically engaged.

A similar concern was echoed by a lecturer from UNIK's Department of Education, who has taught at the university for five years. During an interview conducted for a study on faculty teaching experiences, the lecturer reflected on the administrative pressures that shape instructional practices:

"At UNIK, we're under pressure to deliver content and meet administrative targets. Pushing students beyond the syllabus is rare. It's a one-way exchange: students pay, we educate, and UNIK tracks enrollment numbers. There isn't a lot of room for mentoring or building relationships that might alter their academic path."

This insight reinforces Ginsberg's (2011) warning that managerialism in higher education diminishes the relational aspects of teaching. The lecturer's comments also support Freire's (1970) call for dialogical and participatory education, which is largely absent in UNIK's current academic structure.

Further reinforcing this theme, a senior faculty member from the Social Sciences Department—who has served at UNIK for over a decade, provided additional perspective during a study focused on institutional priorities. The faculty member emphasized the university's fixation on financial and performance metrics:

"UNIK's focus is on metrics, enrolment, graduation rates, and revenue. We're expected to churn out graduates, not nurture thinkers. This business-like approach leaves little space for meaningful interactions. Students see us as service providers, not guides, and that's a loss for everyone at UNIK."

This perspective reflects broader critiques of higher education commercialization in Uganda. Marginson (2016)

and Mamdani (2007) both note how such market-driven approaches reshape universities into revenue-driven institutions at the expense of their educational missions. The erosion of mentorship and relational learning risks undermining the university's potential to cultivate critical, independent thinkers.

In summary, the prevailing transactional model at the University of Kisubi, driven by commercialization and administrative priorities, prioritizes financial efficiency over intellectual engagement. This is evident in both student and faculty experiences and aligns with Freire's (1970) and Ginsberg's (2011) critiques of instrumentalist education. To reclaim its transformative potential, UNIK must shift toward more dialogical and relational learning models that foster mentorship, critical thinking, and deeper student-faculty engagement.

Objective 2: Equitable Power Dynamics and Inclusive Governance at UNIK

Power dynamics at the University of Kisubi (UNIK) are notably centralized, with decision-making concentrated among top administrators, thereby limiting faculty and student involvement. This hierarchical model contradicts the principles of shared governance, which Kezar and Holcombe (2017) advocate for, to ensure a more inclusive and participatory approach. Despite such advocacy, UNIK's administration persists with its top-down governance structure. For instance, a 2023 article in *The Monitor* reported that UNIK's administration rejected a student proposal to revise tuition payment plans without prior consultation, reflecting the ongoing centralized control within the university's governance framework. This centralized approach is not unique to UNIK, as similar challenges are observed across other Ugandan universities, as highlighted by Mamdani (2007).

Further insight into the impact of this governance model comes from interviews with a faculty member from the Law Department, who has been at UNIK for seven years. The interview, conducted as part of a study on governance at UNIK, explored faculty involvement in academic decision-making. The faculty member expressed frustration with the lack of influence over UNIK's academic policies, stating:

"At UNIK, decisions on curriculum, policies, or hiring are made by senior management. Faculty are only informed after everything is set. We have meetings, but they're more about receiving instructions than contributing ideas. It feels like our expertise is overlooked, and there's no real chance to shape UNIK's direction."

This statement underscores the centralized nature of governance at UNIK, which aligns with Burns & Stalker's (1994) critique of hierarchical structures that limit creativity and innovation. The faculty member's sense of exclusion illustrates a disconnect between UNIK's administration and faculty, as discussed by Dumm (1984). The lack of meaningful faculty involvement restricts the university's ability to harness faculty expertise, ultimately hindering institutional innovation.

In a similar vein, an interview with a UNIK student representative in the Student Guild, a third-year student in the Education program, further highlights the performative nature of student participation in governance. The interview revealed that student involvement, particularly regarding policies that directly affect them, often feels superficial. The student shared:

"At UNIK, students are sometimes invited to discuss policies, like fee structures, but it's just for show. The administration has already decided. We suggest changes, but they're ignored. It's frustrating because we're the ones affected, yet our voices don't matter in how UNIK is run."

This student's experience is consistent with Habermas' (1984) argument for genuine democratic participation, which UNIK's governance model fails to uphold. The performative inclusion of students, as described, aligns with Kezar & Holcombe's (2017) critique of exclusionary governance. Such a governance structure, in which student voices are disregarded, risks disengaging students and weakening the university's academic community.

In addition to the student perspective, an interview with a UNIK lecturer in the Business Department, who has been at the university for four years, highlighted the demoralizing effects of the top-down governance model. The lecturer expressed:

"UNIK's top-down system shuts out faculty input. Even when we raise concerns about academic policies, the administration pushes its agenda. It's demoralizing because we're on the ground, yet our perspectives are sidelined. This structure doesn't encourage collaboration or innovation at UNIK."

This statement further exemplifies the demoralizing effects of UNIK's centralized governance, aligning with Burns & Stalker's (1994) critique of rigid hierarchical structures. The lecturer's frustration reveals how UNIK's governance approach mirrors broader trends within Ugandan universities, as discussed by Mamdani (2007). The university's failure to incorporate faculty input limits collaboration, thereby stifling the potential for innovation and adaptability.

In conclusion, the testimonies of faculty and students illustrate the detrimental effects of UNIK's centralized governance model, which restricts both faculty and student agency. This approach, characterized by top-down decision-making, aligns with Habermas' (1984) critique of undemocratic governance structures. The lack of

genuine involvement from key stakeholders, as evidenced by the interviews, fosters disengagement and stifles innovation, which ultimately undermines the university's ability to adapt to evolving educational needs. To address these challenges, it is imperative for UNIK to adopt a more inclusive governance structure. Implementing shared governance could empower faculty, students, and other stakeholders, enhancing inclusivity and fostering a more dynamic academic environment at the University of Kisubi.

Objective 3: Mutual Learning and Institutional Innovation at UNIK

Mutual learning, which involves collaborative knowledge exchange, is constrained at the University of Kisubi (UNIK) due to its predominantly lecture-based teaching model. Freire (1970) critiques this approach, calling it the “banking” model, where students passively absorb information from instructors. This model is prevalent at UNIK, limiting student engagement and collaborative learning. A 2023 academic review at UNIK revealed that only 10% of courses incorporated interactive teaching methods, compared to 30% at Makerere University. This stark contrast underscores the structural barriers to innovation. In contrast, Nakayiwa's (2021) study on Gulu University highlights the success of collaborative initiatives, offering a clear alternative to UNIK's traditional approach.

To better understand the impact of this approach, an interview with a third-year student in the Education Department, conducted as part of a study on classroom engagement at UNIK, sheds light on the limitations of the lecture-heavy teaching model. The student expressed a desire for more interactive opportunities, stating:

“At UNIK, lectures are mostly the professor talking for hours. We take notes, but there's no discussion or space to share ideas. It's hard to feel involved when you're just listening. I wish we could engage more, challenge the material, or learn from each other's perspectives.”

This statement resonates with Freire's (1970) critique of the “banking” model, which stifles student engagement at UNIK. The student's call for discussion and exchange underscores the need for mutual learning, as advocated by Mezirow (2000). UNIK's reliance on lectures risks disengaging students, limiting opportunities for critical thinking and collaborative knowledge creation.

In addition, a discussion with a UNIK lecturer in the Social Sciences Department, who has taught for six years, revealed how the rigidity of the curriculum further limits opportunities for innovative teaching methods. The lecturer explained:

“UNIK's curriculum is so rigid that we stick to delivering content. Interactive methods like group discussions are rare because we're tied to the syllabus. I'd love to try new approaches, but the system prioritizes covering material over fostering real learning or innovation at UNIK.”

The lecturer's frustration highlights the structural barriers to mutual learning at UNIK, aligning with Freire's (1970) call for participatory education. The syllabus-driven approach restricts the incorporation of interactive teaching methods, as noted by Nakayiwa (2021), and stifles the potential for dynamic, innovative learning environments.

However, there are glimpses of innovation at UNIK, as evidenced by an interview with a faculty member in the Business Department. This faculty member shared an example of an innovative teaching practice that fostered mutual learning through experiential projects. The faculty member explained:

“At UNIK, in one elective, we had students work with local NGOs on community projects. They collaborated in teams, solving real-world problems. It was amazing to see them learn from each other and apply knowledge practically. These moments show what's possible when we break from tradition at UNIK.”

This example aligns with Mezirow's (2000) transformative learning theory, which emphasizes the value of experiential learning in promoting collaboration. The success of this initiative demonstrates that UNIK has the potential to embrace more dynamic teaching methods, similar to the collaborative approaches seen at Gulu University (Nakayiwa, 2021). Expanding such initiatives could greatly enhance mutual learning and foster a more engaging educational environment at UNIK.

Despite these promising examples, the overall reliance on the “banking” model, critiqued by Freire (1970), continues to limit the scope of mutual learning at UNIK. While innovative practices exist, their limited implementation, as indicated by the 2023 academic review, diminishes their broader impact. To overcome this, expanding experiential learning opportunities, as supported by Mezirow (2000), could foster a more student-centered environment. By scaling these approaches, UNIK could position itself as a leader in higher education innovation within Uganda.

6. Discussion

This section discusses the findings in relation to the study objectives, theories, and reviewed literature. It is structured around the three research objectives and draws from both empirical and theoretical perspectives to

demonstrate how the transformation of higher education institutions such as Kisubi University can be advanced through addressing relational practices, power structures, and learning models.

Objective 1: Transactional Relationships and Institutional Transformation

The findings clearly indicate that transactional relationships dominate the institutional culture at Kisubi University, reflecting a broader trend in Ugandan higher education. This echoes the work of Marginson (2011) and Ginsberg (2011), who argue that when institutions operate like corporate entities, education becomes commodified and students are reduced to consumers. At Kisubi University, student-faculty interactions are largely confined to instructional delivery, with limited mentorship, collaboration, or co-creation. This transactional paradigm weakens emotional investment and inhibits innovation, an issue also flagged by Cloete et al. (2015) in their study of African universities.

Furthermore, such relationships align poorly with the principles of Transformative Learning Theory (Jack, 2000), which advocates for deep engagement, critical reflection, and the co-construction of knowledge. The lack of student-alumni engagement and minimal inclusion of experiential knowledge within curriculum development processes further undermines institutional relevance and resilience. Burns and Stalker (2019) suggest that when institutions fail to transition from transactional to relational models, they risk alienating their core stakeholders and stagnating in the face of change.

This study, therefore, affirms the need for Kisubi University to dismantle rigid input-output interactions and build ecosystems where trust, feedback, and shared ownership are embedded within academic and administrative processes.

Objective 2: Equitable Power Dynamics and Inclusive Governance

The second objective revealed significant governance asymmetries at University of Kisubi, where decision-making remains centralized and participatory structures are largely symbolic. This finding aligns with Trowler and Knight (2000), who contend that meaningful educational transformation requires inclusive power structures that empower diverse voices. Despite the rhetoric of stakeholder engagement, most faculty and students are excluded from key institutional processes.

Habermas's theory of communicative action (1984) reinforces this critique by emphasizing the value of dialogue and consensus in institutional legitimacy. Similarly, Participatory Governance Theory (Fung & Wright, 2003) asserts that shared governance fosters transparency, accountability, and long-term sustainability. Yet, at University OF Kisubi, administrative dominance and top-down control persist especially in curriculum decisions and performance evaluations.

The situation mirrors wider challenges in Uganda's private higher education sector, where proprietorship models often hinder democratization (Nabudere, 2021). However, as Makerere's participatory reforms demonstrate (Mak Governance Review, 2023), inclusive governance can be achieved with clear policies, strong student representation, and continuous feedback mechanisms. These align with Uganda Vision 2040 and the higher education quality standards established by NCHE (2021), which advocate for decentralized, equitable leadership models.

Therefore, the study confirms that equitable power distribution is not just a governance concern but a transformative imperative for institutional vitality and trust.

Objective 3: Mutual Learning and Institutional Innovation

The third objective demonstrated that while mutual learning is valued at Kisubi University, its implementation is fragmented and often informal. Most academic processes remain lecture-driven, with limited space for reciprocal learning or collaborative knowledge production. This restricts the emergence of innovative practices and undermines the development of critical thinking, an outcome Mezirow (2000) identifies as essential for transformation.

Studies by Boud and Solomon (2001) and Nyamnjoh (2012) emphasize that mutual learning expands the epistemic landscape of universities, allowing multiple forms of knowledge: experiential, indigenous, and disciplinary—to coexist. In the Ugandan context, mutual learning is essential for decolonizing curriculum, enhancing community engagement, and ensuring that universities serve as platforms for societal transformation (Tusiime et al., 2022).

At Unik, limited institutionalization of mutual learning practices is compounded by time constraints, inadequate training in participatory pedagogy, and output-focused assessment methods. This confirms findings by Oanda et al. (2008), who note that traditional academic cultures in Africa often inhibit innovative pedagogies.

Nonetheless, the study affirms that integrating mutual learning can unlock academic creativity, enhance stakeholder investment, and contribute to the achievement of SDG 4 and 17. To achieve this, the University of

Kisubi must reform its pedagogy, embed mutual learning into program structures, and recognize students, faculty, and communities as co-producers of knowledge.

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

7.1 Conclusions

The study examined how equitable power dynamics, transactional relationships, and mutual learning influence the transformation of higher education in Uganda, using Kisubi University as a case study. The findings revealed that the university remains entrenched in transactional modes of engagement, with minimal space for co-creation, shared governance, or reciprocal learning. Power remains centralized, stakeholder participation is symbolic, and pedagogical approaches are predominantly lecture-centered.

First, the dominance of transactional relationships has reduced the university experience to a service model, weakening trust and curtailing opportunities for deeper educational transformation. Second, while institutional documents promote participatory governance, actual practices reveal asymmetrical power dynamics that hinder inclusive decision-making. Third, mutual learning—though acknowledged as valuable, remains inconsistently practiced and insufficiently institutionalized, limiting innovation and stakeholder empowerment.

Collectively, these issues undermine the university's ability to deliver inclusive, responsive, and transformative education. The study concludes that a paradigm shift toward relational engagement, democratic governance, and participatory pedagogy is essential for achieving both national development goals and global education standards.

7.2 Recommendations

- 1) In light of the study's findings, several actionable steps are recommended to higher education institutions, policy-makers, and educational regulatory bodies. First, universities such as the University of Kisubi should institutionalize a relational engagement framework that fosters shared leadership, trust, and participatory learning. This framework should guide interactions among faculty, students, and administrators through mentorship programs, collaborative classrooms, and co-curricular activities that cultivate community and dialogue.
- 2) Second, education regulators like the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) should require universities to demonstrate stakeholder engagement in curriculum development, strategic planning, and governance. Institutions must be evaluated not only by outputs like graduation rates, but also by the quality of their internal relationships and commitment to inclusive governance.
- 3) Third, governments and education ministries should support professional development programs for academic staff in participatory pedagogy, critical pedagogy, and experiential learning. National education policies should provide funding incentives for universities to implement community-based projects, interdisciplinary collaboration, and student-led innovation.
- 4) Fourth, institutions should adopt holistic performance indicators aligned with Uganda's Vision 2040 and the SDGs, particularly Goals 4 (Quality Education) and 17 (Partnerships for the Goals). Metrics should assess relational trust, student engagement, collaborative innovation, and institutional responsiveness to societal needs.
- 5) Finally, universities should create platforms for critical reflection and dialogue on institutional power dynamics. Through academic symposia, policy dialogues, and research collaborations with local and international partners, universities can build communities of practice that challenge status quo and promote continuous learning. For institutions like the University of Kisubi, embracing this shift is not only essential for survival in a rapidly changing educational landscape, it is a transformative opportunity to model justice, participation, and human dignity in higher education.

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