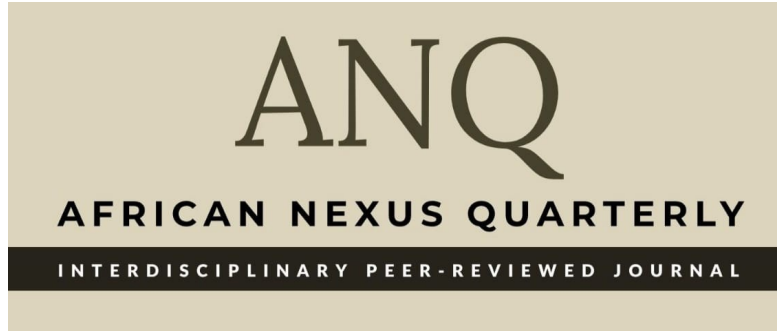




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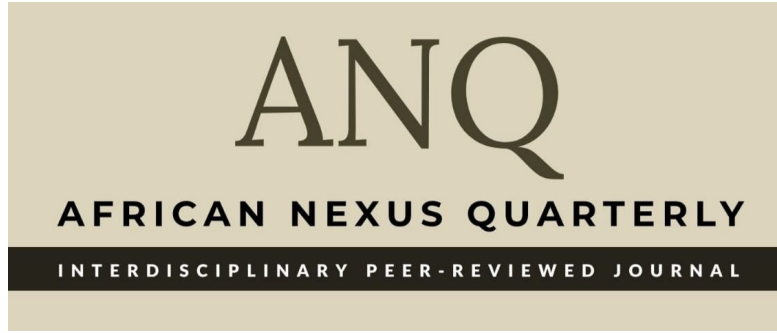
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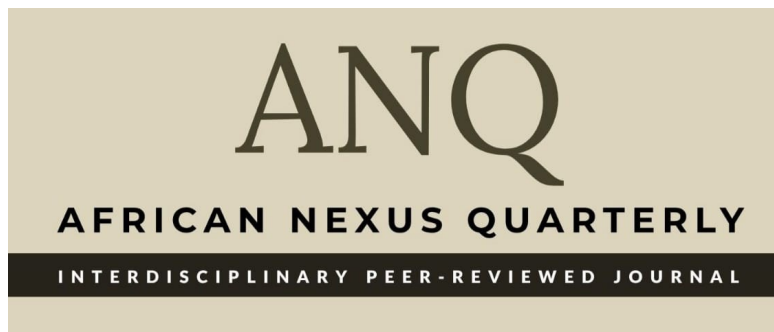
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Foreword

It is a particular kind of privilege—and a particular kind of responsibility—to introduce the first issue of a new journal.

This inaugural issue brings together four research articles spanning Uganda, East Africa, Tanzania, and Türkiye. At first glance, the thematic range may seem broad. On closer reading, I believe the reader will find that the four contributions speak to one another in ways that are not incidental.

The issue opens with the editorial, "Why *African Nexus Quarterly*?"—a piece I regard as the *first scholarly contribution of this journal rather than a merely administrative preface*. It sets out, with bibliometric and epistemological evidence, the structural conditions that have motivated this project: Africa's persistent underrepresentation in globally indexed scholarship, the chronic underfunding of continental research infrastructure, the drain of highly skilled scholars to high-income academic labour markets, and the enduring colonality of dominant knowledge frameworks. I write it not as a manifesto but as an honest accounting—an obligation I owe to authors who have entrusted their work to a new platform, and to readers who deserve to understand why that platform exists.

Charles Kyasanku and Rose Costa Nakawuki open the research section with a timely investigation into teacher proficiency in marking and feedback within Uganda's competency-based curriculum. Their findings are both instructive and sobering. Curriculum reform, they demonstrate, does not automatically translate into transformed classroom practice; the gap between policy intent and pedagogical reality is wide, and it is teachers—under-prepared and under-supported—who must navigate it daily. This is a study in the institutional consequences of implementation without capacity, and its implications extend well beyond Uganda's borders.

Busuulwa Huthaifah Abdallah, Charlotte Karungi Mafumbo, and Harriet Ariko Akiror turn our attention to a domain too often treated as peripheral in African studies: the participation of women in peace and security processes in East Africa. Their collaborative analysis charts both the structural barriers that constrain women's formal inclusion and the informal, often invisible contributions that women make to conflict resolution and community resilience. In reading their work, one is reminded that security is not only a matter of state architecture; it is also a matter of who is permitted to speak, and whose peacemaking counts.

Janeth Kilasi and Irene Etumaro bring the conversation into the university itself. Their critical examination of indigenous knowledge systems and curriculum reform in Tanzanian higher education asks a question that is deceptively simple and politically charged: when universities commit to incorporating indigenous knowledge, are they genuinely restructuring the epistemological foundations of their programmes, or are they performing inclusion while leaving the core curriculum intact? The distinction between symbolic incorporation and structural institutionalisation that Kilasi and Etumaro draw is, I would argue, one of the defining conceptual contributions of this issue.

The issue closes with my own contribution—a study of comprehensive internationalisation practices at Istanbul Medeniyet University. I include it here not out of editorial self-indulgence, but because the questions it raises are directly relevant to the positioning of this journal. Internationalisation, like curriculum reform and peacebuilding, can be an exercise in genuine transformation or an exercise in strategic appearance. Understanding the gap between institutional commitment and institutional capacity is, for me, both a scholarly preoccupation

and a practical challenge I navigate as the editor of a journal that is itself an experiment in South-based, globally-engaged academic publishing.

Taken together, these four articles do not resolve the tensions they surface. No single issue of any journal could or should. What they do is something more durable: they place African scholars, African institutions, and African policy realities at the analytical centre, treating them as sites of knowledge generation rather than objects of external description. That, precisely, is what *African Nexus Quarterly* was founded to do.

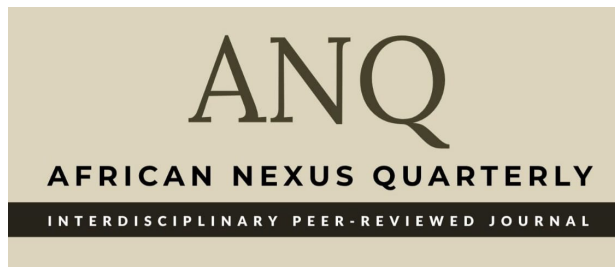
I am grateful to the authors for their trust in a new platform, to our reviewers for their rigour and generosity, and to you—our readers—for your time and critical attention. We begin.

İbrahim Hakan Karataş, Prof. Dr.

Editor-in-Chief, *African Nexus Quarterly*

Istanbul Medeniyet University, Türkiye

March 2026, İstanbul



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Editorial

Why African Nexus Quarterly?

İbrahim Hakan Karataş^{*} ¹

^{*}Istanbul Medeniyet University

ABSTRACT

This founding editorial articulates the rationale, mission, and editorial philosophy of African Nexus Quarterly. Drawing on bibliometric, institutional, and epistemological evidence, it argues that the underrepresentation of Africa in globally indexed scholarship reflects structural inequalities in research funding, journal infrastructure, and skilled-labour mobility rather than a deficit of intellectual capacity. The editorial identifies three interconnected problems—chronic R&D underfunding, brain drain, and the coloniality of dominant knowledge frameworks—and positions the journal as an institutionally independent, open-access platform committed to Africa-centred, peer-reviewed scholarship that is simultaneously rigorous and policy-relevant.

KEYWORDS

*Africa-centred
knowledge production;
epistemic justice;
research
infrastructure;
scholarly publishing;
brain drain*

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Introduction

Every journal begins with a wager. The wager behind *African Nexus Quarterly* is at once modest and immodest: that an Africa-centred editorial lens -institutionally anchored in Türkiye yet oriented, without apology, toward the intellectual priorities of the continent -can make a measurable difference to how knowledge about Africa is produced, validated, indexed, and circulated. This first issue is not simply a collection of manuscripts. It is a declaration of intent, and it obliges me to explain, as plainly as an editor can, why this space is needed and what we intend to do with it.

The Structural Problem We Inherit

Let me begin where any honest account must begin: with data.

Africa accounts for roughly 17 percent of the world's population, yet its share of globally indexed research output has historically hovered between one and three percent of all publications recorded in Scopus or the Web of Science (Tijssen, 2007; Pouris & Ho, 2014). That figure has grown in absolute terms over the past two decades -meaningfully so- but it remains disproportionate in every sense that matters (Boshoff, 2010). A WHO-affiliated bibliometric review noted that Africa's share of global publication output rose from approximately 1.5 percent in 2005 to 3.2 percent by 2016, real progress accompanied, however, by a persistent relative marginalisation within high-impact, discipline-defining outlets (Adams et al., 2010).

The roots of this imbalance are structural and well-documented. The UNESCO Institute for Statistics reports that Sub-Saharan Africa's gross domestic expenditure on research and development (GERD) averaged approximately 0.32 percent of GDP in 2020-far below the world average of roughly 1.93 percent and far below the one-percent threshold that the African Union's own Agenda 2063 sets as a minimum target for member states (UNESCO Institute for Statistics [UIS], 2022; African Union Commission, 2015). Inadequate R&D investment directly constrains the size and continuity of the scholarly workforce: fewer full-time researchers, fewer functioning laboratories, fewer postgraduate programmes operating at the scale and quality required to sustain competitive publication pipelines (Mouton & Waast, 2009).

Low investment intersects, moreover, with structural disadvantages in scholarly infrastructure. Only a fraction of active African journals are indexed in Scopus or the Web of Science, which means that research published locally -often the most policy-relevant, the most contextually precise- disappears from the metrics by which global impact is measured (Alonso-Álvarez, 2024). This creates a vicious cycle: because African scholarship is underrepresented in the indices that govern hiring, tenure,

and grant allocation, African scholars face institutional incentives to publish in overseas outlets whose agenda-setting priorities may not reflect continental needs. The journal ecosystem that ought to sustain local academic communities is thereby systematically starved of its most productive contributors.

These are not grievances; they are empirical conditions. Recognising them is the precondition for addressing them.

The Mobility Problem and the Missing Connective Tissue

Compounding the capacity deficit is the well-known but persistently underanalysed phenomenon of skilled emigration. OECD data indicate that tertiary-educated individuals from Sub-Saharan Africa have among the highest probabilities of emigration to OECD countries of any region in the world; some national emigration rates for the highly skilled reach or exceed thirty percent (OECD, 2017). The continent loses an estimated 70,000 skilled professionals annually, with cumulative economic costs running into billions of dollars in foregone human capital (Docquier & Rapoport, 2012). The consequences for the scholarly community are especially acute: the scholars best equipped to anchor Africa-focused research programmes, those with doctoral credentials, international networks, and methodological breadth, are precisely those most likely to build careers abroad.

This is not a problem of individual disloyalty. It is a rational response to a global academic labour market structured to reward retention in high-income contexts and to penalise return. As the OECD's own analysis makes clear, the pull of established research infrastructures, stable funding environments, and internationally legible publication venues is powerful, and it operates most strongly on those who have already demonstrated the capacity to succeed within them (OECD, 2023). What results is a paradox: the diaspora scholars most capable of bridging African scholarly communities with global networks often lack institutionalised pathways to do so. Their expertise circulates internationally but rarely flows back, in peer-reviewed, policy-connectable form, to the communities whose challenges originally motivated their research.

African Nexus Quarterly is founded, in part, as a response to this structural absence. We intend to function as connective tissue -a platform that keeps Africa-based scholars in productive dialogue with Africa-oriented diaspora researchers, without requiring either group to abandon their institutional moorings or to re-enter the extractive dynamics that currently characterise so much North-South academic collaboration.

The Epistemological Stakes

The structural argument matters, but it is insufficient on its own. A journal can correct an indexing gap while leaving the deeper problem untouched. The deeper problem is what Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) calls the "epistemic line": the systematic exclusion of non-Western ways of knowing from the domain of legitimate, internationally recognised knowledge. Mahmood Mamdani (2007) has made a complementary argument: that the conceptual vocabularies imported into African social science -state, citizenship, civil society, development- carry the sediment of colonial political categories and routinely generate analytical distortions when applied to contexts whose histories they were never designed to illuminate.

To be clear: we are not anti-Western, and we are not anti-empiricist. We do not subscribe to the view that methodological rigour is a Eurocentric imposition. What we do subscribe to is the proposition -now supported by a substantial body of postcolonial and decolonial scholarship- that the questions asked, the data collected, the theoretical frameworks applied, and the policy conclusions drawn are all shaped by the institutional contexts in which scholars work and the funding structures that sustain them (Connell, 2020; Quijano, 2000). When the overwhelming majority of knowledge about Africa is produced under Northern institutional conditions, validated by Northern peer-review panels, and circulated through Northern publication channels, the result is a systematic tendency -not a conspiracy, but a tendency -toward problem framings that privilege external intervention over local agency, crisis narratives over developmental complexity, and exceptional cases over structural patterns.

African Nexus Quarterly aims to cultivate a different default. Our editorial priorities will consistently favour scholarship that places African scholars, African institutions, and African policy communities at the centre of its analytical gaze, not as objects of external scrutiny, but as intellectual subjects generating knowledge that is rigorous, generalisable, and consequential far beyond the continent's borders.

The Unlikely Editorial Address

A word about our institutional location, which some readers will find surprising. This journal is hosted in Türkiye. That geographic position, which might seem to distance us from our subject matter, is in fact one of the conditions of our possibility.

Türkiye occupies a distinctive position in the contemporary global order: a middle-income country with a rapidly expanding higher education system, a growing tradition of South-South scholarly engagement, and no colonial history on the African continent. That absence matters. We are not

unencumbered by geopolitics -no journal is- but we are free from the specific entanglements that complicate Africa-focused scholarship produced within former colonial metropolises. We believe that an editorially autonomous, Africa-centred journal, supported by Turkish academic infrastructure, can offer a form of institutional independence that is genuinely rare in this field.

At the same time, we are acutely aware that "*Africa-centred*" cannot mean "*Africa-only*." The structural asymmetries we have described above are global in their architecture. Addressing them requires scholarship that speaks to, and is legible within, international academic conversations. We will therefore hold ourselves to the highest standards of peer review and methodological transparency, not as a concession to Northern gatekeepers, but because rigour is the currency of credibility and credibility is what this project needs to survive.

What We Will Publish, and What We Will Not

African Nexus Quarterly is a multidisciplinary, open-access journal. We will consider original research articles, review essays, policy analyses, methodological discussions, and critical commentaries from across the social sciences, humanities, and interdisciplinary fields, provided that the work engages substantively with African contexts, actors, or questions. We do not restrict submissions to Africa-based authors; diaspora scholars, international collaborators, and scholars whose primary affiliation is outside the continent are warmly welcomed, provided the intellectual centre of gravity remains firmly on the continent.

We will not publish work that treats Africa as a laboratory for testing theories developed elsewhere without critically examining that theoretical transfer. We will not publish work whose empirical claims rest solely on secondary sources accessible from abroad, when primary engagement with African communities, archives, and institutions is feasible and ethically appropriate. And we will not allow the geography of authorship to substitute for quality: a manuscript from a scholar based in Nairobi or Lagos or Dakar will be held to exactly the same standards as one from a scholar based in London or New York, no lower, and no higher.

Our double-blind peer-review process will draw on a genuinely global, Africa-weighted pool of reviewers. We are committed to turnaround times that respect authors' time, and we are committed to feedback that is developmental rather than merely evaluative, recognising that early-career scholars working in resource-constrained environments may need more substantive editorial engagement to reach their potential.

An Honest Accounting of What We Do Not Yet Know

It would be dishonest to close this editorial without acknowledging the uncertainties that accompany a first issue. We do not yet know whether we will secure the indexing that will make this journal visible to the widest possible audience. We do not yet know whether our model -open-access, South-based, editorially independent- will prove financially sustainable over the long term. We do not yet know whether the scholars we most wish to serve will find in our pages a home worth publishing in.

What we do know is that the need is real, the structural conditions are precisely as we have described them, and the intellectual ambition that animates this project is shared by a remarkable community of scholars across the continent and its diaspora.

Yet, our ambition extends beyond merely adding another title to the directories of academic publications. We expect our readers not only to consume these pages but to contest them, to build upon them, and to use them to dismantle and rebuild the conceptual architectures of their respective fields. Our hope is that *African Nexus Quarterly* will serve as a sanctuary for intellectual risk-taking—a site where theories are not merely imported and applied, but refashioned and born anew from the ground up. Ultimately, our success will not be measured by metrics or database indexing alone, but by the extent to which we help expand the boundaries of what is deemed thinkable and legitimate in African studies.

This first issue is the beginning of a conversation. We invite you—readers, reviewers, authors, and critics—not simply to observe this project, but to co-author its future.

İbrahim Hakan Karataş, Prof. Dr.
Editor-in-Chief, African Nexus Quarterly
Istanbul Medeniyet University, Türkiye
March 2025

Note on Access and Submissions: In alignment with our commitment to removing structural barriers to knowledge, African Nexus Quarterly is a fully open-access journal published on a quarterly schedule. All content is freely available under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 (CC BY 4.0) licence, and submissions are accepted on a rolling basis through our online manuscript portal.

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Research Article

Bridging the gaps: enhancing teachers' proficiency in marking and feedback practices for Uganda's competency-based curriculum

Charles Kyasanku*¹ Rose Costa Nakawuki*

* Makerere University

ABSTRACT

Uganda's Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC), introduced in 2020, aims to equip learners with 21st-century skills through learner-centred teaching, formative assessments, and criterion-referenced evaluation. Despite its potential, teachers in Mpigi District face significant challenges in implementing marking and feedback practices essential to CBC's success. This qualitative multiple-case study, grounded in Biggs' Constructive Alignment Theory, examined teachers' proficiency in these practices in two public lower secondary schools. The findings revealed systemic gaps, including inconsistent marking methods that rely on traditional practices, limited use of rubrics for competency-based evaluation, and generic, non-actionable feedback. Structural constraints, such as oversized classes, inadequate training, and resource shortages, exacerbate these issues, undermining CBC's intended objectives of fostering critical thinking and problem-solving. Recommendations include mandatory rubric training, targeted continuous professional development (CPD), collaborative marking systems, resource investments, and efforts to reduce class sizes. Addressing these issues is critical to bridging the policy-practice gap, aligning formative assessment practices with CBC's transformative goals, and improving educational outcomes in secondary schools across Uganda.

KEYWORDS

Competency-based curriculum; formative assessment; teacher proficiency; marking and feedback; formative assessment literacy.

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Introduction

The adoption of the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) in Uganda's secondary education system in 2020 signifies a significant shift from traditional content-focused approaches to learner-centred paradigms that emphasise the acquisition of practical skills, knowledge, attitudes, and values (MoES, 2020; NCDC, 2019). Influenced by thinkers such as John Dewey (1916) and Benjamin Bloom (1956), global educational trends highlight real-world application and 21st-century skills, including critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration, and innovation (Voogt & Roblin, 2012; OECD, 2008). At its core, formative assessment plays a vital role in CBC, functioning as an ongoing process to monitor learner progress, identify gaps, and modify instruction accordingly (Vegilante, 2025).

In Uganda, the CBC framework incorporates formative assessment through projects, portfolios, Activities of Integration (AOI), observations, and rubrics, aiming to demonstrate mastery of competencies rather than rote memorisation (NCDC, 2020; UNEB, 2023). However, effective implementation depends on teachers' proficiency in key assessment components, particularly marking (scoring) and feedback. Marking in CBC involves criterion-referenced evaluation using rubrics to assess performance against predefined competencies, while feedback must be timely, specific, and actionable to assist learners' improvement (Wandera et al., 2025). Despite policy directives, challenges remain in Ugandan secondary schools, especially in rural districts such as Mpigi, where resource limitations, large class sizes, and limited professional development hinder teachers' ability to align assessment practices with CBC objectives (Atuhura & Nambi, 2024; Ahabwe, 2022). Mpigi District in Central Uganda, with seven public secondary schools, exemplifies these issues, as shown by poor performance in the Uganda Certificate of Education (UCE) and inconsistent adoption of the CBC (UNEB, 2022). Teachers often revert to traditional summative methods, undermining the potential of formative assessment to promote learner autonomy and skill development (Wambi et al., 2024).

This study examined teachers' ability to mark and give effective feedback within CBC formative assessment practices. Marking and feedback are linked processes vital for constructive alignment, as per Biggs' theory (1996, 2014), ensuring that assessments reflect intended outcomes and promote deep learning. Poor skills in these areas weaken CBC's effectiveness, leading to misaligned instruction and suboptimal learner results.

The introduction is structured as follows: first, it provides historical and contextual background on CBC in Uganda; second, it outlines the problem statement; third, it states the purpose and scope; and fourth, it discusses the significance and justification. Uganda's education system evolved from colonial rote-learning models to post-independence reforms emphasising professionalisation (Gyagenda, 2023; MOES, 1992). The 2019 National Teacher Policy and the 2020 CBC launch aimed to address gaps in teacher competency, aligning with SDG 4 and Vision 2040 (MoES, 2019; UNESCO, 2015). However, formative assessment implementation remains fragmented, with teachers struggling to mark against competencies and to provide feedback that promotes self-regulation (Namaalwa et al., 2024). The problem lies in teachers' limited ability to mark and provide effective feedback, often resulting in

subjective scoring and vague comments that fail to guide improvement (Stiggins, 2017). This misalignment risks undermining CBC's goals and contributes to Mpigi's low UCE results (UNEB, 2022). The purpose is to examine this proficiency and inform interventions to improve alignment. The scope is limited to two public secondary schools in Mpigi, focusing on marking and feedback from 2020 to 2025.

The importance lies in enhancing teacher assessment literacy, improving learner outcomes, and supporting policy refinement by MOES, NCDC, and UNEB. It adds to the literature on CBC in Sub-Saharan Africa by applying Biggs' theory to secondary education settings. The rationale is the need to bridge policy-practice gaps, ensuring that CBC promotes 21st-century skills and national development (MOES, 2023; Vision 2040).

Theoretical Review

This study is based on Biggs' Constructive Alignment Theory (Biggs, 2014), which states that effective education requires coherence among intended learning outcomes (ILOs), teaching and learning activities (TLAs), and assessment tasks (ATs). In CBC, ILOs are competencies such as problem-solving and collaboration; TLAs involve active, learner-centred methods; and ATs, including marking and feedback, must demonstrate achievement. Constructive alignment draws on constructivism, where learners build knowledge through engagement and alignment, ensuring that all elements support deep learning (Preeti, 2019). For marking and feedback, this involves using rubrics to assess competencies and providing feedback that supports improvement, aligning with CBC's focus on formative assessment (NCDC, 2020). Strengths include promoting coherence (Hamdoun, 2023) and learner-centred pedagogy (Prosser & Trigwell, 2014). In Uganda, it supports CBC's focus on authentic tasks, such as projects. However, criticisms highlight its assumption of linear learning and its limited attention to teacher capacity (Nakawuki, Kyasanku, & Tebenkana, 2025). In low-resource settings, large classes and an exam-oriented culture hinder alignment. Applied to objective three, the theory frames marking as a rubric-based evaluation aligned with ILOs and feedback as a tool for knowledge construction. Misalignments, such as generic scoring, reveal gaps in teacher proficiency and guide recommendations for CPD to improve alignment.

Although the CBC outlines ILOs that emphasise 21st-century competencies, problems arise when assessments fail to reflect these outcomes due to systemic barriers. This framework sets the stage for examining gaps in Mpigi teachers' marking and feedback practices and their implications for constructive alignment.

Literature Review

The literature on teachers' ability to mark and provide feedback in CBC formative assessment highlights ongoing challenges in assessment literacy, consistency, and alignment with competencies.

Marking and Scoring in Competency-based Curriculum

The Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) fundamentally shifts assessment from norm-referenced, content-heavy evaluation to criterion-referenced approaches that measure learners' mastery of specific competencies, skills, values, and attitudes (Wandera et al., 2025; KNEC Competency-Based Assessment Framework, 2021). Central to this paradigm is the use of rubrics as structured scoring tools that define clear performance criteria, achievement levels, and descriptive indicators, enabling transparent, objective, and formative feedback to guide learner improvement rather than mere ranking (Wandera et al., 2025; Cañadas, 2021; learnercentered.org on competency-based progressions). Despite these theoretical advantages, empirical evidence indicates persistent implementation challenges, particularly concerning teachers' capacity for reliable, consistent rubric-based scoring. Teachers often lack adequate training in developing, applying, and interpreting rubrics, which leads to inconsistent application and diminished assessment validity (Schneider & Bodensohn, 2017). In Sub-Saharan Africa, where CBC reforms have been widely adopted (e.g., in Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, and Tanzania), teachers frequently default to familiar, traditional, norm-referenced, or exam-oriented marking practices due to limited preparation, resource constraints, and entrenched habits (Andiema, 2020; Namaalwa et al., 2024; studies on CBC challenges in SSA). Pre-service and in-service teachers often express uncertainty about CBC grading mechanisms, frequently citing the absence or inadequate provision of standardised rubrics and guidelines (Aheisibwe & Barigye, 2023). Efforts to improve scoring reliability include collaborative task design and joint rubric development among educators, which have shown potential to enhance inter-rater agreement (Ling, 2024). However, practical barriers such as heavy workloads, large class sizes, time constraints, and insufficient institutional support often undermine collaborative approaches (multiple SSA implementation studies highlight overcrowded classrooms and resource shortages).

Assessment tools, such as the Teacher Feedback and Assessment Practices Scale (TFAPS), have been utilised to examine teachers' practices, revealing strong cultural and contextual influences on how scoring is perceived and enacted (Yan & Pastore, 2022). Emerging technologies offer supplementary support for scoring efficiency and consistency (e.g., automated or digital rubric tools), yet human professional judgement remains indispensable for interpreting complex competencies, providing nuanced feedback, and ensuring fairness across diverse educational settings.

Overall, although criterion-referenced, rubric-based marking aligns closely with CBC's emphasis on authentic competency demonstration and continuous improvement, effective implementation in contexts such as Sub-Saharan Africa requires sustained teacher professional development, accessible resources (including exemplar rubrics), collaborative structures, and policy alignment to overcome entrenched challenges and realise the curriculum's transformative potential.

Feedback Provision in Competence-based Curriculum

Effective feedback is a fundamental element of successful learning within competency-based curriculum (CBC) frameworks. Mandouit & Hattie (2023) emphasise that feedback must be timely, specific, and forward-looking, focusing on learners' current progress, future goals, and how to close the gap to maximise its impact on achievement. However, empirical evidence from low-resource and Sub-Saharan African contexts highlights ongoing challenges in achieving these ideals. Studies often report generic, delayed, or infrequent feedback, which reduces its formative value (e.g., Kidega et al., 2023; Rahman et al., 2021). In Rwanda, formative assessment practices, including feedback, remain uncommon and largely ineffective, often overshadowed by traditional teacher-centred approaches and insufficient pedagogical support (Kazinyirako et al., 2024; Ukobizaba et al., 2023). Factors related to teachers further influence the quality of feedback. Self-efficacy significantly affects the effectiveness with which educators deliver constructive feedback (Schütze et al., 2017), and emerging evidence suggests that digital tools offer potential for scaling personalised and timely feedback (Voogt et al., 2018). Systemic constraints exacerbate these issues. Large class sizes, heavy workloads, and scarce resources reduce teachers' ability to provide individualised, actionable feedback (Dayal, 2021). In Uganda, feedback practices within CBC implementation often lack clarity and actionability, tending toward vague, oral comments that do not adequately guide learner improvement—a pattern consistent with broader observations of generic oral feedback in this study.

Despite the increasing adoption of CBC across Sub-Saharan Africa, significant research gaps remain. There is limited empirical focus on the relationship between marking practices and feedback processes in CBC settings, especially in low-resource regional contexts. This study aimed to fill these gaps by analysing feedback dynamics in Ugandan CBC classrooms, thereby offering a more detailed understanding of how to improve formative practices within contextual constraints.

Objectives

To examine how teachers' marking and scoring practices align with the principles of Uganda's Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC).

To assess the quality of feedback provided by teachers and its effectiveness in supporting student improvement.

Research Questions

How do teachers' marking practices align with CBC's emphasis on competency-based assessment?

How effective is the feedback provided by teachers in addressing student strengths, weaknesses, and next steps?

Methodology

Research Design and Approach

This study employed a qualitative multiple-case study design to provide an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon in its natural setting (Yin, 2018; Stake, 1995). A case study approach was selected for its ability to deliver a holistic examination of complex social processes, such as teachers' assessment practices, within bounded contexts, specifically two public lower secondary schools in Mpigi District. The design focused on multiple cases (the two schools) to enable comparison and triangulation, thus enhancing the depth and transferability of findings. The approach was interpretive and phenomenological, aiming to understand participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and challenges in implementing CBC formative assessments (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data were collected iteratively between September 2024 and January 2025, allowing emergent insights to inform subsequent data collection and focusing on post-roll-out maturity. The researcher adopted a reflexive stance, maintaining a research journal to document biases (e.g., prior experience in Ugandan education) and decisions, thereby promoting transparency.

Population and Sampling

The target population consisted of stakeholders directly involved in CBC implementation in public lower secondary schools in Mpigi District, Central Uganda. This included teachers, school administrators (headteachers), and national education officials from the National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC) and the Uganda National Examinations Board (UNEB). A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants with relevant expertise and alignment with the research objectives (Patton, 2015). Two SEED (Secondary Education Expansion and Development) schools were purposively selected: one in Muduuma sub-county (rural, resource-constrained) and one in Kiringente sub-county (semi-urban, slightly better resourced) to capture contextual variation. Within these schools, five teachers were selected (three from arts subjects and two from sciences) based on criteria such as at least 5 years' experience teaching under the CBC, involvement in formative assessments, and willingness to participate. Additionally, the two headteachers were included to oversee their roles. At the national level, one NCDC curriculum specialist and one UNEB assessment expert were purposively sampled through official channels to provide policy perspectives. The total sample comprised nine participants (five teachers, two headteachers, and two officials), determined by data saturation, with recruitment ceasing when new interviews yielded no additional insights (Saunders et al., 2018). This non-probabilistic approach ensured the inclusion of information-rich cases but limited broader generalisations beyond similar contexts. The study concentrates on two public lower secondary schools within Mpigi District, Uganda. This focus reflects a deliberate choice to explore gaps in marking and feedback practices in specific settings, prioritising qualitative depth over quantitative breadth. Furthermore, secondary school teachers in rural areas face systemic challenges, including large class sizes and limited professional

development opportunities, which are critical factors in evaluating proficiency. Selecting two schools aligns with available research resources, facilitating targeted data collection and analysis (Economic Policy Research Centre, 2025).

Inclusion Criteria

Participants had to be certified teachers holding at least a bachelor's degree in education or an equivalent qualification. They must have at least five years of teaching experience in secondary schools implementing the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC). They needed to be employed full-time in public secondary schools within Mpigi District. Participants had to be willing to take part in the study and provide written informed consent. Priority was given to teachers who had attended training or workshops on Competency-Based Curriculum principles organised by the Ministry of Education or other educational partners.

Exclusion Criteria

Teachers employed as part-time or temporary staff were believed to have limited involvement in assessments. Teachers who had recently transferred (within the last six months) to a CBC school were considered unlikely to have had significant interaction with CBC assessment practices. Teachers unwilling to participate or to give informed consent were excluded.

Data Collection Methods

Data were gathered using a triangulated approach that combined in-depth interviews, non-participant lesson observations, and documentary reviews to enhance validity and provide multifaceted perspectives (Denzin, 2017). All data collection occurred on-site at the schools or through face-to-face meetings with officials.

In-Depth Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with all nine participants to explore their perceptions and experiences. The interview guide included open-ended questions (e.g., "Describe your process for marking a formative assessment task under CBC") and prompts for elaboration (e.g., "Can you give an example?"). Interviews lasted 45-60 minutes, were audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed. Teachers and headteachers were interviewed in school offices for privacy; officials were interviewed face-to-face. A total of nine interviews were completed, scheduled at participants' convenience to minimise disruption.

Non-Participant Lesson Observations: Observations were carried out in classrooms to record real-time marking and feedback practices. A structured observation schedule focused on key indicators, including the use of rubrics, scoring consistency, and feedback delivery. Each observation employed a four-point rating scale: Highly Effective (HE: practice fully aligns with CBC principles), Effective (E: practice mostly aligns), Developing (D: practice partially aligns), and Not Evident (NE: practice does not align). Five lessons were observed (three in the arts and two in the sciences), each lasting 40-80 minutes, across the two schools. The researcher sat unobtrusively at the back, taking field notes without intervening. Observations were scheduled in advance and focused on formative assessment activities, such as Activities of Integration (AOI) and group projects.

Documentary Review: Relevant documents were examined to verify interview and observational data. A structured review guide evaluated evidence of marking proficiency on a three-tier scale: Yes (clear and thorough), Partial (some evidence), and No (not evident). Documents included schemes of work, lesson plans, student work samples (e.g., portfolios, AOI tasks), assessment records, and feedback notes from the past two academic terms (Feb-August 2024). With the headteacher's permission, approximately 7 documents per school were accessed, reviewed on site, and photographed for analysis, with sensitive information redacted.

Ethical protocols included verbal and written informed consent, assurances of confidentiality (using pseudonyms), and the right to withdraw. No incentives were offered, and data were stored securely on password-protected devices.

Data Quality Control

To ensure the study's trustworthiness, multiple strategies were used to enhance the credibility, dependability, transferability, confirmability, and authenticity of the data. The credibility and validity of the instruments were assessed with input from experts in teacher proficiency and Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) assessment. Transferability was supported by detailed descriptions of the research context, participants, interpretations, and theoretical foundations (Drisko, 2024). Dependability was achieved through repeated transcript reviews to reach saturation and objective supervisory checks to reduce bias (Stahl & King, 2020). Confirmability was demonstrated by verifying that interpretations aligned with participants' responses and the research aims. Authenticity was maintained by including direct quotations from participants to accurately represent their lived experiences (Chambers & Broadbent, 2025). Reflexivity was practised through a research diary to examine researcher assumptions, power dynamics, and biases (Olmos-Vegas et al., 2023; Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2017). Prolonged engagement in school settings helps build trust and minimise reactivity. Triangulation combined semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and observations for cross-validation (Dado et al., 2023).

Data Analysis

This study employed a rigorous qualitative analysis to interpret rich information gathered from multiple sources. All data from in-depth interviews, non-participant lesson observations, and document reviews were transcribed verbatim. The transcripts and observation notes were then imported into ATLAS.ti for systematic coding and analysis. A comprehensive thematic analysis was adopted as the primary method. Initial open coding identified emerging concepts directly from the raw data. These were grouped into focused codes and organised hierarchically into main themes and sub-themes that aligned directly with the research objective: teachers' proficiency in marking and scoring CBC formative assessments. A coding framework was developed inductively, remaining consistent with the study's conceptual framework and Biggs' Constructive Alignment Theory, and was verified against patterns observed during lessons and evidence from documents. Triangulation was central to enhancing credibility: insights from interviews were cross-analysed with data from document review (schemes of work, lesson plans, student work samples,

AOI tasks, and assessment records). Documents were skimmed, read thoroughly, and interpreted iteratively, with information organised into predefined and emergent categories related to the research questions. Predefined codes from interview transcripts were applied consistently to documentary data to ensure coherence across sources. Frequencies of key codes and co-occurrence patterns were examined to identify dominant issues, recurring challenges, and variations in practice. Irrelevant or off-topic data that did not clarify teachers' proficiency in marking and scoring CBC formative assessments were systematically excluded. Verbatim quotations were retained to preserve participants' authentic voices and provide illustrative evidence. This iterative, multi-source thematic process ensured a trustworthy, transparent, and comprehensive interpretation of teachers' proficiency in marking and scoring CBC formative assessments in the selected schools.

Findings and Discussion

Findings from interviews, observations, and document reviews indicate underdeveloped proficiency. The findings show that teachers' competence in marking and scoring Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) formative assessment tools remains significantly underdeveloped. Multiple sources of evidence, including lesson observations, document reviews of student work and assessment records, and interviews with teachers and education officials, consistently point to inconsistent, mostly traditional scoring practices that do not align with CBC principles.

Theme 1: Inconsistent and Traditional Marking and Scoring Practices

Triangulation reveals a widespread dependence on outdated, binary, or numerical scoring methods that emphasise factual recall over demonstrating competence. Document reviews of student work samples, assessment records, schemes of work, and Activities of Integration (AOI) tasks showed a consistent use of ticks, crosses, numerical marks (e.g., 8/10), or right/wrong judgments, with no evidence of rubrics, performance descriptors, levelled criteria, or progression indicators. Lesson observations confirmed this in real time: for instance, during a Physics practical activity, learner participation was not assessed using checklists or competency-aligned recording, leaving performance undocumented despite active engagement. Interviews with teachers described occasional attempts at advanced marking guides or peer discussions to ensure fairness, but these were neither observed nor documented. When asked about the strategies used to ensure consistency when scoring learners' responses, one teacher participant noted that.

"By making a marking guide before marking, one can help with scoring. Also, involving learners in scoring through a discussion with learners so that it is fair... engage learners in scoring and emphasise the key points".
(TAS)

However, these practices (marking guides and involving learners in scoring) were not observed during lesson observations or document reviews, which showed little differentiation of levels. Consistent with this, an education official added that teachers lack competence in scoring.

“The challenge is that scoring is subjective because teachers are only supposed to put everything on the Checklist. Teachers are still locked into the old curriculum and, therefore, need more training in scoring” (NCDC).

Teachers were still reliant on the old curriculum and submitting superficial checklist results without thorough evaluation. Lesson observation findings also confirmed a focus on right or wrong answers rather than on progress, indicating a lack of proficiency in CBC-aligned scoring. An education official from UNEB clarified this.

The theme of inconsistent marking and scoring practices highlights a fundamental misalignment with CBC principles, which require criterion-referenced, rubric-based assessment to provide transparent evidence of mastery of competencies (NCDC, 2020; Wandera et al., 2025). It directly contradicts Biggs’ constructive alignment, in which assessment tasks (ATs) must reflect ILOs (e.g., problem-solving, collaboration) through structured tools that foster deep learning rather than surface-level recall. This inconsistency reduces validity and reliability, illustrating broader challenges in Sub-Saharan Africa, where teachers often default to familiar norm-referenced practices due to a lack of proper training and resources (Ahesibwe & Barigye, 2023; similar patterns in rural Ugandan contexts). According to constructive alignment, assessment tasks should be criterion-referenced, using tools such as rubrics to evaluate learner progress objectively against specified competencies. However, the study found that teachers tend to rely on traditional marking methods (e.g., numerical scores) without using rubrics or performance descriptors (Biggs & Tang, 2014). This disconnect between assessment methods and CBC principles weakens the connection between assessment tasks (ATs) and intended learning outcomes (ILOs). For instance, during a Physics practical, learner participation was noted but not systematically assessed, contrary to the competency-driven goals of CBC. Conventional marking practices reveal a misalignment that hampers CBC’s aim for deeper learning. Moving forward, rectifying this inconsistency is essential for aligning assessment practices with CBC standards.

Theme 2: Limited Use of Rubrics and Alignment with CBC Competencies

Teachers showed limited skill in creating or using rubrics or scoring guides, leading to a gap between assessments and the intended skills. Interviews highlighted issues with rubric development, with officials stating that teachers “grapple with the development of rubrics and prioritise ‘facts rather than evidence of the learner’s knowledge.’” Although national guidelines from NCDC and UNEB are in place, teachers’ awareness does not lead to effective application. One education official noted that:

“There are guidelines available from NCDC, UNEB, called assessment guidelines. Teachers are aware of the challenges, but many do not check at least the websites and school portals” (UNEB).

Similarly, another education official noted that:

“Teachers and school administrators are aware of the guidelines. At the school level, they ignore and follow school guidelines and yet the guidelines are very clear.” (NCDC)

Hence, the findings indicate a gap between awareness and practical use. Document analysis revealed no attached rubrics or descriptive indicators in student portfolios and records, and observations showed no differentiated performance levels or student involvement in self- or peer-assessment. Although some teachers acknowledged awareness of national guidelines (via NCDC/UNEB portals), implementation was weak and often overlooked in favour of school routines. Rubrics are essential for assessing competencies because they provide structured criteria aligned with ILOs. The absence of rubric use shows a failure to connect assessment tasks (ATs) with CBC’s emphasis on critical thinking, collaboration, and problem-solving (Mandouti & Hattie, 2023). Without rubrics, teachers’ practices remain detached from the curriculum’s learner-centred approach, leading to superficial learning. Teachers’ difficulties in developing rubrics reflect a lack of alignment needed to ensure that formative assessment supports improvement and mastery of competencies (Lestari & Yusuf, 2025). Without rubrics, assessments lack consistency and transparency, making scoring more challenging and hindering meaningful feedback.

Summary comparison of lesson observations.

The table addresses the research question regarding teachers’ proficiency in grading and scoring formative assessments. Ratings use the provided scale: HE (Highly Effective), E (Effective), D (Developing), NE (Not Evident). If no explicit rating is given but the evidence indicates absence, NE (Not Evident) is applied. Evidence is summarised concisely from observations. SSWA was school 1, and SSB was school 2.

Table 1

Observation Findings on Teachers’ Marking and Scoring Practices

Area of Focus/Indicator	School SSWA (History) – Evidence and Rating	School SSB (Physics Practical) Evidence and Rating
Samples of completed FA tools showing clear scoring/grading	Samples of AOI/tasks just scores, but not grading; others marked without scores. P (Partial towards NE for proper grading)	Not directly addressed in samples; teacher marks, but no scores/grades are evident on the work. NE
Scoring/grading aligns with formative purpose (e.g., identifying improvement, informing instruction)	Teachers marked without scores/comments on improvement or informing instruction. NE	Teacher marks/scores without comments; no specific information on strengths/improvement. NE
Scoring/grading reflects progression of competencies (not just right/wrong)	No evidence; just right/wrong answers. NE	Not evident; focus on marking without progression in competency. NE
Consistent/accurate application of rubrics/scoring guides	No evidence of teacher-developed rubrics/scoring guides. NE	No evidence of rubric or scoring criteria. NE
Differentiation in scoring/grading levels	Scores/grades not included, but tasks marked. P/ NE	The teacher marks all tasks, but no scoring/grading or differentiation.
Feedback alongside scores/grades (specific, descriptive on development)	No samples with scores/grades plus specific feedback. NE	No comments/feedback; marking without feedback for learning. NE
Consistency in scoring/grading across learners/tasks	No evidence of multiple samples reviewed for consistency. NE	Not demonstrated; no scoring/grading consistency shown. NE

Both observations indicate very limited or no effective scoring and grading aligned with CBC principles (e.g., criterion-referenced, competency-based progression, use of rubrics, formative focus rather than just right/wrong or numerical grades). Practices remain traditional (marking without detailed criteria, feedback, or tracking of progression). SSWA had some evidence of scores in certain cases, but SSB shows even less (mostly oral guidance during activity, with no post-activity scoring or grading).

Theme 3: Generic, Non-Actionable Feedback Hindering Formative Potential

Feedback was infrequent, vague, and rarely forward-looking, which limited its capacity to guide improvement. Observations noted minimal or no personalised comments during activities. At the same time, document reviews revealed oral or generic remarks (e.g., “good” or “try harder”) that lacked specificity about strengths, gaps, or next steps. Teachers and officials recognised the importance of feedback but cited workload and class-size barriers to providing timely, personalised responses. When asked to describe their approaches to giving feedback and the methods they use, a teacher participant noted:

“I talk to them directly in class, tell them how they are progressing and how to improve. Maybe I can design a second activity to encourage learners to practise more and improve their skills. After the assessment, I record scores and provide individual feedback, encouraging them to improve for future tasks” (Teacher)

However, lesson observations revealed limited detail in feedback. The findings showed effective oral feedback during group work, but it lacked written comments or guidance on specific skill development. Teachers recognised correct answers in class but did not provide descriptive feedback on how learners could improve. Feedback was brief, oral, and general (e.g., “Correct,” “Good”), and it lacked clarity, guidance, and a focus on skills. No feedback tools were used, such as reflection sheets, peer assessment prompts, or success criteria charts. This indicates that although teachers interact with learners, the feedback they provide does not meet CBC formative assessment standards. Actionable feedback is essential for guiding learners towards improvement. The current lack of meaningful feedback diminishes the formative potential of CBC assessments and denies learners critical growth opportunities.

Summary comparison of lesson observation.

The table addresses the research question related to teachers’ proficiency in providing CBA feedback to learners. Ratings follow the provided scale: HE (Highly Effective), E (Effective), D (Developing), NE (Not Evident). If no explicit rating is given but the evidence suggests absence, NE (Not Evident) is assigned. Evidence is concisely summarised from observations. SSWA refers to school 1, and SSB to school 2.

Table 2
Findings on Teachers' Ability to Provide CBA Feedback to Learners

Area of Focus/Indicator	School (SSWA) History, Evidence and Rating	School (SSB) Physics Evidence and Rating
Student work samples with written feedback related to competencies/outcomes	No samples with written feedback; just scores. NE	Not addressed (focusing on oral during lesson); no written feedback evident. NE
Feedback identifies strengths and areas for improvement (re: competence development)	No feedback identifying strengths/improvement (e.g., just "Good") NE	Not directly evident in written form; oral encouragement, but not specific strengths/improvement pinpointed. NE
Differentiated feedback tailored to individual needs/progress	No evidence of differentiated feedback. NE	Not evident; general group/oral guidance. NE
Timelines of feedback	Not addressed NE	Prompts oral feedback during practical/group work to inform immediate learning. E
Specificity of feedback (relates to Los/competencies, pinpoints strengths/improvement)	Not addressed. NE	Oral feedback fairly related to Los/focus but not specific on strengths/improvement (mostly encouragement). E (fairly) / NE (for pinpointing)
Focus on competency development (skills, knowledge, attitudes; progress understanding)	Not addressed. NE	Fairly encourages development; tasks are done as a class, then as a group to build progress. D
Actionability of feedback (clear guidance on next steps)	Not addressed. NE	Guided during the lesson with specific steps/resources (e.g., practical guide). E
Variety of feedback methods	Not addressed. NE	Mostly oral explanations; frequent but limited to oral. D
Student engagement with feedback (understanding checked, used in subsequent learning)	Not addressed. NE	Not evident for checking understanding; fairly used to inform subsequent practical activities. NE / E (fairly)

The table above indicates that SSWA provides virtually no written or other feedback aligned with CBC's specific, competency-focused developmental approach. SSB performs better with real-time oral feedback during the practical activity—timely, somewhat actionable, and integrated—but lacks written feedback that specifically addresses strengths and improvements, offers variety, ensures differentiation, and checks for understanding. Oral guidance during the lesson acts as a substitute for formal post-assessment feedback.

Therefore, effective feedback must be specific, timely, and focused on the task, process, or self-regulation to close learning gaps (Mandouit & Hattie, 2023). Its weakness here further disrupts constructive alignment, as feedback is a key mechanism for linking TLAs to ILOs and enabling iterative improvement. This pattern aligns with Ugandan CBC studies reporting vague oral feedback and systemic constraints that overshadow formative intent (broader SSA evidence of ineffective practices in rural settings). These findings coincide with and expand the broader literature on assessment in competency-based reforms. The reliance on right/wrong or fact-based scoring, rather than progression-oriented evaluation, contradicts Biggs' (constructive alignment) principle, which emphasises that assessments must align with intended learning outcomes to promote deep understanding and competency development rather than surface recall. Similarly, the absence of clear criteria, consistent standards, and descriptive feedback undermines high-quality

formative assessment, as Brookhart (2013) emphasises these elements as essential for transparency, learner growth, and informed instructional decisions. The observed gaps echo studies in similar contexts, such as those by Aheisibwe and Barigye (2023), in which uncertainty persisted regarding the integration of competency-aligned grading into the overall evaluation.

The persistence of an “implementation gap,” where awareness of guidelines does not translate into practice, reflects Guskey’s (2002) model of teacher change. This model suggests that meaningful shifts in beliefs and practices often require evidence of improved student outcomes before attitudes change through training alone. Without structured support, follow-up, and relevance to the context, teachers tend to revert to familiar methods. This aligns with Kennedy (2014), who argues that professional learning must directly connect to classroom practice and school realities to bring about change; abstract knowledge of frameworks rarely suffices without targeted application. The EPRC follow-up survey conducted in 2025 highlighted emerging trends in the implementation of Uganda’s Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC). While there were improvements in teacher acceptance and increasing confidence in the CBC framework, significant assessment gaps remained. The findings showed that teachers were increasingly integrating CBC principles into lesson planning but still struggled to adopt effective marking and feedback mechanisms (EPRC, 2025). Additionally, systemic issues such as large class sizes and a lack of resources remained unchanged, as highlighted in the 2025 report. There was progress in professional development initiatives, which helped improve teacher alignment with CBC’s learner-centred goals, yet formative assessment practices still lagged behind the standards (APHRC, 2025). These findings reinforce the themes identified in the Mpigi District case study, particularly the challenges of rubric development and the provision of actionable feedback. By improving assessment literacy and addressing systemic barriers, further progress in CBC adoption can be achieved. However, full alignment will require ongoing policy refinement and investment in resources (EPRC, 2025).

Feedback in formative assessment not only confirms alignment but also helps learners bridge the gap between their current performance and desired competencies. The findings suggest that feedback is often vague, sporadic, and generic (e.g., “good” or “try harder”). In line with Biggs’ theory, effective feedback should focus on competencies and provide actionable steps for improvement (Mandouit & Hattie, 2023). The failure to provide specific, future-oriented feedback restricts learners’ ability to reflect and make meaningful progress, weakening the vital connection between TLAs and ILOs.

Overall, these themes collectively reveal underdeveloped teacher proficiency in marking and providing effective feedback, characterised by inconsistent practices, underutilisation of rubrics, and generic feedback that fails to support competency development. Based on Biggs’ Constructive Alignment Theory, the findings highlight a clear misalignment: while ILOs emphasise practical skills and competencies, teaching-learning activities (TLAs) may include learner-centred elements, yet ATs (marking and feedback) remain rooted in traditional paradigms, which hinder deep learning and learner progress. This directly addresses the study’s main objective of

investigating teachers' ability to mark and give effective feedback within CBC formative assessment practices in Mpigi District's public lower secondary schools. It answers the research question about how teachers describe and implement these processes. The evidence shows not just isolated gaps but a systemic disconnect in implementation: although there is awareness of CBC and national guidelines (NCDC/UNEB), practical enactment struggles due to inadequate training, resources, and support. This weakens CBC's transformative aims in rural Ugandan environments, contributing to ongoing challenges such as low learner outcomes and poor alignment with 21st-century skills. By linking empirical patterns to theory, the findings reinforce the need for targeted interventions (e.g., CPD on rubric design, feedback literacy, and guideline enforcement) to achieve constructive alignment, thus bridging the gap between policy and practice and improving educational quality as intended by the study.

Study Limitations

This qualitative multiple-case study provides rich, contextualised insights into teachers' marking and feedback practices under Uganda's Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) in two public lower secondary schools in Mpigi District. However, like all interpretive, bounded case studies, it faces several inherent limitations.

First, the study is geographically and contextually limited to two purposively selected SEED schools (one rural in Muduuma sub-county and one semi-urban in Kiringente sub-county) within Mpigi District. While Mpigi exemplifies common rural and peri-urban challenges in Uganda, such as oversized classes, resource shortages, and uneven CBC adoption, the findings may not fully apply to urban settings, private schools, districts with higher resources, or regions with different implementation dynamics (e.g., those with stronger district-level support or better infrastructure). Recent national reports (e.g., EPRC, 2025; APHRC/Namatovu-Sakwa et al., 2025; UNEB, 2026) highlight widening equity gaps between affluent/urban and low-resource/rural schools, suggesting that Mpigi may represent more challenging rather than typical cases.

Second, reliance on self-reported data from semi-structured interviews, combined with researcher-conducted non-participant observations and document reviews, introduces potential biases. These include social desirability (participants may present practices more favourably during interviews), observer effects (despite unobtrusive positioning), and researcher positionality (e.g., prior experience in Ugandan education, documented through reflexivity). Triangulation across sources and prolonged engagement helped mitigate these risks, but they remain inherent to qualitative research in school settings.

Thirdly, the cross-sectional design captures practices at a specific point in time (September 2024-January 2025), shortly after the initial CBC rollout phases and during the post-COVID recovery. It does not track longitudinal changes, such as potential improvements following intensified teacher retooling, moderation efforts, or resource investments reported in later national assessments (e.g., UNEB's 2025-2026 research on CBC impacts, which noted ongoing large-class and material constraints but some progress in project work). The evolving nature of CBC

implementation, as evidenced by persistent challenges in assessment alignment, ICT access, and workload in 2025-2026 reports, means the findings reflect an early-to-mid rollout phase rather than mature enactment.

Fourth, the small sample size (nine participants: five teachers, two headteachers, two national officials) prioritises depth, saturation, and information-rich cases, consistent with qualitative principles. However, the limited national-level representation (only one NCDC and one UNEB official) may under-represent broader policy perspectives or variations across districts. Similarly, the focus on public schools excludes private or better-resourced institutions, where recent studies indicate stronger CBC fidelity due to differential resourcing.

Fifth, the study does not directly evaluate learner outcomes or the long-term effects of observed marking and feedback practices on competency development (e.g., critical thinking, self-regulation). Although aligned with the research questions, this restricts understanding of downstream impacts, especially given equity concerns raised in recent analyses (e.g., APHRC, 2025), which suggest that under-resourced schools risk increasing disparities.

Contribution to Knowledge

Despite these limitations, the study makes several valuable contributions to curriculum implementation and assessment literacy in Sub-Saharan Africa, especially within Uganda's CBC context.

It offers triangulated empirical evidence from public lower secondary schools in a rural district (Mpigi), documenting underdeveloped teacher proficiency in rubric-based marking, criterion-referenced scoring, and actionable feedback, all of which remain misaligned with CBC principles. This fills a gap in localised qualitative data on the implementation of formative assessment, where much previous research concentrates on policy intentions, teacher knowledge more broadly, or on urban/primary levels. Recent studies in Mpigi and similar settings confirm patterns of limited assessment tool design, reliance on traditional methods, and systemic barriers (e.g., inadequate training, large classes). However, few provide in-depth case-based exploration of marking and feedback specifically.

By grounding findings in Biggs' Constructive Alignment Theory, the research extends its application to low-resource secondary contexts in Sub-Saharan Africa, demonstrating how misalignments among intended learning outcomes, teaching-learning activities, and assessment tasks (particularly ATS involving marking and feedback) sustain surface learning and hinder competency development. This theoretical framing emphasises structural rather than individual deficiencies, adding nuance to discussions of CBC fidelity in constrained environments.

The study also provides policy-relevant insights for stakeholders (MOES, NCDC, UNEB, district officials), emphasising root causes (e.g., training gaps, resource constraints) rather than symptoms, and supporting recommendations such as mandatory rubric certification and moderation protocols. In a landscape where CBC implementation faces persistent challenges, including inconsistent formative practices and a reversion to old methods, the findings serve as a benchmark for

targeted interventions and comparative research across districts or regions. Overall, by highlighting the policy-practice gap in a representative rural setting, this work strengthens the evidence base for improving assessment literacy, fostering equitable competency development, and advancing Uganda's Vision 2040 and SDG 4.

Conclusion

There is a significant misalignment between Uganda's Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) goals and the implementation of formative assessment in public lower secondary schools in Mpigi District. Teachers' skills in marking and giving feedback remain notably underdeveloped, characterised by inconsistent traditional scoring methods (such as ticks, crosses, or numerical marks without clear criteria), a near-total lack of rubrics or performance descriptors, and mostly generic, non-actionable feedback that does not highlight strengths, weaknesses, or ways to improve. These practices directly undermine Biggs' Constructive Alignment Theory because assessment tasks (ATs) do not produce valid evidence of the intended learning outcomes (ILOs), which focus on skills like critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration. Instead, they encourage surface-level learning through rote memorisation, which conflicts with CBC's focus on learner-centred, formative processes that promote deep skill development and self-regulation. The issues are not mainly due to individual teachers' shortcomings but are rooted in systemic constraints typical of rural, low-resource Ugandan settings: large classes (often exceeding 60-80 learners), severe time shortages caused by heavy workloads, insufficient pre- and in-service training on CBC-specific assessment tools (especially rubric design and feedback literacy), chronic shortages of instructional materials and digital resources, and limited institutional mechanisms for moderation or collaborative marking.

Recommendations

To address the identified gaps and achieve true constructive alignment, the following multi-level, systemic recommendations are proposed, emphasising structural support over isolated teacher training.

Mandate and certify the development and use of rubrics. The Ministry of Education and Sports (MOES), in collaboration with the National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC) and the Uganda National Examinations Board (UNEB), should establish mandatory certification for teachers in rubric design and application. This could include integration into pre-service training at teacher colleges and compulsory in-service modules with practical assessments, with recertification required every 2-3 years. Standardised exemplar rubrics for common AOI tasks and competencies should be disseminated nationwide via online portals and printed guides.

Establish national and school-level moderation protocols. Implement structured moderation systems, including national sampling of marked student work for quality assurance, district-level moderation clusters, and school-based collaborative marking sessions (e.g., weekly or termly peer review of AOI tasks). These measures would improve consistency, inter-rater reliability, and shared understanding of competency criteria, thereby reducing subjective scoring.

Encourage collaborative, peer-supported marking practices. Schools should implement timetabled collaborative marking (for example, co-marking sessions or professional learning communities centred on formative tasks) to share the workload, develop collective expertise, and demonstrate effective feedback. Headteachers should be provided with training to support these structures.

Invest in targeted capacity building and ongoing professional development (CPD). Broaden and decentralise CPD programmes, with a strong emphasis on formative assessment literacy, including practical workshops on actionable feedback, rubric co-creation, and digital tools to boost efficiency. Prioritise rural districts, such as Mpigi, through mobile training units, peer mentoring, and benchmarking visits to better-resourced schools. Incorporate follow-up coaching and classroom-based application to ensure practical transfer.

Address systemic resource and workload constraints. The government should invest in reducing class sizes, aiming for phased reductions to 50-60 learners, providing affordable digital assessment supports (e.g., offline rubric apps or shared tablets), and supplying essential materials such as portfolios, checklists, and exemplars. Incentives like workload adjustments or allowances for assessment-heavy subjects could help ease time poverty. Strengthen policy alignment and monitoring. MOES, NCDC, and UNEB should improve assessment guidelines to explicitly emphasise formative contributions, including the quality of marking and feedback, in school performance evaluations. Regular national monitoring surveys (building on recent UNEB studies) should monitor progress in formative practices, with tailored support for low-resource schools to prevent further inequalities.

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Research Article

Women's participation in peace and security efforts in East Africa: Challenges and opportunities

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the progress and gaps in women's participation in political leadership and security sector integration across the East African Community partner states. It draws specifically on the status of implementation of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 in East African Community partner states. It follows from a baseline survey that analyzed the National Action Plans (NAPs) of partner states, the 2014 Regional Action plans and conducted Key Informant Interviews with 31 experts from the Peace and Security department of the EAC structure and Ministries, Departments and Agencies responsible for implementing the NAPs in the EAC partner states. The findings suggest that while some partner states have made progress in establishing positions that women occupy in the peace and security sectors, others continue to face resistance due to entrenched patriarchal norms, religious belief systems, and limited resources. Drawing on this study, the paper argues for a more intentional and coordinated regional approach to advancing gender-responsive Security sector reforms and inclusive governance.

KEYWORDS

*participation;
prevention; protection;
relief and recovery;
women; peace;
security.*

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Introduction

The adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) in 2000 marked a significant moment in acknowledging the vital contributions of women to peacebuilding, conflict resolution, and governance globally. With the surge of conflicts that had erupted in the world following the end of the Cold War and the sudden increase in their protracted nature the need to have more women in conflict resolution and peace building became urgent and was articulated in the UN Security Council of 2000. The UNSCR 1325 initiative presented four foundational elements of the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda-participation, protection, prevention, and relief and recovery-designed to reshape the understanding and implementation of peace and security. In East Africa, a region characterized by protracted conflict situations, intra-state political instability, and mass population displacement, the application of UNSCR 1325 was especially significant. Historically, by 2000, the EAC comprised of Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. But by 2025, it has expanded to include other partner states, Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Rwanda, South Sudan and Somalia. Each Partner State has established a National Action Plan (NAP) to operationalize the UNSCR 1325 as well as take oversight role in ensuring its effective implementation in the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda. Through the NAPs, national frameworks, the Partner States have through the Peace and Security Department of the EAC set up the the EAC Regional Action Plans (RAPs) to facilitate the coordination of regional commitments towards the UNSCR 1325 (East African Community, 2014; 2024). The current status of the UNSCR 1325 within the Partner States stands at varied level. In the figure below, it is evident that commitment to the establishment of the NAPs has been strong, what remains is to establish the operationalization of the UNSCR 1325 by these NAPs in the respective Partner States.

Even with these advancements, the figure indicates that the implementation varies significantly throughout the region. The variation is attributed to Partner States intra-states characteristics that have hindered the progress by entrenched patriarchal norms, religious limitations, insufficient financial resources, and fragmented institutions. Research indicates that when women are involved in peace processes, the resulting agreements tend to be more lasting and inclusive (Hudson et al., 2012). However, in reality, their participation often appears to be more symbolic, characterized by token representation that does not effectively lead to meaningful influence on policy or security reform results (Waylen, 2014). For example, while Rwanda has achieved over 60% representation of women in parliament, the challenge lies in converting this representation into meaningful influence within the security sector, which continues to evolve.

Table 1
Partner States Status of National Action Plans of UNSCR 1325:

<u>Serial No.</u>	<u>Partner State</u>	<u>Blocs of NAP</u>	<u>NAP1</u>	<u>NAP2</u>	<u>NAP3</u>	<u>Domesticating the UNSCR 1325 (2000)</u>
1	Republic of Burundi		2012-2016	2017-2021	2022-2027	Ministry of National Solidarity Human Rights and Gender
2	Democratic Republic of the Congo		2016-2018	2020-2024		Ministry of Gender Family and Children
3	Republic of Kenya		2016-2018	2020-2024		Ministry of Public Service Gender and Affirmative Action
4	Republic of Rwanda		2008-2012	2018-2022		Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion
5	Federal Republic of Somalia		2022 to date			Ministry of Gender Child and Welfare
6	Republic of South Sudan		2015-2020	2023-2027		Ministry of Gender Child and Social Welfare
7	United Republic of Tanzania		2020 to date			Ministry of Community Development Gender and Special Groups
8	Republic of Uganda		2008-2010	2011-2015	2021-2025	Ministry of Gender Labour and Social Development

Source: Compiled from the Base line Survey of the EAC implementation of the UNSCR 1325.

This paper explores how EAC Partner States have put UNSCR 1325 into practice, the challenges they encounter, and the possibilities for strengthening women's roles in security.

To attempt these questions, we ground the paper in feminist institutionalism theory, which suggests that gendered norms are intricately woven into the rules, practices, and culture of institutions (Waylen, 2014). Feminist security studies challenge the conventional male-centric perspective of security institutions, highlighting that peace processes and security sector reform frequently overlook the contributions of women and do not adequately address security issues that are specific to gender (Hudson et al., 2012). These frameworks play a crucial role in comprehending the formal structures, such as laws, quotas, and action plans, alongside the informal barriers, including norms and stereotypes, that influence the execution of WPS commitments in the region.

We utilize a Mixed-Methods design and a qualitative approach that integrates document analysis of the baseline survey of the status of implementation of UNSCR 1325, expert interviews, and a comparative review of Partner States security and gender policies. An analysis of documents was carried out on the National Action Plans (NAPs) from Uganda, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, South Sudan, Burundi, and the DRC, as well as the 2014 EAC Regional Action Plans, the EAC Treaty, the Gender Policy (2018), and the Gender Equality and Development Act (2016). This also included reports from the EAC, United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA)-UN Women workshop that took place in December 2023. Between July and November 2023, we conducted 31 semi-structured interviews with a diverse group of individuals, including policymakers, civil society

leaders, representatives from the security sector, academics, and experts in Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) across six East African Community (EAC) Partner States. Participants were chosen through purposive sampling of officials from, the Multisectoral Experts Working Group (MEWG), East African Partner States, Civil society organizations, Government agencies and departments directly concerned with the implementation and operationalization of the UNSCR 1325 from each Partner State and the EAC respective departments of Gender and Peace and Security.

Results

The findings highlight five important themes regarding the implementation of the WPS agenda throughout the EAC region: (1) the development and institutionalization of policies; (2) the presence of structural and socio-cultural barriers; (3) the challenges of financing and resource mobilization; (4) the role of innovation and localized practices; and (5) the need for regional coordination and integration.

The Process of Creating and Establishing Policies

Many EAC Partner States have created National Action Plans, with some advancing to their second or third NAPs. Rwanda and Uganda are notable for incorporating gender-responsive elements into their national security strategies and legal frameworks. Rwanda's constitutional quota guarantees that more than 60% of parliamentary seats are held by women, a strategic move that has been utilized to advance legislation and policies that are sensitive to gender issues. Uganda has established gender desks within its security forces, complemented by budgeting mechanisms that are responsive to gender considerations in its third National Action Plan.

The data shows that in all Partner States, the NAPs were in ministries directly relevant to women's and youth problems. The NAPs have also been incorporated implicitly into each Partner State's overall national development goals. Except for one, none of the Partner States have a clear framework in place to offer oversight, monitoring, and assessment of NAP implementation.

Table 2
Women in EAC Partner States in National Assemblies/Parliaments

Rank In the World	Partner State	Lower or Single House				Upper Chamber			
		Elections	Seats*	Women	% W	Elections	Seats*	Women	% W
37	Burundi	5.2020	123	47	38.2	7. 2021	39	16	41
155	Democratic Republic of the Congo	12.2018	500	64	12.8	3.2019	109	26	23.9
1	Kenya	8.2022	350	81	23.1	8.2022	68	21	30.9
57	Rwanda	9.2018	80	49	61.3	9.2019	26	9	34.6
57	South Sudan	5.2021	550	178	32.4	8.2021	84	27	32.1
50	Uganda	1.2021	556	188	33.8	-	-	-	-
40	United Republic of Tanzania	10.202	388	143	36.9	-	-	-	-

Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union Open Data via Gender equality (ipu.org): Ranking as of 1/9/2022

From the table above, there has been varied progress in improving the participation of women in peace and security, and in governance structures across the East Africa region. For instance, the table shows the status of women in national assemblies of East African states as of 2022. According to the data above, Rwanda is the world leader in empowering women to make legislative decisions. Rwanda leads the EAC, followed by Burundi, Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The most recent data on women in the world's legislative institutions present a positive picture. Different partner countries have different gender laws, representation quotas, and rationales. These figures are not used to assess decision-making capacities, as this is entirely the responsibility of the Partner States.

In terms of capability and participation in peacemaking, including arbitration and talks, the number of women participating in official discussions as negotiators, mediators, signatories, or witnesses remains exceptionally low in the region, reflecting a global trend with a local twist. Women have not received adequate recognition for their ability to contribute to conflict prevention, act as active peacemakers, and participate in armed combat. Some of the few data available will demonstrate this.

Table 3.

Women Participation in Region's Peace Processes

Peace Process	Women Signatories	Women Mediators	Women Witnesses	Women in the Negotiating Team
Burundi (2000) – Arusha Accord / CSF / CPA	0%	0%	-	2%
Somalia (2002) - Eldoret Coh / CSF	0%	0%	-	-
DRC (2003) - Sun City CPA	5%	0%	0%	12%
Sudan (2005) - Naivasha CPA	0%	0%	9%	-
Darfur (2006) – Abuja CPA	0%	0%	7%	8%
DRC (2008) - Goma - North Kivu CSF	5%	20%	0%	-
DRC (2008) - Goma - South Kivu CSF	0%	20%	0%	-
Uganda (2008) – Juba Coh / CSF / IAG	0%	33%	0%	9%
Kenya (2008) – Nairobi	0%	33%	0%	-
South Sudan (2015) Agreement on Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan	No	No	No	15%
South Sudan (2019) Current Peace Effort	No Data	1%	-	25%

Source- UNIFEM 2010

In this table, we evaluate data from Christine Bell and O' Rourke, who studied 585 peace accords between 1990 and 2010, as well as UNIFEM's later data collection, to provide an overview of the levels of women's involvement in recent peace processes in the region after the 1325 (2000) resolution. It is clear that the average percentage of women signatories to men in ten peace processes was 1.0%, while women mediators constituted 10.7%. Women witnesses averaged 1.6%, while women negotiators averaged 7.1%, indicating that they were the true peacemakers.

Barriers Related to Structure and Socio-Cultural Factors

Even with these formal advancements, deeply rooted patriarchy, cultural restrictions, and conservative religious views still hinder women from actively engaging in peace and security governance. In Burundi and South Sudan, cultural resistance is evident through the prevalent exclusion of women from public life and leadership roles. In nations such as Kenya and Tanzania, where quotas are

implemented, the evolution of institutional culture continues to progress at a gradual pace. Gender stereotypes persist in framing women as passive recipients instead of active contributors to peace, reducing their agency in both community-based and formal peacebuilding efforts.

These cultural dynamics not only constrain women but also negatively influence the attitudes and behaviors of boys and men. In many communities, traditional gender norms discourage men from participating in domestic responsibilities such as household chores, viewing such tasks as inherently feminine. This reinforces gender hierarchies that associate leadership and authority with masculinity, while relegating caregiving and emotional labor to women. Such constructions make it difficult for women to be perceived as capable actors in conflict mediation or security governance.

Additionally, cultural stereotypes are often reinforced within families, where women themselves may play a role—consciously or unconsciously—in socializing children into traditional gender roles. As mothers, aunts, and caregivers, women are sometimes complicit in discouraging daughters from pursuing leadership roles or in upholding beliefs that men are naturally suited for public life while women belong in the private, domestic sphere. This intergenerational transmission of norms contributes to the resilience of patriarchal values, even in contexts where gender-sensitive policies exist on paper.

The normalization of such gender norms presents a significant barrier to WPS implementation, particularly at the community level. Without active cultural transformation alongside legal and institutional reforms, gender-responsive policies risk becoming performative. As several interviewees in Uganda and Rwanda noted, “Even when the law says we should be included, society still says we should not speak.” This quote captures the disjuncture between normative change and lived realities—a central challenge in operationalizing UNSCR 1325 in East Africa.

Securing Funding and Mobilizing Resources

Financial constraints present a significant and pervasive challenge to the effective implementation of the WPS agenda across East African states. Many Partner States do not have specific budget allocations for WPS-related programming, making it difficult to transition from policy to practice. The lack of dedicated funding hampers efforts to build institutional capacity, establish gender-sensitive data systems, and implement effective monitoring and evaluation (M&E) frameworks. Outreach, awareness-raising, and community mobilization activities—crucial for transforming societal attitudes—also suffer from chronic underfunding.

In Kenya and Burundi, for example, national stakeholders have identified resource scarcity as a major impediment to progress. While precise comparative financial data is often unavailable or inconsistently reported, it is evident that WPS initiatives receive disproportionately lower funding compared to broader national security or governance portfolios. For instance, while security budgets in Kenya and Uganda run into hundreds of millions of dollars annually, allocations for gender-focused peacebuilding or protection services are often marginal and reliant on ad hoc donor support.

This heavy reliance on external donors, although helpful in jumpstarting projects, raises concerns about long-term sustainability. Donor-driven programs can be subject to shifting geopolitical interests and short funding cycles, resulting in fragmented interventions and weak ownership by national institutions. Furthermore, dependence on foreign funding can undermine the political accountability of governments to invest in and prioritize the WPS agenda from their own domestic resources.

Creative Approaches and Community-Specific Methods

A number of Partner States are experimenting with innovative approaches that show promise. Contingent upon the increase in women in peace and security directly, Burundi set up a bank specifically for women to be able to obtain manageable loans that can address their socio-economic needs. These are critical because, commitment to WPS can only be feasible if women are assured of a successful wellbeing of their families. Those that are survivors of the protracted conflicts are also provided with relief and recovery interventions for post conflict transformation.

Kenya's "Policare" one-stop centers for gender-based violence response bring together medical, legal, and psychosocial services in a cohesive manner. Rwanda has implemented gender-responsive banking, providing financial incentives to businesses led by women that play a vital role in post-conflict recovery. Kenya's "Policare" one-stop centers for gender-based violence response bring together medical, legal, and psychosocial services in a cohesive manner. In Uganda, the National Action Plans have been adapted to local contexts by establishing district-level Women, Peace, and Security committees and implementing awareness campaigns that are sensitive to cultural nuances. These innovations demonstrate tailored responses to specific contexts and a capacity for adaptive learning that improve both ownership and effectiveness. In Uganda, the National Action Plans have been adapted to local contexts by establishing district-level Women, Peace, and Security committees and implementing awareness campaigns that are sensitive to cultural nuances. These innovations demonstrate tailored responses to specific contexts and a capacity for adaptive learning that improve both ownership and effectiveness.

Collaboration and Integration at the Regional Level

Although many WPS initiatives tend to concentrate on national levels, the EAC RAP of 2014 and the proposed EAC's 2024-2034 RAP indicates an increasing dedication to fostering regional integration. The RAP highlights the importance of being sensitive to cross-border conflicts, utilizing digital monitoring and evaluation via the EAC-RAPIMS platform, and ensuring the inclusion of youth and marginalized groups. The recent inclusion of Somalia in the EAC has initiated discussions on how to adapt regional frameworks to suit fragile and post-conflict environments. Nonetheless, the lack of a strong regional accountability system still hinders coherence and shared learning among states. The EAC region has no reporting framework nor a Monitoring and Evaluation agreed system. The EAC RAP 2024-2034 has been intentional and built in this M&E framework that clearly articulates

the parameters that will be used in the overall process of assessing the UNSCR 1325 implementation and operationalization.

Discussion

This paper highlights the intricate relationship between advancements made by institutions and the ongoing structural challenges that affect the implementation of the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda within the East African Community (EAC). Understanding these dynamics requires a comprehensive approach that takes into account institutional capacity, socio-cultural norms, political will, and the mechanisms of regional integration. Although considerable progress has been achieved in establishing gender-responsive peace and security policies, the real effects of these frameworks on the everyday lives of women and their institutional empowerment are still inconsistent and frequently superficial.

The strong policy frameworks observed in countries such as Rwanda and Uganda highlight how institutional reform can foster environments that support women's participation. Nonetheless, feminist institutionalism highlights that merely having formal rules in place does not ensure meaningful change unless those rules actively challenge established gender hierarchies. Rwanda's achievement in implementing quotas and Uganda's integration of gender desks is noteworthy; however, their impact remains influenced by informal norms and the prevailing patriarchal cultures within security institutions. Therefore, it is essential that formal mechanisms are paired with deliberate initiatives aimed at confronting discriminatory practices and fostering women's leadership.

The ongoing presence of structural and socio-cultural obstacles, especially in nations like Burundi, South Sudan, underscores the importance of tackling entrenched gender beliefs. In these situations, gender stereotypes continue to be widespread, restricting women's opportunities to participate in decision-making positions and diminishing the impact of WPS programs. This aligns with current academic discussions indicating that merely changing policies is not enough for true inclusion unless there are also transformations in cultural narratives and power dynamics. It is essential to adopt a more comprehensive intersectional approach to understand how factors such as ethnicity, religion, class, and geographic location uniquely contribute to the marginalization of women across different states.

Resource limitations present a significant challenge to the successful execution of initiatives. The absence of sustainable funding hinders the establishment and oversight of Women, Peace, and Security frameworks. Many Partner States depend significantly on donor funding, which frequently entails limited timeframes and priorities that are driven by external factors. This results in interventions that are both fragmented and unsustainable. The collaboration between Uganda and academic institutions to create cost-effective monitoring and evaluation frameworks represents a hopeful approach to improving accountability and impact through the utilization of local knowledge and skills. The EAC states might benefit from exploring financing models that engage multiple stakeholders, including civil society, the private sector, and international development partners.

It is encouraging to see that a number of innovative and context-responsive practices are starting to transform the landscape. The initiatives include localized awareness campaigns and district-level Women, Peace, and Security committees in Uganda, gender-responsive banking in Rwanda, and integrated gender-based violence service centers in Kenya. These practices illustrate that adjusting to local contexts can lead to more sustainable and meaningful results. The innovations presented here act as gateways for expanding effective models throughout the region, emphasizing the importance of participatory policy design that is grounded in the real experiences of women from various communities.

Viewing it through the lens of regional governance, the 2024–2034 EAC Regional Action Plan emerges as a significant and well-timed chance to align national initiatives and encourage collaborative learning across borders. The RAP's focus on digital tools, engagement with youth, and the consideration of fragile states like Somalia reflects a progressive approach. Nevertheless, the absence of strong enforcement and coordination mechanisms at the regional level persists as a barrier to the RAP's ability to bring about meaningful change. To enhance regional implementation, the EAC should focus on developing institutional frameworks that foster mutual accountability, facilitate data harmonization, and encourage dialogue on policies across nations.

Insights drawn from other African regional blocs provide valuable perspectives on potential strategies to enhance the WPS agenda in East Africa. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has shown a more centralized and directive method in its coordination of regional Women, Peace, and Security initiatives. The ECOWAS Gender Development Centre (EGDC) has played a pivotal role in promoting the alignment of National Action Plans (NAPs) and fostering discussions across nations regarding the involvement of women in peace processes. Furthermore, ECOWAS has taken the initiative to incorporate gender advisors into peace support operations, a strategy that the EAC might consider adopting to strengthen the involvement of women in regional conflict resolution efforts.

In a similar vein, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) has implemented tailored mechanisms aimed at tackling gender and security challenges within the region. The Regional Action Plan for 2023–2030 thoughtfully integrates the connections between climate security and migration dynamics, addressing two vital issues that significantly impact the EAC region. The focus of IGAD on establishing gender focal points within the peace and security framework, along with the development of a regional network of women mediators, provides important insights for the EAC. East Africa stands to gain from tailoring these innovations to its unique circumstances, especially in incorporating Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) into strategies addressing environmental stress and cross-border displacement.

In summary, the progress of the WPS agenda in East Africa relies not just on the formal adoption of policies, but also on addressing informal norms, ensuring sustainable resources, and establishing regional accountability. Future advancements will rely on ongoing political determination, inclusive and participatory implementation methods, and a dedication to confronting the

fundamental power dynamics that sustain gender inequality in the realms of peace and security. Through the enhancement of localized innovations, the encouragement of regional collaboration, and the utilization of comparative insights from ECOWAS and IGAD, the EAC stands to exemplify a model for other regions aiming to implement gender-transformative peace and security frameworks.

Conclusion

The Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda has become an essential framework for promoting gender-equitable governance, inclusive peacebuilding, and sustainable development within the East African Community (EAC). This study shows that although significant advancements have been achieved—especially with the creation of National Action Plans (NAPs) and the initiation of the EAC Regional Action Plan (2024–2034)—the implementation process continues to face ongoing structural, financial, and socio-cultural obstacles.

The comparative analysis indicated that certain states, including Rwanda and Uganda, have made noteworthy progress in institutional advancements, such as implementing gender quotas, establishing gender desks, and adopting gender-responsive budgeting practices. At the same time, other regions like South Sudan and Burundi are facing ongoing challenges related to instability fueled by conflict, limited resources, and deeply rooted patriarchal traditions. Throughout the region, it is essential to move beyond merely adopting policies to truly transformative implementation that changes institutional cultures, guarantees accountability, and promotes women's leadership.

The regional framework, especially the EAC RAP, provides a valuable opportunity for aligning strategies, coordinating cross-border efforts, and utilizing shared strengths. Nonetheless, the findings suggest that the success of this framework hinges on strong political will, sustainable funding, inclusive engagement with stakeholders, and a steadfast dedication to gender justice.

This paper highlights the crucial point that the implementation of WPS should not be confined solely to gender institutions. A comprehensive approach involving both government and society is essential, incorporating ministries such as security, defense, justice, and finance, alongside education, civil society participants, traditional leaders, and women's organizations. Furthermore, drawing on comparative insights from other African regional organizations like ECOWAS and IGAD underscores the opportunity for the EAC to embrace innovative and proven strategies tailored to its unique context.

Ultimately, the WPS agenda in East Africa embodies both a policy commitment and a transformative vision aimed at fostering inclusive peace. By prioritizing the perspectives and leadership of women, addressing systemic obstacles, and embedding gender equality into peace and security frameworks, EAC states can progress from mere words to significant and enduring transformation. Achieving this vision will necessitate intentional, collaborative, and ongoing efforts at both national and regional levels. Through sustained investment, innovative approaches, and a commitment to accountability, East Africa has the potential to serve as a global model for gender-responsive peacebuilding and regional unity. In the greater

scheme of security planning, the EAC Partner States should be cognizant of the African Peace and Security Architecture in which regional undertakings are clearly aligned to the continental role of women, peace and security.

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Research Article

Symbolic inclusion or structural institutionalisation? Indigenous knowledge systems and curriculum reform in Tanzanian higher education

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ABSTRACT

Across Africa, universities increasingly endorse Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) as central to decolonising higher education. Yet the extent to which such endorsement results in structural curriculum transformation remains under-examined. This qualitative case study investigates the integration of IKS within the curriculum of St. Augustine University of Tanzania. Guided by the Quintuple Helix Model, the study analyses knowledge democracy, cultural resilience, ecological sustainability, and stakeholder engagement. Findings reveal that while indigenous knowledge is visibly acknowledged in courses, community engagement, and sustainability initiatives, integration remains uneven and largely lecturer-dependent. The study introduces an analytical distinction between symbolic inclusion and structural institutionalisation, arguing that meaningful decolonisation requires systemic curriculum redesign rather than discretionary incorporation. The article contributes empirical insight into the practical challenges of epistemic transformation in African higher education.

KEYWORDS

Indigenous Knowledge Systems; curriculum decolonisation; knowledge democracy; structural institutionalisation; African higher education.

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Introduction

Across the Global South, higher education institutions are increasingly confronted with calls to decolonise their curricula by recognising and integrating Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS). In Africa, these calls are not merely symbolic; they are tied to broader projects of epistemic justice, cultural reclamation, and sustainable development. Universities are expected to move beyond inherited colonial epistemologies and reposition local knowledge traditions as legitimate sources of scholarly production and societal transformation.

In Tanzania, the integration of indigenous knowledge in formal education is not a new aspiration. During the Ujamaa era (1967–1985) under Julius Nyerere, educational philosophy emphasised self-reliance, communal values, and the alignment of schooling with local realities. Yet, while primary and community-based education incorporated aspects of indigenous agricultural and social knowledge, university curricula largely remained anchored in Western epistemological traditions. Decades later, policy frameworks such as Vision 2025 continue to advocate cultural inclusivity and locally responsive education, but questions remain regarding how universities operationalise these aspirations at the curricular level.

Across the continent, universities in countries such as South Africa and Ghana have undertaken varying efforts to embed indigenous epistemologies within disciplines such as agriculture, environmental studies, language education, and theology. While existing scholarship highlights the importance of IKS integration, much of it focuses on normative arguments for inclusion rather than empirical analyses of how institutional structures enable or constrain meaningful curricular transformation. In particular, limited research examines how private or faith-based African universities negotiate the tension between global academic standards and locally grounded knowledge traditions.

This study addresses that gap by examining the integration of IKS in the curriculum of St. Augustine University of Tanzania (SAUT), a private higher education institution located in Mwanza. Specifically, the study asks: How are IKS integrated into the university curriculum, and to what extent are these efforts structurally institutionalised rather than symbolically represented?

Drawing on the Quintuple Helix Model as an analytical framework, this article examines four dimensions of curricular integration: knowledge democracy, cultural resilience, ecological sustainability, and stakeholder involvement. While African universities increasingly endorse IKS as central to decolonising higher education, this study demonstrates that integration often remains rhetorically affirmed but structurally fragmented, dependent on individual actors rather than institutionalised curriculum mechanisms. By empirically illustrating how IKS integration unfolds within an institutional context, this article contributes to ongoing debates on curriculum reform, epistemic justice, and the practical challenges of decolonisation in African higher education.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section outlines the theoretical framework guiding the analysis. This is followed by a description of the research design and methodology. The findings section presents four analytical themes that reveal

tensions between symbolic recognition and structural transformation. The discussion situates these findings within broader continental debates on decolonising higher education, before concluding with implications for policy and future research.

Theoretical Framework

The integration of IKS in higher education requires more than curricular modification; it demands a reconceptualisation of how knowledge is produced, legitimised, and institutionalised. This study is guided by the Quintuple Helix Model developed by Elias G. Carayannis and David F. J. Campbell, which provides an analytical framework for examining the interaction between knowledge systems, societal actors, and environmental sustainability.

The Quintuple Helix Model

The Quintuple Helix Model extends earlier innovation system models by conceptualising knowledge production as emerging from the dynamic interaction of five subsystems: academia, government, industry, civil society, and the natural environment. Rather than treating universities as isolated knowledge producers, the model situates them within a broader ecosystem in which knowledge is co-created and socially embedded (Carayannis et al., 2022).

Three dimensions of the model are particularly relevant to this study. First, the model emphasises knowledge democracy, which challenges hierarchical epistemologies by advocating the inclusion of diverse knowledge actors in knowledge creation. This principle aligns directly with calls to recognise IKS alongside dominant Western academic traditions. Second, the model foregrounds multi-stakeholder collaboration, positioning civil society and community actors as legitimate participants in curriculum formation and innovation processes. For universities integrating IKS, this implies moving beyond extractive engagement toward sustained institutional partnerships with indigenous communities. Third, the model introduces the environmental helix, incorporating ecological sustainability as a constitutive element of knowledge systems. Indigenous ecological knowledge — including land use practices, conservation ethics, and community-based environmental management — thus becomes central rather than peripheral to academic inquiry. Within this framework, curriculum is not merely a pedagogical instrument but a site where knowledge systems are negotiated, validated, or marginalised.

Knowledge Democracy and Epistemic Inclusion

The concept of knowledge democracy, as embedded within the Quintuple Helix Model, provides a normative foundation for the inclusion of IKS in higher education. Knowledge democracy implies that legitimate knowledge does not reside exclusively within formal academic institutions but is distributed across communities, traditions, and lived practices.

African scholarship on IKS integration (Kaya & Seleti, 2013; Mmola, 2010; Mekoa, 2023) highlights how colonial educational systems privileged Western epistemologies while marginalising indigenous intellectual traditions. In this

context, the integration of IKS into university curricula represents not only pedagogical reform but epistemic redress.

However, knowledge democracy also raises critical questions:

- Who defines what counts as legitimate knowledge?
- How are community knowledge holders incorporated into academic structures?
- Does inclusion alter institutional power relations, or does it merely symbolise diversity?

This study treats knowledge democracy not as an assumed outcome but as an empirical question. It examines whether the inclusion of IKS at the case institution reflects structural transformation or remains dependent on individual academic initiatives.

Cultural Resilience as Curricular Anchoring

Cultural resilience is conceptualised in this study as the capacity of educational systems to preserve, adapt, and transmit cultural knowledge while responding to contemporary global pressures. Researchers (Ajani, 2024; Cotton et al., 2017; Baruai et al., 2024) associates cultural resilience with student identity formation, institutional inclusivity, and sustainable development. Within the Quintuple Helix framework, the “cultural helix” intersects with civil society and academic systems, emphasising the embedding of local languages, histories, artistic expressions, and spiritual traditions into formal curricula.

Yet cultural resilience may operate at different levels: symbolic level (celebrations, language courses, co-curricular activities), pedagogical level (integration into teaching content and methods), structural level (institutional policies mandating curriculum reform). Distinguishing between these levels allows this study to analytically assess whether cultural elements are embedded in the core curriculum or remain peripheral extensions.

Ecological Sustainability and the Environmental Helix

The environmental dimension of the Quintuple Helix positions ecological sustainability as an integral knowledge domain rather than an auxiliary concern. Indigenous ecological knowledge — including community-based conservation practices and sustainable resource management — aligns strongly with this environmental helix.

Studies (Benyei et al., 2020; Druker-Ibáñez & Cáceres-Jensen, 2022) emphasise the value of integrating indigenous ecological knowledge into sustainability education. In theory, such integration should foster contextually grounded environmental awareness and practical application. However, institutionalising ecological knowledge within higher education requires: curriculum mandates, cross-disciplinary integration, formal research agendas, resource allocation. Without these structural supports, ecological sustainability risks remaining an aspirational discourse rather than an operational framework.

From Symbolic Recognition to Structural Institutionalisation

Drawing on these conceptual strands, this study introduces an analytical distinction between symbolic inclusion and structural institutionalisation. Symbolic inclusion refers to rhetorical endorsement, isolated modules, guest lectures, or extracurricular activities that acknowledge IKS without fundamentally altering curriculum design processes or institutional governance. Structural institutionalisation involves formal policies, mandated curriculum components, assessment reforms, stakeholder decision-making authority, and sustained faculty development mechanisms.

The Quintuple Helix Model suggests that genuine knowledge democracy requires systemic integration across academic, civil, environmental, and governance domains. Therefore, this study examines whether IKS integration at the case institution reflects alignment across helices or remains fragmented within particular departments or individuals. By applying this theoretical lens, the research moves beyond documenting examples of integration to analysing the depth, coherence, and institutional embeddedness of IKS in higher education.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to examine the integration of IKS within the curriculum of SAUT. A case study approach was appropriate because the research sought an in-depth understanding of how institutional actors interpret and operationalise IKS within a specific university context (Yin, 2011). Rather than measuring the prevalence of IKS integration, the study aimed to explore the processes, perceptions, and institutional mechanisms shaping curricular practice.

The case was bounded geographically and institutionally to SAUT, a private university located in Mwanza, Tanzania. The Faculty of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences was selected because of its central role in cultural education and its potential alignment with indigenous knowledge domains. The study focused on the 2023–2024 academic year to capture contemporary integration efforts.

Participants and Sampling

The study involved sixteen participants selected through purposive sampling. Participants were chosen based on their direct involvement in curriculum development, teaching, or learning within the faculty. The sample comprised of one faculty dean, three heads of department, nine lecturers and three students. This composition enabled perspectives from both curriculum designers (academic leadership and lecturers) and curriculum recipients (students). Purposive sampling was used to ensure that participants possessed relevant knowledge of curricular processes and IKS-related initiatives.

Although the sample size was relatively small, it was consistent with qualitative case study logic, which prioritises depth of insight over statistical generalisability. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached, with recurring patterns emerging across interviews and focus group discussions.

Data Collection

Data were collected through two primary qualitative methods:

1. Semi-structured interviews with the Dean, Heads of Department, and lecturers
2. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with students

Semi-structured interviews allowed flexibility to probe participants' experiences with knowledge democracy, cultural resilience, ecological sustainability, and stakeholder engagement within the curriculum. Focus groups facilitated collective reflection among students, capturing shared perceptions of how indigenous knowledge is encountered in their learning experience.

Interviews and FGDs were audio-recorded with informed consent. Institutional permission was obtained prior to data collection, and ethical principles of voluntary participation, confidentiality, and anonymity were upheld. Participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Data Analysis

Audio recordings were transcribed electronically using Turboscribe software and manually reviewed for accuracy. Data analysis followed a thematic approach informed by Bryman (2016). The analytical process involved repeated reading of transcripts to ensure immersion in the data, initial coding through highlighting key ideas and assigning descriptive labels and use of both deductive and inductive coding strategies. Deductive codes were derived from constructs within the Quintuple Helix Model, particularly knowledge democracy, cultural resilience, ecological sustainability, and stakeholder involvement. Inductive codes emerged from participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and institutional observations. Codes were then grouped into higher-order themes reflecting patterns across participants. Particular attention was given to identifying tensions, contradictions, and gaps between rhetorical commitment and practical implementation. This interpretive approach allowed the study to move beyond descriptive reporting toward analytical insight regarding institutionalisation processes.

Trustworthiness and Reflexivity

To enhance credibility and trustworthiness, the study adopted strategies outlined by Korstjens and Moser (2017). These included prolonged engagement with participants, triangulation of data sources (administrators, lecturers, students), and member checking during interviews to clarify interpretations. Transferability was supported through detailed contextual description of the institutional setting. Dependability and confirmability were addressed through maintaining an audit trail of research steps and documenting the progression from raw data to themes. As the research was conducted within a single institution, findings are not statistically generalisable. However, the case provides analytical insight into broader dynamics shaping IKS integration in Tanzanian and African higher education contexts.

Findings and Analysis

The analysis revealed a patterned tension between rhetorical endorsement of IKS and their uneven structural institutionalisation within the curriculum. Across the four analytical dimensions—knowledge democracy, cultural resilience, ecological

sustainability, and stakeholder engagement—participants affirmed the importance of IKS integration. However, implementation often remained fragmented, individualised, and inconsistently embedded within formal curriculum mechanisms.

Knowledge Democracy: Individual Initiative in the Absence of Systemic Policy

Participants widely acknowledged the value of recognising diverse knowledge systems within university education. Faculty members emphasised that indigenous knowledge could enhance students' cultural awareness, foster critical thinking, and strengthen the relevance of learning to community realities. Students similarly expressed support for integrating local knowledge in areas such as agriculture, fishing, mining, home economics, and moral education.

However, this recognition was frequently described as lecturer-dependent rather than institutionally mandated. Several participants indicated that integration occurs through individual teaching choices rather than through formalised curriculum policy. Indigenous knowledge is incorporated where lecturers deliberately connect classroom content to community practices, particularly through practicum components such as micro-teaching, environmental outreach, or community engagement activities.

From a knowledge democracy perspective, this reflects epistemic openness but limited structural transformation. The curriculum allows space for indigenous perspectives, yet such inclusion remains discretionary rather than systematised. There was no consistent indication of formal curriculum review processes explicitly embedding IKS across programmes.

Moreover, participants noted that indigenous knowledge varies across Tanzanian regions, suggesting the need for context-sensitive integration. While this awareness reflects epistemic pluralism, it also highlights institutional complexity: without structured mechanisms, local variability may reinforce ad hoc inclusion rather than coordinated reform.

Analytically, knowledge democracy at the institution appears rhetorically affirmed but structurally fragmented. Indigenous knowledge enters the curriculum through pedagogical agency rather than institutional policy, indicating partial alignment with the Quintuple Helix model's call for systemic knowledge co-creation.

Cultural Resilience: Strong Symbolic Presence, Limited Curricular Reconfiguration

Cultural resilience emerged as the most visible dimension of IKS integration. Participants consistently described Tanzania as culturally diverse yet unified, and many affirmed that integrating local languages, traditions, and cultural practices strengthens students' identity and belonging.

Mandatory Kiswahili courses, Tanzanian literature modules, and content addressing ethnic groups, local histories, and cultural values were cited as existing vehicles for cultural transmission. Participants also referenced co-curricular activities—including drama, music, dance, and the celebration of cultural or international heritage days—as reinforcing cultural pride.

Within the analytical distinction proposed earlier, these practices indicate robust symbolic inclusion. Cultural elements are visible, recognised, and valued in institutional life. Students are exposed to cultural knowledge within formal coursework and extracurricular settings, and faculty members express normative commitment to strengthening such integration.

However, the findings suggest that cultural resilience is often implicit rather than explicitly framed as IKS integration. Cultural content appears embedded within humanities and social science disciplines, yet there was limited evidence of institution-wide curriculum restructuring centred explicitly on IKS. Integration occurs within existing courses rather than through formal curricular redesign.

Participants expressed optimism that deeper integration would not be resisted, noting strong African cultural attachment. Yet this confidence coexists with acknowledgement that education systems have historically detached from indigenous epistemologies. This suggests that cultural resilience remains pedagogically supported but structurally under-articulated in curriculum governance processes. Thus, cultural resilience at the institution reflects strong symbolic representation, but limited transformation at the policy and structural level.

Ecological Sustainability: Emerging Practices Without Coordinated Mechanisms

Ecological sustainability presented a more uneven picture. Participants reported that sustainability-related content is integrated within specific programmes, particularly Environmental Studies, Natural Resources Management, Geography, Biology, Engineering, Business, and Law. Courses addressing climate change, biodiversity, renewable energy, environmental law, and green economics demonstrate disciplinary engagement with environmental concerns.

In addition, practical initiatives—such as tree planting campaigns, recycling projects, and environmental outreach through micro-teaching practicum—were described as reinforcing sustainability awareness. Some participants referred to the campus functioning as a “living laboratory,” where environmental practices support both learning and research.

However, significant divergence emerged regarding institutional mechanisms. While some participants described sustainability as integrated through disciplinary approaches and research focus, others stated explicitly that no formal mechanisms exist to ensure systematic integration of ecological sustainability into curriculum planning. One participant observed that activities occur within a “business as usual” framework rather than through structured institutional strategy.

This divergence illustrates institutional fragmentation. The environmental helix of the Quintuple Helix model requires coordinated integration of ecological knowledge across systems. In this case, sustainability appears as a programme-specific strength rather than a university-wide framework. Research on local environmental issues, such as deforestation and water conservation, informs teaching, but this linkage depends on individual or departmental initiative. Therefore, ecological sustainability

reflects a developing but uneven institutionalisation process. Practical engagement is present; policy coherence is limited.

Stakeholder Engagement: Consultation Without Decision Authority

Stakeholder involvement represents a central component of knowledge democracy within the Quintuple Helix framework. At the institution, formal governance structures—including Departmental Boards, Faculty Boards, Senate, and Industrial Advisory Boards—exist to support curriculum deliberation. Participants described the use of surveys, focus groups, and informal consultations to gather diverse perspectives.

Community engagement also occurs indirectly through research and outreach programmes. Local stakeholders contribute knowledge through guest lectures, practicum interactions, and field-based activities. Indigenous knowledge holders occasionally share lived experiences within academic settings.

However, the depth of stakeholder influence was described as uneven. Internal stakeholders, particularly students, reported limited involvement in early stages of curriculum design. Consultation sometimes occurs after core decisions have already been made. Similarly, while external stakeholders such as employers, alumni, and government representatives may be represented in governance structures, their involvement in shaping indigenous knowledge integration appears sporadic.

The findings therefore reveal a distinction between stakeholder presence and stakeholder power. Participation mechanisms exist, yet decision-making authority remains concentrated within academic structures. Community engagement is frequently positioned as complementary to curriculum, rather than integrated into curriculum design itself. Analytically, this suggests partial alignment with the collaborative ideal of the Quintuple Helix model. Engagement practices signal openness, but structural redistribution of curricular authority remains limited.

Cross-Cutting Pattern: Rhetorical Commitment, Fragmented Institutionalisation

Across all four dimensions, a consistent pattern emerges. Participants affirm the importance of integrating IKS. Cultural pride, ecological awareness, and community engagement are valued. Practical examples of inclusion exist within courses, research projects, and co-curricular activities.

Yet integration often depends on individual lecturer initiative, department-specific programmes, informal consultation and extracurricular reinforcement. Evidence of comprehensive institutional policy mandating systematic IKS integration across the university was limited. Formal mechanisms appear unevenly developed, and participants expressed differing levels of awareness regarding existing strategies.

The case therefore illustrates not absence of integration, but incomplete institutionalisation. Indigenous knowledge is present, yet not uniformly embedded across governance, curriculum structure, and assessment systems. This fragmentation underscores the distinction between symbolic inclusion and structural transformation. While IKS are increasingly visible and valued, their incorporation remains selectively embedded rather than fully systematised within university curriculum architecture.

Discussion

This study set out to examine how IKS are integrated within the curriculum of a Tanzanian university and whether such integration reflects structural institutionalisation or symbolic inclusion. The findings reveal neither absence nor comprehensive transformation, but rather a patterned condition of fragmented institutionalisation. While participants consistently affirmed the value of indigenous knowledge and provided multiple examples of its presence, integration remains uneven, largely dependent on individual academic agency rather than embedded institutional policy.

These findings resonate with broader continental debates on the decolonisation of African higher education. Across the continent, calls to re-centre indigenous epistemologies have intensified, particularly in contexts such as South Africa, where curriculum reform has been framed as epistemic justice and knowledge redress (Kaya & Seleti, 2013; Mekoa, 2023). Yet scholars have cautioned that rhetorical endorsement of decolonisation does not automatically translate into structural transformation. The present case study provides empirical evidence of this distinction.

From Epistemic Recognition to Institutional Reform

African higher education institutions increasingly recognise the importance of diversifying epistemological foundations. The strong normative support expressed by participants aligns with continental scholarship arguing that IKS enhances cultural identity, social cohesion, and context-sensitive development. Cultural resilience, as reflected in mandatory Kiswahili courses and culturally grounded humanities curricula, demonstrates that indigenous knowledge is not entirely marginalised within the institution.

However, the study shows that epistemic recognition does not necessarily disrupt underlying governance structures. Cultural elements are embedded primarily within specific disciplines, particularly humanities and social sciences, rather than reorganising curriculum architecture across faculties. This pattern reflects what some scholars describe as additive reform—incorporating indigenous content into existing frameworks—rather than transformative restructuring.

The distinction matters. Decolonisation debates emphasise not only what is taught, but who determines curriculum legitimacy and how knowledge hierarchies are negotiated. In the case examined here, decision-making authority over curriculum remains concentrated within traditional academic governance structures. Stakeholder consultation occurs, yet authority over institutional direction is not substantively redistributed. This suggests that integration remains contained within established epistemic boundaries.

Knowledge Democracy and the Limits of Lecturer-Dependent Integration

The Quintuple Helix Model foregrounds knowledge democracy as inclusive, multi-actor knowledge production. The findings demonstrate partial movement toward this ideal. Indigenous knowledge appears in classroom discussions, practicum

experiences, environmental outreach, and community-informed examples. Yet these initiatives often emerge from individual lecturers who intentionally integrate local knowledge into teaching.

Such lecturer-dependent integration presents both strength and vulnerability. On the one hand, it reflects epistemic openness and pedagogical commitment. On the other, it signals the absence of formalised institutional mechanisms to guarantee continuity. When integration depends on individual disposition rather than structural mandate, sustainability becomes uncertain.

This dynamic echoes broader African debates in which IKS integration is championed but inconsistently operationalised. Without explicit curriculum policy frameworks, faculty development strategies, or assessment reforms, inclusion remains uneven. The study therefore contributes to decolonisation discourse by empirically illustrating how epistemic pluralism can coexist with structural inertia.

Ecological Sustainability and the Environmental Turn in African Higher Education

The environmental dimension of the Quintuple Helix provides a critical lens for understanding how indigenous ecological knowledge intersects with sustainability education. Across Africa, climate change, land degradation, and biodiversity loss have intensified calls to revalorise community-based ecological knowledge systems.

In the case examined, ecological sustainability is visible through programme-specific courses and campus-based initiatives. Disciplines such as Environmental Studies and Natural Resources Management demonstrate structured engagement with sustainability themes. However, participants' divergent perceptions regarding institutional mechanisms indicate fragmentation. Some described coordinated sustainability practices; others perceived an absence of formal policy alignment.

This mirrors continental challenges where sustainability rhetoric is strong, but institutional coordination varies widely. Indigenous ecological knowledge is recognised as valuable for environmental management, yet often remains embedded within particular programmes rather than shaping university-wide curriculum frameworks. The environmental helix thus appears activated but not fully integrated across institutional systems.

Symbolic Inclusion and the Politics of Curriculum

A central insight emerging from this study is the analytical distinction between symbolic inclusion and structural institutionalisation. Symbolic inclusion is evident through recognition of indigenous languages and cultural practices, inclusion of local examples in teaching, celebration of cultural heritage events and community outreach and practicum engagement. These practices reflect institutional openness and alignment with cultural identity. However, structural institutionalisation would require formal curriculum redesign, mandated integration guidelines, institutional policy alignment, and redistributive participation mechanisms.

The case suggests that universities may occupy an intermediate position: neither rejecting indigenous epistemologies nor fully reorganising institutional systems around them. This “middle ground” complicates simplistic binaries of colonial

versus decolonised curricula. Instead, it reveals gradual, negotiated processes shaped by institutional constraints, disciplinary traditions, and governance hierarchies. By grounding this distinction empirically in a Tanzanian context, the study extends continental debates beyond highly publicised reform movements. It demonstrates that the challenges of decolonisation are not confined to protest-driven contexts but are embedded in everyday curriculum governance processes across African higher education.

Implications for Tanzanian Higher Education

Tanzania's educational history, including the philosophy of self-reliance advanced during the post-independence era under Julius Nyerere, provides a historical foundation for integrating indigenous knowledge into formal education. The current findings suggest that elements of this legacy remain present, particularly in cultural and community-oriented pedagogies.

However, the study also reveals the need for clearer institutional frameworks to move beyond discretionary inclusion. Policy articulation, faculty development, and systematic curriculum review processes could enhance coherence. Without such mechanisms, integration risks remaining uneven and vulnerable to institutional turnover or shifting priorities.

The Tanzanian case thus contributes to African higher education scholarship by demonstrating that decolonisation is not simply a matter of ideological endorsement but of institutional design. Curriculum transformation requires alignment across governance, pedagogy, research, and community engagement systems.

Theoretical Contribution

Theoretically, the study refines the application of the Quintuple Helix Model to curriculum reform debates. While the model conceptualises systemic knowledge co-production, empirical application reveals that alignment across helices is neither automatic nor uniform. Universities may activate certain helices—particularly cultural and environmental—while leaving governance and decision-making structures comparatively unchanged.

By introducing the analytical distinction between symbolic inclusion and structural institutionalisation, this study offers a conceptual tool for evaluating the depth of IKS integration. This distinction moves the debate beyond whether indigenous knowledge is present to how it is embedded and sustained within institutional architecture.

Conclusion

This study examined how IKS are integrated within the curriculum of SAUT and whether such integration reflects structural institutionalisation or symbolic recognition. Guided by the Quintuple Helix Model, the research analysed four dimensions of integration—knowledge democracy, cultural resilience, ecological sustainability, and stakeholder involvement.

The findings demonstrate that IKS are neither absent nor fully institutionalised. Rather, integration is characterised by a pattern of rhetorical affirmation

accompanied by uneven structural embedding. Cultural content is visible and valued, ecological sustainability is present within certain disciplines, and community engagement mechanisms exist. However, integration frequently depends on individual lecturer initiative, department-level practices, and informal consultation rather than comprehensive curriculum policy mandates.

This distinction between symbolic inclusion and structural institutionalisation constitutes the central analytical contribution of the study. Symbolic inclusion reflects openness to indigenous epistemologies and cultural identity affirmation. Structural institutionalisation, however, requires formalised curriculum redesign, policy alignment, systematic stakeholder participation, and sustained governance support. The case illustrates that endorsement of decolonisation principles does not automatically translate into institutional transformation.

By empirically examining these dynamics within a Tanzanian university context, the study contributes to broader continental debates on decolonising African higher education. It demonstrates that curriculum reform is a negotiated, incremental process shaped by governance structures, disciplinary traditions, and institutional capacity. Decolonisation, therefore, should be understood not as a binary shift but as a continuum of institutional alignment across knowledge, culture, environment, and governance systems.

The findings also have practical implications. For universities seeking deeper integration of IKS, three interrelated shifts appear necessary. First, formal policy articulation that explicitly embeds IKS within curriculum review frameworks. Second, institutional mechanisms ensuring that community stakeholders participate meaningfully in curriculum design processes. And third, cross-disciplinary integration strategies linking cultural and ecological knowledge beyond individual programmes. Without such systemic alignment, integration risks remaining discretionary and fragmented.

This study is limited by its focus on a single institution and faculty, which constrains statistical generalisation. However, the case provides analytical insight applicable to similar higher education contexts in Tanzania and across Africa. Future research could adopt comparative multi-institutional designs to examine variation in institutionalisation processes, or longitudinal studies to assess how rhetorical commitments evolve into structural reforms over time.

In conclusion, the integration of IKS in African higher education is not simply a question of curricular presence but of institutional architecture. The challenge facing universities is not whether to recognise indigenous knowledge, but how to embed it sustainably within governance, pedagogy, and knowledge production systems. The movement from symbolic inclusion to structural institutionalisation remains the critical frontier of decolonising curriculum reform.

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Research Article

Institutional commitment vs. capacity: Comprehensive internationalisation practices at Istanbul Medeniyet University

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how a newly established Turkish public university, İstanbul Medeniyet University (IMU), interprets and implements internationalisation strategies in alignment with national policy and global trends. Anchored in the framework of comprehensive internationalisation (CI) and informed by internationalisation at home (IaH), the study employs a qualitative case study design. Data were collected through institutional self-assessment documents, a validated comprehensive internationalisation rubric, and semi-structured interviews with 14 senior academic leaders. Findings reveal a strong strategic commitment at the institutional level but limited operational coherence, particularly in curriculum integration, faculty engagement, and support systems for student mobility. The study contributes a context-sensitive model of phased internationalisation for emerging higher education institutions. It offers insights for both policymakers and university leaders navigating the complexities of aligning ambition with institutional capacity in the Global South.

KEYWORDS

Comprehensive internationalisation, higher education, Türkiye, institutional capacity, academic leadership, İstanbul Medeniyet University.

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Introduction

The internationalisation of higher education has emerged as a core strategic objective for universities worldwide, aiming to enhance academic quality, foster intercultural competencies, and increase global competitiveness (Knight, 2004; de Wit & Deca, 2020). While global trends have broadly institutionalised internationalisation as a normative practice, its conceptualisation and implementation remain context-dependent—shaped by national policy priorities, institutional capacities, and regional dynamics (IAU, 2019; Altbach & Knight, 2007).

In the Global North, models of internationalisation often emphasise revenue generation through international student recruitment and global branding (Marinoni & Bartolomé Pina Cardona, 2024). In contrast, many countries in the Global South pursue hybrid approaches, using internationalisation to support national development agendas, improve academic capacity, and promote soft power diplomacy (Kapfudzaruwa, 2024; Eriçok & Arastaman, 2022). These emerging models are especially prominent in regions such as Southeast Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, where higher education systems are rapidly expanding and diversifying.

Türkiye represents a compelling case of a non-Western country actively shaping its internationalisation agenda. Over the past two decades, its higher education system has undergone significant expansion, with over 200 new universities established and international student numbers increasing sixfold—from 50,000 in 2013 to over 300,000 in 2023 (CoHE, 2024; Lewis & Lüküslü, 2024). National policies such as the Higher Education Internationalisation Strategy Document 2018–2022 have positioned Türkiye as a regional education hub, emphasizing institutional visibility, student mobility, and global partnerships (CoHE, 2017). However, despite this policy momentum, there is growing concern that institutional practices have not kept pace with national ambitions (Şenay et al., 2020; Bulut-Şahin, 2023).

Existing literature on Türkiye's higher education internationalisation has predominantly focused on macro-level policies or elite institutions (e.g., METU, Boğaziçi), overlooking how newly established public universities interpret and operationalise internationalisation (Çalışkan & Büyükgöze, 2025; Tasçı et al., 2022). These institutions—often younger, less resourced, and more dependent on state support—face unique challenges and opportunities. Understanding how they navigate the gap between national strategies and local capacities remains an underexplored area of research, particularly given the country's highly centralised higher education governance (Kondakçı, 2010).

This study addresses that gap by examining the internationalisation strategies of Istanbul Medeniyet University (IMU), a public institution founded in 2010 in Türkiye's largest and most cosmopolitan city. IMU is strategically located in Istanbul, employs a globally trained faculty, and has embedded internationalisation into its institutional vision. As such, it offers a relevant case to explore how a mid-sized, state-funded university in an emerging system attempts to translate policy-level directives into actionable institutional practice.

Drawing on a mixed-methods case study design—including document analysis, semi-structured interviews with senior academic leaders, and a validated rubric-based self-assessment—this research provides a multidimensional analysis of IMU’s internationalisation trajectory. The study is guided by three interrelated research questions:

1. What are the main internationalisation strategies implemented at IMU?
2. How are internationalisation efforts operationalised across academic, administrative, and policy domains?
3. To what extent are IMU’s strategies aligned with Türkiye’s national vision and global higher education trends?

By addressing these questions, the study contributes to the growing body of research on internationalisation in non-Western and emerging higher education systems. It offers empirical insights into how institutional actors in newly established universities conceptualise and enact internationalisation, and what tensions arise between ambition and capacity. The findings aim to inform both institutional strategy and national policy refinement, particularly for countries navigating the complexities of aligning global competitiveness with regional priorities and resource constraints.

Conceptualising the Internationalisation of Higher Education

Internationalisation of higher education is broadly defined as “the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of higher education” (Knight, 2004, p. 11). It is no longer limited to cross-border mobility or global rankings; rather, it has evolved into a comprehensive, strategic imperative integrated across teaching, research, governance, and community engagement (Hudzik, 2011; Marinoni & Bartolomé Pina Cardona, 2024).

Key rationales for internationalisation vary by region and institution, including academic quality enhancement, institutional prestige, revenue generation, graduate employability, and geopolitical diplomacy (Altbach & Knight, 2007; de Wit, 2002). In high-income countries, economic rationales—especially international student recruitment—are often dominant (Brandenburg, 2020). In contrast, developing systems tend to frame internationalisation as a means of capacity building, academic reform, and international visibility (Kapfudzaruwa, 2024; Gazzoni et al., 2025).

Over time, several operational models have emerged. These include mobility-driven approaches (e.g., student and staff exchange), curriculum internationalisation, transnational education, joint degrees, international research networks, and increasingly, virtual internationalisation through collaborative online learning (Beelen & Jones, 2015; O’Dowd, 2021).

Among the most influential frameworks is CI, which advocates an institution-wide strategy rather than fragmented initiatives. As Hudzik (2011) argues, CI requires leadership commitment, strategic planning, resource allocation, and engagement across all university functions. Another widely adopted concept is Internationalisation at Home (IaH), which emphasises that all students—regardless

of mobility opportunities—should gain intercultural and global competencies within the domestic learning environment (Beelen & Jones, 2015). These models are complementary and increasingly integrated into global benchmarks for institutional quality and relevance (Knight, 2016; Leask, 2015).

Global Trends and Shifts in Internationalisation Practice

Several global shifts have reshaped IHE. The rapid growth of international student numbers—from 2 million in 2000 to over 6.4 million in 2020—demonstrates increasing global demand (UNESCO, 2025). However, student mobility alone now constitutes only one pillar of IHE strategies. Post-pandemic conditions have reinforced the relevance of digital tools, such as Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), virtual exchanges, and internationalisation at a distance (Huang et al., 2022; Lim, 2024).

Additionally, transnational education (TNE) has matured beyond offshore campuses to include joint universities, dual-degree programs, and franchised curricula (McBurnie & Ziguras, 2006; Knight, 2016). These models allow universities to extend global reach without physical relocation, although issues of quality assurance, regulatory compliance, and equitable access persist.

Critiques of internationalisation have also become more pronounced. Scholars have cautioned against market-driven, neoliberal forms of internationalisation that commodify education and reinforce global inequalities (Stein, 2021; de Wit & Jones, 2022). In response, the literature increasingly calls for ethical, inclusive, and decolonial approaches to IHE—emphasising cultural plurality, reciprocity, and social justice (Stein & de Andreotti, 2016; Cassol-Silva et al., 2023). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have also been positioned as a guiding framework for socially responsible internationalisation (Lim, 2024).

In summary, the global discourse has moved from transactional and prestige-driven models toward inclusive, digitally mediated, and socially accountable approaches—though implementation remains uneven.

Türkiye's Strategic Position in the Global Internationalisation Landscape

Türkiye has rapidly transformed from a sending to a receiving country in global student mobility. With over 300,000 international students as of 2023, it ranks among the top 10 host countries globally (CoHE, 2024). This growth has been driven by national policy initiatives, notably the Higher Education Internationalisation Strategy Document 2018–2022 (CoHE, 2017), Türkiye Scholarships, and Study in Türkiye campaigns. Key objectives include increasing international student diversity, fostering academic collaboration, and enhancing the global standing of Turkish higher education (Eriçok & Arastaman, 2022).

Turkish internationalisation strategies combine elements of European alignment (via Erasmus+, Bologna Process), political soft power in the Muslim world, and developmental diplomacy through scholarships and bilateral agreements (Öz, 2021; Lewis & Lüküslü, 2024). These efforts position Türkiye within a hybrid model—

neither purely market-driven nor purely humanitarian, but balancing cultural outreach, regional leadership, and academic advancement.

Nonetheless, structural challenges persist. Turkish-medium instruction dominates in most public universities, limiting appeal for non-Turkish-speaking students. Bureaucratic complexity, uneven digital readiness, and reliance on individual initiative often hinder institutional follow-through (Kondakçı, 2010; Bulut-Şahin, 2023). Moreover, literature points to a gap between national-level policy intentions and institutional-level implementation, especially outside elite institutions (Şenay et al., 2020; Çalışkan & Büyükgöze, 2025). Despite Türkiye's robust strategic framework, the diffusion of internationalisation practices remains uneven, raising questions about institutional capacity, leadership, and cultural readiness.

Internationalisation in Young vs. Established Turkish Universities

Türkiye's higher education landscape is diverse, comprising legacy institutions like Istanbul University and newly established universities created after 2000. Research reveals that established universities benefit from historical prestige, strong international alumni networks, and longstanding Erasmus+ participation (Tasçı et al., 2022). Institutions such as METU, Boğaziçi, and Bilkent have long offered English-medium instruction, global research collaborations, and competitive international branding.

In contrast, younger public universities, especially those established in the 2010 expansion wave, often approach internationalisation as a means to gain legitimacy, attract recognition, and accelerate institutional development. These institutions may be more flexible, entrepreneurial, and willing to innovate—e.g., launching English-language programs or seeking bilateral agreements. However, they also face significant barriers: limited financial and human resources, underdeveloped international offices, fewer global connections, and high dependence on state policy and funding mechanisms (Eriçok & Arastaman, 2022; Bulut-Şahin, 2023).

Studies suggest that while many young universities adopt ambitious internationalisation strategies in their vision statements, actual implementation often relies on individual champions and lacks coordinated policy execution (Gazzoni et al., 2025). This misalignment between institutional rhetoric and operational reality points to a critical bottleneck in Türkiye's broader internationalisation agenda. Yet, these universities also present untapped potential. Located in dynamic urban regions or strategically important border zones, they may serve as key nodes in Türkiye's higher education diplomacy—if adequately supported with strategic investments, leadership development, and flexible policy frameworks (Lewis & Lüküslü, 2024; Öz, 2021).

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts an exploratory qualitative case study design to investigate how internationalisation strategies are conceptualised and operationalised at a young public university in Türkiye. A case study approach is particularly suitable for examining complex, institution-specific processes such as internationalisation,

where context, policy, and stakeholder dynamics intersect (Yin, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The exploratory orientation reflects the need to generate grounded insights in an under-researched area: the practices of mid-sized, recently established Turkish universities in aligning with national and global internationalisation agendas. By integrating document analysis, a validated institutional assessment rubric, and semi-structured interviews, the study triangulates multiple data sources to enhance analytical depth and reliability. This multi-method design enables both descriptive mapping and interpretive understanding of institutional strategies and challenges.

Case Selection

IMU was purposefully selected as a representative case of a young, public, research-oriented university. Founded in 2010, IMU is located in Istanbul—a key academic, cultural, and geopolitical hub—and has explicitly positioned internationalisation as a pillar of its institutional strategy. With a growing cohort of international students, an internationally trained faculty, and involvement in national and European mobility programs, IMU offers an illustrative case for examining how emerging institutions navigate internationalisation in practice. The selection was guided by theoretical and practical relevance rather than generalisability. As Stake and Visse (1995) notes, the goal of case studies in education is to provide rich, context-sensitive understanding that informs broader conceptual and policy debates.

Study Group

The study involved 14 senior academic leaders at IMU, including six deans, three department heads, three academic division chairs, and two senior faculty members. All participants held professorial rank and were selected through purposive sampling based on their active involvement in internationalisation-related roles or decision-making. Participants represented nine faculties, offering diverse institutional perspectives. Demographically, the sample included 9 males and 5 females, ranging in age from early 40s to mid-60s. Their tenure at IMU varied from 2 to over 11 years, ensuring a mix of founding-era and more recent academic leaders. Pseudonyms (P1–P14) were assigned to protect confidentiality.

Data Collection Tools and Procedure

Three primary data sources were employed. The Comprehensive Internationalisation Rubric (Mace & Pearl, 2021) assesses institutional maturity across six core domains: (1) institutional commitment, (2) administrative leadership, (3) curriculum and learning outcomes, (4) faculty policies, (5) student mobility and (6) partnerships and collaboration. Each domain contains multiple indicators rated on a three-level developmental scale (L1: Emerging, L2: Capacity-Building, L3: Sustained Practice). The rubric served both as a structured self-assessment and as a data collection tool enabling cross-case comparison of perceptions and institutional progress. Following rubric completion, participants were invited to engage in 30–45 minute interviews conducted in Turkish. Interviews were guided by a protocol exploring: (1) perceptions of imu's internationalisation strategies, (2) key achievements and persistent challenges, (3) institutional culture, leadership, and coordination, (4) faculty readiness, capacity, and support structures.

Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and translated into English for analysis. Member checking was used with a subset of participants to ensure accuracy of interpretation. Lastly, document analysis was employed to enrich the data and to support triangulation in the overall analysis. Institutional self-evaluation reports (2020–2024), strategic plans, Erasmus+ participation statistics, and faculty-level performance reports were reviewed to contextualise and triangulate findings. Particular attention was given to sections related to mobility, curriculum design, faculty recruitment, and international cooperation.

Table 1.
Demographic and Professional Profiles of Rubric Respondents and Interview Participants

Faculty	Gender	Age	Academic Title	Institutional Role	Years of Service at IMU	Code of the Participants
Law	Male	55	Professor	Dean	3 years	P1
Engineering and Natural Sciences	Female	43	Professor	Dean	3 years	P2
Dentistry	Female	42	Professor	Dean	3 years	P3
Educational Sciences	Male	41	Professor	Dean	4 years	P4
Dentistry	Female	42	Professor	Dean	3 years	P5
Health Sciences	Female	54	Professor	Dean	3 years	P6
Tourism	Male	58	Professor	Department Chair	Over 11 years	P7
Islamic Studies	Male	55	Professor	Department Chair	2 years	P8
Health Sciences	Female	50	Professor	Department Chair	6–10 years	P9
Dentistry	Male	42	Professor	Head of Division	4 years	P10
Engineering and Natural Sciences	Male	47	Professor	Academic Staff	Over 11 years	P11
Art, Design and Architecture	Male	54	Professor	Academic Staff	Over 11 years	P12
Medicine	Male	65	Professor	Head of Division	6–10 years	P13
Faculty of Political Science	Male	44	Professor	Head of Division	6–10 years	P14

Data Analysis

Rubric data were compiled and analysed descriptively (means, standard deviations) to map institutional self-assessment across domains. Comparative tables were created to highlight discrepancies between formal documents and stakeholder perceptions. Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), supported by both deductive codes (drawn from the rubric domains) and inductive themes (emerging from interview narratives). The document analysis informed interpretation by illustrating strategic alignment, performance trends, and gaps in implementation.

Research Credibility and Trustworthiness

Multiple strategies were employed to enhance the study's trustworthiness. Triangulation is the most valuable one. Combining rubric data, interviews, and

institutional documents allowed cross-validation of findings and reduced reliance on any single data source. While findings are context-specific, the methodology enables conceptual generalisability and transferability to similar institutions in Türkiye or comparable higher education systems.

Ethical Considerations

The study received ethical approval from the IMU Social and Humanities Ethics Board. All participants provided informed consent and were assured of anonymity and voluntary participation. Data were securely stored and pseudonymised in reporting.

Findings

This section presents an integrated analysis of IMU internationalisation practices, based on the triangulated data from institutional self-assessment reports (2020–2024), Mace and Pearl’s (2021) comprehensive internationalization rubric, and in-depth interviews with 14 senior academic leaders. Rather than reporting rubric dimensions in isolation, the findings are organised into four thematic categories that best capture institutional strengths, constraints, and perceived priorities: (1) strategic commitment vs. operational gaps, (2) curriculum and language policy as partial drivers, (3) faculty engagement and disconnected incentives and (4) student mobility and fragile support ecosystems. The aggregated results of the rubric self-assessment, presented in Table 1, show that while IMU scores relatively high in vision alignment and strategic planning, it remains underdeveloped in areas such as funding, operational leadership, and faculty development.

Theme 1: Strategic Commitment vs. Operational Gaps

IMU demonstrates a high-level commitment to internationalisation through its vision statements, strategic documents, and structural investments. The university’s strategic plan identifies internationalisation as a core goal, reinforced by the creation of coordination offices (e.g., the International Office and the International Performance Development Coordination Unit) and the adoption of institutional policies aligned with the Bologna Process and Erasmus+ principles. In the rubric assessment, “Vision and Mission Alignment” received the highest average score ($M = 3.14$), followed by the “Strategic Plan” component ($M = 2.71$). However, participants expressed significant concerns about the gap between formal articulation and institutional readiness. The lowest scores were given to “Funding Allocation” ($M = 1.29$) and the existence of a dedicated “Internationalisation Task Force” ($M = 1.43$), suggesting that while the rhetoric is strong, enabling structures are fragile. Multiple interviewees reported the absence of horizontal coordination across faculties. P6 states: “Our university has vision documents about internationalisation, but what’s lacking is a culture of action. There’s an overreliance on individuals rather than system-wide planning.” Internationalisation initiatives were often described as fragmented, depending on unit-level leadership rather than being centrally directed and monitored. Annual self-evaluation reports consistently set targets (e.g., 20% mobility growth per year) but lacked documented follow-through or systematised progress reviews.

Moreover, strategic targets often focused on quantitative metrics (e.g., number of bilateral agreements, Erasmus+ participation) rather than qualitative outcomes, such as integration of international students or learning outcome alignment. P12 highlights the position: “Yes, there are many signed protocols. But many of them remain dormant. They look good in reports, but they are not generating actual academic exchange.” This reveals a disconnect between policy ambition and implementation capacity, which echoes broader critiques of “symbolic internationalisation” in resource-constrained HEIs (Bulut-Şahin, 2023).

Table 1.

Assessment Scores of Respondents Across Six Domains of Comprehensive Internationalisation

Pillars and Dimensions	N	Mean	SD	Rank
Pillar 1: Articulated Institutional Commitment	14	2,11	1,26	3
TM01: Vision/Mission Statement	14	3,14	1,23	1
TM02: Institution Strategic Plan	14	2,71	1,33	2
TM03: Internationalization Committee or Task Force	14	1,43	0,85	9
TM04: Funding Allocation	14	1,29	0,73	10
TM05: Formal Assessment Mechanisms	14	2,00	1,04	5
Pillar 2: Administrative Leadership Structure and Staffing	14	1,90	1,01	5
TM06: Institutional Leadership	14	2,00	1,04	5
TM07: Reporting Structures	14	1,71	0,99	7
TM08: Staff and Office Configurations	14	2,00	1,04	5
Pillar 3: Curriculum, Co-curriculum, and Learning Outcomes	14	2,71	1,11	1
TM09: General Education and Language Requirements	14	3,14	0,95	1
TM10: Co-curricular Activities and Programs	14	2,29	1,27	4
TM11: Specific Student Learning Outcomes	14	2,71	1,07	2
Pillar 4: Faculty Policies and Practices	14	2,24	1,08	2
TM12: Hiring Guidelines	14	2,43	0,94	3
TM13: Tenure and Promotion Policies	14	2,43	1,22	3
TM14: Faculty Development Opportunities	14	1,86	1,03	6
Pillar 5: Student Mobility	14	2,10	1,08	4
TM15: Education (Study) Abroad Programs	14	2,71	1,27	2
TM16: International Student Recruitment	14	2,00	1,04	5
TM17: International Student Support	14	1,57	0,94	8
Pillar 6: Collaboration and Partnerships	14	1,43	0,83	6
TM18: Institutional Partnerships	14	1,57	0,94	8
TM19: Joint Degree and Dual/Double Degree Programs	14	1,43	0,85	9
TM20: Institutional Presence Abroad	14	1,29	0,73	10
Overall	14	2,04	1,15	

Theme 2: Curriculum and Language Policy as Partial Drivers

Curriculum internationalisation emerged as the strongest-performing rubric pillar overall ($M = 2.71$), particularly regarding language requirements and general education standards ($M = 3.14$). IMU currently offers 10 undergraduate programs in English or Spanish, and faculty members have initiated curriculum revisions to include global competencies and SDG-aligned outcomes. The presence of a TÖMER language centre supports Turkish language instruction for international students. However, the qualitative data reveal a nuanced picture. While English-medium instruction (EMI) was praised as a strategic tool for visibility and mobility, multiple participants described inconsistencies in implementation, staff capacity, and student preparedness.

Moreover, curriculum-level internationalisation was often interpreted narrowly—as the language of instruction, rather than pedagogical design, international readings, or intercultural learning outcomes (Leask, 2015). Faculty members noted that few programs include internationally benchmarked syllabi or globally relevant course content. “There is enthusiasm for English programs, but we struggle with sustainability. Some departments don’t have enough instructors fluent in English. Others find it hard to recruit students” (P9). “Internationalisation of the curriculum is not just about offering courses in English. We need more interdisciplinary, comparative, and critical perspectives” (P2).

Co-curricular programming (e.g., international weeks, guest lectures) was described as occasional rather than systematic. Although rubric scores for co-curricular activities were moderate ($M = 2.29$), most activities appeared to be event-based rather than integrated into broader educational strategies. A dean explains: “There is no mechanism to track or evaluate how students gain global competencies unless they study abroad. We are missing the ‘at-home’ side” (P5). This indicates partial adoption of Internationalisation at Home (IaH), with language reform leading, but curriculum reform lagging.

Theme 3: Faculty Engagement and Disconnected Incentives

Faculty-related internationalisation policies were rated as moderately developed in the rubric ($M = 2.24$). Hiring and promotion practices ($M = 2.43$) showed some sensitivity to international publication and mobility experience. However, opportunities for faculty development, such as training, exchange, or collaborative research, received weaker evaluations ($M = 1.86$). The interviews suggest a disconnect between institutional goals and faculty incentives. Several academic leaders reported that while international output is encouraged rhetorically, it is not adequately rewarded or supported in performance appraisals: “We are told to internationalise, but the workload policies, travel approvals, or publication incentives don’t really align with that objective” (P7).

Moreover, the institutional capacity to support visiting scholars, sabbaticals, or externally funded research is limited. Faculty who engage in international activities often do so through personal networks or individual initiative, not institutional facilitation. According to a faculty member, “Faculty mobility depends on who you know, or if you studied abroad. There’s no structured roadmap or mentorship” (P11).

Notably, some participants voiced frustration about a lack of alignment between hiring policies and program needs—particularly in English-medium departments. While young faculty with international degrees bring valuable networks and ideas, they often lack administrative support and clarity about how to advance internationalisation goals. This reflects a common challenge in emerging HEIs. The tension between decentralised academic innovation and centralised bureaucratic inertia (Hudzik, 2011; Çalışkan & Büyükgöze, 2025).

3.4. Theme 4: Student Mobility and Fragile Support Ecosystems

Student mobility was the most publicly promoted aspect of internationalisation at IMU, and the area most visible in institutional documents. Erasmus+ participation increased from 13 agreements in 2020 to over 60 by 2024. The university reported a consistent rise in both outbound and inbound mobility, with international students comprising approximately 3% of the student body. Rubric scores for outbound mobility ($M = 2.71$) were higher than for inbound recruitment ($M = 2.00$) and international student support ($M = 1.57$). Interviews confirmed these disparities: “We are good at sending students abroad through Erasmus. But supporting incoming students is much harder. There are issues with dormitories, course registration, and integration” (P8). Participants described a fragile support ecosystem, where much of the responsibility for international students falls on overburdened academic advisors or office staff. There is no centralised induction program, intercultural mentoring, or sustained language support beyond TÖMER.

Additionally, the administrative infrastructure—such as credit transfer systems, bilingual websites, and course mapping—was often cited as a barrier to effective mobility: “When students return from mobility, their transcripts sometimes don’t match our systems. This creates friction and discourages others from applying” (P10). This gap reflects broader patterns identified in the literature: that many HEIs in emerging systems excel at mobility as quantity, but lack systems for quality, inclusion, and sustainability (Beelen & Jones, 2015; Stein, 2021).

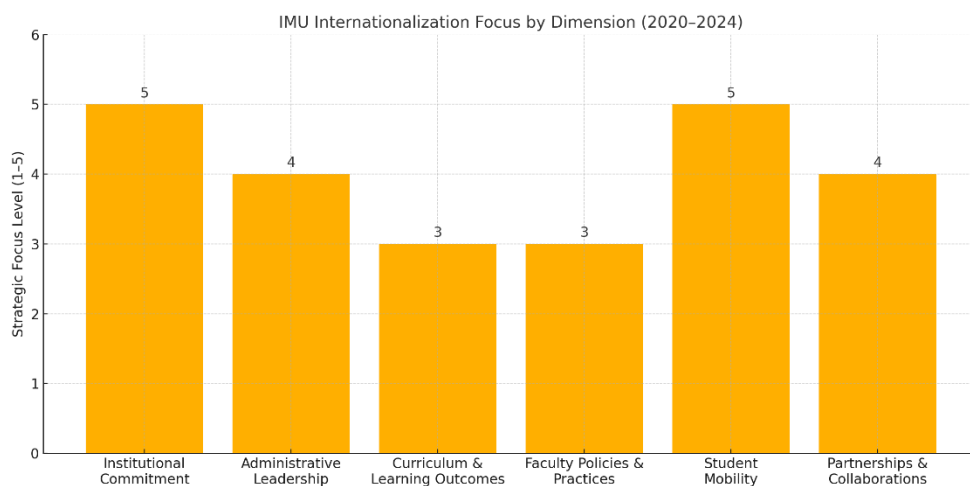


Figure 1. *IMU Internationalization Focus by Dimension in terms of IMU Institutional Self-Evaluation Reports (2020–2024).*

As visualised in Figure 1, participant perspectives clustered into three distinct groups—those expressing high institutional readiness, those indicating moderate progress, and those highlighting persistent structural constraints. IMU’s internationalisation journey can be characterised as strategically committed but operationally uneven. High-level vision and structural investments (e.g., EMI programs, Erasmus+ expansion) have created a promising foundation. However, challenges remain in cross-unit coordination, faculty engagement, curriculum integration, and student support. The four emergent themes underscore the misalignment between policy intent and institutional capacity, echoing critiques of top-down internationalisation in comparable systems (Bulut-Şahin, 2023; Gazzoni et al., 2025). Nonetheless, the study also reveals pockets of innovation and high readiness, particularly in units led by internationally trained faculty or proactive deans.

Discussion

This study set out to examine how a newly established public university in Türkiye—IMU—conceptualises and operationalises internationalisation in light of national policy expectations and global higher education trends. Through a triangulated qualitative approach involving self-assessment rubrics, document analysis, and interviews with senior academic leaders, the study revealed important insights about institutional capacity, leadership, and cultural dynamics in emerging higher education systems. This discussion interprets the findings through a theoretical lens, compares IMU with international literature, and identifies implications for both policy and institutional strategy.

Rhetorical commitment vs. organisational alignment

A central theme emerging from the study is the disconnect between strategic intent and institutional readiness, a gap frequently reported in non-Western and Global South institutions (Bulut-Şahin, 2023; Çalışkan & Büyükgöze, 2025). While IMU has embedded internationalisation in its mission and policy frameworks—reflected in its strategic plan, the establishment of international offices, and the introduction of EMI programs—this rhetorical commitment is not fully matched by internal governance, resourcing, or faculty incentives. In Mace and Pearl’s (2021) rubric, indicators such as “vision/mission” and “strategic plan” scored relatively high, but others tied to implementation—like “funding allocation,” “partnership management,” and “faculty development”—remained underdeveloped. This reinforces a broader critique of “surface-level” or “symbolic” internationalisation (Knight, 2011), in which institutions conform to external policy pressures or global visibility expectations without transformative engagement. True CI demands integration across academic functions, coordinated leadership, and cultural shift (Hudzik, 2011)—conditions that are difficult to achieve in resource-constrained, bureaucratically rigid institutions like IMU. The IMU case thus affirms that CI cannot be achieved merely through structural reforms or document-based compliance. Rather, it must be approached as a long-term process of internal alignment, guided by inclusive leadership and faculty buy-in.

IMU and the hybrid model of internationalisation in the global south:

IMU's trajectory mirrors a hybrid model of internationalisation common in the Global South, blending global aspirations with domestic constraints (Kapfudzaruwa, 2024; Stein, 2021). Its strategies combine compliance with European frameworks (e.g., Erasmus+, Bologna Process), regional soft power outreach through Türkiye Scholarships, and institutional aspirations for global recognition through rankings and EMI offerings. This mirrors similar dynamics in emerging systems such as Malaysia, Colombia, or Uganda, where internationalisation serves multiple, sometimes competing purposes—quality improvement, national diplomacy, economic development—but is constrained by limited autonomy and resources (Gazzoni et al., 2025; de Wit et al., 2015). What distinguishes IMU is that, as a young university, it lacks the legacy, prestige, and global networks enjoyed by more established institutions. While this limits its attractiveness to global partners, it also enables greater flexibility in design and reform. For example, its EMI programs were introduced within a decade of its founding—a timeline faster than most older Turkish public universities. However, this flexibility is undermined by inadequate support structures, faculty overload, and a lack of strategic alignment across units. IMU, therefore, embodies what might be called “emergent internationalisation”—where vision exceeds capacity, and progress is piecemeal, dependent on entrepreneurial faculty or isolated champions rather than institutional coherence.

Reframing CI for emerging institutions:

The findings suggest a need to rethink how CI is conceptualised in young, public universities. The standard Western model of CI—holistic, fully integrated, resource-rich—may be unrealistic or even inappropriate in contexts like IMU. Instead, a developmental or phased approach may better reflect the pathways of emerging HEIs. Such a framework might include four phases: foundational structuring (establishing international offices, embedding CI in strategy, joining Erasmus+), programmatic expansion (launching emi programs, increasing mobility, piloting partnerships), institutional integration (aligning curriculum, faculty incentives, governance reforms), cultural embedding (developing global citizenship outcomes, inclusive policies, and academic identity rooted in international engagement). IMU currently sits between Phases 1 and 2. It has developed policy architecture and initiated programs, but has not yet achieved deep curricular, cultural, or governance-level integration. Recognising CI as an institutional learning journey rather than a fixed model may help avoid the pitfalls of compliance-driven implementation.

Faculty and curriculum as underutilised drivers of deep internationalisation:

Another major insight concerns the underutilised potential of faculty and curriculum. While faculty hiring policies now consider international research outputs, and EMI has gained traction, there remains limited support for faculty development, exchange, or incentive alignment. Most international activities are driven by individual motivation, with little institutional scaffolding. This reflects a broader issue in the CI literature. Faculty are often seen as implementers of internationalisation, rather than co-designers of strategy (Leask, 2015). Without

clear performance incentives, workload protection, and support for research collaboration, faculty engagement remains peripheral. The curriculum, too, remains a missed opportunity for meaningful change. Though English-medium programs exist, few departments have embedded global or intercultural outcomes into their learning design. Internationalisation at Home (IaH)—designed to democratise global learning for non-mobile students—is mentioned but not meaningfully enacted. This reinforces critiques that mobility remains the dominant paradigm, even in institutions that claim to value inclusivity (Beelen & Jones, 2015). To deepen CI, institutions like IMU must move beyond language-based reform toward curricular and pedagogical internationalisation, including intercultural learning objectives, globally contextualised course content, Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) initiatives, cross-border research integration into teaching.

The IMU case also raises important questions about national policy approaches to internationalisation. Türkiye's higher education governance is highly centralised, with national bodies setting quotas, approving EMI programs, and coordinating scholarship schemes (CoHE, 2017). While this provides consistency and visibility, it also creates rigidity and limits institutional autonomy. For younger or mid-tier public universities, this creates a dependency on top-down initiatives—e.g., Erasmus+ agreements facilitated centrally—but leaves a gap in bottom-up capacity-building. Policies that focus on counting agreements or increasing inbound student numbers miss the need for qualitative improvements, such as academic integration, research collaboration, and governance reform.

To address this, national actors (e.g., CoHE, Ministry of National Education) should support differentiated internationalisation strategies based on institutional type and maturity, provide dedicated funding for internationalisation of curriculum and faculty development, encourage regional clusters or consortia for joint international initiatives, create mechanisms for evaluating the impact, not just the volume, of internationalisation. These lessons apply not only to Türkiye but to many systems in transition across the Global South.

This study makes two primary contributions to the literature. First, while much research focuses on elite or legacy institutions, this study provides rare insight into how a mid-tier, recently founded public university in an emerging system interprets and enacts internationalisation. Second, the findings support a developmental and contextualised model of CI, highlighting the need for phased implementation, flexible adaptation, and embedded cultural change—particularly in systems where formal structure outpaces institutional capacity. By centering the voices of institutional actors and triangulating rubric, interview, and documentary data, this study offers a grounded, realist perspective that complements more normative or prescriptive models of internationalisation.

Conclusion

Present study examined how a young public university in Türkiye -IMU- interprets and implements internationalisation strategies in line with national ambitions and global frameworks. Using a qualitative case study approach that combined a

validated institutional rubric, document analysis, and interviews with academic leaders, the research provided a nuanced understanding of the opportunities and limitations of internationalisation in emerging higher education institutions.

Findings reveal a significant gap between IMU's strategic commitments and its operational realities. While the university has clearly articulated internationalisation in its vision and policy frameworks—demonstrated by its EMI programs, participation in Erasmus+, and institutional support offices—implementation remains fragmented and highly dependent on individual initiative rather than coordinated, system-wide strategy. Institutional documents often emphasise quantity-focused targets such as mobility numbers or bilateral agreements, while deeper forms of integration, particularly in curriculum development, faculty incentives, and intercultural learning, remain underdeveloped. This reflects a broader trend in resource-constrained contexts, where internationalisation is pursued as policy compliance rather than transformative practice.

The study contributes to the literature by offering a grounded, institutional perspective on how comprehensive internationalisation (CI) unfolds in non-elite, recently established universities. Unlike established institutions with longstanding global partnerships and reputational capital, IMU represents a category of institutions that must build international capacity while simultaneously navigating centralised policy mandates and limited resources. The findings suggest that existing models of CI—often rooted in Global North contexts—may require recalibration when applied to emerging systems. A phased or developmental approach to internationalisation, aligned with institutional maturity and local constraints, may be more appropriate and sustainable.

In addition to its empirical findings, this study offers methodological value by integrating a validated rubric with qualitative interviews to assess internationalisation practices in a Global South context—an approach that remains underutilised in the literature. By foregrounding the institutional narratives of academic leaders, the research also brings attention to the strategic tensions and cultural nuances often overlooked in policy-level analyses. While the study is context-specific, the conceptual and diagnostic framework developed here may be transferable to other emerging universities navigating similar challenges in Türkiye and beyond.

While the study is limited by its single-institution focus and insider perspective, its methodological triangulation enhances its credibility and transferability. Future research could explore comparative cases across institutional types or investigate how students and staff experience internationalisation in practice. There is also scope to explore how ethical, decolonial, or sustainability-oriented frameworks are—or are not—being integrated into the internationalisation agendas of universities like IMU.

In sum, this study underscores that effective internationalisation requires more than strategic documents or external partnerships; it demands deep institutional alignment, inclusive leadership, and cultural change. For young universities in

transitional systems, internationalisation must be context-sensitive, realistically phased, and meaningfully integrated into the core academic mission.

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Ethical Considerations

This research adhered to ethical standards, including respect for participants' rights and confidentiality. The study was ethically approved by the IMU Social and Humanities Ethics Board.

AI Use Disclaimer

The author discloses the use of AI in the research process, manuscript preparation, and data analysis. Specifically, ChatGPT 4.5 was used as a tool to assist with proof reading of the research. The authors take full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and ethical considerations of any AI-generated content included in the manuscript.

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Appendix 1: Comprehensive Internationalization Rubric (Original Form)

L1: Emerging

L2: Capacity Building

L3: Sustained International

Pillar 1: Articulated Institutional Commitment.

TM1: Vision/Mission Statement

TM2: Institution Strategic Plan

TM3: Internationalization Committee or Task Force

TM4: Funding Allocation

TM5: Formal Assessment Mechanisms

Pillar 2: Administrative Leadership Structure and Staffing.

TM6: Institutional Leadership

TM7: Reporting Structures

TM8: Staff and Office Configurations

Pillar 3: Curriculum, Co-curriculum, and Learning Outcomes.

TM9: General Education and Language Requirements

TM10: Co-curricular Activities and Programs

TM11: Specific Student Learning Outcomes

Pillar 4: Faculty Policies and Practices.

TM12: Hiring Guidelines

TM13: Tenure and Promotion Policies

TM14: Faculty Development Opportunities

Pillar V: Student Mobility.

TM15: Education (Study) Abroad Programs

TM16: International Student Recruitment

TM17: International Student Support

Pillar 6: Collaboration and Partnerships.

TM18: Institutional Partnerships

TM19: Joint Degree and Dual/Double Degree Programs

TM20: Institutional Presence Abroad

Appendix 2: Kapsamlı Uluslararasılaşma Rubriği (Turkish Form translated by Author)

L1: Başlangıç aşamasında

L2: Kapasite oluşturma aşamasında

L3: Sürdürülebilir uluslararasılaşma aşamasında

1. Alan: Belirlenmiş Kurumsal Taahhüt

TM1: Vizyon/Misyon Bildirimi

TM2: Kurum Stratejik Planı

TM3: Uluslararasılaştırma Komitesi veya Ekibi

TM4: Fon Tahsisi

TM5: Kurumsal Değerlendirme Mekanizmaları

2. Alan: İdari Liderlik Yapısı ve Personel

TM6: Kurumsal Liderlik

TM7: Raporlama Yapıları

TM8: Personel ve Birim Yapılandırmaları

3. Alan: Müfredat, Ortak Müfredat ve Öğrenme Çıktıları

TM9: Genel Eğitim ve Dil Gereklilikleri

TM10: Müfredat Dışı Etkinlikler ve Programlar

TM11: Spesifik Öğrenci Öğrenme Çıktıları

4. Alan: Fakülte Politikaları ve Uygulamaları

TM12: İşe Alma Yönergeleri

TM13: Görev Süresi ve Terfi Politikaları

TM14: Fakülte Gelişim Fırsatları

5. Alan: Öğrenci Hareketliliği

TM15: Yurtdışı Eğitim Programları

TM16: Uluslararası Öğrenci Alımı

TM17: Uluslararası Öğrenci Desteği

6. Alan: İş birliği ve Ortaklıklar

TM18: Kurumsal Ortaklıklar

TM19: Ortak Derece ve Çift/Yandal Diploma Programları

TM20: Yurtdışında Kurumsal Varlık