

From Policy to Practice: The Role of University Leaders in Enhancing Research Internationalisation in Tanzania

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Abstract

This study investigates the role of university leaders in fostering research internationalisation (RI) in Tanzanian universities. The study employed a qualitative research approach as informed by a case study design. Data were collected through interviews with 40 senior university leaders, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with 32 academic staff members, and documentary review. The collected data were analysed using the thematic analysis technique. The findings reveal that leaders use various mechanisms to foster RI, including motivating and inspiring academic members, mobilising and managing resources, providing guidance and decision making. Other mechanisms are building research capacity among academic staff members, creating a supportive research environment and communicating on the significance of international collaborative research. It is concluded that internationalisation through research requires concerted efforts by numerous education stakeholders, including academics, policy makers, government and senior university leaders. Indeed, it is essential to establish an effective structural and policy-enabling environment for universities to engage in RI.

Key words: education policy, internationalisation, internationalisation of research, Tanzania.

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Résumé

Cette étude examine le rôle des dirigeants universitaires dans la promotion de l'internationalisation de la recherche au sein des universités tanzaniennes. Elle repose sur une approche qualitative, et plus spécifiquement sur l'étude de cas. Les données ont été recueillies au moyen d'entretiens avec 40 hauts responsables universitaires, de discussions de groupe avec 32 membres du personnel académique et d'une analyse documentaire. Les données collectées ont été analysées à l'aide de la technique d'analyse thématique. Les résultats révèlent que les dirigeants recourent à divers mécanismes pour favoriser l'internationalisation de la recherche, notamment en motivant et en inspirant les membres du corps académique, en mobilisant et en gérant les ressources, en fournissant des orientations et en prenant des décisions. D'autres mécanismes consistent à renforcer les capacités de recherche du personnel académique, à créer un environnement propice à la recherche et à communiquer sur l'importance de la recherche collaborative internationale. Il est conclu que l'internationalisation par la recherche nécessite des efforts concertés de la part de nombreux acteurs du monde de l'éducation, notamment les universitaires, les décideurs politiques, le gouvernement et les hauts responsables universitaires. En effet, il est essentiel de mettre en place un environnement structurel et politique qui favorise l'engagement des universités dans l'internationalisation de la recherche.

Mots-clés : politique éducative ; internationalisation ; internationalisation de la recherche ; dirigeants ; universités tanzaniennes.

Introduction

RI has become an increasingly significant priority for higher education institutions (HEIs), although it has attracted comparatively limited attention within the broader aspects of internationalisation of higher education (Woldegiorgis et al., 2018). RI is the process through which HEIs integrate international dimensions into their research activities by fostering cross-border collaborations, researcher mobility, joint projects, international publications and global knowledge exchange (de Frutos-Belizón et al., 2024; Woldegiorgis et al., 2018). By participating in RI, HEIs can promote innovation, strengthen research excellence, widen the spectrum of international academic visibility, and contribute more substantially to solving complex international and societal constraints (Fussy, 2019).

RI is characterized by international research collaboration where faculty or researchers from diverse countries jointly conduct studies, and share academic experiences, methodological approaches and technological resources. Such collaborations cultivate research quality, visibility, and impact by integrating diverse perspectives and resources (de Frutos-Belizón

et al., 2024). Research conducted through international collaboration is frequently published in reputable and internationally recognised journals, receives greater citation impact, and spreads to broader academic audiences than that conducted within a single national context (Kassie, 2024). In addition, collaborations provide access to funding opportunities, improved research infrastructure and international scholarly network that may not be realised locally (Moshtari & Safarpour, 2024). International collaborations also enable researchers and HEIs address global challenges such as climate change, inclusive and sustainable development and public health.

Further, RI is characterised by cross-border knowledge exchange facilitated by mobility of faculty, among others, enables transfer of ideas, methodologies and innovations among HEIs and faculty globally. The mobility of faculty and doctoral students is an important feature in promoting intercultural competencies and strengthening international academic linkages (Moshtari & Safarpour, 2024). This practice enhances complementary sharing of expertise, scientific advancement and induces interdisciplinary and international approaches to solving global challenges (Huang & Chen, 2024). Cross-border knowledge exchange strengthens research capacity, enhances diffusion of innovative ideas, and promotes adoption of best practices across institutions and countries.

RI is also reflected in international co-publications, which are widely used as indicators of global research engagement and scholarly connectivity (Woldegiorgis et al., 2018). This occurs when researchers or academics from various countries collaborate in research, and together publish their findings in reputable international outlets. Co-publications indicate the extent to which researchers and institutions integrate international research networks, and actively engage in global knowledge production. Through co-authorship, researchers get an opportunity for exchanging various expertise, perspectives, methodologies and resources which can improve the quality and relevance of research output (de Frutos-Belizón et al., 2024). In addition, international co-authorship is among the evidence of successful cross-border collaboration, which is also used to assess the international standard and research performance of HEIs. International research co-authorship also promotes a long-term academic partnership, encourages interdisciplinary research and creates a future opportunity for collaborative research (Kadikilo et al., 2024).

Similarly, RI creates commitment to addressing global issues through internationally relevant research agendas, enhancing both institutional reputation and societal impact (de Wit & Altbach, 2021). These features of RI indicate the growing interconnectedness of research in a globalized

academic environment. Consequently, international research collaboration has become a key component of RI and a central strategy for enhancing institutional research capacity, reputation, and global competitiveness.

RI is highly advanced in developed countries than their counterpart developing countries because apart from being economically powerful, the former have well-established research systems, research infrastructure, government policies, and global academic partnership networks that enhance international research cooperation and collaboration. These countries thus invest heavily in research, universities and research institutions, faculty mobility, participation in international conferences, and joint research projects (Woldegiyorgis et al., 2018; de Wit & Altbach, 2021). By so doing, these countries attract highly skilled researchers and international students by creating academic environments that foster knowledge exchange and innovation.

Despite the benefits associated with RI, developing countries lag far behind due to a number of challenges, including financial, institutional, and structural constraints that limit their engagement in global research projects. Consequently, insufficient investment in research, weak internationalisation policies, limited research infrastructure, and inadequate skilled faculty hinder opportunities for participation in RI. Faculty and researchers in developing countries encounter challenges in securing international funding, publishing in international high impact outlets, attending international conferences and creating partnerships with foreign universities (de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Fussy, 2019; Woldegiyorgis et al., 2018). Notwithstanding its recognised benefits, RI continues to be weak in developing countries, leading to the question of how universities, particularly in Tanzania, can strengthen RI.

Literature Review

Leadership Role for Institutional Transformation

Leaders play a critical role in guiding institutions and organisations in achieving the desired goals. In the contemporary environment of globalization, policy shifts, technological advancement and equity complexities, leadership has become indispensable for organisational effectiveness, transformation, innovation and sustainability (Maduforo et al., 2026). Leaders shape an institution's vision and culture by inspiring employees, guiding organizational change, coordinating resources, and ensuring accomplishment of strategic goals and objectives. Their role is particularly vital in institutions where the realization of both short and long-term plans depends on collective efforts of stakeholders (Hojeij, 2024). This suggests that effective leadership is crucial in building collaborative relationships, and creating good environment where employees contribute

their knowledge and skills to support development and performance of long-term organisational goals.

The essential roles of leaders include providing the vision and strategic direction of an institution. Specifically, leaders define strategic objectives and communicate to stakeholders a clear vision for the organization's future. According to Kislov et al. (2025), leaders set and communicate a compelling vision that motivates collective action, guides organisational members and supports change processes. A shared vision facilitates and shapes organisational direction, and enables employees to work toward common goals for transformation of an organisation. In the context of universities, leaders such as vice-chancellors, directors, heads of departments, and deans can enhance institutional development by articulating a shared vision that aligns colleges, faculty, staff, and students toward excellent academic, research, and internationalisation goals and objectives. This collective commitment enables implementation of change and improves institutional performance.

Similarly, leaders play a significant role in motivating and inspiring employees in an institution, which is essential for improving employee's commitment, productivity and job satisfaction. Leaders also encourage teamwork, create conducive working environment that enhances institutional success and recognise the employee's contributions to the flourish of the same. Bass and Riggio (2021) emphasise that leaders inspire employees by promoting trust, shared values and innovation. Employees are more likely to work hard when leaders provide support, opportunities for professional development and encouragement. In a university context, this signifies that leaders who support academic and administrative staff through, for instance, mentorship, research opportunities, training and recognition, can increase staff productivity, engagement and commitment. In turn, this can lead to improved teaching quality, research output, and overall institutional performance.

Leaders also play a critical role in establishing productive relationships with internal and external stakeholders. By cultivating partnerships with communities, governments, industry actors, funding agencies, and international collaborators, leaders enhance cooperation and secure resources that facilitate the achievement and success of the institution. Effective involvement of stakeholders also strengthens institutional reputation, encourages resource mobilisation, and promotes long term organisational sustainability (Hojeij, 2024). In HIEs, for example, leaders who establish relationship with international universities, development agencies and research organisations can better promote academic exchange,

research collaboration, and global visibility. Eventually, effective involvement of stakeholders contributes not only to short-term organisational achievements but also to long-term competitiveness, institutional success and sustainability.

Leaders perform a wide range of interconnected roles that are central to organisational success and sustainability. For example, they are responsible for making decisions that guide organisational performance, solve problems and reduce uncertainties while promoting commitment of employees and institutional success (Clark et al., 2024; Kjellström et al., 2024). Leaders also manage financial, human and physical resources to realise efficiency, accountability and long-term sustainability. Equally important, leaders foster innovation and creativity by encouraging new ideas, collaborative problem solving and continuous learning thereby enhancing organisational adaptability and competitiveness in a rapid changing environment (Lythreath et al., 2024; Clark et al., 2024). Thus, these roles place leaders as central drivers of organisational growth, transformation and sustainability.

Numerous studies have systematically reviewed literature to establish the role of leaders in enhancing performance in higher education (Maduforo et al., 2026; Kislov et al., 2025; Hojeij, 2024; Kjellström et al., 2024; Lythreath et al., 2024; Clark et al., 2024; Bass & Riggio, 2021). While, these and other studies explored the leadership role in developed countries and thus, there is however a paucity of empirical studies on leadership role in developing countries. The current study contributes in bridging that gap by investigating the role of leaders in promoting RI in Tanzanian universities.

Policies Informing RI in Tanzania

Since RI is fundamentally important for the socio-economic development of a country, government policies are equally crucial as they facilitate its implementation. In Tanzania, research is conducted by higher learning institutions as well as public and private research institutions (URT, 2010). Various national policies bear sections that specify the importance of enhancing knowledge generation through various ways, including international mobility of researchers and faculty outside and inside the country, collaborative research, and scholarships. These policies include the Education and Training Policy (ETP) of 1995; the National Higher Education Policy (NHEP) of 1999; and the Tanzania National Research and Development Policy (TNRDP) of 2010.

ETP describes how to enhance international cooperation amongst universities by recognising the “existence of knowledge, skills and expertise gap between one country and another and between countries of the North and

the South and affirms Tanzania’s commitment to remove this gap through international cooperation by exchange of information, experts, faculty, students and publications.” (URT, 1995, p. 79 & URT, 2014). Furthermore, the policy identifies the motives behind internationalisation in Tanzania, which include narrowing the knowledge gap by establishing international cooperation through global knowledge sharing and promoting faculty circulation and international co-authoring of publications and contributing that these motives can be achieved through joint international research and publications (URT, 1995, p. 80).

NHEP underlines that the key role of HEIs entails teaching, research and consultancy. In order to foster the quality of the knowledge produced, the policy stresses cooperation in the education landscape between local and foreign universities, including capacity building in research and collaboration and links with foreign institutions. The policy further stresses increased research funding so as to facilitate the implementation of RI in Tanzania. Moreover, the policy underscores that collaboration and complementary expertise are crucial to cope with the changing needs of society (URT, 1999).

TNRDP stresses the need to employ mechanisms to strengthen partnership, networking and collaboration between researchers at regional and international levels. Notwithstanding the government’s efforts to strengthen international collaboration, the involvement of researchers remains minimal. Consequently, Tanzania is unable to capture critical opportunities such as capacity building in terms of transfer of technology, and effective utilisation of human resources and facilities. Following this situation, the policy emphasises establishing a strong network of local researchers’ network with foreign counterparts to harness and share expertise for national development (URT, 2010).

Despite the efforts made by the government, research productivity in Tanzania is low (Fussy, 2019). This situation underscores the perceived weakness of universities in fulfilling their mandated core function of conducting research to address the prevailing societal challenges. Existing studies focus on how academic members of staff perceive research, and the challenges faced by academics in conducting research, rather than the role of leaders in fostering research (Püttmann & Thomsen, 2025; Ndekao, 2025; Jilcha, 2025; Kadikilo et al., 2024; Fussy, 2024; Kasie, 2024; Fussy, 2019; Mwangi, 2017). This study contributes in addressing this gap in Tanzanian universities.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach informed by a case study design. The approach enabled an in-depth investigation of the role of leaders in

implementing RI in Tanzanian universities. The study involved eight universities selected based on geographical location, nature of ownership, accreditation and charter statuses. Tanzania has 49 approved operating universities whereas 30 are privately-owned and 19 are public. Among the public universities, 12 are accredited and chartered while the accredited and chartered 10 are private (TCU, 2024). The current study involved accredited and chartered universities as they operate as fully-fledged universities as per predetermined university-set standards (TCU, 2024). To enhance diversity and data comprehensiveness, the researchers selected four private and four public universities from different regions of Tanzania. To observe research ethics, the researcher coded the involved universities (as YU1, YU2), and participants' leadership positions.

The researcher further secured a research clearance letter from the Vice Chancellor of the University of Dar es Salaam, which introduced the researcher to the respective regional and district authorities. Participants were also informed of the purpose of the study, and informed consent was sought from them to participate and be recorded during interviews and FGDs.

A total of 72 participants were involved in this study, including 40 senior university leaders featuring 16 School/Faculty deans; eight directors of research and innovations; eight Deputy Principals in academic, research and consultancies; and eight directors of internationalisation. The other 32 participants were academic staff. Specifically, the participants were equally distributed across the involved universities.

Senior university leaders were selected by virtue of their leadership positions in the implementation of internationalisation through research. Similarly, academic staff members were obtained through stratified sampling based on their level of education whereby two PhD and Master's degree holders were included from each participating university. This group of academic staff was deemed important to this study because of their direct knowledge and experience in how university leaders enhance RI within their universities. In addition, gender and professional diversity (social sciences and natural sciences) were also considered.

In this study, three data gathering methods were used, namely interviews, FGDs and documentary review. The use of a variety of approaches enables researchers to establish convergence lines of evidence to make findings as vigorous as possible (Yin, 2018). Equally important, the use of multiple methods was imperative to minimise biases which could arise in the process of data analysis. Semi-structured interviews combine predetermined

questions with the flexibility to explore emerging issues during the interview, making the interaction more conversational and allowing researchers to capture participants' voices (Bell et al., 2022). Interviews focused particularly on the roles of leaders in directing, envisaging, empowering, mobilizing resources and creating enabling environment for enhancing internationalisation through research. Furthermore, FGDs were held with members of academic staff in which case eight sessions were held; one from each university, involving four members of academic staff. The discussions lasted approximately 50 minutes and were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. FGDs were suitable because the members of academic staff would be free to discuss how their leaders engaged them in the implementation of RI in their respective universities.

Likewise, the documentary analysis was essential as it enabled the researcher to explore the role of leaders in the RI in higher education and established the educational insights on the context in which the study was carried out i.e. research, policy and leadership structure in higher education. Documentary review also helped the researcher to learn the statuses of the universities (accredited and chartered), and provided diverse and comprehensive data on the role of leaders in fostering RI. In order to broaden the understanding of the phenomenon under study and achieve credibility of the findings, documentary analysis helped.

Document analysis began with a search for pertinent papers on the internet using the websites of studied institutions using search terms used included Tanzanian public and private universities, higher education policy, university act, and research policy. The search offered research policy documents (URT, 2010), research general research guidelines and standards for provision of university education in Tanzania (TCU, 2014) and universities approved to operate in Tanzania (TCU, 2024), Tanzania Education and Training Policy (URT 1995; 2014) and University Act, 2005.

After the search for research policy documents, policy statements were critically examined, assessed, and interpreted in light of the purpose of the current study. The six main stages of thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke (2022) were duly implemented. These included familiarising with the data, creating preliminary codes, looking for themes, evaluating themes, defining and labeling themes, and producing the report. Finally, the data analysis revealed a number of themes regarding the role of university leaders in fostering internationalisation in Tanzanian universities.

Findings and Discussion

Motivating and Inspiring Academic Staff Members

Findings from interviews and documentary reviews revealed that leaders encouraged academic members to conduct research by emphasising commitment and teamworking. Leaders insisted that commitment and teamwork are paramount significant for achieving the institutional goals. The respondents explained that it is essential to establish collaboration with different researchers from different institutions within and outside the country for the sake of enhancing RI. In addition, leaders recognised the efforts of employees who demonstrated their commitment to conducting research with other international researchers. To justify this, one deputy principal in academic, research and consultancies recognised the effort of one academic staff by stating;

Four years ago, one academic staff won a proposal amounting 700,000 Pounds from the UK Research Council. One of the requirements of the proposal was to involve diverse researchers from different universities in Africa. Another criterion was to disseminate data in international outlets. In addition, the project remitted fund for four academic staff to pursue PhDs abroad. The project focused on facilitating secondary school teachers in teaching Mathematics. We selected few secondary schools from the five countries (Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya, Malawi and Mozambique) to offer training. The project was realised last year. (Director of internationalisation, YU 1).

Another leader shared similar academic staff initiatives in promoting RI by acknowledging that:

In April this year, one member of academic staff in collaboration with other researchers from the Christian University of East Africa (CUEA) submitted a research proposal worth 300,000 Euros to a Charity organization known as Next Generation Leadership Programme (NGLP). The proposed research aims at preparing young ladies in universities to become potential leaders in the community. This is indeed among the initiatives our academics take to enhance the university vision, including RI (Dean of faculty, YU 6).

The statements above indicate the initiatives of university leaders in enhancing and expanding collaboration and networking as one of the mechanisms of internationalising research. By promoting collaborative relationships, leaders create opportunities for researchers to share expertise, perspectives

and resources which, in turn, improve the quality, relevance and impact of research outcomes. The involvement of international researchers also plays a significant role in promoting internationalisation in universities. More importantly, joint research with international faculty is crucial for escalating international expertise in research arena.

Alongside, the findings disclosed that leaders demonstrated hard work, integrity, and commitment in handling their responsibilities. Specifically, they consistently showed dedication to their duties, upheld ethical standards and maintained strong work ethics. To elucidate this, one head of department noted:

With all my leadership responsibilities, conducting research stands to be a priority. As a leader, I must lead by example through cultivating the key functions of university, which are teaching, research and consultancy. Every year, I conduct and publish at least three papers in international reputable outlets, and attend not less than two international conferences (Head of department, YU 2).

Popular voices from members of the academic staff were also noted and included such as enthusiastic one heard; “we are inspired by the head of department, as she actively participates in international conferences, conducts research projects, solicits fund and establishes international academic network for the visibility of our university.” The preceding quotation captured through FGD acknowledges the role of a leader in enhancing RI by example and its significance in inspiring academic staff. Thus, effective leadership is a powerful tool for motivating and inspiring other members at a work place.

The findings also revealed that leaders were committed and dedicated to their duties as they performed all their responsibilities effectively. This was a good example to those who were leading. A faculty dean of one university stated:

I have a number of responsibilities, including teaching and administrative duties. I perform all of them timely. In addition, I have formed a platform with international academics, most of them from China and University of Helsinki in Finland. I share with them academic-related matters, and I have managed to publish with them three papers (Faculty dean, YU 5).

A faculty dean from YU6 added: “I have two friends from Kenya and one from Nigeria. I regularly share with them the academic experiences. I

sometimes do research and publish with them.” These indicate how leaders are dedicated to their responsibilities and thus lead through examples. In addition, this demonstrates that senior university leaders, particularly chancellors and vice-chancellors appoint hard working personnel who can enforce internationalisation of research effectively.

Motivating and inspiring academics is a critical leadership function in promoting RI, though its effectiveness depends on more than simply encouraging academic staff to participate internationally. University leaders can enhance motivation by articulating a clear vision for RI, supporting academic mobility, recognising scholarly achievements, facilitating access to international networks and funding opportunities. However, motivation alone may not translate into meaningful internationalisation due to structural hinderances, such as inadequate funding, limited research infrastructure, restrictive internationalisation policies and heavy teaching workloads.

Mobilising and Managing Resources

The findings indicated that leaders secure and allocate human, financial and material resources to facilitate engagement in research projects. Specifically, they identify the type of resources, acquisition process and allocate them appropriately and ensure that they are used effectively and efficiently to achieve institutional goals, including RI. To explain this, one faculty dean said;

I often involve the academic staff members to identify the priorities of the faculty. Based on these priorities, research activities and participation in international conferences are often given greater budgetary consideration than other projects. Together, we discuss how to solicit fund all projects and distribute the responsibilities to them in accordance with their expertise. Each one has to work harder to achieve what is agreed upon (Faculty Dean, YU 5).

In validation of this remark one faculty member during FGDs acknowledged:

My faculty colleagues and I were assigned by our dean to write a proposal to Schlumberger Foundation for women from developing countries pursuing advanced studies in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics. The dean provided us with all technical and material support, and made a close follow up during proposal development. Through such grants, the faculty members conduct research, strengthen institutional

research capacity and support female postgraduate students (Academic staff, YU 7).

The above accounts justify how university leaders strengthen RI through different approaches. In addition, this implies that leaders understand that the available resources are scarce and, therefore, have to be utilised effectively. Leaders strategically allocate resources, which contributes greatly to RI instead of distributing them across all projects. Effective resource management involves prioritisation and accountability to prevent waste, misuse and duplication of efforts. Through regular monitoring, leaders assess the development of projects, and make adjustment whenever necessary.

Similarly, through interviews, it was indicated that leaders established partnerships that provided opportunities for academic staff exchange and joint research initiatives. These efforts enabled researchers to access global expertise, advanced technologies, and international funding opportunities. To cement this, one of the directors of internationalisation of research admitted that:

This year, our university has signed a memorandum of understanding with the University of Bonn in Germany. Through this partnership, academic staff are given opportunities to spend a certain period of time at the university conducting research, and sharing expertise. Researchers from both universities collaborate on joint research projects and co-author publications (Director of Research Internationalisation, YU 2).

To cement the preceding statement, University-level evidence highlights the growing significance of international research collaboration within Tanzania’s higher education sector. The University of Dar es Salaam views collaboration as a key strategy for enhancing research capacity, promoting innovation, and addressing complex societal issues. Its Guidelines for Collaboration on Applied Research, Innovation and Training Infrastructure underscore:

The value of partnerships in facilitating the sharing of resources, expertise, and knowledge among universities and external universities is indispensable. Such collaborations also provide opportunities for joint research initiatives, knowledge exchange, and capacity development. Moreover, the guidelines demonstrate universities engagement with international partners and research institutions, reflecting its commitment

to expanding research collaboration beyond Tanzania's national boundaries (University of Dar es Salaam, 2024, pp. 5–7).

This implies that the collaboration between and among universities strengthens RI, enhances academic capacity building and knowledge exchange; and promotes global institutional visibility. This practice also increases access to research funding, promotes intercultural learning and contributes to the production of high-quality research. Moreover, the partnership improves the reputation and competitiveness of universities.

RI entails substantial financial, fiscal, technological and human resources to support internationalisation projects. University leaders play a crucial role in identifying, securing, and allocating these resources to create an enabling environment for international research participation. Through strategic planning and effective resource mobilization, leaders can attract funding from governments, development partners and international agencies. In the majority of developing countries, including Tanzania, inadequate financial resources often hinder researchers' ability to participate in international activities. This calls for proactive leadership in seeking external grants and partnerships to overcome these challenges.

Providing Guidance and Decision-Making

The findings through interviews and FGDs indicated that universities provided clear direction, strategic planning, and informed decision-making to ensure that research activities align with institutional goals and international standards. For example, Deputy vice-chancellors, directors of research and innovation, directors of internationalisation, deans, and heads of departments guide academic staff towards engagement in international collaboration through research projects. During interviews, one of the deputy-vice chancellors had this to disclose:

Our institution develops objectives to achieve every year; and are communicated to the academic staff for implementation. One of the objectives is to enhance global visibility of the university through conducting research and publishing in internationally recognised journals. Every lecturer has to publish at least two manuscripts every year while an assistant lecture has to publish at least one. This is monitored through quarterly reports and PEPMIS (Public Employee Performance Management Information System) submitted by heads of departments (Deputy vice chancellor, YU 5).

Along this line one of the deans stated,

We have established strategic priorities focusing on the vision of our institution of becoming a world-class university. To achieve this, we encourage the academic staff to participate actively in international research collaborations, publish in internationally reputable journals, engage in global research networks, and seek external research funding. Through strategic plans, institutional frameworks and policies, we give them directions on how internationalisation should be integrated in the university research agenda (Faculty dean, YU 3).

The preceding accounts imply that developing and communicating a clear vision for RI provides a strategic direction that aligns institutional research activities with global academic standards and opportunities. Similarly, a clear vision helps academic staff understand the university's internationalisation goals; and motivates them to engage in activities such as international research collaborations, joint publications, participation in global research networks, and applications for external research funding. As a result, researchers become more actively involved in cross-border knowledge production and scholarly exchange.

Furthermore, the findings indicated that university leaders make decisions that helps researchers participate in international exchange and research visit. One of the faculty deans reported "I approved a sabbatical leave for an academic staff member to spend one year at a partner university abroad conducting collaborative research and developing joint publications." A deputy principal-academic, research and consultancies further:

Staff mobility, including sabbatical period, is crucial in providing access to advanced research facilities, specialised laboratories, libraries, databases, and technical resources that are not readily available at the home institution. This access enables the researcher to conduct more rigorous and innovative research, thereby improving the quality and impact of the research outputs. Additionally, working within an international research environment allows the academic staff member to learn new research techniques and best practices that can later be transferred to colleagues and students upon returning to their home university (Deputy principal-academic, research and consultancy, YU 8).

These statements indicate that staff mobility is significant in enhancing internationalisation of research by increasing researchers' access to

global knowledge, international scholarly networks and advanced research infrastructure. Exposure to well-equipped infrastructure also increases the chance for research competitive advantage.

Decisions regarding international partnerships, research focus areas and funding priorities require careful consideration of issues such as equity, sustainability, and mutual benefit, particularly in contexts where institutions face resource challenges. Therefore, while leadership guidance and decision-making are important for enhancing RI, their impact depends on whether decisions are participatory, strategic, evidence-based, and responsive to both local and global research priorities, enabling institutions to realise meaningful and sustainable international participation.

Research Capacity Building of Academic Staff

The findings indicated that leaders played their role in developing research skills among members of academic staff. For example, they implemented numerous trainings focusing on building research capacity among members of academic staff in their universities. In these trainings, international collaboration in research was an important agenda and was given due weight. One of the leaders stated:

In our university, we have a clear schedule of trainings on research capacity building and skills for academics. We sometimes invite gurus in research from other universities outside Tanzania to share skills and knowledge on research. In every training, academics are encouraged to conduct collaborative international researches since they add value when ranking universities (Faculty dean, YU 6).

A number of academic staff similarly indicated their efforts to attend research trainings to become acquainted with skills in conducting scholarly researches. In addition, they noted the importance of these trainings to build confidence in collaborating with other international researchers and in effectively supervising junior researchers. This was also identified as an opportunity for expanding research network and raising the spirit of executing meaningful international collaborative researches. It is a recognition that the National Research Policy (URT, 2010:1, URT, 1999) emphasises training of academic staff on research to enhance their research skills, which can foster collaborative, international and multidisciplinary research in universities and with external universities.

The preceding accounts imply that academic staff and the policy documents acknowledge the contribution of trainings in facilitating knowledge creation

and widening research skills. Majority of academic staff also acknowledge the role of their leaders in initiating research trainings in their respective institutions.

Furthermore, the findings revealed that university leaders organized workshops on searching and applying for international research funding opportunities from different organisations, such as the European Union, funding organisations like ERASMUS, the World Bank, and the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural organization. To elucidate this, one of the vice-chancellors-academic, research and consultancy said;

Training exposes academics to the world of learning and knowledge production. Our university organises different seminars, workshops, symposiums, trainings and international conferences. All these aim at fostering exposure especially on how to conduct research and disseminate knowledge to high impact international journals (Vice - Chancellor, Academic, Research and Consultancy, YU 1).

In the same vein, one of directors of internationalisation explained that “Capacity building entails mentorship through international research collaborations. Early-career academics is paired with experienced international researchers through collaborative projects.”

Building research capacity among academic staff members is a vital component of RI because it equips them with the knowledge, skills, and expertise necessary to engage actively in global scholarly networks and international research collaborations. However, providing capacity-building opportunities alone does not automatically lead to successful RI. Rather, success requires a combination of initiatives like availability of institutional support including funds, infrastructure, and technical assistance. In addition, capacity-building efforts that focus on individual researcher without addressing broader institutional constraints may produce inadequate outcomes. Hence, while it is essential to strengthen research capacity among academic staff, success requires a holistic approach that integrates individual skill development with adequate resources, supportive institutional policies, and sustained opportunities for international collaboration.

Creating Supportive Research Environment

The findings indicated that most deputy principals for academic, research and consultancies created an enabling environment for research by providing resources to assist academics who were committed to conducting research. For example, they provided resources like time, seed money, and

research facilities to enable academics to attend international conferences and conduct research. To elucidate this, one of the deputy principals in academic, research and consultancies stressed that:

Leadership requires a friendly and enabling environment for academics to conduct research and disseminate findings. This is among the key roles of a leader as it is clear that research in higher learning institutions should take a total of 35-45 per cent of academics' time (Deputy principal in academic, research and consultancy, YU 2).

Another deputy principal in academic, research and consultancy (YU 8) added that... "I am used to facilitating the academics conduct research and attend conferences only if the resources are available."

However, during FGDs, the majority of academic staff reported that the shortage of funds constrains research activities as they depended on external organisations and themselves to conduct research and attend international conferences. They added that funds from funding organisations are unreliable and inadequate. It was also found that university leaders set aside budget for research to support academics as they write proposals and conduct research as they also extended support by reducing barriers to international engagement. To explain this, one of the heads of departments remarked: "...if the fund is available, our staff members wishing to attend international conferences are supported." This implies that funding constraints RI especially in developing countries.

Moreover, voices from heads of department revealed that, a good policy framework and reinforcement is among the most important aspects in ensuring that RI and collaboration is effectively achieved by HEIs. One head of department was quoted saying that:

Our institution has a well-developed policy on RI and collaboration, but the department itself has to ensure that the policy is reinforced in order for majority of the academic staff to participate in establishing international collaborations with foreign institutions in Africa and beyond. Additionally, creating awareness on its relevance as well as empowering academic staff can produce some positive impact on the internationalisation of research. (Head of department- YU 1).

Another head of department added that,

Despite the existence of institutional guidelines supporting RI and external partnerships, departments need to translate these provisions into practical initiatives that facilitate wider staff involvement. Such efforts can create opportunities for academics to develop meaningful research networks with universities and scholars across Africa and other parts of the world. Providing staff with relevant information, capacity-building opportunities, and institutional support may further strengthen their ability to initiate and sustain internationally oriented research activities (Head of department, YU 4).

Creating a supportive research environment is a paramount important prerequisite for the RI as it provides the institutional conditions essential for academic staff to engage effectively in global research projects and partnerships. However, provision of mere supportive environment does not assure successful RI. In developing countries, for instance, many universities encounter inadequate funding, limited access to research databases, bureaucratic procedures, heavy teaching responsibilities, and weak institutional incentives which jeopardise researchers' capacity to engage internationally despite the presence of proper support mechanisms. Besides, supportive environments that fail to address discrepancies among academic staff may result in unequal participation in international research opportunities. Therefore, while creating a supportive research environment plays an important role in advancing RI, its effectiveness depends on the extent to which institutional support is accessible, comprehensive, sustainable, and responsive to the diverse needs of faculty and academics, thereby enabling meaningful and reasonable participation in the global research community.

Communicating the Significance of International Collaborative Research

Most senior leaders involved in this study explained that they took time to explain institutional expectations and priorities, particularly regarding research as one of the key functions of HEIs. They further affirmed the to be unequivocal about pursuing international joint research given the universities' low positions due to low research productivity. As one of the directors of innovation and research stressed:

Internationally co-authored papers hold water when it comes not only to the internationalisation of research but also to the circulation of knowledge. The higher the number of international collaborations of researchers, the higher the reputation of the

institution. I strive to instill morale in academics to develop a culture of conducting research and publishing with different researchers outside Tanzania to widen their research skills and academia spectrum (Director of research and innovation, YU 8).

Another participant emphasised that,

During academic meetings, I encourage members of academic of staff to conduct research and attend international conferences. This is an opportunity for them to establish international networks for research. I also insist that international co-authorship counts greatly in academic industry rather than focusing on local and institutional authors alone (Director of research and innovation, YU 2).

These statements indicate that emphasis on implementing international collaborative research is critical for universities striving to advance RI. Leaders motivate members of the academic staff to implement RI through various ways, including co-authorships, and attending international conferences.

As one academic staff noted;

...Yes, director of research and innovation and the faculty dean remind us now and then to attend international conferences, to write fundable research proposals and projects, publish in international and reputable journal outlets, and create international academic network so as to promote not only our institution but also update our academic profiles. The challenges we encounter include time and money for carrying out these activities (Academic staff, YU7).

The internationalisation policy of Mbeya University of Science and Technology (MUST) states that the RI is vital and recognised for its contribution to enhancing the reputation and global standing of universities. The policy states that the university should “champion international collaboration in scientific and scholarly endeavours with other institutions globally” (MUST, 2024, p. 8).

The significance of international collaborative research is also explained through the mission and vision statements of most of the universities under study. They emphasis on the goals of becoming internationally recognised, and world-class and leading universities in Africa. The findings are in line with

Eta et al. (2025), who state that research partnership between universities is a key aspect of internationalisation, leading to knowledge production and institutional strengthening. Through internationalisation of research, universities are increasingly strategic agencies of Africa’s development. The international collaboration stands to be a panacea for strengthening the institutional capacity, exposing academics to a wide range of academia life, improving the research scholarship and expertise and enhancing global knowledgeable academics.

Communicating the significance of RI is a key leadership role in promoting the implementation of RI, as it helps create awareness, understanding, and commitment among academics toward global research engagement. Effective communication enables university leaders to articulate the numerous benefits of international collaboration, including access to advanced research facilities, diverse expertise, international funding opportunities, increased research visibility, and enhanced knowledge exchange across countries and disciplines.

By continuously communicating these advantages through institutional policies, meetings, workshops, and strategic plans, leaders can foster a culture that values international partnerships and encourages researchers to participate in global scholarly networks. Moreover, effective communication helps align individual research efforts with institutional internationalisation goals; and can minimize resistance to change by demonstrating to the academics and the society on the benefits of cross-border collaboration. Through sustained and strategic communication, universities can strengthen researchers’ motivation to engage internationally and foster their contribution to global knowledge production.

Conclusion and Recommendations

RI is considered indispensable for sustainability of higher education as it offers opportunities for strengthening the institutional capacity and complementary expertise with emphasis on international collaborative learning and sharing critical resources across universities. However, the process is constrained by various challenges particularly funding, time and teaching responsibilities, among others. Therefore, there is an urgent need to strengthen the implementation of RI by mitigating its challenges. This requires concerted efforts by numerous education stakeholders in promoting internationalisation, including academics, policy makers, government and senior leaders in respective universities. Indeed, it is of vital importance to establish the environment which enables members of academic staff to engage in internationalisation through research.

Based on the study findings, university leaders should adopt a proactive and strategic approach in enhancing RI by establishing clear institutional policies, strategies and visions that prioritise global research participation. They should also strengthen international partnerships with universities, funding agencies, research institutions, and industry partners to create opportunities for collaborative research, academic staff mobility, and joint publications. In addition, leaders should mobilise and allocate designated resources to support international research activities, including conference participation, research grants, and capacity-building initiatives. Creating an enabling research environment through mentorship, training, research infrastructure, and administrative support is also crucial for increasing researchers' ability to engage actively in international collaborations. Furthermore, leaders should motivate and recognise academic staff who participate in international research activities while continuously monitoring and assessing internationalisation efforts to ensure sustainable growth in global research engagement, visibility, and impact.

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