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

Constancia Norbeth Nziku, Joseph Manase Joseph

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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Exploring the Inequalities and Experiences of International Students Through a Postcolonial Lens

Gifty Oforiwaa Gyamera and Patrick Donyoh

Abstract

Student mobility has become a key component of the internationalisation of higher education. While it offers numerous benefits, international students continue to face critical challenges that reinforce global inequalities and colonial legacies. This qualitative study draws on postcolonial theory to examine the experiences of international students at two universities in Ghana. It focuses on both full-degree and credit-transfer students. Participants were selected using snowball and convenience sampling techniques, and data were collected primarily through interviews. Findings indicate that most participants viewed the academic environment positively. Lecturers were described as approachable, supportive and knowledgeable. Socially and culturally, many students reported positive experiences. However, challenges such as limited interaction with local students and the high cost of living were frequently mentioned. Some experiences also reflected lingering colonial dynamics within academic practices, including perceptions of preferential and hierarchical treatment of students. Universities should strive to address these challenges. As they work to enhance international students' experiences, it is essential for them to remain vigilant against turning student mobility into yet another postcolonial tool that perpetuates historical inequalities.

Key words: international students, experiences, higher education, postcolonialism, qualitative methodology.

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Résumé

La mobilité étudiante est devenue un élément clé de l'internationalisation de l'enseignement supérieur. Bien qu'elle offre de nombreux avantages, les étudiants internationaux continuent de faire face à des défis majeurs qui renforcent les inégalités mondiales et les héritages coloniaux. Cependant, une grande partie des recherches visant à améliorer l'expérience des étudiants internationaux s'est concentrée sur les pays occidentaux, accordant une attention limitée aux étudiants issus de contextes non occidentaux. Cette étude qualitative s'appuie sur la théorie postcoloniale pour examiner les expériences des étudiants internationaux dans deux universités du Ghana. Elle porte à la fois sur les étudiants inscrits à un cursus complet et sur ceux bénéficiant d'un transfert de crédits. Les participants ont été sélectionnés à l'aide de techniques d'échantillonnage en boule de neige et de commodité, et les données ont été recueillies principalement par le biais d'entretiens. Les résultats indiquent que la plupart des participants percevaient l'environnement universitaire de manière positive. Les enseignants ont été décrits comme accessibles, encourageants et compétents. Sur le plan social et culturel, de nombreux étudiants ont fait état d'expériences positives. Cependant, des difficultés telles que le manque d'interaction avec les étudiants locaux et le coût de la vie élevé ont été fréquemment mentionnées. Certaines expériences reflétaient également la persistance de dynamiques coloniales au sein des pratiques universitaires, notamment la perception d'un traitement préférentiel et hiérarchique des étudiants. Les universités devraient s'efforcer de relever ces défis. Alors qu'elles s'attachent à améliorer l'expérience des étudiants internationaux, il est essentiel qu'elles veillent à ne pas transformer la mobilité étudiante en un énième outil postcolonial qui perpétue les inégalités historiques.

Mots-clés: étudiants internationaux ; expériences ; enseignement supérieur ; postcolonialisme ; méthodologie qualitative.

Introduction

Student mobility has become a critical component of the internationalisation of higher education (HE). It serves not only as a key indicator of campus diversity but also as a major source of revenue for both destination countries and host institutions (Jones, 2017). However, alongside its benefits, student mobility has increasingly become a site of exploitation, perpetuating inequality (Lomer, et. al. 2023) and reinforcing colonial legacies. Colonial legacies refer to the enduring political, economic, social, and cultural effects of colonialism on formerly colonised countries. These legacies shape institutions, identities, and global relationships in ways that continue to impact development, governance, inequality, and cultural expression (Majee & Ress, 2020).

In response to these issues, a growing body of research has emerged aimed at improving international student experiences. However, much of this scholarship has focused on Western contexts (e.g., Findlay, et.al, 2010; Jones, 2017) and primarily on full-degree students.

We contend that all students who transition across national and institutional boundaries, regardless of the context, duration, or classification, encounter significant academic and socio-cultural challenges (Jones, 2017). These challenges have a profound impact on their overall experiences and well-being. Therefore, any higher education institution that recruits international students, irrespective of their number, status, or programme type, must be committed to understanding and addressing the specific needs and experiences of this diverse student population.

Ghana has emerged as a popular destination for international students, particularly from neighboring African countries (Gyamera, 2015). Despite this growing trend, there is still limited literature on the experiences of international students in Ghana. This study addresses this gap by drawing on data collected from two Ghanaian universities to explore the lived experiences of international students and how they interpret these experiences. The research specifically investigates their academic and socio-cultural encounters, as well as the challenges they face.

The paper is organised into five sections: the introduction, a review of relevant literature, the methodology, findings and discussion, and finally, the recommendations and conclusion.

Literature review

Conceptualising the International Student

The term international student has been conceptualised in various ways across policy and academic literature. UNESCO defines an international student as an individual who has physically crossed an international border to engage in educational activities in a host country, with the educational experience differing from that available in their country of origin (UNESCO, 2015). Similarly, the Office for Students (OfS), the independent regulator of higher education in England, defines international students as “students from outside the UK who come to study at institutions in England, or who study with English institutions at local campuses or via distance learning while resident abroad” (Office for Students, 2022). In general, international students are typically classified as individuals holding non-resident visa status who pursue tertiary or higher education degrees in a destination country (Knight, 2012).

International students can be grouped into different categories. First, there are students who enrol in full-degree programmes abroad. These individuals complete an entire degree at a foreign institution and are awarded the qualification by the host institution (Ibid.). Another category includes credit-mobile students. These involve students who remain enrolled in their home institutions while they earn transferrable credits through short-term study abroad programmes. They typically spend one semester or a year at a foreign institution, with their degrees ultimately conferred by their home universities (Bista, 2019; Knight, 2012). They are often excluded from the definition of “international students” (Awuor, 2021).

There are also cross-border collaborative degree programmes. These involve partnerships between two or more institutions or providers. In these programmes, students register for an academic programme jointly offered by multiple institutions. This often leads to dual or jointly awarded degrees (ibid.).

Experiences of International Students

International students have multifaceted experiences that span personal, social, professional, national, cultural, and familial dimensions (Jones, 2017). These could both positive and negative impacts on them.

On a personal level, international mobility contributes significantly to students’ development by enhancing analytical skills, self-confidence, and self-esteem (Jones, 2017). The challenges students encounter in foreign universities often push them beyond their comfort zone. This fosters resilience, emotional intelligence, and adaptability. Socially, students gain opportunities for social networking to form lasting friendships. Exchange programmes create rich environments for developing international connections, which may serve both personal and professional purposes (Ibid). Professionally, international exposure can significantly shape and improve career trajectories. Such experiences foster transformative thinking and a commitment to equitable and justice-oriented practices in the workplace (Mansouri et al., 2017, p. 7). Exposure to diverse professional environments prompts critical reflection, which can enhance the student’s own approach to work.

Culturally, studying abroad deepens students’ self-awareness and promotes an appreciation of multiculturalism. These experiences often lead to the development of global awareness, understood as critical knowledge of global systems and one’s interconnectedness and solidarity with others (Mansouri et al., 2017).

Challenges

Despite the numerous benefits of international student mobility, international students often face significant academic, cultural, social, and economic challenges that can lead to culture shock (Jones, 2017; Ward, et. al., 2004). Culture shock is defined as “a crisis characterised by feelings of inadequacy, frustration, and anxiety [that goes]... hand-in-hand with the realization that the new environment may be ‘difficult’ and requires considerable effort to negotiate” (Ward et al., 2004, p. 187). Academically, international students bring diverse values, expectations, and perspectives into the classroom. However, these contributions are often overlooked or undervalued by lecturers, which can exacerbate students’ academic struggles.

Language barriers also represent a major hurdle, particularly when students are unfamiliar with accents, colloquialisms, or academic jargon in the host country (Jones, 2017). These difficulties affect students’ ability to read, write, comprehend lectures, and actively participate in classroom discussions.

They may also be confronted with cultural and religious differences that influence daily life, academic engagement, and social interaction. Conflicts may arise due to differing taboos, gender norms, lifestyle expectations, and sexual mores (Cooper, 2016). These tensions can manifest in anxiety, stress, fatigue, and even depression.

In spite of these challenges, many institutions continue to focus heavily on strategic plans to attract international students without commensurate investment in the structures needed to support their integration and well-being (Jones, 2017). Support services are often underdeveloped, and student diversity is not always met with tailored or differentiated support mechanisms.

Institutions continue to view international students primarily through an economic lens. They are perceived as revenue sources, rather than as individuals with complex lived realities, who face a range of challenges. This instrumental view persists regardless of whether the students originate from Asia, Europe, Africa, or the Americas (Bista, 2019, p. 5).

Many of these challenges are often linked to colonial legacies. Students from ex colonial countries often face greater marginalisations and discriminations. Researchers, challenge the notion of the university as a neutral or ideologically innocent space. Student mobility, although often celebrated, can reproduce colonial patterns of exclusion (Lee, et., 2017). There have been increasing calls to decolonise international students’

experiences by addressing the structural inequalities that mirror historically uneven power relations and colonial legacies (Ibid).

Institutional and Individual Strategies to Combat Challenges

The challenges mostly are addressed from both the institutional and individual levels.

Individual Strategies

Tran and Vu (2018) introduce the concept of agency in mobility. The concept underscores that international students are not merely passive recipients of global education experiences but active agents who shape their trajectories. They exercise strategic self-determination in navigating campus climates, institutional structures, and the broader socio-cultural contexts of their host environments.

On an individual level, students employ various coping strategies to manage these challenges. Many seek friendships with domestic students and members of the local community as a way of gaining insight into the host culture and building a support network (Lee & Ahn, 2013). Others connect with peers who share similar cultural backgrounds. These relationships foster a sense of belonging and offer emotional support to manage the stresses of cross-cultural adjustment (ibid).

Institutionally, higher education institutions must recognise that international students are not a homogenous group, even when they come from the same country. There is considerable diversity among international students in terms of cultural background, academic preparation, socio-economic status, and personal experiences (Jones, 2017). Consequently, institutions should develop differentiated support services aimed at promoting equity and inclusion. However, differentiation should not equate to preferential treatment. Services must be equitable, not discriminatory or exclusive. Preferential treatment based on race, ethnicity, nationality, or gender, whether explicit or implicit, should be avoided entirely.

Unfortunately, many institutions continue to privilege students from Western countries while offering limited support or concern for students from other regions, particularly from the Global South (Tannock, 2013). This practice perpetuates global inequalities and reflects the enduring influence of colonial hierarchies in contemporary higher education. The legacy of European colonialism continues to shape dominant discourses and institutional practices in international education. This reinforces power asymmetries that marginalise non-Western perspectives and experiences (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018; Zeleza, 2009).

To address these challenges, institutions must commit to providing non-discriminatory, inclusive student services that prioritise the well-being and dignity of international students. This calls for a shift toward humanizing internationalisation.

Humanizing Internationalisation

This is an approach that values international students as individuals with the capacity to contribute meaningfully to transnational education. Rather than viewing students through an economic or colonial lens (Lomer, et. al. 2023), institutions are expected to recognise them as human beings with rights, aspirations, and lived experiences. Central to this framework is the well-being of international students, with care acting as a foundational principle (Deuchar & Gorur, 2023). Well-being extends beyond academic success to include a sense of belonging, respect, recognition, and appreciation.

Humanising internationalisation also places inclusivity at the centre of international education. It ensures that diverse populations, including historically marginalised groups, have equitable access to global learning opportunities. Such inclusive practices contribute to the creation of a more just and equitable world.

At its core, this approach requires a critical examination of the dominance of Western knowledge systems in higher education. This commitment to epistemic diversity challenges the privileging of Western paradigms and dominant educational norms that often marginalise non-Western voices.

The Study

This qualitative study is based on data collected through semi-structured interviews. Participants involved undergraduate and graduate international students from various disciplinary backgrounds including Population Studies, Humanities, and African Studies.

The methodological approach enabled a comprehensive collection of in-depth insights (Silverman, 2024) into the lived experiences of international students. The institutions were purposively selected based on feasibility, age and size. University A is a large institution with a strong international reputation (Times Higher Education, 2020). It is located in Accra and is one of the oldest universities in Ghana. The university's vision is to become a research-intensive, world-class institution (Institutional Strategic Report, 2014–2024). University B is also a reputable public university, though smaller in scale than University A. Although its original focus was on national and sub-regional capacity building, the university has since broadened its programmes and outreach to attract students globally. Its current strategic

objective is to reposition itself in the international arena (Institutional Strategic Plan, 2018).

We utilised convenience and snowball sampling techniques due to challenges in reaching international students. Those who volunteered to participate were interviewed and, in turn, they introduced us to other international students.

Most of the graduate students were enrolled in regionally-focused programmes such as the Public Sector Management Training Programme (PSMTP), the West Africa Centre for Crop Improvement (WACCI), and the Regional Institute for Population Studies (RIPS). These programmes operate under regional mandates and follow recruitment policies that admit students from across the sub-region, often based on specific funding conditions.

Details of Student Participants
University A

Institution	Number of students	Duration of programme	Age brackets
Undergraduate			
Canada	3	One year	18–25
USA	8	One year	18–25
Nigeria	12	Four years (Full time)	
Graduate			
Cameroon	1	One year Master's	25–30
South Africa	1	One year Master's	25–30
Kenya	1	One year Master's	25–30
Sierra Leone	1	One year Master's	25–30
Total	27		

University B

Institution	Number of students	Duration of programme	Age brackets
Undergraduate			
Spain	3	One semester	19–22
France	3	One semester	19–22
Nigeria	10	Four-year programme	
Graduate			
Liberia	10	One year master's	25–30
Nigeria	3	One year master's	25–30
Total	29		

We collected the data primarily through face-to-face group interviews. In a few cases, individual interviews were conducted via Zoom or in person. These were necessary for participants who were not in Accra at the time of data collection, including those who had returned to their home countries for holidays. The use of both individual and group interviews did not affect the overall quality of the data.

Students were asked to share their experiences as international students in Ghanaian universities. The study included both students pursuing full-degree programmes and those engaged in short-term programmes, such as one-semester or year-abroad experiences. All students were included because, as Bista (2019) noted, “whether we call it ‘study abroad’ or ‘overseas study,’ students are constantly pursuing their dreams of studying in a foreign country” (p. 4). There is therefore a need to understand the experiences of all categories of international students. The study also considered students from both African and non-African countries.

The nationalities of participants were highlighted to underscore the point that international students are not limited to those from non-African countries (Bista, 2019). Students from African countries are also international students

and should be afforded the necessary support. Presenting the nationalities of participants also helps to identify the countries from which Ghanaian universities typically attract their international student population. Moreover, participants’ nationalities were found to have a significant influence on their experiences.

We analysed the data manually using thematic and content analysis. These were applied to both full-time and short-stay students.

Although the experiences of full-degree and short-term students may differ, they were treated equally in the analysis to reinforce the notion that all are international students, regardless of the duration of their stay.

This study was informed by postcolonial theory. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (2002, p. 2) use the term post-colonisation to refer to all cultures affected by colonisation, from the time of its practice to the present. This theoretical perspective addresses key issues in higher education, such as the infiltration of neoliberal ideologies, persistent inequalities and exclusions, and the enduring legacies of colonialism in international academic discourse. Postcolonial theory provides a critical lens through which the experiences of international students can be interrogated.

Ethical Considerations

We emphasised key ethical considerations such as obtaining voluntary informed consent and ensuring confidentiality and privacy (Silverman, 2021). Given the sensitivity of some of the issues raised by international students, we ensured all identifying information including names of participants or host institutions has been disclosed.

Findings

This section presents the findings of the study, with a particular focus on the academic and social experiences of international students.

Academic Experiences of Students

To strengthen their international appeal, several Ghanaian universities have expanded their academic offerings beyond their original mandates (Gyamera, 2014). The institutions now provide a wide range of programmes including postgraduate taught, research-based, sandwich, and PhD degrees for international students. Typically, international students select from existing course offerings available during a given semester, rather than requesting new courses to be created for them.

The curriculum across the institutions is largely Western-oriented. Instruction is delivered almost exclusively in English, with no academic programmes offered in other foreign or local languages. For students from non-English-speaking countries, language proficiency programmes are mandatory. At University A, a one-year in-house English proficiency programme is available, whereas University B refers such students to private language institutions upon request.

Nonetheless, most participants across both institutions, disciplines, and academic levels reported a high level of satisfaction with the quality of lectures and instruction they received.

Openness and Transparency

One of the key strengths, students highlighted, was the openness and transparency of lecturers:

I liked the fact that...the lecturers were very open...I mean, if you go to class, the lecturers are very eloquent... (Nelson, undergraduate, University B).

One thing I love about me taking the decision to come to (Institution) is the support you get from the lecturers. In as much as they teach, they go outside the box to teach us about everyday life which prepares you for the future.

Lecturer transparency refers to the clarity and openness with which lecturers communicate course expectations, assessment criteria, learning outcomes, and feedback mechanisms (Winkelmess et al., 2016). Transparent instruction is especially critical for international students, as it helps them understand academic norms and expectations, thereby reducing confusion and anxiety.

Interactive Engagement with Lecturers

Another strength is interactive engagement with lecturers:

In [country of origin] my classes are not too interactive, so I turn to slack off a bit but here sometimes they give us work every week...and there are discussions.

...there's a real exchange between the student and the lecturer and that's very nice (Nelson, undergraduate, University B).

Interactive teaching approaches, such as discussion-based classes, collaborative projects, and inquiry-driven activities, create opportunities for

active engagement. They enable students to make sense of their education personally and academically. Such pedagogical practices also foster deeper learning and intercultural dialogue.

Efficiency of Lecturers

Participants also perceived the lecturers as efficient:

I see that lecturers are young, but they are well-versed in their area of specialty, and these are the people when they teach you and you leave the shores of Ghana, you can make an impact (Tudu, graduate, University B).

Fantastic tutorials, 90% average is what I can apportion because over the years, the lectures I met demonstrate a high level of professionalism (Sarah, graduate, University A).

Opportunities to Collaborate with Local Students

Students also highlighted the enriched nature of the teaching and learning experience, particularly through opportunities to collaborate with local students. Such interactions not only facilitated deeper academic engagement but also promoted intercultural understanding and peer learning.

My interaction with local students in my class has been enriching. I could collaborate on group projects, exchange ideas, and learn from their perspectives on various topics related to public sector management.

Interaction with local students at the institution has been positive overall. I have found them to be supportive, respectful and willing to share their experiences and insights with international students like me.

The impact of the learning environment on student well-being has been widely emphasised in the literature. Brooker and Vu (2020) found that positive academic experiences, such as class discussions, active participation and study groups significantly contribute to students' overall well-being. Similarly,

Social-cultural Experiences

In line with the International Charter for Health Promoting Universities, there is a growing recognition of the importance of prioritizing students' well-being as a core aspect of higher education. Most participants in this study expressed satisfaction with their social and cultural experiences. The following excerpts are illustrative of their typical experiences:

Friendliness of People

Here, people are more sociable...and...they really want to know how you're doing...and they genuinely want to be a friend. (Charlotte, Undergraduate, University B).

But after they have become comfortable around you, that's when you start to see their cheerful nature (Tudu, graduate student, University B).

Polite and Helpful

Ghanaians are generally described as patriotic, polite, kind, and generous:

Here everybody is down to help one another. If I go to town and I get lost...someone will approach me and something like, 'oh you are completely lost, should I help you find your way? And they will take their time of their day and really walk with me to show me where the location is (Kemi, graduate student, University A).

They are very helpful with no expectation of anything (Alice, undergraduate, University B).

Their reflections highlight the positive aspects of integration, cultural exchange, and social support systems. Social experiences have a positive impact on students (Brooker and Vu, 2020). It facilitates international students' social integration, reduce cultural shock, and promote a sense of belonging.

Challenges

Some participants encountered challenges that significantly impacted both their academic and social experiences. This section explores these challenges in greater detail.

Miscommunication

Some participants expressed concerns about language barriers that led to instances of miscommunication.

...at times there is miscommunication and people don't study the same thing (Rio, undergraduate, University A).

Psychologically, sometimes I don't feel happy because of the insecurity and the language barrier.

Miscommunication, sometimes, has a negative impact on both academic and social experiences. For example, Rio recounted a situation where, due to a misunderstanding of instructions, he submitted an assignment that exceeded the required length, writing five pages instead of one. On another occasion, he wrote only one page when five were expected. These miscommunications affected his academic confidence and performance.

Excessive Use of Local Languages

The language barrier was further compounded by the frequent use of local languages both within and beyond the classroom. This practice often excluded international students from academic discussions and everyday conversations, leading to feelings of isolation and marginalization. The inability to participate fully in such interactions limited their opportunities for engagement, networking, and cultural integration.

...in class, you see Ghanaians speaking Twi and sometimes lecturers speak Twi before they interpret it in English and that is not a good experience for a foreign student...even if we are to brainstorm on some questions in class they would have to do it in Twi before they speak the English language and that aspect is not good for me (Kowshi, Masters student, University B).

Particularly when it comes to political stuff in the class, and people are arguing about different parties and stuff, it was over my head (Angie, University B).

As for these people, they are always speaking in their language wo we are not always understanding (Agnes, University A).

However, some participants noted that local students and lecturers occasionally translated conversations or lecture content delivered in Twi into English.

...if they are explaining in Twi and we don't get it, they try to explain it in English (Joyce, undergraduate, University B).

Language continues to pose a significant barrier for international students (Wong & Hyde, 2024). Many students struggle with understanding, navigating unfamiliar accents, engaging in classroom discourse, and participating in informal social interactions (ibid). These challenges not only hinder their academic engagement but also contribute to feelings of social exclusion and isolation.

Handling of Sensitive Topics

While students from neighbouring African countries did not express specific concerns, several exchange students raised issues regarding the handling of sensitive topics in the classroom. This is particularly, in relation to sexual orientation and religion. The findings revealed that some lecturers and local students adopted attitudes and postures that made international students uncomfortable during discussions on these subjects. Particularly, discussions on sexuality often lacked sensitivity. While some lecturers avoided the topic altogether, others introduced it either deliberately or as part of the lecture content. This offered the opportunity to openly criticise individuals with non-heteronormative sexual orientations, especially homosexuals.

Another point of concern was the frequent use of the Bible as a reference during lectures. Students from other African countries did not raise concerns, perhaps due to the fact that many African countries are predominantly Christian (Statista, 2022).

Yes, a lot of them [use] references from the Bible etc (Nelson, University B).

I will be in class, and a lecturer will ask a question and someone will give an answer with a Bible quote or something of that sort, but back in America that's impossible. (Ronnie, University A).

Integrating of African Knowledge Systems

Participants expressed mixed views regarding the integration of African knowledge systems into the curriculum. While a few students acknowledged efforts to incorporate African culture and values into the academic environment, the majority, particularly exchange students and some graduate students, voiced concerns about their limited presence in the lecture room. However, these systems are significant for the academic experiences of international students. Some students are attracted to African universities specifically to engage with indigenous knowledge (Gyamera, 2024).

I feel like they weren't emphasised in the curriculum, but they were facilitated through discussions. I think there were a lot of conversations...there were like good comparisons between African values and others like American or Western values and how these are in conflict (Patricia, University B).

Some lecturers made some examples and case studies about Ghana but also, I think a lot of lecturers did theories, that's why there weren't many examples on Africa and there were no

examples on Ghana either. Even African history, we didn't learn Ghanaian history. (Lucas, University B).

Long Hours of Lectures

While undergraduate participants, both African and non-African, did not raise concerns regarding lecture schedules, most graduate students expressed dissatisfaction with the intensity and scheduling of their courses. Many reported that the long hours of lectures, resulted in fatigue and adversely affected their mental health:

When I first came to the University, I went to class on Sunday and sat for more than nine hours, I think that the brain gets weak. If you sit for more than two hours, which I'm used to, you get stressed up, and for you to sit for nine hours is something else. And, to be honest, it's mentally stressful, I mean because even sometimes on Saturdays you go to lectures at 9 am, and you come end at 9 pm. (Kuwor, Graduate, University B).

For me, I feel it's very intense, in my understanding all master's programmes in Ghana are one year and the student doesn't get time to breathe. I believe in mental health, so what's reflected to me is that perhaps the country has not caught up with what the world is doing (Naomi, graduate, University A).

The deterioration of mental health among students in higher education has become a growing concern (Hartrey et al., 2017). Some causes of mental health include extended duration of lectures, and academic pressures, including assignments and tight deadlines. These contribute significantly to both emotional and physical stress for many students, leading to fatigue and frustration. These affect not only academic performance but also overall personal well-being.

Limited Opportunities for Local–International Student Interaction

Although many participants expressed satisfaction with their social and cultural experiences, a significant number, particularly those at University B, highlighted that these experiences primarily occurred off-campus:

I think my expectations were fully met, in terms of culture, in terms of experience, but it was mostly outside of the school. It was great. I like the city, the music, the travels I've done, that was fun and nice, but mostly outside of the school. (Nelson, Undergraduate, University B).

...so for the past few months, I got there I did find it very hard to make friends on campus But as I stuck to myself it became a lot easier and I also started to meet a lot of people outside of class, like in my area, friends of friends (Lizzy, undergraduate, exchange student, University B).

Limited interaction with local students remains a persistent challenge for international students (Pagliarello, 2023). This lack of engagement often fosters a sense of otherness, social isolation, and loneliness, which undermine the holistic international student experience. It hampers opportunities for meaningful cultural immersion, which is a critical aspect of international education.

Some participants attributed the limited interaction to a lack of awareness or orientation programmes aimed at informing local students about the presence and needs of international students:

A Ghanaian once asked me: 'Why did you choose Ghana instead of South Africa?' But I was thinking you should be happy that I chose Ghana. (Saaj, graduate, University A).

It was never mean excerpt that I would pass them, and they would be looking at me and saying hi oboroni, oburoni [White person], you know. I must say sometimes, it is a bit frustrating because some of them know I have been on campus for months now and still every day I walk past them and they will have the same, reaction and I will be like it's been weeks since I have been here and why are you surprised? I don't think, it was explained why we were here. Everyone I was talking with, it was like why are you here, are you a teacher? But I think nobody told them that there were going to be international students (Nelson, undergraduate, University B).

Participants observed that many local students seemed unaware of the significance of having international students on campus. Although this challenge was expressed across all institutions, it was reported to be less pronounced at University A.

Lack of Entertainment on Campus

The limited availability of entertainment further intensified the issue of social isolation. This concern was particularly emphasised by students at University B. They increasingly emphasised the absence of on-campus recreational activities or events.

Also, one thing that did disappoint me was I think because ... [University B] was quite small there is still very small student life and there are few associations (George, University B, graduate student).

Social life is very poor. There is very limited entertainment (Godwin, Undergraduate student, University A.).

The psychological adjustment and social integration of international students are often hindered by limited opportunities for interaction with domestic students (Jones, 2017). Social activities offer shared, non-verbal contexts through which international students can observe, engage, and build natural connections with peers (Ibid).

Food Accessibility and Cultural Preferences

Another concern raised by participants, particularly those at University B, was the limited availability of food, particularly, in the evenings. They also found difficulty in accessing culturally familiar meals. Even when food was available, the cost was often prohibitive. The inability to access familiar cuisine, compounded by the high cost of local meals, posed a significant challenge to their overall wellbeing and cultural adjustment Bhanu Pilli and Slater (2021).

At... [University B], once the canteen is closed you hardly get food to buy. So, we would be grateful if management could think in that direction, I mean centres to entertain or recreational centres so we can relax during holidays (Hawa, University B, graduate student).

If ...[University B] can work on the facilities so that we get places where we can cook on our own. For Liberians, we love our taste, and we love to cook for ourselves (Yao, University B, graduate student).

University A offers a range of services, including large and vibrant markets and shops that cater to the needs of both domestic and international students. Many international students reported being able to access a variety of food options, including some that reflect their culinary preferences.

Perceived Preferential and Hierarchical Treatment

A recurring concern raised by many African students, both undergraduate and graduate, was the perception of preferential or hierarchical treatment favouring exchange students, particularly those from Western countries. We explain preferential treatment, in this context, as situations in which

students from Europe and North America are perceived to receive greater attention or care. Hierarchical treatment reflects the perceived differential valuing of students based on their country of origin or racial identity.

Some participants interpreted the disparity in treatment through a racial lens, pointing to the continued privileging of White bodies in academic and social spaces. One Nigerian student, during participant recruitment, encapsulated this sentiment. When I approached her to take part in the study, and after I explained the aim of capturing the experiences of international students, she gestured towards a white student seated across the room and said:

Ask her, she has a lot to say... they treat them differently, you know the skin colour. Those of us here nobody cares.

This comment speaks to a deeper sense of marginalisation and invisibility felt by some African students. It raises critical questions about how internationalisation is practised and perceived in some Ghanaian higher education institutions.

Many of the White students interviewed acknowledged that considerable efforts were made by institutional staff to ensure their comfort and satisfaction. The preferential treatment is not only limited to the campuses but even in the local communities:

In the community...people tend to put White international students on a high pedestal ...and I think people get used to the way they're treated, and they seek to operate in it like superiority... and I think there's a big legacy of colonialism in Africa. (Nelson, undergraduate, University B).

I definitely think that white people have an advantage... if you go out to a restaurant for example, you see like every waitress approaches a White person first...the Blacks, attention is not on them...and like if we went to clubs, guys would approach White women more than other people.

After whites, Black Americans are the next to be treated better.

I'm treated very well, although I'm Black, people see my skin, and complexion and they can deduce that I'm not from an African country. (Ava, Undergraduate, University A).

I feel colonial legacies are very, very, ingrained here from my perspectives because I feel sometimes like people will not pay

attention to me until I speak and they say, wow, I thought... and all of sudden they will change their whole attitude which I feel like... very terrible to me.

In contrast, several African students reiterated the forms of discrimination they encountered, both on campus and within the broader community. These experiences ranged from subtle exclusions in classroom interactions and administrative processes to overt acts of bias in public spaces. This reinforces their sense of marginalisation and 'otherness'.

What I enjoyed least is the perceptions of Ghanaians towards Nigerians. Ghanaians assume that Nigerians are criminals, violence and fraudulent but this cannot be right, I do not like it at all (Chinedu, Nigerian Student leader).

I have my closest friend, we met at [Institution] and she's from... [An African country]. She has a very different experience than me...they treat African foreign students differently than if you're from other parts of the world. ... (Patricia, Undergraduate, University B).

These findings corroborate a growing body of research revealing that international students experience discriminatory treatment along lines of race and ethnicity within host institutions. For example, Lee, et. al., (2017) found that compared to students from Europe, North America, and other regions, non-Caucasian students, particularly those from the Global South, reported more significant hardships and instances of discrimination.

We interpret such unequal experiences as manifestations of enduring colonial legacies. Fanon (2008) illustrates how colonial ideologies foster internalised inferiority among Black people, influencing their interactions with White and non-White individuals alike. He asserts that a Black person behaves differently in the presence of a White person than with another Black person—an outcome of colonial conditioning and the internalisation of racial hierarchies (pp. 3–8). These dynamics persist in contemporary educational settings, subtly shaping interactions, power relations, and institutional cultures.

Support Systems

In spite of the challenges, there appears to be limited support system for students. When we asked students about support systems, they provide some of these typical responses:

Our faculty don't really get involved when it comes to that aspect. It's only about school and studying for them.

Honestly, I don't receive any service, and I think because I don't ask for any.

However, some participants suggested that some of the lecturers serve as supportive system for the students.

I had to go for counselling in one of the experience lecturer's offices.

There have been mixed arguments about the role of institutions in achieving student well-being. McLachlan and Justice (2009) posit that students must achieve well-being primarily through their own efforts. They gave limited attention given to the structural inequities, such as racism, marginalisation, and power dynamics, that shape the international student experience. Similarly, Tseng and Newton (2002) argue that international students must negotiate acculturative stressors using personal coping mechanisms. They, however, acknowledge the systemic pressures present in academic and social environments.

All the institutions involved in this study have formal support systems, such as counselling, health facilities, and international offices. However, most participants indicated limited engagement with these services. This may be due to unawareness, mistrust, cultural stigma, or the perception that such services are not tailored to their specific needs.

Integration Strategies and Student Agency

In exercising this agency, international students adopt a variety of strategies to cope with the academic, social, and emotional challenges they encounter. These include both proactive and adaptive approaches to overcoming structural barriers such as language difficulties, institutional bias, and cultural unfamiliarity (Tran & Vu, 2018).

Participants in this study demonstrated various ways of exercising agency and resilience.

Maintaining Contact with Family and Friends

A central emotional coping strategy students used to adapt to the situation is maintaining contact with family members remains. Participants often rely on frequent communication with family to maintain a sense of continuity and support:

I get in touch with my family every day, via WhatsApp calls, text messages, and video call.

Students also shared their reliance on friends. They formed friendships at recreational locations, such as swimming pools, and through class interactions:

Yes, I have been able to make a lot of friends in class, and most often I go to the swimming pool and make friends there also.

Developing Close Relationship with Countrymen

Some participants explained that they preferred interacting with their country people. This was particularly with Nigerian students:

I prefer to communicate with my fellow Nigerians where the vibes would flow, and it will be just simple (Augustina, Nigerian undergraduate female).

My social life is with my Nigerian friends, my boyfriend, and church, that is it.

One of the most prominent strategies was the forging of strong connections with individuals from similar cultural backgrounds (Tran & Vu, 2018).. These peer-based networks became critical spaces for support, identity reinforcement, and navigating both academic and social life.

Developing a Strong Sense of Purpose

A strong sense of purpose and personal vision also emerged as key drivers of resilience. Several participants expressed that their long-term goals served as a source of motivation:

I don't really know, but the only thing I can say is my vision of becoming an ambassador. That is the only thing I use to make myself happy in stressful moments.

Lee and Ahn (2013) similarly found that some students maintain optimism by focusing on the main reasons for pursuing international education. This future-oriented mindset provides psychological stability and helps manage current discomforts.

Engaging in Social Activities

Social activities and cultural exploration play an equally important role. Students engage in excursions and local tourism as a means of cultural immersion and stress relief:

For vacation, as international students, we organise so many excursions just to see or know more about Ghana.

Ultimately, self-determination and resilience emerge as central mechanisms in students' integration journeys. Their ability to respond positively and strategically to challenges reflects a dynamic process of adaptation, transformation, and identity negotiation (Jones, 2017).

This echoes McLachlan and Justice's (2009) assertion that international students should not be viewed merely as passive recipients of support. They should be perceived as individuals who actively generate solutions and demonstrate agency in difficult situations.

Discussion and Implication for Practice

In general, most participants across academic levels, countries of origin, and programmes, expressed satisfaction with their academic experiences. However, there were marked nuances in their social and cultural experiences. Exchange students from non-African countries tended to be highly positive. They often described their experiences as enriching and enjoyable. In contrast, many African international students reported exclusion, discrimination, and social isolation.

This divergence is not surprising. As Ogden (2007) observes, organisers of international study-abroad programmes are under persistent pressure to meet the expectations of students from the Global North. These expectations include the provision of familiar amenities, structured experiences, and a high degree of institutional responsiveness (p. 36). The evidence in this study suggests that institutions expend more effort in meeting the needs of students from non-African countries, often to the neglect of their African counterparts.

This disparity in treatment reveals a problematic hierarchy within internationalisation practices in the institutions. It becomes one that privileges students based on nationality, race, or perceived status. This underscores the persistence of colonial logics and global inequalities within higher education, where the needs and well-being of African students are frequently rendered invisible or secondary (Lee, etc., 2017).

It is also notable that many of the challenges participants face, such as language barriers, limited interaction with local students and high tuition and living costs, mirror those experienced globally. However, in the Ghanaian context, these challenges are compounded by deep-seated colonial residues in the higher education system and broader society.

One of the most persistent colonial legacies is the devaluation of academic institutions in the Global South. As the data reflects, most of the students generally expressed positive academic experiences in the Ghanaian. However, African universities continue to be perceived as offering limited opportunities for academic achievement and intellectual development compared to institutions in the Global North. These perceptions are rooted in colonial hierarchies that framed Western education as superior and African knowledge systems as primitive or irrelevant (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018; Zeleza, 2009). Such misconceptions are perpetuated today through global rankings, university branding, and international policy discourses. They elevate "world-class" institutions, often Western, while marginalizing African ones.

Another critical marker of colonial legacy is the dominant use of the English as the language of instruction in Ghanaian higher education. Despite increasing discourse around inclusivity and multilingualism in global higher education, English remains unchallenged as the main language of instruction and research globally (Tight, 2022).

Equally concerning is the continued marginalization of African knowledge systems. Since the first encounter between Europe and Africa in the 15th century, Africa has been subjected to profound epistemic violence (Zeleza, 2009). As Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) argues, colonial domination emptied African minds of their indigenous knowledge and memories, replacing them with European epistemologies and ontologies. Contemporary internationalisation policies, while ostensibly inclusive, do little to challenge this epistemic asymmetry. On the contrary, most universities have become more deeply embedded in Western academic models, including curriculum design and teaching methodologies. This trend undermines efforts to reposition African universities as autonomous knowledge producers.

Colonial legacies also manifest in the pedagogical practices of lecturers, particularly in the incorporation of Christian doctrine in classrooms and the open expression of negative attitudes towards individuals of diverse sexual orientations. This can be traced to the historical relationship between colonisation and Christian missionary activities. Christianity was introduced to the Gold Coast (modern-day Ghana) in the late 15th century by Roman Catholic missionaries accompanying Portuguese traders. With formal colonisation, missionary activity intensified and became intertwined with colonial governance and education. As Okon (2008) notes, "Christianity became the religion of civilization and development" (p. 1), positioning it as an essential pillar of colonial hegemony.

Despite Ghana's constitutional commitment to secularism and religious pluralism, Christian rituals, such as public prayers and the use of the Bible, are normalised in educational and public institutions. These practices are rarely seen as infringing on the principle of separation between religion and the state.

Another significant concern illuminated in the study is the perceived preferential treatment of Western international students over their African counterparts. As revealed earlier in the paper, participants across various groups including almost all exchange students observed that students from Western and some Asian countries received better services, more attention, and greater institutional care. African international students, particularly those from neighbouring countries, often faced subtle and overt forms of discrimination. These observations suggest a racialised hierarchy of international students: White students are treated most favourably, followed by Black students from the diaspora (e.g., the United States), and lastly Black students from sub-Saharan Africa, who often remain marginalised. In some instances, this preferential treatment fostered a sense of entitlement among Western students, reinforcing dynamics of superiority.

The preferential treatment echoes the arguments of postcolonial scholars such as Zeleza (2016) that coloniality continues to shape global power relations, including within higher education. Particular is the perception among some Africans that Westerners are inherently superior. This continues to feed into institutional practices, unwittingly reproducing racial hierarchies.

Crucially, this hierarchy is not only enforced by institutional structures but also reinforced by local students and the broader community.

Implications for Practice

Institutions must prioritise international student well-being by improving the scope and responsiveness of student services. No aspect of student welfare should be regarded as trivial. Services should address not only academic needs but also emotional, psychosocial, cultural, and mental health concerns.

The lecture room remains a key space for fostering well-being, belonging, and intercultural awareness. The curriculum should be intentionally designed to promote connection and empathy. It should be devoid of culturally exclusive content or practices, such as privileging one religious perspective over others. There should be equitable recognition of diverse identities, including those based on gender, sexuality, and faith.

Social integration is crucial. There is the need to encourage strong relationship between local and international students. Institutions should intentionally design social and entertainment programmes that include both groups of students. For instance, intercultural events, such as international days should not be limited to international students. This will provide opportunities for international and local students to interact and form stronger relationships.

Significantly, universities must guard against turning student mobility into a postcolonial reproduction of hegemonic structures. Internationalisation efforts should not re-inscribe old hierarchies, but rather promote intercultural responsibility among all students and staff, with structured opportunities to explore, reflect, and engage with cultural difference.

It is deeply concerning that universities, particularly those in Africa, would be perceived to frame international student experiences through racialised and hierarchical lenses. One of the fundamental aspirations of internationalisation is to foster mutual understanding, cultural respect, and global tolerance. For African universities, this mandate carries an added urgency; to disrupt and dismantle colonial legacies and to reshape long-standing misconceptions about Africa and Africans. As Ploner and Nada (2020) argue, international students' presence can have a transformative impact on socio-cultural and political identities both the students and institutions. Whether their experiences reinforce or challenge colonial legacies, depends on how they are received, integrated, and engaged.

International students, whether from Africa or elsewhere, often arrive with open minds, seeking experiences that either affirm or challenge dominant global narratives. African postgraduate students, in particular, tend to approach international education with a transformative agenda. They seek to gain exposure, knowledge, and collaborative networks to combat the persistent effects of colonialism (Gyamera, 2024). Thus, institutional practices that deny them equitable treatment contradict the very spirit of internationalization.

Generally, the reinforcement of colonial hierarchies through unequal support services, preferential treatment, and inaction in the face of student stereotyping defeats the broader purpose of internationalization. It particularly contradicts frameworks of "humanizing internationalization" and student well-being. These are increasingly recognised as foundation to build an inclusive and just global higher education (Lomer, 2023).

We argue that student well-being must be redefined not as a by-product of individual resilience, but as an outcome of structural justice. A justice-oriented, postcolonial approach to internationalisation demands that institutions go beyond the provision of services. It calls for a humanising paradigm, one that foregrounds dignity, agency, and participation. Rethinking international education through this lens means engaging in critical policy reform, enhanced institutional accountability, and a deeper theoretical engagement with decolonial frameworks.

Conclusion

As Ghanaian universities emerge as regional hubs for international education, there is a critical need to design and implement internationalisation strategies that centre the principles of student well-being, decolonial care, and equity. Institutions must scale up their support services not only to enrich students' academic experiences but also their social, cultural experiences. While differentiated care may be necessary to meet diverse student needs, it must never translate into preferential or racially skewed treatment.

International student experiences must not be framed through the lenses of skin colour, nationality. Universities should foster non-colonial, equitable relationships, ensuring that White, Brown, and Black students are treated with equal dignity, respect, and institutional care.

In this context, the decolonisation of teaching and learning becomes essential. This involves challenging dominant narratives, recovering silenced and marginalised knowledges, and embracing more inclusive, open-ended, and multicultural educational practices (Zezeza, 2009). Through sustained research, pedagogical reform, and transformation of institutional cultures, Ghanaian can position themselves not just as participants in global academic networks but as leaders in equitable and transformative internationalization.

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Unpacking External Quality Audit's Influence on Quality Management Practice of Ghana's Health Training Institutions: A Critical Realist Exploration

Francis Ansah and Emmanuel Oware Nyarko

Abstract

This study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to explore quality audit reports on Ghanaian Health Training Institutions (HTIs), aiming to understand how external quality audit as a quality assurance mechanism is influential on quality management practices of the HTIs because quality assurance mechanisms are to be a stimulus for innovation and enhancing quality. Utilizing the CDA design, a purposive sampling strategy is employed to select the first cycle external quality audit reports and through data abduction, key themes and linguistic markers are extracted, while data retroduction interprets the findings using Social Reality Theory (SRT) and Neo-Institutional Theory (NIT) lenses. Drawing on SRT, the research unveils power dynamics and discursive patterns that influence the audit process. Additionally, adopting Neo-Institutional Theory, the study reveals the influence of institutional norms and external pressures on quality management practices of the HTIs. The study's implications lie in enhancing the quality audit methodology and quality management practices of the HTIs whilst fostering contextually relevant and effective quality assurance mechanisms of the Ghana Tertiary Education Commission (GTEC).

Key words: external quality audit, Ghana tertiary education commission, health training institutions, quality assurance, quality management.

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Résumé

Cette étude utilise l'analyse critique du discours (ACD) pour examiner les rapports d'audit de qualité des établissements ghanéens de formation en santé (HTI), dans le but de comprendre comment l'audit externe de qualité, en tant que mécanisme d'assurance qualité, influence les pratiques de gestion de la qualité de ces établissements, sachant que les mécanismes d'assurance qualité sont censés stimuler l'innovation et améliorer la qualité. Dans le cadre de la ACD, une stratégie d'échantillonnage raisonné est utilisée pour sélectionner les rapports d'audit externe de qualité du premier cycle; grâce à l'abduction des données, des thèmes clés et des marqueurs linguistiques sont extraits, tandis que la rétroduction des données permet d'interpréter les résultats à la lumière de la théorie de la réalité sociale (TRS) et de la théorie néo-institutionnelle (TNI). S'appuyant sur la TRS, la recherche met en évidence les dynamiques de pouvoir et les schémas discursifs qui influencent le processus d'audit. Davantage, en s'appuyant sur la théorie néo-institutionnelle, l'étude met en évidence l'influence des normes institutionnelles et des pressions externes sur les pratiques de gestion de la qualité des établissements de formation en santé. Les implications de cette étude résident dans l'amélioration de la méthodologie d'audit de la qualité et des pratiques de gestion de la qualité des établissements de formation en santé, tout en favorisant la mise en place de mécanismes d'assurance qualité efficaces et adaptés au contexte au sein de la Commission ghanéenne de l'enseignement supérieur (CGES).

Mots-clés : établissements de formation en santé du Ghana ; audit externe de la qualité ; commission ghanéenne de l'enseignement supérieur.

Introduction

The last decade has witnessed a growing attention on the need for improved quality management practices in tertiary education institutions (TEIs). For example, several studies (Brennan, 2018; Leiber, 2018; Rezeanu, 2011; Seyfried & Pohlenz, 2018) have highlighted the importance of quality management practices in TEIs. These studies, overall, suggest that effective quality management practices can have a significant influence on tertiary education outcomes. To this end, in many countries, external quality assurance (QA) agencies are paying much attention to quality management practices of TEIs through quality audit exercises (Boughey & McKenna, 2017).

Presently in Ghana, the main external QA agency for tertiary education, Ghana Tertiary Education Commission (GTEC), has taken its quality audit mechanism to all Health Training Institutions (HTIs) in the country in its quest to ensure effective quality management practices in all tertiary institutions in the nation. Although, jurisdictionally, GTEC is an agency

under the Ministry of Education responsible for tertiary education whilst HTIs are under the Ministry of Health, the Education Regulatory Bodies Act of Ghana (Act 1020) has mandated GTEC to take oversight responsibility for all training institutions providing tertiary level education irrespective of the Ministry they fall under. For the reason of its mandate under Act 1020, GTEC has completed a first cycle of quality audit exercises in HTIs in the country.

During the GTEC's audit exercises in the HTIs, the auditors' reports seem to make several adverse findings on the quality management practices of the HTIs in the areas of governance and administration, academic programmes, learning environment and facilities, and quality enhancement. In effect, the reports indicate observable critical weaknesses in these areas of quality management practices of the HTIs that require immediate attention for improvement interventions as per the recommendations of the audit reports. However, these audit recommendations for improvement in the quality management practices are mainly on mechanistic implementation of coercive isomorphic changes based on hard data from the audit findings. The recommendations are mechanistic and coercive because they are based on responses to checklist of standardised reporting format that leaves little or no room for history and context of individual institutions audited. Mechanistic reporting does not elucidate the contextual elements of individual institutions under auditing to highlight the specific causal mechanisms responsible for the observed quality management practices in the institutions. Meanwhile, studies (Masehela, 2015; Boughey & McKenna, 2017) suggest that quality audit recommendations focused on mechanistic implementation of regulatory mechanisms in TEIs without addressing the causal conditions that foster agency among the institutional actors, do not bring expected improvement in the quality management practices, which create quality tertiary education outcomes.

Currently, there is a paucity of critical analysis of quality auditors' recommendations for implementation in Ghanaian TEIs in general and HTIs in particular, which can stimulate both scholarly and practitioner-based discussions with the potential to make external quality audit more influential on the quality management practices of the TEIs. Meanwhile the effectiveness of quality management systems in TEIs depends on the critical analysis of socio-cultural and agential conditions which enable or constrain quality management practices (Boughey & McKenna, 2017; Browning, 2021). Therefore, this paper focuses on a critical analysis of quality audit reporting and recommendations on quality management practices of HTIs in Ghana as a basis to explain the plausible causal mechanisms that can create effective agency for improving quality management practices of the HTIs. It argues that quality audit report and recommendations require abduction

and retroduction to move from the empirical data to explanations of causal mechanisms occasioning the empirical evidence that inform the audit reports and recommendations. The paper seeks to provide a deeper analysis and interpretations of the audit findings beyond the mechanistic reporting and recommendations, and ignite a discussion on rethinking the current quality audit methodology and how it can be made much more influential on improving quality management practices of TEIs in Ghana. It further argues that for external quality audit to make meaningful influence on institutional quality management practices, it should provide sufficient context analysis and focus on providing support to make compliance a natural occurrence where coercive enforcement becomes redundant.

The paper is informed by Social Reality Theory (SRT) advanced by Archer (1995) and applied by other authors (Boughey & McKenna, 2017; Quinn & Boughey, 2009) to illuminate the realities of quality audit processes in tertiary education. However, SRT is used as an under-labourer to support Neo-Institutional Theory (NIT) as the main theory for explaining the plausible causal mechanisms responsible for the observed audit findings and related recommendations. The paper discusses the theoretical framework first, to elucidate the triad concepts of quality, QA and quality management in TEIs.

The Concept of Quality Management Practices in TEIs

In the realm of tertiary education, quality, QA, and quality management are nested concepts that play crucial roles in ensuring the delivery of effective and fit-for-purpose educational outcomes (Ansaah, 2016). Although quality lacks one universally accepted definition in tertiary education, definitions cluster around what stakeholders want and the desire to make it better (Greere, 2023) which makes quality a dynamic and aspirational concept. Thus, quality in tertiary education represents different things at different times even in the same context which educational systems and institutions are to meet the expectations, needs, and requirements of the stakeholders, including students, faculty, employers, and society at large (Berhane, 2023). It encompasses various aspects, such as the relevance and currency of the curriculum, teaching and learning methodologies, infrastructure, research output, and overall stakeholder satisfaction (Greere, 2023; Mello Silva & Vargas, 2022). In this context, quality is an intrinsic attribute that drives education systems and institutions' reputation, credibility and acceptance (Harvey, 2018).

On the other hand, QA in tertiary education is the mechanisms to guarantee and enact stakeholders negotiated and accepted meaning of quality (Ansaah, 2016). Therefore, QA in tertiary education refers to a systematic process of monitoring and evaluating the performance of tertiary education systems and

institutions to ensure that they meet established quality standards (Asiyai, 2022; Berhane, 2023). QA in tertiary education, therefore, begins from compliance to assurance, to development, to best practice, and to excellence (Greere, 2023). The mechanisms involve both internal and external devices to identify areas of improvement and promote continuous enhancement of institutional practices (Glendinning et al., 2019; Madani, 2019). The external QA mechanisms include quality audits which are conducted by independent agencies to assess an institution's compliance with external standards and guidelines. These audits generate recommendations based on their findings, aimed at fostering improvements and enhancing the overall quality of the institution (Seyfried & Pohlenz, 2020).

Regarding quality management, it refers to the proactive and strategic approach adopted by TEIs to pursue best practices and achieve excellence continuously (Brennan, 2018). It involves the establishment of policies, processes, and practices that focus on quality enhancement across all levels of the organization (Brennan, 2018). Quality management practices include setting specific quality objectives, implementing quality control measures, conducting internal evaluations, and ensuring that feedback from various stakeholders is actively incorporated into the decision-making process to deliver to stakeholders' satisfaction (Rezeanu, 2011; Seyfried & Pohlenz, 2020).

The relationship among quality, QA and quality management is symbiotic and nested. The quest for quality brings about QA which leads to quality management, and effective quality management practices indicate robust QA system, which in turn, leads to desired quality. In conclusion, the concepts of quality, QA, and quality management are intertwined and nested in the pursuit of excellence in tertiary education. While quality is the ultimate goal that institutions strive to achieve, QA serves as the means to assess adherence to external standards, leading to the generation of recommendations for improvement. However, according to Boughey and McKenna (2017) if these recommendations are mechanistic, but forced into an institution's quality management practices, they may not lead to continuous enhancement and the realization of the institution's mission to provide high-quality education and services to its stakeholders.

Theoretical Framework

Two theories underpin this study: Social Reality Theory (SRT) and Neo-Institutional Theory (NIT). This section discusses how these two theories inform the study.

Social Reality Theory (SRT) is a variant of Critical Realism (CR) Worldview that takes context and history into account to explain patterns of social phenomena such as the phenomenon of QA in tertiary education and its mechanism of quality audit with associated practices. Readers may consult (Vincent & O'Mahoney, 2016) and (Archer & Morgan, 2020) for a comprehensive explanation of CR philosophy and SRT with their underlining concepts. Nonetheless, the paper provides a conceptual explanation of SRT as it guides the argument in discussing quality audit methodology as applied in tertiary education QA.

Tertiary education quality assurance mechanisms usually align with the widely accepted notions of quality in tertiary education as the fitness for and of purpose conception which underpin most of the national QA mechanisms and practices (Berhane, 2023; Seyfried & Pohlenz, 2018). The UK Quality Assurance Agency's framework prioritizes institutional mission alignment (Quality Assurance Agency, 2023); Finnish and Irish agencies participate in mission-driven QA reforms (FINEEC, 2022; Irish Universities Association, 2023); and African agencies increasingly adopt "fitness for purpose" to address massification and resource constraints, as seen in Zimbabwe and Nigeria's pandemic-responsive reforms (Neema-Abooki, 2022).

In this depiction, the paper argues that QA and its mechanisms in tertiary education could be better explained and understood from a SRT perspectives that takes cognizance of context and history to move beyond standardised empirical data to underlying causal conditions for effective social change through human agency (Archer, 2013; Boughey & McKenna, 2017). SRT encourages researchers to explain experienced or observed social phenomenon (for example, quality management practices in TEIs) beyond the empirical evidence to the plausible causal mechanisms responsible for that particular emergent social phenomenon (Archer & Morgan, 2020). Thus, from SRT perspective, the reality of any social phenomenon is layered in history and context, to the extent that the history and the context need to be unpacked to explain the observed and experienced social phenomenon (Archer & Morgan, 2020; Edgley et al., 2016). A focus on only the observable or experiential levels constitutes a 'flat ontology' which is not sufficient to bring about a transformational change in social structure and agency to achieve an expected end (Archer, 2013; Archer & Morgan, 2020).

To this end, using QA mechanisms such as quality audit to bring about improvements in quality management practices of TEIs, the audit methodology must go beyond employing a 'flat ontology' to inform its processes and eventual recommendations for improvement in quality management practices of the institutions and explore the causal

mechanisms (Boughey & McKenna, 2017; Browning, 2021). A more layered approach to reality by unpacking the potential mechanisms responsible for actual events that have resulted in the observable and experiential quality management practices would produce better understanding of the social structures and agency in the institutions for driving improved quality management practices. In this case, SRT seeks to account for how and why quality management practices of the HTIs have changed or remained the same after becoming TEIs within the context of social structure, culture and agency interplays. From SRT standpoint, quality management practices are produced by social structure, culture and agency (Quinn & Boughey, 2009). Thus, it is important for quality audit exercises to probe the institutional structural and cultural conditioning and the agency of staff and students for quality management practices. It is key for quality audit to establish that authentic positive change in structure, culture and human agency would emerge to improve quality management practices as a result of the audit findings and recommendations.

Relatedly, SRT expects quality audit reports to provide explanation to structural and cultural mechanisms at the macro (national) and micro (institutional) levels that are responsible for the empirical evidence of quality management practices observed by the audit panel members to inform their findings and recommendations. The interrogation and explanation of the causal mechanisms would provide a better understanding to tackle the root causes of any weakness in the quality management practices and generate human agency for authentic structural and cultural change to occur for improved quality management practices. In this vein, the study draws on the SRT to abduct the audit report to understand the structural and cultural conditioning and the human agency present in the HTIs at the time of the audit exercises. The paper seeks to understand the existing structural and cultural conditions for quality management practices in the HTIs and the human agency for implementing the recommended changes in the audit report.

Despite the usefulness of SRT to illuminate the understanding of social phenomenon, it might not have the explanatory power for all the specific causal mechanisms of events resulting in the observed and experienced in social science investigations. For instance, Vincent and O'Mahoney (2016) contend that at the point of empirical data retrodution in their critical reality study of a strategic partnership between one public and one private organisations, adding existing theories become invaluable for deeper understanding of mechanisms observed. SRT offers the opportunity to understand more about the relationships between the mechanisms and

the context, but other theories are required to build better explanations for interconnections among the mechanisms (Vincent & O'Mahoney, 2016).

Thus, for better explanations of the causal mechanisms responsible for the existing structural and cultural conditioning and the human agency captured in the quality audit reports on the HTIs, a Neo Institutional Theory (NIT) is added to the explanatory tool mix through retroduction of the audit findings and recommendations. The NIT has long been used in tertiary education organisational research due to its explanatory power linked to rationalisation of structures in society including TEIs (Klassen & Sá, 2020). Practices of TEIs have become highly institutionalised within appropriately established structures for responsibility, rationality and modernity as desirable traits for legitimacy in the society (Klassen & Sá, 2020). In this depiction, NIT comes in handy as a tool to explain the plausible sources of the prevailing structural and cultural conditioning as well as the human agency for the quality management practices in the HTIs. This is because NIT is built on the concept of isomorphism which involves cultural-cognitive, normative and regulative mechanisms for explaining procedures and practices in TEIs including quality management practices (Klassen & Sá, 2020; Zapp et al., 2021). The NIT concept of isomorphism explains the bases of order, motives of compliance, logics of action, mechanisms and indicators employed by organisations including TEIs (Klassen & Sá, 2020; Seyfried et al., 2019).

The cultural-cognitive isomorphism also known as mimetic isomorphism manifests through mimesis and emulation of practices for legitimacy (Gulden et al., 2020; Zapp et al., 2021). This isomorphism component of NIT argues that institutions in their formative and less stable phases gravitate towards copying the practices of well-established institutions within the same sector or across different sectors in order to gain legitimacy (David et al., 2019; Zapp et al., 2021). Nonetheless, the mimesis of practices represents shared mental conception of social reality that shape meaning and interpretation of events which affect actions and choices (Klassen & Sá, 2020). The mimetic isomorphism pillar of NIT could explain the cultural conditioning of quality management practices of TEIs.

Also, NIT's normative dimension of isomorphism is based on moral motivation to behave appropriately as professionals and experts for social obligation (Klassen & Sá, 2020). As professionals are socialised to act in certain ways, they come under pressure to internalise others' expectations of them and adhere to particular set of behaviours and roles (Klassen & Sá, 2020; Zajda, 2020). The normative isomorphism helps to explain the nature of human agency within the institution to act on quality audit findings and recommendations.

Additionally, NIT uses its regulative or coercive isomorphism to offer explanation for why institutions take certain actions to avoid costly or embarrassing consequences because the regulative isomorphism captures pressures that come from legal frameworks (Klassen & Sá, 2020; Zapp et al., 2021). The regulative isomorphism is a useful analytical tool for explaining the structural conditioning of quality management practices of TEIs in that they operate under legal frameworks and financial conditionalities requiring them to set up certain institutional structures for their operations.

Having explained and justified the theoretical framework for the study, the context of GTEC's quality audit mechanism and a brief description of the audit methodology in use is provided next.

The Context of GTEC's Quality Audit for TEIs in Ghana

The Ghanaian tertiary education landscape is governed by GTEC at the national level, which plays a pivotal role in ensuring the quality and standards of tertiary institutions in the country. GTEC employs QA mechanisms including quality audit to ensure that TEIs provide high-quality education, meet international standards, and contribute effectively to national development. In this context analysis, the article examines the role and significance of the quality audit conducted by GTEC on Ghanaian TEIs, with a focus on the audit methodology and its potential influence on the quality management practices of tertiary institutions, particularly the HTIs.

The main goal of the GTEC-conducted quality audit is to review and appraise the TEIs' quality management practices in order to raise standards (Ghana Tertiary Education Commission, 2023). The audit is designed to look at a number of issues, such as institutional governance, academic programmes, faculty credentials, learning environments and infrastructure, research output, student support services, and quality enhancement mechanisms (Ansa & Swanzy, 2019). The GTEC aims to foster ongoing improvement and enhancement of educational quality by identifying areas of strength and weakness within the institution's quality management practices through this thorough evaluation (Ansa & Swanzy, 2019).

To accomplish this, the quality audit process entails a methodical and thorough evaluation of institutions using a combination of document analysis, on-site visits, and stakeholder involvement. To obtain insight into the institutions' quality management processes, GTEC Audit Teams examine institutional policies, strategic plans, academic programmes, learning environments and facilities, and quality enhancement mechanisms throughout the document analysis phase. The Auditors have the chance to speak with faculty, staff, students, and administrators during on-site

inspections to develop a more comprehensive picture of the institution's operations and culture. Through stakeholder engagement, the Auditors are able to get opinions and feedback from internal stakeholders, primarily key officers, faculty, and students, ensuring a thorough assessment of the institutions' adherence to standards and practices for quality enhancement as well as agency for ongoing improvement.

The GTEC quality audit has important ramifications for Ghanaian TEIs as a result. Corrective action plans may be created as a result of the audit results; these plans may call for implementing interventions to remedy inadequacies, addressing improvements, or even facing potential sanctions. The audit process pushes institutions to adopt best practices, comply with international quality standards, and show dedication to ongoing improvement, all of which help to promote the tertiary education industry in Ghana as a whole.

Overall, GTEC's quality audit is an essential tool for guaranteeing and upgrading the standard of education offered by Ghanaian TEIs. The auditing process fosters openness, responsibility, and ongoing development by assessing many facets of institutional operation. The audit's conclusions have wide-ranging effects on the institutions and the tertiary education industry as a whole, encouraging an atmosphere that is conducive to excellence, innovation, and relevance in Ghanaian tertiary education.

Study Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative research design, specifically a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach, to explore the quality audit reports. CDA is “a particular strand of discourse analysis that focuses on the role of language in society and in political processes, traditionally targeting texts produced by elites and powerful institutions, such as news and political speeches” (Bouvier & Machin, 2020, p. 2). It is qualitative research strategy that “focuses on power and ideology in discourse, and insists that research needs to take the material and social reality outside of discourse into account in order to make meaningful claims about society and culture” (Hjelm, 2021, p. 13). As a research approach, CDA provides a comprehensive framework for examining language use and communication patterns in texts, enabling researchers to delve into the underlying power dynamics, ideologies, and social structures that shape discourse (Bouvier & Machin, 2020; Hjelm, 2021).

CDA was adopted as an appropriate method for analysing the data from quality audit reports in Ghanaian HTIs because when applied to quality audit reports, CDA allows researchers to explore the implicit meanings,

biases, and the influence of powerful actors, shedding light on how quality management practices are represented and constructed in these reports. In quality audit reports, language plays a significant role in shaping perceptions of educational quality. CDA helps to unveil power relations by closely analysing the linguistic choices made by auditors and accrediting bodies in their assessments during audit exercises. By identifying the use of evaluative language and authoritative voice, researchers can uncover how certain actors exercise their authority and influence over the auditing process (Ahmad & Shah, 2019; De Bernardi, 2021). This critical scrutiny of power dynamics enables a deeper understanding of whose interests and perspectives are prioritized, and whose voices may be marginalized within the discourse on quality management practices in the HTIs.

Further, CDA is instrumental in identifying dominant discourses present in the audit reports which can reflect broader societal ideologies and norms that may influence the assessment criteria and standards used in the audit process (Bouvier & Machin, 2020; De Bernardi, 2021). Researchers employing CDA can analyse how these dominant discourses shape the portrayal of quality, shedding light on whether the reports are contextually relevant by considering the unique cultural and contextual aspects of Ghanaian tertiary institutions.

Moreover, CDA allows for the exploration of gaps and silences in the audit reports. Researchers can uncover what is omitted or left unsaid, which may indicate deliberate exclusions or areas that lack proper attention (Bouvier & Machin, 2020). These omissions may reveal the interests and priorities of the auditing bodies and provide insights into potential biases or limitations in the reporting process.

Report Sampling

A purposive sampling strategy is employed to select the first full audit cycle reports on all the HTIs that participated in the audit exercises. The HTIs have different profiles regarding ownership types, geographical locations, and academic programme levels. However, none of them offer degree programmes yet. They offer three-year diplomas together with professional licensure certificates to practices as State Registered Nurses or Midwives.

A total of 134 HTIs, made up of 86 public and 48 private, were audited during the first full audit cycle across the 16 political regions of the country. This first cycle audits were conducted between January 2019 and December 2022. The study focused on the first cycle audit because the full reports on all the HTIs that participated were obtainable from GTEC upon request for

research purposes. Besides, only one cycle of quality audit reports had been completed for the HTIs at the time of this study.

Data Extraction

The data extraction strategy began with a Codebook development (Ritchie et al., 2022) which enabled to outline the key concepts such as structural and cultural preconditions to explore from the authors' theoretical orientation for the study. For example, under SRT, the concepts of structural and cultural preconditions at the macro (national) and micro (institutional) levels to code the reports were used. Under NIT, pressures from mimesis and emulation of practices for legitimacy, moral motivation to behave appropriately as professionals and experts as social obligation, and legal frameworks were coded.

The data extraction process started June 2023 by reading through the audit reports thoroughly to familiarize with the content and structure (Saldaña, 2021). Using the codebook as a guide, relevant sections, paragraphs, or quotes that reflect the concepts outlined in the codebook were sought. Then, the narratives and data points that best represent the theoretical constructs labelled in the codebook were extracted. For example, explicit mentions of demands for policies and procedures by regulatory GTEC were extracted because they represented pressure from external regulatory framework. Finally, the extracted data in a structured manner were organized, linking each narrative or data point to its respective theoretical construct in the codebook.

Data Analysis

Once the data extraction was complete, its analysis using abduction and retroduction techniques followed (De Bernardi, 2021). The data abduction process involved systematically analysing the content of the reports to identify recurring themes, linguistic markers, and discursive patterns related to the constructs in the codebook. With the linguistic markers, instances of evaluative language and authoritative voices in the reports were themed whilst the discursive patterns themed instances of ideological expressions in the reports (Hjelm, 2021).

The data retroduction in the analysis followed, moving from what is empirically observable to structural and cultural conditions at the macro and micro levels that are not immediately observable in the audit reports (De Bernardi, 2021) using the lenses of SRT and NIT. By applying these critical lenses, the study sought to unveil the underlying structures, discourses, power relations, and institutional norms that shape quality management practices captured in the audit reports.

Ethical Considerations

The study observes sound research ethics in using the audit reports and addressed several ethical issues associated with the use of institutional information. First, an application was submitted and permission granted from GTEC in April 2023 to use the reports for scholarly argument and contribute to knowledge on QA practices in tertiary education. Second, confidentiality and anonymity ethical principle in research were observed by ensuring that any information obtained from the quality audit reports is presented in a way that maintains the confidentiality and anonymity of the health training institutions, faculty, students, and any other stakeholders involved. Finally, data integrity and accuracy were observed by ensuring that the information taken from the audit reports is accurately represented without misrepresenting or manipulating data. Direct quotes, data excerpts, and statistics have been contextualized and presented responsibly.

Findings and Discussion

In this section, emerging issues from the external quality audit reports and their recommendations are presented. By employing SRT and NIT, the study aims to shed light on the intricate dynamics of how influential GTEC's quality audit exercises are on quality management practices of HTIs in Ghana. The findings and discussions are presented under four major themes that emerged from the coding and analysis of the audit reports. These themes are: Governance and Administration, Academic Programmes, Learning Environment and Facilities, and Quality Enhancement. Findings under these themes are presented and discussed in this section.

Discourse on Governance and Administration

The governance system, which is represented by the decision-making structures of the HTIs, consists mainly of the Governing Board (also known as the Advisory Board) and the Academic Board as identified in the audit reports. One of the major findings in the audit reports on governance was that the Governing Boards and the Academic Boards of the HTIs were not consistent and well-structured with respect to GTEC's published norms and standards for tertiary institutions in terms of compositions of the boards. This is captured in the sampled reports as:

The Advisory Boards' composition was not consistent and well-structured. The composition should include representations of people with technical competence, gender equity, students, and mentoring institutions. ... Unfortunately, also, an examination of the Academic Board reveals that in most of the institutions, key officers including the Quality Assurance Officer, Librarian, College Administrator, and Dean of Students were not members.

The Academic Board's membership should be enlarged to include critical officers such as a Quality Assurance Officer, a Librarian, a College Administrator, and a Dean of Students.

The quotation on the governance structures suggests a narrative of deviations from established norms by the GTEC or best practice benchmarks. However, the basis for such mass deviation from the norms are not captured in the reports, meanwhile a recommendation was made for the governing boards and academic boards to be well constituted and structured. From the standpoint of critical realists, the findings on the governance structures do not address the issue beyond the empirical level and examine the causal mechanisms responsible for the manifest mass deviation from the norms. In the view of SRT as articulated by Quinn and Boughey (2009), the findings and recommendations of the governance structures of the HTIs indicate a situation of using “flat ontology” in audit methodology that usually does not address actual causes of issues in audit findings. It has been argued that it is not good enough if auditors do not present causal conditions but focus on only the observable or experienced during audit exercises (Bunt, 2018). Nonetheless, it is discernible from the discourse of the quotations on the governance structures that macro level causal mechanisms are responsible for the governance system observed by the auditors because almost all the HTIs manifested the same governance conditions. In such a situation, the recommendations offered in the audit reports for the HTIs to be ordered to restructure their governance system appear to be an application of coercive isomorphic device for activating a regulatory power to ensure compliance with established norms of tertiary education institutional governance structures (David et al., 2019; Loi et al., 2021). In such a context, the coercive isomorphic device would probably achieve the intended purpose only for want of institutional legitimacy requirement irrespective of the root causes of the existing governance structures.

Regarding the administrative systems, which are usually depicted by the institutional organograms that define the administrative arrangements for implementing statutes, policies and governance decisions, the audit reports indicate that they were poorly designed and implemented in the HTIs. The audit reports put it this way:

The Organograms that implement the Statutes are poorly unconventional practices required of modern TEIs that demands immediate corrective actions designed and implemented. There are several conflicts between the Statutes and the Organograms. Certain positions created in some of the Organograms are not found in the Statutes, and vice versa. Some positions, such as

the Vice Principal and Internal Auditors, do not have suitable reporting lines or placement. GTEC has developed a simplified Organogram for private tertiary education institutions in Ghana. HTIs could use the GTEC template to create an institutional organogram.

Again, the discourse in the audit reports on the administrative structures predicated on the Organograms and the Statutes, lacks adequate interrogation on the causal mechanisms of the observed inadequacies found in the Organograms and the Statutes' implementation. It is not clear from the discourse, how the inharmonious relationship between the Organograms and Statutes emerged and the likely causative factors. Meanwhile, recommendation is made for the adoption of an Organogram template GTEC developed for private TEIs. Thus, this audit recommendation on Organograms presents a vivid case of pressures from mimesis and emulations of practices for legitimacy. Although, the recommendation to adopt the organogram template GTEC developed for private TEIs is a proposal without seeking compliance, however, due to power dynamics, the HTIs might feel obliged to adopt the recommended organogram to gain acceptance even if it might not have any consequential improvement to their quality management practices. Besides, the linguistic marker of the language, “the HTIs could use the GTEC template” connotes an impression of alluding to what is implicitly acceptable to the regulatory authority so that adopting it has legitimacy.

Discourse on Academic Programmes

The discourse on Academic Programmes focuses on student admissions, assessment, and staff-student ratios. The discourse indicates unconventional practices required of modern TEIs that demand immediate corrective actions. The reports proceed to make what is deemed as appropriate recommendations for implementation. Meanwhile, the discourse is silent on the causal mechanisms responsible for the unconventional practices. For instance, on student admissions, the reports collectively state:

There is no Admissions Committee in place, and most admissions are handled by the College Principal. Mentoring institutions are not involved in all aspects of the admissions process. The admission processes of HTIs should be streamlined by putting in place properly constituted admission committees. Mentoring institutions should be included on the admissions committee.

Evidently, the discourse does not provide any context why admissions committees are absent and the College Principal solely handles admissions. As reasonable as the recommendations appear with common practices of modern TEIs, the silences on contexts constrain a holistic view of the issue to enable the GTEC Board decide on keeping to the rule or make an exception if what is practiced works for the HTIs. In this situation, GTEC enforcement of the recommendations as they are, might address only the empirical layer of reality leaving the actual and real layers of reality (De Bernardi, 2021) which address the root causes of the issue for real influence on admission practices.

On student assessment, the nature of the discourse is not different in terms of absence of context and information beyond the empirical level. The findings and the recommendations state:

There are no assigned External Examiners/Moderators for the institutions, and even when they are, moderators delay in submitting their reports while others do not. A concerning observation is that some moderators have never visited their respective institutions after their appointments. In the majority of HTIs, examination leakages are also common.

External moderation procedures must be adequately strengthened. As part of the affiliation agreement, the mentoring institutions should appoint external moderators to the HTIs. The moderators should agree on a visit schedule with the institution, as well as submit feedback and reports to the HTIs.

The discourse on the assessment or examinations is obviously silent on causal conditions of the state of affairs. Meanwhile, the assessment of external examination and moderation procedures within the HTIs reveals a critical deficiency in the quality control mechanisms beyond the HTIs. This situation exposes a structural issue in the absence of oversight responsibility over the External Examiners/Moderators, leading to delays in report submissions and, in some cases, complete negligence of their roles. It is imperative that the mentoring institutions play a more active oversight role over external moderators, ensuring regular visits, and fostering accountability to maintain the quality of education and the integrity of assessments in HTIs.

The discourse on academic programmes also highlights observed deficiencies in staff-student-ratios with a potential compromise on quality. The reports collectively states:

The Staff Student Ratio (SSR) was found to be too high, particularly for midwifery programmes, hovering at 1:70 for some institutions. Such a high SSR has a direct influence on the quality of teaching and learning. In order to address the high SSR, the Ministry of Health should consult with the Ministry of Finance for financial authorization to hire the necessary employees, particularly for the Midwifery programmes. The recruitment of crucial employees like Librarians and Internal Auditors should also demand the Hon. Minister's attention. It is advisable to replace incompetent departmental heads with qualified cognate staff.

The high Staff-Student Ratio (SSR) highlighted in the discourse poses a significant structural challenge to the quality of teaching and learning in the HTIs. This situation results from both resource limitations and potentially misaligned organizational structures. In this particular instance, the reports point to a national level causal condition of the Government's inability to provide funds for hiring additional staff and the HTIs' misaligned organisational structures. Thus, the recommendations assign responsibilities to specific actors to take action. From an SRT standpoint, such interrogation of causal conditions generates better human agency for transformative action (Archer & Morgan, 2020).

Discourse on Learning Environment and Facilities

The discourse on learning environment and facilities captured in the reports indicate a state of concern for compromise on quality with regards to developing the student nurses and midwives' practical competence. The report captures the discourse as such:

Physical facilities are required to support the proper operation of the HTIs' programmes for the development of practical competence. The majority of the supporting facilities are either inadequate or in disrepair. A few examples are provided below:

- Most HTIs do not have internet access. Even where it is available, coverage is limited to a few locations.
- Skill laboratories are under-equipped.
- Inadequate computers in computer labs.
- Libraries are ill-equipped and badly managed. There is no library management software in place, and no e-books/journals are subscribed to.

The government, through the GETFund, should devise a strategy to retool and equip all HTIs with the necessary cutting-edge technology to support their programmes and practical work. HTIs should also have reliable internet access, appropriate PCs, and library management software/e-library.

The state of affairs described in the discourse as inadequate facilities and resources could be attributable to a combination of structural and cultural conditions that have evolved over time. Financial constraints appear the obvious critical factor because Ghana's TEIs have long struggled with limited budgets, and often receive insufficient funding, leading to the inability to maintain and upgrade facilities (Kwasi-Agyeman et al., 2020). In another vein, there might be institutional culture of resistance to change and a preference for maintaining the status quo by the HTIs with little institutional level initiatives, reinforced by a lack of effective external oversight to keep learning environment and facilities up-to-date.

Admittedly, the reports use the recommendations to draw attention to the government's limited funding as a possible causal condition for the state of affairs observed but silent on plausible institutional level culture of resistance to change and keeping to the status quo. From a critical realist standpoint, the recommendations may address symptoms instead of actual causes because the main causal condition could be the culture of maintaining the status quo instead of institutional level initiatives to transform the learning environment and facilities (Masehela, 2015).

Discourse on Quality Enhancement

The discourse on quality enhancement presented in the reports show concern for quality enhancement systems and practices in the HTIs as stated in the extract below.

The quality assurance (QA) unit needs adequate funding, and personnel with the right qualifications should be chosen to lead it. The QA officers should receive a job description to enable them discharge their duties diligently. To establish a quality enhancement culture in the HTIs, the QA officers should first have a quality assurance policy and annual plans. It is advised that the QA officers receive training on the underlisted:

- Preparation of QA Policy
- Preparation of QA Plan
- Development of tools and checklists for monitoring performance on academic standards

- Formulation of Strategic Plans

The Commission might also assist the HTIs by creating relevant templates and guidelines for writing policy texts.

This extract from the reports on quality enhancement underscores critical issues in the realm of quality enhancement within the HTIs. However, as usual, the discourse does not interrogate the causal mechanisms either at the institutional or national level responsible for the deficiencies observed. Thus, the recommendations may not address the root causes of the issues.

Concluding Thoughts

The findings from this study provoke a rethink of the current GTEC's quality audit methodology intended to strengthen quality management practices of the HTIs, particularly the reporting format. The findings demonstrate the inadequacy of the quality audit reports that inform GTEC to deploy its regulatory authority to enforce compliance on standards regarding quality management practices of the HTIs. From the standpoint of SRT and NIT, it is evident from the analyses and discussions of the quality audit reports that GTEC's audit methodology is based on 'flat ontology' which does not go beyond the empirical layer of reality to explain the structural and socio-cultural conditions responsible for audit observations on quality management practices of the HTIs. The reports also lack evocative discourses to get the sense of internal actors' narratives informing Auditors' claims during live audit exercise. If the audit observations appear mechanical and do not explain the causal conditions surrounding the findings with evocative narratives of actors in the institution, it is plausible that GTEC's action on the reports would be less influential as expected because the socio-cultural context is missing in the report. Thus, the quality audit mechanism would have minimal potential to bring authentic quality improvement culture in the HTIs beyond the usual compliance mode of quality management practices to appease regulatory demands.

For GTEC's quality audit mechanism to be more influential on quality management practices of the HTIs, audit reports should include evocative discourses from the participants of the auditee institution highlighting explanations for causal conditions responsible for observed quality management practices in the institutions. This calls for a review of the current quality audit reporting format to compel auditors to highlight causal conditions of quality management practices with evocative writing so that institutions involved can vividly relate to the report to generate human agency and natural responsibility for improvement actions in quality management practices in the institution.

Limitations of the Study

In order to comprehend the underlying causes of the observed quality management practices, the study provides a thorough analysis of quality audit reports on the HTIs in Ghana. There are a few restrictions, though, that must be noted. First, questions concerning the accuracy and objectivity of the data may arise given that the study's main source of data was quality audit reports. Due to their inherent selectiveness, audit reports might not fully account for all internal and external factors influencing the activities that were observed. Furthermore, the study's qualitative methodology, that is, Critical Discourse Analysis, may include subjectivity in interpretation, thereby restricting the generalizability of findings, even though it is helpful in revealing power dynamics and latent meanings.

Second, the results may not be as applicable to other kinds of educational institutions due to the study's narrow focus on a certain segment of Ghanaian tertiary education (HTIs). It's possible that the special traits and difficulties faced by HTIs do not accurately reflect Ghana's larger higher education sector. Moreover, the focus of the study is limited to Ghana, which begs the question of how generalizable the results are to other institutional and sociocultural contexts. It is possible that the dynamics of quality management in HTIs are different from those in other nations or in other fields of education. As a result, the study's conclusions should be evaluated in light of Ghanaian HTIs, and care should be used when using them in other contexts.

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Postgraduate Students' Utilisation of Research Paradigms and Approaches in Theses and Dissertations Development at a Selected University in Tanzania

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Abstract

Research paradigms and approaches constitute the philosophical and methodological foundations of scholarly inquiry, shaping how researchers conceptualise problems, generate knowledge, and select appropriate methods; however, their utilisation in postgraduate theses and dissertations remains insufficiently examined in many African universities, including Tanzania. This study examined the level of utilisation of educational research paradigms and approaches in the development of theses and dissertations among postgraduate students at a selected university in Tanzania. Data spanning over four decades between 1985 and 2023 were generated through review of theses and dissertations found in university library. To determine the prevalence and distribution of research paradigms and approaches, a content analysis of theses and dissertations was conducted using descriptive statistics. Findings revealed varying degrees of utilisation of research paradigms and approaches among postgraduates in theses and dissertations development. Notably, positivism has limited application, while interpretivism and pragmatism are widely used. However, newer paradigms saw limited use.

Key Words: research paradigm, research methods, postgraduate students, educational research, theses, dissertations, Tanzania.

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Doctoral candidates prioritise research philosophies and methodological protocols, while master's students often focus solely on research approaches, overlooking paradigmatic stances. The study emphasises the need to enhance the application of contemporary research paradigms to improve educational research and address issues effectively in higher education institutions.

Résumé

Les paradigmes et approches de recherche constituent les fondements philosophiques et méthodologiques de la recherche scientifique ; ils déterminent la manière dont les chercheurs conceptualisent les problèmes, produisent des connaissances et choisissent les méthodes appropriées. Cependant, leur utilisation dans les mémoires et thèses de troisième cycle reste insuffisamment étudiée dans de nombreuses universités africaines, y compris en Tanzanie. Cette étude examine le niveau d'utilisation des paradigmes et des approches de recherche en sciences de l'éducation dans l'élaboration des mémoires et thèses chez les étudiants de troisième cycle d'une université tanzanienne. Des données couvrant plus de quatre décennies, entre 1985 et 2023, ont été recueillies grâce à l'examen des mémoires et thèses disponibles à la bibliothèque universitaire. Afin de déterminer la prévalence et la répartition des paradigmes et des approches de recherche, une analyse de contenu des mémoires et thèses a été menée à l'aide de statistiques descriptives. Les résultats ont révélé des degrés variables d'utilisation des paradigmes et des approches de recherche chez les étudiants de troisième cycle lors de la rédaction de leurs thèses et mémoires. Il convient de noter que le positivisme a une application limitée, tandis que l'interprétativisme et le pragmatisme sont largement utilisés. En revanche, les paradigmes plus récents ont été peu utilisés. Les doctorants accordent la priorité aux philosophies de recherche et aux protocoles méthodologiques, tandis que les étudiants en master se concentrent souvent uniquement sur les approches de recherche, négligeant les positions paradigmatiques. Cette étude souligne la nécessité de renforcer l'application des paradigmes de recherche contemporains afin d'améliorer la recherche en éducation et de traiter efficacement les problématiques au sein des établissements d'enseignement supérieur.

Mots-clés: paradigme de recherche ; approche de recherche ; étudiants de troisième cycle ; recherche en éducation ; thèses, mémoires.

Introduction

Research paradigms provide the philosophical foundations that shape how educational phenomena are understood and investigated. They encompass researchers' assumptions regarding the nature of reality (ontology), the

nature and sources of knowledge (epistemology), the procedures used to generate knowledge (methodology), and the role of values in the research process (axiology) (Lincoln et al., 2023; Paul, 2005; Phillips & Burbules, 2000). These assumptions influence every stage of inquiry, including the formulation of research questions, selection of research designs, choice of data collection methods, and interpretation of findings (Bridges, 2017; Khatri, 2020). Consequently, paradigms are not merely abstract philosophical concepts; rather, they constitute practical frameworks that guide the coherence and rigour of research practice.

Within educational research, the increasing diversity of methodological traditions has expanded opportunities for investigating complex educational issues from multiple perspectives (Cohen et al., 2018; Creswell & Creswell, 2022). However, this methodological pluralism also places greater demands on researchers to justify their methodological choices and demonstrate alignment between their philosophical assumptions and research procedures. For postgraduate students, who are expected to undertake independent scholarly inquiry through theses and dissertations, an understanding of research paradigms is particularly important because it contributes to the development of methodologically sound and defensible studies (Paltridge & Starfield, 2020). Failure to appreciate these philosophical foundations may result in inconsistencies between research questions, methodological choices, and interpretations, thereby compromising the credibility of research findings (Moon & Blackman, 2014). Accordingly, understanding research paradigms has become an essential component of postgraduate research training and an important indicator of research competence in higher education.

Research methodology training occupies a central position in postgraduate education because it equips students with the knowledge and skills necessary to design, conduct, and communicate scholarly research. Through research methods courses, postgraduate students are introduced to the philosophical foundations of inquiry, principles of research design, ethical considerations, data collection strategies, and analytical techniques required for independent investigation (Khaldi, 2017; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Such training is intended not only to enhance technical competence but also to cultivate critical thinking and methodological reasoning that enable students to make informed decisions throughout the research process.

Nevertheless, international literature suggests that postgraduate students frequently experience difficulties in understanding methodological concepts, particularly those related to research paradigms, epistemological assumptions, and the relationships among methodology, methods, and

research design (Mkansi & Acheampong, 2012; Earley, 2014). These challenges are often compounded by lecturer-centred pedagogical approaches that emphasise the transmission of methodological content rather than active engagement with research practice (Lewthwaite & Nind, 2016; Matos et al., 2023). As a result, students may complete research methodology courses without fully understanding how philosophical assumptions inform methodological choices. Research has also shown that supervisory practices, disciplinary traditions, peer interactions, and prior educational experiences significantly influence students' methodological development (Daniel, 2022; Kaur et al., 2021). Consequently, while research methodology training remains an indispensable component of postgraduate education, concerns persist regarding its effectiveness in fostering deep conceptual understanding and facilitating the practical application of research paradigms and approaches in students' own research endeavours.

The development of postgraduate education in Tanzania has been shaped by broader efforts to expand higher education and strengthen national capacity for research, innovation, and socioeconomic development. Since the liberalisation of higher education in the 1990s, Tanzania has experienced substantial growth in the number of universities and postgraduate programmes, supported by policy initiatives such as the Education and Training Policy and the National Higher Education Policy, which advocate for increased access to advanced education and the enhancement of academic quality (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology [MoEST], 2023; Tanzania Commission for Universities [TCU], 2025, 2020). This expansion has contributed to a steady rise in postgraduate enrolment, reflecting increasing demand for highly skilled professionals and researchers capable of addressing national development priorities (TCU, 2025).

Despite these achievements, concerns remain regarding the adequacy of institutional resources required to sustain quality postgraduate education. Studies have highlighted challenges related to limited academic staffing, insufficient research infrastructure, and variations in the provision of methodological support to postgraduate students (Mgaiwa, 2018; TCU, 2020). To strengthen research capacity, universities commonly incorporate research methodology courses into postgraduate curricula, particularly within coursework-based programmes. However, the nature, intensity, and timing of methodological training differ considerably across institutions and programme structures, with students enrolled in thesis-only programmes often relying more heavily on supervisory guidance and self-directed learning (TCU, 2023). Regardless of programme type, the successful completion of a thesis or dissertation remains a mandatory requirement for the award of postgraduate degrees, reflecting the central role of research competence

within postgraduate education (Paltridge & Starfield, 2020). Given these expectations, understanding how postgraduate students acquire and utilise knowledge of research paradigms and approaches is essential for improving the quality of research training and strengthening postgraduate education in Tanzania.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the growth in postgraduate programmes and universities' efforts to provide research training and supervision, studies have documented challenges among postgraduate students in understanding and applying appropriate research paradigms and approaches in conducting scholarly inquiry (Khatri, 2020; Khumalo & Dongwe, 2025; Mashau & Fhatuwani, 2023; Nwosu et al., 2024; Wu et al., 2024). However, little is known about the extent to which postgraduate students utilise various educational research paradigms and approaches in their theses and dissertations, particularly within the Tanzanian context. Examining these patterns is important for informing curriculum improvement and strengthening research capacity development initiatives in higher education institutions. To bridge this gap, it was imperative to examine their utilisation to inform institutional policy for improved postgraduate curriculum design, specialised training, supervision and mentoring programmes, and accessibility to resources.

Research Objective

The main objective of this study is to examine the utilisation of educational research paradigms and approaches among postgraduate students in their theses and dissertations and explore the implications of these utilisation patterns for postgraduate research training and supervision.

Specific Research Objectives

The specific research objectives are to:

1. Identify the types of educational research paradigms and approaches utilised by postgraduate students in their theses and dissertations;
2. Determine the extent to which postgraduate students utilise educational research paradigms and approaches in their theses and dissertations;
3. Establish the proportion of postgraduate theses and dissertations that do not explicitly indicate the research paradigms and approaches guiding the studies.

Main Research Question

How do postgraduate students utilise educational research paradigms and approaches in their theses and dissertations?

Specific Research Questions

The specific research questions are:

1. Which educational research paradigms and approaches are most and least frequently utilised by postgraduate students in their theses and dissertations?
2. To what extent do postgraduate students utilise educational research paradigms and approaches in their theses and dissertations?
3. To what extent do postgraduate students fail to explicitly indicate the research paradigms and approaches underpinning their studies?
4. What implications do the observed patterns of paradigm and research approach utilisation have for postgraduate research training and supervision in higher education institutions?

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it provides empirical evidence on how postgraduate students apply research paradigms and methodological approaches in theses and dissertations, thereby shifting attention from general discussions of postgraduate research challenges to actual methodological practices. Its findings can inform the improvement of research methodology curricula by identifying areas in which students experience difficulties in understanding and applying methodological principles. The study also offers evidence that may assist supervisors and academic mentors in strengthening methodological guidance and support, while providing quality assurance units and university administrators with insights for enhancing methodological rigour, coherence and transparency in postgraduate research. More broadly, the findings may inform institutional and policy strategies for strengthening research capacity, promoting appropriate methodological diversity and improving postgraduate research training in higher education.

Literature Review

Conceptualisation and Significance of Research Paradigms and Research Approaches

Research paradigms occupy a central position in scholarly inquiry because they provide philosophical assumptions that shape how researchers understand reality, generate knowledge, and justify methodological choices (Paul, 2005; Phillips & Burbules, 2000). Kuhn (1970) popularised the concept of paradigm as a shared system of beliefs, values, assumptions, and practices guiding scientific inquiry. Guba and Lincoln (1994) further conceptualised paradigms as interconnected ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions influencing the research process. Similarly,

Khatri (2020) and Keong et al. (2021) regard paradigms as intellectual frameworks that determine what constitutes legitimate knowledge, how knowledge can be acquired, and how its credibility should be assessed.

Several paradigmatic traditions are relevant to educational research. Positivism assumes an objective reality that can be systematically observed and empirically measured (Paul, 2005; Phillips & Burbules, 2000; Sapkota, 2024). Interpretivism and constructivism emphasise socially constructed realities and focus on human meanings, experiences, and interactions within particular contexts (William, 2024; da Silva, 2025). Critical theory examines power relations and seeks social transformation (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002; Strunk & Betties, 2019; Misiaszek et al., 2022), while poststructuralism challenges universal truths by examining the relationships among discourse, language, and power (Howarth & Griggs, 2015; Mason & Clarke, 2022; Niesche, 2020). Pragmatism, meanwhile, prioritises practical problem-solving and methodological flexibility, often supporting the integration of qualitative and quantitative approaches (Tashakkori et al., 2021).

The significance of paradigms lies in promoting coherence between assumptions about reality, knowledge, and methodological procedures. Paradigmatic awareness enables researchers to justify methodological decisions, maintain consistency, and strengthen methodological rigour (Creswell & Creswell, 2022; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Lincoln et al., 2023). Paradigms also provide foundations for assessing the trustworthiness, validity, and credibility of research findings (Bridges, 2017; Greene, 1994).

Nevertheless, the necessity of explicit paradigmatic positioning remains debated. Pragmatist scholars argue that research should primarily respond to the nature of the research problem rather than rigid philosophical traditions, since excessive paradigm allegiance may constrain methodological innovation and reinforce divisions between qualitative and quantitative research (Tashakkori et al., 2021). Siegel (2012) similarly suggests that meaningful research can be produced without extensive philosophical engagement. The growth of mixed methods has further challenged rigid paradigm boundaries by promoting methodological pluralism and integration of diverse forms of evidence (Tashakkori et al., 2021; Munoz-Najar et al., 2020).

Despite these developments, abandoning paradigms completely may produce conceptual confusion and methodological inconsistency. Guba and Lincoln (1994), Lincoln et al. (2023), and Sławecki (2018) maintain that paradigms clarify the assumptions underlying methodological choices and promote coherence among research questions, methods, and

interpretations. Makombe (2017) similarly emphasises the importance of distinguishing paradigms, methodologies, and research designs.

This debate is particularly important in postgraduate education, where students are expected to demonstrate both methodological competence and understanding of philosophical foundations. However, students frequently experience confusion regarding paradigms, epistemology, methodology, methods, and research designs (Mkansi & Acheampong, 2012; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Examining their utilisation of paradigms therefore provides insight into both philosophical understanding and methodological justification.

Research approaches represent broader strategies for generating and analysing evidence. Quantitative research, commonly associated with positivist and post-positivist traditions, uses numerical data and statistical procedures to examine relationships and test hypotheses (Cohen et al., 2018; Cooksey, 2020). Qualitative research focuses on meanings, experiences, and social processes within natural contexts (Isik, 2025; da Silva, 2025), while mixed methods integrates qualitative and quantitative procedures to provide more comprehensive understandings of complex phenomena (Tashakkori et al., 2021). However, these relationships should not be treated as rigid one-to-one associations; methodological choices should reflect research problems while maintaining philosophical coherence (Makombe, 2017; Fuyane, 2021; Khaldi, 2017).

Teaching and Learning of Educational Research Methods in Postgraduate Programmes

Research methodology training is a fundamental component of postgraduate education because it equips students with the knowledge and skills needed to design, conduct, and evaluate scholarly inquiry (Cohen et al., 2018; Creswell & Creswell, 2022). Beyond technical competence, it should develop understanding of the philosophical assumptions underlying research, including epistemological, ontological, and axiological positions, enabling students to justify methodological choices and demonstrate awareness of the foundations of inquiry (Bridges, 2017; Greene, 1994; Abdulai & Owusu-Ansah, 2014; Hamond, 2023).

However, teaching and learning research methods remain challenging. Studies indicate that postgraduate courses are often characterised by lecturer-centred pedagogies, extensive content coverage, and limited opportunities for critical engagement (Coronel Llamas & Boza, 2011; Earley, 2014; Lewthwaite & Nind, 2016). Heavy reliance on lecture-based knowledge transmission may restrict deep conceptual learning (Fulford & Mahon, 2020;

Loughlin & Lindberg-Sand, 2023; Trigwell & Prosser, 2020), encouraging procedural competence while giving inadequate attention to philosophical foundations (Mkansi & Acheampong, 2012). Consequently, students may acquire methodological techniques without fully understanding the assumptions guiding their application (Daniel et al., 2018; Daniel, 2022).

These difficulties are particularly evident in learning research paradigms. Concepts such as ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology are often regarded as abstract, while students may struggle to distinguish paradigms, methodologies, methods, and research designs (Keong et al., 2021; Khatri, 2020; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Makombe, 2017; Daniel et al., 2018). Such confusion can contribute to methodological inconsistencies in postgraduate research, potentially undermining research quality and coherence (Kairembo, 2018; Hamond, 2023).

From a social constructivist perspective, complex methodological knowledge is better developed through active engagement, dialogue, collaboration, and interaction with authentic research problems (Vygotsky, 1978; Akpan et al., 2020; Bandura, 1977; Thompson & Spenceley, 2020). Accordingly, critical reflection, methodological debate, peer learning, and engagement with real research examples can deepen both philosophical and practical understanding (Lewthwaite & Nind, 2016; Matos et al., 2023; Shawa, 2020; Lebert & Vilarroya, 2024).

Despite growing evidence on methodological learning, empirical research on postgraduate students' paradigmatic understanding remains limited, particularly in African higher education (Ssenyonga & Nakiganda, 2020; Nwosu et al., 2024). In Tanzania, concerns persist regarding students' understanding of paradigmatic foundations and methodological application in dissertations (TCU, 2023; Kairembo, 2018). Examining how postgraduate students understand and apply research paradigms and approaches is therefore important for strengthening research capacity and improving postgraduate education quality (Mgaiwa, 2018; MoEST, 2023).

Postgraduate Students' Utilisation of Research Paradigms and Approaches

The utilisation of research paradigms and methodological approaches among postgraduate students has received increasing scholarly attention because it provides an important indication of the effectiveness of postgraduate research training in preparing students for independent scholarly inquiry (Erwee et al., 2018; Nwosu et al., 2024). Ideally, postgraduate research should demonstrate coherence between philosophical assumptions, research questions, methodological approaches, research designs and

analytical procedures (Creswell & Creswell, 2022; Cohen et al., 2018). However, evidence indicates that novice researchers frequently experience difficulties in establishing such methodological coherence.

Students' methodological choices are influenced by interacting individual, institutional, disciplinary and contextual factors. These include prior educational and research experiences, disciplinary traditions, supervisors' methodological orientations, institutional expectations, and access to methodological resources and research support (Daniel et al., 2018; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Ssenyonga & Nakiganda, 2020; Mashau & Fhatuwani, 2023; Nwosu et al., 2024). Supervision is particularly influential because supervisors guide students in selecting paradigms, designs, data collection methods and analytical procedures (Kaur et al., 2021; Wu et al., 2024). Consequently, students may adopt methodological orientations reflecting dominant practices within their supervisory and disciplinary environments (Mohamed et al., 2017). Although such guidance can strengthen methodological rigour, excessive dependence on supervisors may constrain students' critical engagement with alternative paradigms and the development of independent methodological reasoning (Lewthwaite & Nind, 2016; Makombe, 2017).

A persistent concern in the literature is students' difficulty distinguishing research paradigms, methodologies, methods and designs, together with weak articulation of the ontological and epistemological assumptions underlying their methodological choices (Mkansi & Acheampong, 2012; Khatri, 2020). These difficulties may produce inconsistencies between research questions, philosophical positions, methodological frameworks and analytical procedures (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Hamond, 2023). Consequently, some students may treat paradigms as formal requirements of thesis writing rather than as foundational frameworks that shape the logic and conduct of inquiry (Bridges, 2017; Greene, 1994).

The role of paradigms in research remains contested. While some scholars emphasise explicit paradigmatic positioning to establish philosophical and methodological coherence (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln et al., 2023), others advocate flexible, problem-centred approaches that give greater priority to research questions than rigid paradigmatic boundaries (Fuyane, 2021; Khaldi, 2017). Such differences in methodological discourse may create uncertainty for postgraduate students, particularly where supervisors and academic texts promote competing expectations.

The literature further suggests that meaningful understanding of paradigms requires active, social and reflective learning rather than memorisation of

abstract philosophical concepts (Bandura, 1977; Vygotsky, 1978; Akpan et al., 2020). Lecture-dominated and theoretically dense methodology instruction may consequently limit students' ability to translate paradigmatic knowledge into research practice (Fulford & Mahon, 2020; Loughlin & Lindberg-Sand, 2023). In Tanzania, empirical evidence remains limited, although available studies point to inadequate integration of philosophical debates into methodology training and insufficient opportunities for applied methodological reasoning (Kairembo, 2018; TCU, 2023). Institutional pressures surrounding thesis completion may further encourage procedural compliance rather than critical methodological engagement (Mgaiwa, 2018; MoEST, 2023).

This gap warrants systematic examination of completed theses and dissertations because these documents provide direct evidence of how postgraduate students translate methodological knowledge into actual research practice. Analysing the paradigms and approaches represented in postgraduate research can illuminate the effectiveness of methodology training, the influence of supervision, and the extent of methodological coherence, while providing evidence for strengthening postgraduate curricula, supervision and institutional research capacity (Daniel, 2022; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Munoz-Najar et al., 2020).

Theoretical Framework

This study integrates Social Learning Theory and Constructivist Learning Theory to explain postgraduate students' utilisation of educational research paradigms and approaches. Social Learning Theory proposes that learning occurs through observation, modelling and imitation, while behaviour is shaped by the interaction between cognitive processes and environmental conditions (Bandura, 1977; Shawa, 2020). The theory is relevant to postgraduate research education because students acquire methodological knowledge not only through formal instruction but also by observing lecturers, supervisors, peers and established research practices. Through these interactions, students may learn how research problems are framed, paradigms are selected and justified, and methodological approaches are applied in theses and dissertations.

Observational learning involves four interconnected processes: attention, retention, reproduction and motivation (Lebert & Vilarroya, 2024; Lin et al., 2025). Postgraduate students must attend to methodological practices, retain relevant knowledge, reproduce it in their own research, and remain motivated to apply it appropriately. Social Learning Theory therefore helps explain how academic environments, supervision and exposure to methodological models influence students' utilisation of research

paradigms and approaches. However, the theory has been criticised for placing considerable emphasis on environmental influences and modelling while providing limited attention to individual responsibility, information processing and learning behaviours that develop without identifiable models (Rumjaun & Narod, 2025). Constructivist Learning Theory is consequently used to complement this perspective.

Constructivist Learning Theory, rooted in the work of Piaget, Vygotsky and Dewey, conceptualises learning as an active process through which learners construct knowledge based on previous experiences and interaction with their environments (Fosnot & Perry, 2013). Its first principle, knowledge construction, suggests that postgraduate students develop methodological understanding by connecting new concepts with prior learning and research experiences (Thompson & Spenceley, 2020). Knowledge is also subjective and context-dependent because students' interpretations are shaped by their sociocultural backgrounds, interests, beliefs and experiences (Aubrey & Riley, 2021).

The theory further emphasises active learning, whereby knowledge is developed through thinking, discussion, investigation and problem-solving. Such activities enable postgraduate students to critically engage with research paradigms and methodological approaches rather than merely memorising methodological concepts (Aubrey & Riley, 2021; Thompson & Spenceley, 2020). Social and collaborative learning is equally important, as interaction with lecturers, supervisors and peers supports the development of knowledge and methodological competence (Vygotsky, 1978). Finally, contextual learning recognises that students' knowledge and practices are influenced by institutional, social, cultural, technological and academic environments.

Together, Social Learning Theory and Constructivist Learning Theory provide a complementary framework for understanding postgraduate students' utilisation of research paradigms and approaches. Social Learning Theory explains how methodological knowledge is acquired through observation and modelling, whereas Constructivist Learning Theory explains how students actively construct, interpret and apply this knowledge within particular social and institutional contexts. The integrated framework therefore highlights the importance of supervision, peer interaction, active engagement, prior experience and contextual conditions in shaping postgraduate students' methodological understanding and practice.

Methodology

This study employed a documentary research design to examine postgraduate students' utilisation of research paradigms and methodological approaches in theses and dissertations. The methodology comprised the study context, research design, population and data sources, data production and analysis procedures, measures for ensuring analytical trustworthiness, and ethical considerations.

Study Context

The study was conducted in a selected academic unit at a public university in Tanzania, referred to as *University Y* to preserve institutional anonymity. The university is among the country's long-established higher education institutions with a substantial history of postgraduate education and research in education-related disciplines (University Y, 2014, 2022). The selected academic unit provided an appropriate setting because it has enrolled considerable numbers of master's and doctoral students and produced a large body of postgraduate research outputs over several decades. This context provided a valuable opportunity to examine patterns in the use of research paradigms and methodological approaches in completed theses and dissertations.

Research Design and Data Sources

A documentary research design, supported by descriptive content analysis, was adopted to systematically examine completed postgraduate theses and dissertations (Tight, 2019). Documentary research is appropriate for investigating existing textual and institutional records that were originally produced for purposes other than the immediate research but can provide important evidence concerning academic and social practices (Cohen et al., 2018). The design was particularly suitable because the study focused on methodological practices as demonstrated in completed research outputs rather than students' self-reported understandings or perceptions.

The study analysed the entire accessible population of 1,278 postgraduate research reports submitted to the selected academic unit between 1985 and 2023. These comprised 1,222 master's dissertations and 56 doctoral theses. The inclusion of the entire accessible population enabled the study to provide a comprehensive account of methodological practices within the selected institutional context and eliminated sampling error associated with selecting only a subset of the available documents (Cantwell, 2008). Including both master's and doctoral studies also enabled comparison of methodological patterns across postgraduate levels.

Data Production and Analysis

Data were produced through a structured document review conducted over five months during the 2022/2023 academic year. A document extraction guide was developed to ensure systematic and consistent capture of methodological information from each thesis and dissertation. The review focused primarily on methodological sections and extracted information relating to philosophical orientation, research paradigms, methodological approaches, research designs and, where available, the justification provided for methodological choices.

The extracted information was classified using predetermined categories derived from methodological literature. Research paradigms included positivism, interpretivism, critical theory and pragmatism, while methodological approaches were classified as qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods. Descriptive content analysis was used to identify, organise and quantify these methodological characteristics across the large corpus of postgraduate research documents. Content analysis provides a systematic and replicable procedure for reducing textual information into analytically meaningful categories through explicit coding procedures (Krippendorff, 2018; Neuendorf, 2017).

The analysis proceeded through document screening, coding, classification and statistical summarisation. Relevant methodological information was first identified and extracted from each document. The extracted data were subsequently coded using predefined abbreviations, including positivism (POS), interpretivism (INT), critical theory (CRT), pragmatism (PRG), qualitative (QLT), quantitative (QNT) and mixed methods research (MMR). The coded data were entered into a database and analysed using descriptive statistics. Frequencies and percentages were calculated to establish the prevalence and distribution of different research paradigms and approaches across master's and doctoral studies.

The integration of systematic content analysis with descriptive statistical procedures enabled the study to identify dominant and underrepresented methodological traditions and to compare patterns across the two postgraduate levels (Krippendorff, 2018; Neuendorf, 2017; Cooksey, 2020). This approach was particularly appropriate for examining a large corpus of documentary evidence because it combined close examination of textual methodological information with quantitative summarisation of patterns across the population of studies.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Analytical trustworthiness was enhanced through the development of explicit operational definitions and predetermined coding criteria for each research paradigm and methodological approach. The structured extraction guide and coding framework were used consistently throughout the review to minimise ambiguity and subjective interpretation. Explicit coding procedures also enhanced transparency and the potential replicability of the analysis, consistent with established principles of content analysis (Cohen et al., 2018; Neuendorf, 2017; Krippendorff, 2018).

Ethical clearance and institutional permission to access the theses and dissertations were obtained from the relevant university authorities before data collection. Institutional anonymity was maintained by referring to the university as University Y and withholding identifying information about the academic unit and individual postgraduate students. The extracted information was used exclusively for research purposes and managed confidentially. No personal identifiers of students were reported, thereby ensuring that the analysis focused on aggregate methodological patterns rather than the performance or identity of individual researchers.

Study Findings

The study findings are presented according to the research questions. The analysis focused on postgraduate theses and dissertations produced at University Y between 1985 and 2023, examining the extent to which students specified and utilised different research paradigms and educational research approaches.

Postgraduate Students' Utilisation of Research Paradigms

This section presents findings on postgraduate students' utilisation of research paradigms in theses and dissertations between 1985 and 2023. The documents were examined to identify and record the paradigms specified by master's and doctoral students. The findings reveal substantial differences in paradigm utilisation between the two postgraduate levels as presented in Table 1.

Non-Utilisation of Research Paradigms

A substantial proportion of postgraduate students did not specify a research paradigm in their research reports. Among doctoral students, 8.9% did not identify a research paradigm, compared with 80.9% of master's students. Overall, 77.7% of all postgraduate theses and dissertations did not clearly specify the research paradigm guiding the study. Thus, the majority of research reports, particularly at master's level, did not explicitly identify a philosophical research orientation.

Table 1 Frequency Distribution of Postgraduate Students' Utilisation of Research Paradigms at University Y between 1985 and 2023

No	Research Paradigm Utilised	Doctoral		Master		Total	
		<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
1	No Paradigm Indicated	5	8.9	988	80.9	993	77.7
2	Pragmatism	18	32.1	65	5.3	83	6.5
3	Interpretivism	22	39.3	42	3.4	64	5.0
4	Positivism	1	1.8	45	3.7	46	3.6
5	Post-positivism	2	3.6	42	3.4	44	3.4
6	Constructivism	1	1.8	36	2.9	37	2.9
7	Social Constructionism	2	3.6	4	0.4	6	0.5
8	Critical Theory	3	5.4	0	0	3	0.2
9	Realism	1	1.8	0	0	1	0.1
10	Transformative Worldview	1	1.8	0	0	1	0.1
11	Poststructuralism	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Total	56	100	1,222	100	1,278	100

Source: Field data (2023)

Utilisation of Pragmatism

Pragmatism was utilised by 32.1% of doctoral students and 5.3% of master's students. Overall, pragmatism accounted for 6.5% of all postgraduate research reports. The findings therefore show substantially greater utilisation of pragmatism among doctoral students than among master's students.

Utilisation of Interpretivism Paradigm

Interpretivism was utilised by 39.3% of doctoral students and 3.4% of master's students. Across all postgraduate research reports, the overall utilisation rate was 5.0%. Interpretivism was therefore more frequently identified among doctoral research than master's research.

Utilisation of Positivism Paradigm

Positivism was identified in 3.7% of master's research reports and 1.8% of doctoral research reports. The overall utilisation rate was 3.6% of

postgraduate research. The findings indicate relatively limited utilisation of positivism at both postgraduate levels.

Utilisation of Post-positivism

Post-positivism was utilised by 3.6% of doctoral students and 3.4% of master's students, resulting in an overall utilisation rate of 3.4%. The findings show relatively similar levels of post-positivist paradigm utilisation between doctoral and master's research.

Utilisation of Constructivism Paradigm

Constructivism was utilised by 2.9% of master's students and 1.8% of doctoral students, with an overall utilisation rate of 2.9%. Its utilisation was therefore relatively low across both categories of postgraduate research.

Utilisation of Social Constructionism Paradigm

Social constructionism was identified in 3.6% of doctoral research reports and 0.4% of master's research reports. Overall, it accounted for only 0.5% of all postgraduate research reports. The findings demonstrate considerably greater utilisation at doctoral level.

Utilisation of Critical Theory

Critical theory was utilised by 5.4% of doctoral students, while none of the master's students identified critical theory as their research paradigm. Overall, critical theory accounted for 0.2% of all postgraduate research reports.

Utilisation of Realism and Transformative Worldview

Realism and the Transformative Worldview were each utilised by 1.8% of doctoral students and were not identified among master's students. Each paradigm accounted for 0.1% of all postgraduate research reports.

Utilisation of Poststructuralism

The analysis found no utilisation of poststructuralism among either doctoral or master's students during the period from 1985 to 2023. Thus, none of the reviewed research reports identified poststructuralism as the guiding research paradigm.

Therefore, the findings show that 77.7% of postgraduate research reports did not specify a research paradigm. Among the reports that did identify paradigms, doctoral students demonstrated greater utilisation

of several paradigms, particularly interpretivism (39.3%), pragmatism (32.1%), and critical theory (5.4%). Among master's students, utilisation was considerably lower across most paradigms, with positivism (3.7%), pragmatism (5.3%), interpretivism (3.4%), post-positivism (3.4%), and constructivism (2.9%) representing the comparatively more frequently identified paradigms. Poststructuralism was completely absent from both doctoral and master's research.

Postgraduate Students' Utilisation of Educational Research Approaches

This section presents findings on the utilisation of educational research approaches among postgraduate students at University Y between 1985 and 2023. The analysis identified qualitative, mixed-methods, quantitative, and unspecified research approaches as presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Frequency Distribution of Postgraduate Students' Utilisation of Research Approaches

No	Research Approach Utilised	Doctoral		Master		Total	
		<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
1	Qualitative	33	59	614	50	647	50.6
2	Mixed Methods	19	34	490	40	509	39.8
3	Quantitative	4	7	84	7	88	6.9
4	Approach not Indicated	0	0	34	3	34	2.7
	Total	56	100	1,222	100	1,278	100

Source: Field data

Predominance of Utilisation of Qualitative Research

Qualitative research was the most frequently utilised approach, accounting for 50.6% of all postgraduate research reports. It was utilised by 59% of doctoral students and 50% of master's students. The findings therefore indicate that qualitative research constituted the dominant research approach across both postgraduate levels.

Significant Utilisation of Mixed Research

Mixed methods constituted the second most frequently utilised research approach, accounting for 39.8% of all postgraduate research reports. Mixed methods were utilised by 34% of doctoral students and 40% of master's

students. The findings indicate relatively high utilisation of mixed methods at both levels, with a slightly higher proportion among master's students.

Limited Utilisation of Quantitative Research

Quantitative research accounted for only 7% of all postgraduate research reports. The proportion was identical for master's and doctoral students, with 7% of students at each level utilising quantitative research. Thus, quantitative research represented a substantially smaller proportion of postgraduate research compared with qualitative and mixed-methods approaches.

Lack of Utilisation of Research Approach

The findings further indicate that 3% of master's students did not specify the research approach used in their theses or dissertations. This category was recorded separately from the identified qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods approaches.

Generally, the findings demonstrate a clear pattern in the utilisation of educational research approaches at University Y. Qualitative research was the dominant approach (50.6%), followed by mixed methods (39.8%), while quantitative research accounted for only 7% of postgraduate research. Qualitative research was particularly prominent among doctoral students, at 59%, while mixed methods were slightly more common among master's students, at 40% compared with 34% among doctoral students. Quantitative research was equally represented at both levels, at 7%. In addition, 3% of master's students did not specify their research approach.

Taken together, the findings indicate that postgraduate research at University Y during the period under review was characterised by limited explicit specification of research paradigms and a strong preference for qualitative and mixed-methods approaches. The most pronounced finding concerning paradigms was the high proportion of research reports that did not specify a paradigm, while the most pronounced finding concerning research approaches was the predominance of qualitative research.

Discussion of the Findings

The findings show that postgraduate students at University Y predominantly employed interpretive and pragmatic paradigms, together with qualitative and mixed-methods approaches, while positivist and quantitative approaches were comparatively less utilised. This pattern reflects the broader movement in educational research towards context-sensitive and methodologically pluralistic inquiry following traditional paradigm debates (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Lincoln et al., 2023; Fuyane, 2021). The prominence of interpretive and

pragmatic approaches may therefore indicate increasing recognition that educational phenomena are complex, socially situated, and not adequately understood through a single methodological tradition.

However, this pattern should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of methodological advancement. The relatively limited use of quantitative approaches may indicate unequal exposure to methodological traditions, differences in students' methodological competence, or institutional and supervisory preferences. Students may consequently adopt approaches because they are familiar or perceived as manageable rather than because they are epistemologically and methodologically appropriate to their research questions. Methodological preferences may therefore reflect institutional practices as much as individual intellectual choices.

Social Learning Theory provides an important explanation for this pattern. Students acquire research knowledge and methodological orientations through observation, modelling, and interaction with supervisors, lecturers, peers, and existing research outputs (Bandura, 1977). If particular approaches dominate an academic environment, students may reproduce those approaches because they are the approaches most frequently demonstrated and reinforced. Similarly, constructivist learning theory emphasises that complex methodological knowledge develops through guided participation, interaction, and scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978). Limited opportunities for practical engagement with quantitative analysis or unfamiliar paradigmatic traditions may therefore reduce students' confidence and willingness to adopt them.

The findings also suggest that postgraduate curricula and supervision may contribute to methodological concentration. Research-methods courses operating within compressed academic periods may prioritise procedural coverage over sustained engagement with epistemological and philosophical questions. Supervisors may also guide students towards approaches with which they are most familiar, thereby facilitating completion while potentially narrowing methodological experimentation (Mkansi & Acheampong, 2020). Methodological diversity therefore depends not only on curriculum content but also on the breadth of expertise available within postgraduate research environments.

A further concern is the limited representation of critical and transformative paradigms. Although interpretive and pragmatic approaches can provide valuable understanding of educational experiences and problems, limited engagement with critical perspectives may reduce opportunities to examine power, inequality, exclusion, and structural conditions shaping educational

outcomes (Strunk & Betties, 2019). This is particularly important in educational contexts characterised by persistent inequalities, where research needs not only to understand educational realities but also to question the structures and practices that produce them. The societal contribution of educational research therefore depends on both methodological rigour and its capacity to interrogate the conditions underlying educational experiences (Felder & Garz, 2025).

Generally, the findings suggest that the central issue is not the dominance of one paradigm but the need for genuine methodological pluralism. Methodological pluralism requires students to understand different philosophical positions, critically evaluate their assumptions, and select approaches according to the research problem rather than familiarity, convenience, or institutional convention. Strengthening methodological training, expanding supervisory expertise, increasing practical exposure to diverse approaches, and creating opportunities for critical methodological dialogue could therefore improve the coherence, diversity, and societal relevance of postgraduate research.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings have several implications for postgraduate education policy and practice. First, universities should periodically review postgraduate research-methodology curricula to ensure that students receive balanced exposure to qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods, and diverse paradigmatic traditions. Methodology courses should move beyond teaching research procedures to developing students' capacity to understand, compare, justify, and critically evaluate methodological choices.

Second, universities should strengthen supervisory capacity across methodological traditions. The concentration of students' research within particular paradigms may partly reflect the methodological expertise available within their academic environments. Institutions should therefore provide continuous professional development for supervisors and encourage collaborative supervision where complementary methodological expertise is required. This would expand the methodological options available to students and reduce excessive dependence on individual supervisors' methodological preferences.

Third, postgraduate programmes should provide additional practical support for quantitative research and data analysis. The relatively limited use of quantitative approaches suggests the need for research clinics, statistical workshops, practical data-analysis sessions, peer-learning groups, and individual methodological consultations. Such support should complement

formal coursework and enable students to progressively develop confidence and competence in quantitative inquiry.

Fourth, postgraduate education should provide greater opportunities for critical and transformative research traditions. Seminars, reading groups, methodology workshops, and supervision discussions should expose students to approaches that examine power, inequality, exclusion, social justice, and institutional structures. This would broaden the intellectual purposes of postgraduate research beyond describing educational problems towards critically examining their causes and possible transformation.

Fifth, universities should establish periodic reviews of postgraduate theses and dissertations to monitor methodological trends. Such reviews can identify patterns of methodological concentration, emerging areas of research, gaps in students' methodological preparation, and areas requiring curriculum or staff-development interventions. The findings of these reviews could inform programme review, supervisor development, and postgraduate research-support strategies.

Generally, the study implies that improving postgraduate research quality requires an institutional environment that promotes epistemological openness, methodological competence, supervisory diversity, and critical reflexivity. The objective should not be to increase the use of any particular paradigm or approach, but to ensure that students possess sufficient methodological knowledge and confidence to make informed choices appropriate to their research problems.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study investigates the use of educational research paradigms among postgraduate students at University Y. By analysing thesis and dissertation samples from 1985 to 2023, the research found a higher frequency of interpretivism and pragmatism use, with less emphasis on positivism. Despite greater application of qualitative and mixed methods, students showed limited engagement with paradigms like social constructionism, critical theory, and poststructuralism. The study implies that postgraduate programmes at University Y insufficiently emphasise educational research paradigms, impacting the quality and contribution of research. The limited use of quantitative research methods is attributed to inadequate mathematical and statistical knowledge.

To improve the diversity and quality of research at University Y, the study recommends the following. First, promoting methodological diversity by encouraging balanced knowledge of different paradigms and approaches.

Second, enhancing quantitative, critical and transformative paradigms knowledge and skills by integrating them into short and long-term research training (workshops and seminars), curriculum development, and supervisory practices. Third, facilitating access to resources to improve students' knowledge of quantitative educational research. Fourth, promoting interdisciplinary collaborations in teaching and research to enable learning from various backgrounds. Fifth, strengthening supervision and mentorship to build student confidence in quantitative and contemporary paradigms. Sixth, faculty members to play a more active role in guiding postgraduate students toward research that not only contributes to academic knowledge but also challenges systemic inequities and advances social transformation. Further studies are recommended to qualitatively explore students' and supervisors' attitudes and experiences related to research methodologies.

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Exploring Students' Experiences On Campus Health Services

Kwezilomso Sonkwala and Sonja Nicolene Mostert

Abstract

Transitioning from high school to a tertiary environment presents challenges like emotional difficulties, stress, financial strain, and social isolation, which can negatively affect health. Exploring the health experiences of young adults is vital for developing policies that address their needs and aim to improve their health. Promoting health and maintaining healthy lifestyles in this vulnerable population ultimately relies on access to healthcare services and quality healthcare. Research at South African tertiary institutions highlights the value of on-campus healthcare services. However, limited studies focus on student experiences, as most are outdated or quantitative in nature. This study aimed to explore student experiences with on-campus healthcare using a qualitative approach. Semi-structured interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams and analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The following themes were identified: Healthcare staff at its best; Campus care that meets student needs; Communication gap in campus healthcare; All-in-One healthcare and improved health awareness across campus. The results revealed some of the challenges students face with accessing on-campus healthcare services and included recommendations for improvement.

Key words: students' experience, student health, on-campus healthcare services, South Africa, universities.

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The findings were shared with the University Health Clinic staff and posters were created to raise awareness about the services. The study concluded that while students generally value on-campus healthcare services, they face barriers that may limit the benefits of on-campus health facilities. The implications of the findings suggest the need for improved cultural competence, enhanced awareness, increased staffing, and expanded service availability to better meet the diverse student health needs.

Résumé

Le passage du lycée à l'enseignement supérieur s'accompagne de défis divers, dont les difficultés émotionnelles, le stress, les contraintes financières et l'isolement social, qui peuvent avoir des répercussions négatives sur la santé. Il est essentiel d'étudier les expériences de ces jeunes adultes en matière de santé afin d'élaborer des politiques qui répondent à leurs besoins. La promotion de la santé et le maintien d'un mode de vie sain au sein de cette population vulnérable dépendent en fin de compte de l'accès aux services de santé et à des soins de qualité. Les recherches menées dans les établissements d'enseignement supérieur sud-africains soulignent l'importance des services de santé sur le campus. Cependant, peu d'études se concentrent sur les expériences des étudiants, la plupart étant obsolètes ou de nature quantitative. Cette étude visait à explorer les expériences des étudiants en matière de soins de santé sur le campus à l'aide d'une approche qualitative. Des entretiens semi-structurés ont été menés via Microsoft Teams et analysés à l'aide de l'analyse phénoménologique interprétative (API). Les thèmes suivants ont été identifiés : un personnel de santé au meilleur de ses capacités ; des soins sur le campus répondant aux besoins des étudiants ; un déficit de communication dans les soins de santé sur le campus ; des soins de santé « tout-en-un » ; et une meilleure sensibilisation à la santé sur l'ensemble du campus. Les résultats ont mis en évidence certains des défis auxquels les étudiants sont confrontés pour accéder aux services de santé sur le campus et ont donné lieu à des recommandations d'amélioration. Les conclusions ont été partagées avec le personnel de la clinique universitaire et des affiches ont été créées pour informer des services proposés. L'étude a conclu que, bien que les étudiants apprécient généralement les services de santé sur le campus, ils se heurtent à des obstacles susceptibles de limiter les avantages des infrastructures de santé sur le campus. Parmi les recommandations qu'inspirent ces résultats figure la nécessité d'améliorer la compétence culturelle, de renforcer la sensibilisation, d'augmenter les effectifs et d'élargir la disponibilité des services afin de mieux répondre aux divers besoins des étudiants en matière de santé.

Mots-clés : expérience ; santé des étudiants ; services de santé sur le campus ; Afrique du Sud ; universités.

Introduction

Universities serve as environments where students pursue an education, develop life skills, and gain independence. The tertiary experience is a time of change where students face several challenges (Evans et al., 2018; Munyaradzi & Addae, 2019), ranging from psychological, financial, and social challenges to academic stressors, which can impact their performance and adjustment (Adams et al., 2016; Barbayannis et al., 2022). Financial constraints mean that many students are dependent on external funds for tuition, often leaving them without resources for personal expenses. Further, some students may relocate to other provinces to be close to the institutions, further straining their emotional and financial stability (Halliday-Wynes & Nguyen, 2014; Naidoo & McKay, 2018; Nasr et al., 2024). All these factors can negatively impact their health.

Access to healthcare services is thus vital. Students encounter diverse health-related issues that play a defining role in their tertiary experience as physical and psychological factors are important determinants of optimal student learning (Adams et al., 2016; El Ansari et al., 2013; Wilks et al., 2020). If students' health is compromised this can influence class attendance, and preparation for assessments, negatively impacting their academic performance. Access to healthcare services thus becomes important to support their health needs and benefit their learning experience. The availability of health resources, including access to healthcare, helps students manage their health thereby enhancing their academic experience and overall wellbeing (Shapley & Hamuka, 2019; Simpson & Ferguson, 2014).

Limited research is available on how students use health services, with most research being quantitative in nature, focusing specifically on the prevalence of certain health conditions, or exclusively on students' mental health. Exploring the unique health experiences of young adults is vital to develop policies aimed at addressing their needs and ultimately improving their overall health. Promoting health and maintaining healthy lifestyles within this population is contingent upon access to quality healthcare (Musakwa et al., 2021). Evans et al. (2018) report that students use health services differently compared to adults and they face unique barriers when accessing such services (Musakwa et al., 2021). More research is needed to explore the value, use, and nature of available on-campus health services from a student perspective as these facilities cater specifically to the health needs of young student populations. This study explored students' experiences

with on-campus healthcare services to understand their challenges and seek opportunities for improvement. Student health and wellbeing ultimately impact academic success and adjustment to university life. Inquiring how students use on-campus health services and their experiences with such services creates an opportunity for health promotion initiatives to be implemented.

This study sought to explore students' healthcare experiences, through the following research question: How do students experience the healthcare services available on campus? This article outlines the methodology used and presents the study themes identified. The authors offer a discussion and interpretation of the findings and reflect on the implications of the results. The conclusion is followed by an overview of the study limitations and recommendations for future research.

Literature

Conceptualisation of Health

The World Health Organization (WHO) (1948) defines health as "...the state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, and it goes beyond the mere absence of disease or infirmity" (p. 1). In the context of student health, health would ideally mean that students are not only free from illness but are also mentally and socially well. Health management is paramount to maintaining health and wellbeing and accessing resources such as healthcare services for students on campus.

Healthcare Services in Institutions of Higher Learning

Student healthcare services offer a range of support programmes and services to students with limited healthcare options (Simpson & Ferguson, 2014). These services include sharing knowledge on how to deal with an acute or chronic illness and offer medication prescriptions and HIV testing, among other services (Leroy et al., 2017). When students feel unwell, a sense of support can help alleviate their anxiety, which can reduce the discomfort associated with an illness (AlKandari, 2020). This supportive atmosphere and treatment can promote faster recovery, allowing students to return to academic responsibilities sooner (Leshner & Scherer, 2021). Access and utilisation of health resources are linked to enhancements in brain health, effective weight management, lowered chronic disease risk, increased bone and muscle strength, and enhanced capacity for daily tasks (American Psychological Association, 2020; Park et al., 2016; Van Cappellen et al., 2018). These benefits also extend to decreased risk of mental health disorders, emotional resilience, better cognitive functioning, decreased stress, and life satisfaction (Kim et al., 2020; Mandolesi et al., 2018; Ronen, 2021; Schultchen et al., 2019; Wickham et al., 2020). Healthcare is also

important for better social well-being, self-confidence, and self-esteem, fostering improved communication skills, and a sense of belonging (Eather et al., 2023; Fernández-Bustos et al., 2019; Haim-Litevsky et al., 2023; Malm et al., 2019; Siegmund et al., 2021).

Student Perceptions of Campus Healthcare Quality and Its Impact on Service Utilisation

Despite the importance of student healthcare services literature reveals a consistent trend of underutilisation of campus health services (Kleinhans, 2019; Musakwa et al., 2021; van Papendorp et al., 2007). This underuse could be due to multiple factors including the majority seeking healthcare elsewhere (Musakwa et al., 2021), issues of inclusivity, social challenges, and as well as a hostile campus environment, which can deter specific groups such as LGBTI students, among other factors (Kleinhans, 2019). Luescher et al. (2019, p.7) found that some students perceive the quality of university healthcare services as being "very poor" suggesting that students are not benefiting fully from the available healthcare resources on campus.

According to Msibi (2013), although South African students frequently view universities as varied, liberal spaces, the contrary frequently occurs. Many students who display non-normative genders and sexualities experience discrimination. Mavhandu-Mudzusi (2016) indicate that these students lack access to culturally competent healthcare practitioners. In addition, issues like gender identity and sexual orientation continue to be taboo because of the slow pace of change in South Africa's higher education sector, which tends to focus on race and gender at the cost of other types of discrimination (Hood et al., 2019; Msibi, 2013). If these negative experiences are addressed, students can have improved interactions with on-campus healthcare services enabling students to access required health services and benefit physically, psychologically, and socially. This study intended to address the research gap by looking at students' personal use of on-campus health services, the challenges they experience, and the recommendations they propose to improve it.

Theoretical Framework

The Ecological Systems Theory developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) was used as a guiding theoretical framework. It consists of the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem and these systems interact continuously, impacting individual behaviour and development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Scott et al., 2016). In relation to this study, the microsystem of the students would consist of the immediate environments such as family, which directly influence students' experiences and decisions regarding on-campus healthcare. The mesosystem encompasses interac-

tions between different microsystems including relationships with peers and clinic staff that affect students' attitudes and use of health services. The exosystem refers to broader institutional and organisational factors like clinic resources and staffing that shape the availability and quality of healthcare. Finally, the macrosystem includes larger societal factors such as the national economy and policies that impact students' healthcare access and affordability.

Methodology

Research Design and Sampling

A qualitative research approach with an interpretive phenomenological research design was used to explore students' experiences. According to Smith et al. (2009), when employing phenomenology, the focus shifts towards the firsthand experiences of individuals encountering a phenomenon rather than simplifying or generalising the phenomenon.

Purposive sampling was used as people with particular characteristics are needed to answer the research question (Etikan, 2016). The following inclusion criteria applied: students registered at the university for the year 2024, proficient in English, aged 18 and above, and who had used the university healthcare services within the past two years. The exclusion criteria encompassed students who had not used the healthcare services in the past two years due to COVID-19 restrictions and those who only utilised the Student Counselling Unit (SCU).

Data Collection

Students were invited through posters and flyers, which were available at the university healthcare facility. Healthcare staff working at the facility also informed students about the study. The flyers provided details about the purpose of the study, inclusion criteria, and the contact details of the researcher if they wanted to participate. Participants signed informed consent and agreed to be audio-recorded. Semi-structured interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams.

Data Analysis

After data were collected and transcribed, the researcher analysed the data using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, 1996). First, the researcher immersed himself in the data by reading transcripts multiple times and listening to the audio recordings. Next, detailed notes were made capturing experiences, language use, and interpretations. Then, these notes were transformed into emergent themes reflecting the core ideas expressed by participants. Afterward, related themes were grouped together while weak or unsupported themes were removed to refine the analysis. Finally, the

researcher wrote up the findings by describing each theme with supporting participant quotes and linked the interpretations to existing literature.

Trustworthiness

According to Forero et al. (2018) and Lincoln and Guba (1985), the most well-known criteria to ascertain trustworthiness involve the following: Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. In the research, transferability was addressed by providing detailed descriptions of the study setting, participant recruitment, and data collection methods. Dependability was ensured by having an external qualified researcher review the research process and findings for consistency and reliability. Confirmability was maintained through participant transcript verification, supervised research processes, keeping a reflective diary, and acknowledging researcher reflexivity to minimise bias.

Ethical Considerations

The research study was conducted in line with the ethical principles outlined by the ethics committee. The researcher obtained informed consent by providing participants with detailed information sheets and consent forms, ensuring that participation was voluntary. Privacy and confidentiality were maintained by assigning pseudonyms to participants and securely storing data to prevent any personal identification. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without negative consequences to their healthcare access. Participants were provided with the contact information of counselling services in case of emotional distress. All data collected were securely stored in encrypted folders accessible only to the researchers, with audio recordings destroyed after transcription and analysis. Permission to use the data for future research and dissemination was obtained during the informed consent process to support ongoing academic contribution.

Results

Demographics of Participants

This sample consisted mostly of females ($n = 7$), one non-binary participant ($n = 1$), and two males ($n = 2$). The age ranges of the participants span from 21 to 29 years old, with a mean age of 25 years. In terms of education, participants were enrolled in various degree programmes, ranging from undergraduate to postgraduate levels. While the majority reside in university accommodation, some individuals live in private accommodation.

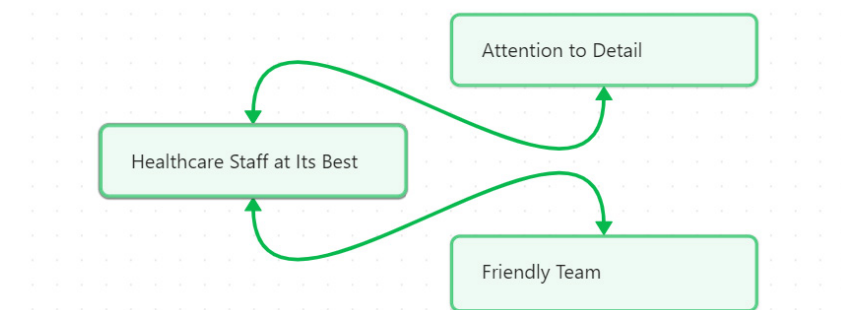
Presentation of Themes

The findings are presented in line with the study objectives, main themes, and sub-themes with supporting quotations from participants.

Theme 1: Healthcare Staff at Its Best

The main objective was to explore students' experience and use of on-campus healthcare services. This theme, healthcare staff at its best, emerged and through interrogation of students' experiences and interactions with staff when using healthcare services. Generally, students described positive experiences where they felt welcome and noted pleasant interactions and positive experiences.

Figure 1: Theme One With its Subthemes



Students referred to “attention to detail” with staff demonstrating attentiveness to both their medical needs and personal circumstances. Participants reported that staff members engaged in meaningful conversations, showing genuine interest in their academic progress and well-being, creating a supportive and caring atmosphere. Participant 1 stated, “Umm, those nurses are very attentive and they even ask you about schoolwork and they encourage you to protect yourself more.” This attentiveness was described as “hands-on” and “welcoming” by Participant 2.

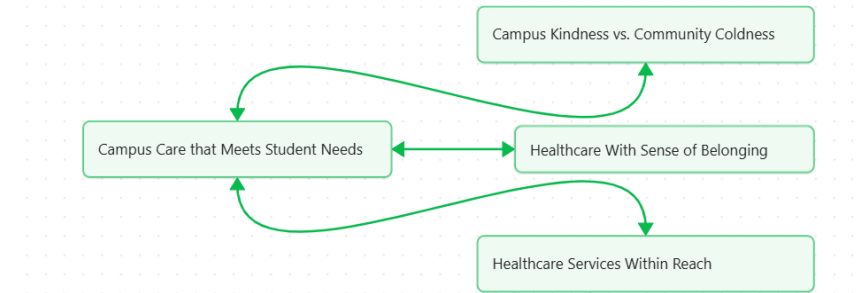
Participants also described their interactions with staff as “friendly” and “gentle”. This fostered a sense of comfort and openness, encouraging students to share their concerns more freely. One participant emphasised, “You know the mind is so powerful that once someone gives me a gentle response and welcomes me with a positive response, my mind and my body just relaxes...”. Therefore, having nurses who paid attention to and were friendly toward students enhanced the overall healthcare experience with the university healthcare services.

Theme 2: Campus Care that Meets Student Needs

This theme emerged as students compared their experiences with the campus clinic and local government clinics. Students felt more welcome at on-campus health facilities and experienced a sense of belonging compared

to public healthcare clinics while appreciating the closeness of the university healthcare services.

Figure 2: Theme Two With its Subthemes



Students reported receiving better treatment and a more respectful, professional atmosphere at university healthcare centres, compared to the often “judgmental” and uncomfortable experiences at local clinics. Participant 1 said, “In local clinics, it’s just bad. I do not wanna lie. It’s just bad in a way that they would just shout...” In addition, instances of feeling judged or stereotyped based on gender or assumptions about their medical needs were common complaints regarding community clinics. This is what Participant 10 noted, “Whereas for men it is not that situation and in a campus clinic I don’t get that... I feel like it goes back to that thing that people treat you based on your gender, your age, if you’re woman, how short or how tall you are, because it happens.” Thus, students felt more at ease discussing personal health matters at the university health facility, where they did not encounter the stigma or scrutiny prevalent in local clinics.

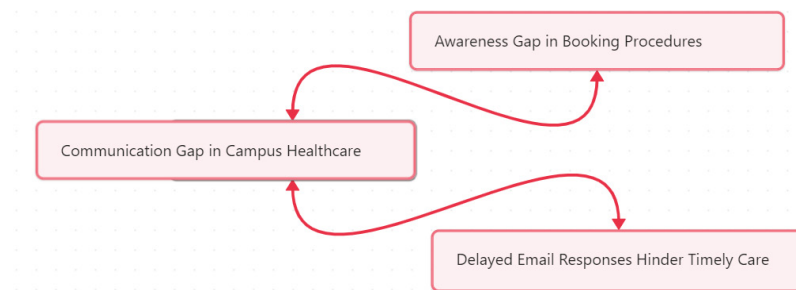
Regarding the experience of a sense of belonging at campus facilities, the use of accessible language and communication skills created a welcoming and inclusive atmosphere. Participant 6 noted, “What I have observed is that they treat people equal, and they have good communication skills.” In addition, the convenience of the on-campus services was also reported by participants as this made the services easily accessible. Participant 5 said, “...it is easy for them to get help, because the clinic is on campus, so it’s near...”. This allows for quick access to healthcare without the burden of travel. Participant 1 further concurred, “Having a clinic on campus, it allows you, let’s say for example you are walking around, maybe you are thinking that you are HIV positive or whatever... It (the on-campus clinic) is just like right next to you.” Overall, the positive experiences shared by participants highlight

how important easy access to services and good communication are in creating a sense of belonging and community for students on campus.

Theme 3: Communication Gap in Campus Healthcare

This theme captures the challenges experienced by students while using university healthcare services. Students noted communication issues and highlighted a lack of awareness and problems with booking consultations.

Figure 3: Theme Three With its Subthemes



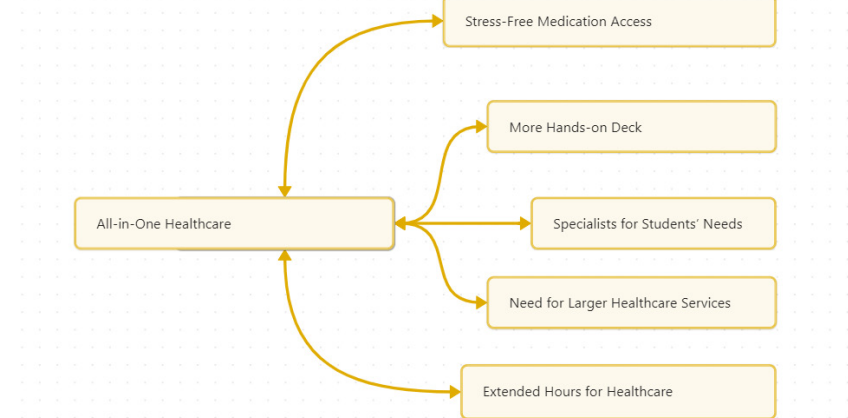
Participants expressed a lack of awareness about the necessity to schedule appointments in advance, leading to confusion upon arrival. Participant 3 recounted discovering the booking requirement only after arriving at the clinic: “So, I didn’t know that one had to book an appointment when I had to go to the clinic... So I just got there and I was like, I’m here and I was told that you have to do an appointment first.” Participant 4 noted a similar experience, realising she needed to book via email: “...I remember on my first time when I was about to visit the clinic whereby I came there without booking and they said you have to book. So, I didn’t even know how to book, only to find out we book using an email.” However, despite not having appointments, participants reported that the clinic staff was accommodating and assisted them, demonstrating a level of understanding and flexibility in supporting students as Participant 3 noted, “...but they didn’t send me away.”

In addition to the gap in awareness, students expressed varying communication experiences some noting slow responses to their booking confirmation emails, while others reported quicker replies. Participant 6 said, “If I send an e-mail today, maybe (I get a response) by next week Wednesday...” However, Participant 1 noted recent improvements, including the introduction of a Google Calendar system for easier booking, which lessened waiting times: “In the beginning you would write an email to them, now they just send you a link and then you go to Google Calendar and you literally book and then your booking literally reflect on your collection.”

Theme 4: All-in-One Healthcare

This theme reveals several recommendations made by students for improving the university healthcare services. Recommendations in this theme include having more medication on campus, more staff support, a call for specialising doctors, an integrated healthcare system on campus that addresses all their healthcare needs in one location, the inclusion of more medication, and the expansion of clinic hours.

Figure 4: Theme Four With its Subthemes



Students highlighted the need for increased availability of medications on campus. While the clinic provides contraceptives and commonly prescribed medications like antibiotics, participants expressed the need for a wider range of medicines, especially for chronic conditions. Participant 2 noted a situation where she was referred for external help to get medication that the university did not have: “...so if they do not have it, they can recommend something that you can go and buy over the counter that is going to help you.” This relates to participants advocating for the availability of chronic medications and specific treatments, like asthma inhalers. Participant 7 stated, “For instance, I go there, I must be provided with medication. I must get the pump (asthma inhaler) that I need for my asthma...”

Accompanying the need for more medication is the call for more staff as students noted a shortage of healthcare professionals, particularly doctors, who are only available on campus on specific days. Therefore, students requested that specialist doctors also be available. Participant 10 stated, “... So, an ideal healthcare services would be where there is a doctor every time we need him/her...” indicating a need for more staff. Further, a specific call for readily available specialists was made by the students. This would allow them to receive immediate and comprehensive medical attention without

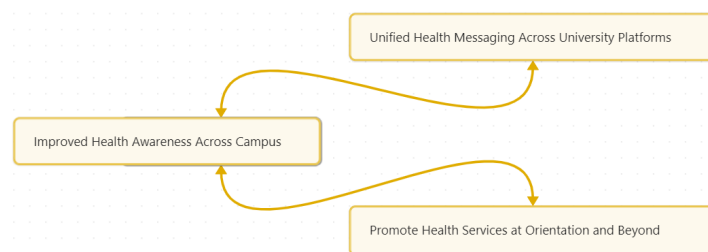
the inconvenience of external referrals, which can be time-consuming and costly. Participant 8 specifically advocated for the presence of a gynaecologist at the clinic, recounting her experience with long waiting times after being referred to an external hospital: “...I just think that it would be really nice if we actually had access to a gyne (gynecologist) on campus within the clinic...”.

Students also expressed a desire for larger facilities and an expansion of the services offered, assuming that increased space would allow for quicker and more efficient healthcare access for a greater number of students. Some advocated for larger central facilities to improve capacity and treatment efficiency. Participant 1 stated, “I believe it’s supposed to be bigger, the Student Counselling and the clinic.” At the same time, Participant 6 argued for decentralised clinics to enhance immediate access to healthcare across campus: “So, if they can maybe, from each res (residence), like each res, if they can maybe have their clinics not the whole institution depends to the one clinic.” In addition, participants highlighted a need to extend the operating hours of on-campus healthcare services, including opening on weekends, to better accommodate students. Participant 9 stated the academic implications of limited clinic hours, arguing that 24-hour access would enable students to seek healthcare without missing classes or seminars: “I think it should be accessible 24 hours. It will also help those ones who have like classes during the day to be able to access those services later on the day...”.

Theme 5: Improved Health Awareness Across Campus

This last theme is about the recommendations for bridging the communication gap between healthcare staff and students. Students suggested using more platforms to create awareness of the booking system and the types of healthcare services provided.

Figure 5: Theme Five With its Subthemes



Students discussed improving communication through digital platforms to raise awareness among students about healthcare services at the university. Participants emphasised the need to utilise various technological platforms

for better information dissemination regarding scheduling services and available resources. For example, collaborating with student societies to effectively promote these services on popular social media platforms to reach more students. An example of this is from Participant 4 who stated: “I think on our UP portal, there can just be a section. I don’t know if there is now. But I haven’t seen...”.

Further, participants also recommended organising outreach events and seminars to engage students and promote health beyond the healthcare promotion that usually occurs during the student orientation process. Participant 9 emphasised that despite brief mentions of the clinic during orientation, many students remained unaware of its existence due to information overload at that time: “One reason for that I think there is lack of a healthcare promotion in the university...They (the university) do mention it on the orientation day. But I don’t think that’s enough to mention it on orientation day...”.

Discussion

Positive Student Experiences with On-Campus Healthcare Services

The findings show that students expressed very positive experiences with the use of on-campus health services highlighting helpful interactions that contributed to their recovery and promoted a culture of openness. Contrary to these findings, in the South African context, Bantjes et al. (2020) and Musakwa et al. (2021) reported that students had more negative experiences with campus healthcare services. This study also revealed that various factors can impact students’ perceptions and experiences with on-campus health services across different contexts and environments. For example, Evans et al. (2018) highlighted that students have diverse experiences and face unique challenges concerning the use of campus health services.

Barriers and Challenges in Using Campus Health Services

It is important to note that while participants described positive experiences with on-campus health services, they also expressed several barriers and challenges. The barriers comprise individual barriers, challenges with healthcare providers, or system-related barriers (Musakwa et al., 2021). Financial limitations may require students to rely on public health services or on-campus health services instead of private healthcare as they may not have access to medical aid. In relation to personal barriers, using health facilities outside campus may incur travelling costs (Maskew et al., 2016) and cultural and language factors can also compromise interactions with staff. Using public or student healthcare services may include long waiting times (Maskew et al., 2016), limited staff or staff that are inadequately

trained to deal with young adults (Geary et al., 2014; Maughan-Brown et al., 2018).

Communication Issues and Recommendations for Improvement

Students in the current study highlighted the need for more staff and specialised doctors to be available. Healthcare staff with limited communication skills, cultural incompetence, or language barriers could also pose noticeable challenges to the use of healthcare services (Taylor & Stanton, 2021). The challenges encountered by participants in this study revolved around communication issues and a lack of awareness regarding the available services and the booking process. Musakwa et al. (2021) recommended an appointment allocation model to help manage booking requests. A similar process was implemented in the current study context to improve booking appointments, however it had its own challenges. These challenges comprised problems with slow replies to emails and a lack of awareness regarding the available services which was also highlighted in the study by Musakwa et al. (2021). Students also proposed recommendations to improve on-campus health services including extending operating hours, more specialised doctors, more staff, and better infrastructure.

Importance of Accessibility and Awareness of Campus Healthcare

The value of accessible and convenient healthcare was echoed by this student sample as it is available on campus and no travel costs are involved unless they are referred to specialist services. Students in this study also encouraged more awareness initiatives and opportunities to advocate for healthcare promotion. The use of digital platforms and the inclusion of student bodies were recommended by this student cohort to increase awareness of on-campus health services. Thus, this study offered a deeper understanding of the unique health experiences and challenges faced by students when accessing on-campus health services. This will allow for an opportunity to implement recommended changes to enhance awareness and inspire future health promotion initiatives. Therefore, quality healthcare should be available to all students to help them maintain healthy lifestyles ultimately predicting a healthier adult population and through this contributing to a healthier South African community.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, this study explored students' experiences with using on-campus healthcare services. The findings highlight the unique health needs of the student population and the challenges they face as they also proposed several recommendations on how healthcare services can be improved. The research makes a valuable contribution to understanding students' experiences with the use of on-campus healthcare facilities and also serves

as a call for university healthcare services to be adequately utilised. An accessible, diverse, and comprehensive health facility can optimise student wellbeing and help them thrive in various academic environments.

It is recommended that future research include a more diverse sample in terms of gender, age, and ethnicity. It will also be valuable to include students from various degree programmes and years of study. A broader demographic will also provide a more comprehensive understanding of students' experiences with using healthcare services. Lastly, exploring student experiences with using on-campus health services from various institutions would be useful.

Acknowledgments

The researchers acknowledge the work of the healthcare staff and the students' valuable inputs.

Ethics statement

The research proposal was presented, and ethical approval was obtained from the Faculty of Humanities and the Faculty of Health Sciences ethics committees (Ref number: HUM13/o823) University of Pretoria.

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Full-Time Equivalence Metrics and Financial Efficiency of Ghanaian Public Higher Education Institutions

Justice Ray Achoanya Ayam

Abstract

This study examines the application of Full-Time Equivalence (FTE) metrics and their relationship with financial efficiency in Ghanaian public higher education institutions (HEIs). Using a mixed-methods design, the study integrates panel data from 151 public HEIs from 2018 to 2022 with semi-structured interviews involving 14 senior financial and administrative officers and documentary analysis. Fixed-effects and random-effects panel models were employed to examine cost efficiency, while deductive thematic analysis explored institutional practices and policy implications. The results indicate that institutional scale, revenue per student, and expenditure per student significantly predict the unadjusted Cost Efficiency Ratio (CER). However, after workload normalization, the FTE-adjusted model exhibits weaker effects, with individual predictors failing to attain conventional levels of statistical significance. Qualitative findings nevertheless demonstrate the operational importance of FTE for staffing, budgeting, resource allocation, and institutional planning, while revealing inconsistencies in calculation methods, fragmented data systems, and the absence of standardized reporting protocols. The findings suggest that FTE is most valuable as a standardized planning and resource-allocation metric whose effectiveness depends on institutional data quality, governance capacity, and regulatory coherence. The study recommends standardized national FTE reporting protocols, strengthened institutional data systems, and the progressive integration of FTE measures into evidence-based budgeting and performance-financing frameworks.

Key words: full-time equivalence (fte), financial efficiency, public higher education institutions, higher education resource allocation, Ghana.

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Résumé

Cette étude examine l'application des indicateurs d'équivalence à temps plein (ETP) et leur relation avec l'efficacité financière dans les établissements publics d'enseignement supérieur au Ghana. S'appuyant sur une méthodologie mixte, dont l'organisation de discussions de groupe et des entretiens individuels, l'étude combine des données provenant de discussions de groupe dans 151 établissements d'enseignement supérieur publics sur la période 2018-2022, des entretiens semi-structurés menés auprès de 14 hauts responsables financiers et administratifs, ainsi qu'une analyse de documents. Des modèles de discussions de groupe à effets fixes et à effets aléatoires ont été utilisés pour examiner l'efficacité en termes de coûts, tandis qu'une analyse thématique déductive a permis d'explorer les pratiques institutionnelles et les implications politiques. Les résultats indiquent que la taille de l'établissement, les recettes par étudiant et les dépenses par étudiant sont des prédicteurs significatifs du ratio d'efficacité en termes de coûts (REC) non ajusté. Cependant, après normalisation de la charge de travail, le modèle ajusté en fonction de l'ETP présente des effets plus faibles, les prédicteurs individuels n'atteignant pas les niveaux conventionnels de signification statistique. Les résultats qualitatifs démontrent néanmoins l'importance opérationnelle de l'ETP pour la gestion des effectifs, la budgétisation, l'allocation des ressources et la planification institutionnelle, tout en révélant des incohérences dans les méthodes de calcul, la fragmentation des systèmes de données et l'absence de protocoles de reporting standardisés. Les résultats suggèrent que l'ETP est particulièrement utile en tant qu'indicateur standardisé de planification et d'allocation des ressources, dont l'efficacité dépend de la qualité des données institutionnelles, de la capacité de gouvernance et de la cohérence réglementaire. L'étude recommande la mise en place de protocoles nationaux standardisés de déclaration des ETP, le renforcement des systèmes de données institutionnels et l'intégration progressive des mesures d'ETP dans les cadres de budgétisation fondée sur des données factuelles et de financement lié à la performance.

Mots-clés : équivalent temps plein (ETP) ; efficacité financière ; établissements d'enseignement supérieur publics ; allocation des ressources dans l'enseignement supérieur ; Ghana.

Introduction

Financial efficiency is a critical issue for higher education institutions (HEIs) globally, particularly as they navigate the challenges of resource management and institutional sustainability. Effective financial management in HEIs encompasses the optimal allocation and utilization of resources to meet academic, infrastructure, and research objectives while minimizing

inefficiencies (Chapman & Dearden, 2021). This efficiency is essential for maintaining educational quality, supporting institutional operations, and strengthening long-term sustainability (Chapman & Dearden, 2021; Delaney & Marcotte, 2024).

Previous studies on Ghanaian higher education finance have largely emphasized funding adequacy, governance, regulatory coordination, and sustainability challenges (Mensah, 2020; Oketch, 2023). However, limited empirical attention has been given to how Full-Time Equivalence (FTE) metrics are calculated, applied, and linked to institutional financial efficiency in Ghanaian public HEIs. What remains insufficiently examined is whether FTE-based workload and enrolment measures can improve resource allocation, budgeting accuracy, and cost-efficiency analysis within Ghana's public higher education sector. This study addresses that gap by empirically assessing FTE applications and their financial implications within a resource-constrained and evolving regulatory environment.

In Ghana, the urgency for financial efficiency has intensified amid constrained public funding and increasing demand for higher education (Oketch, 2023). These dynamics have exposed inefficiencies in resource planning and have called attention to the absence or inconsistent application of data-driven tools such as FTE. FTE, which converts part-time enrolments and staff into full-time workload equivalents, is critical for financial planning, as it enables standardized metrics for assessing cost-efficiency, staffing levels, and student-related expenditure (Welton et al., 2020). The lack of reliable FTE applications impairs institutions' ability to make evidence-based financial decisions, weakens budget transparency, and distorts equitable resource allocation.

Although Full Economic Costing (FEC) offers a more holistic view of institutional cost structures, this study focuses on FTE due to its foundational role in operational planning and its direct, measurable linkage to financial efficiency. While FEC encompasses broader cost categories such as indirect and opportunity costs, FTE is a critical input in calculating these broader estimates. Hence, this study narrows its scope to FTE as a gateway metric, recognizing its relevance for future integrative costing frameworks that may incorporate FEC principles.

This study addresses a significant gap in the Ghanaian higher education literature by exploring the empirical application and policy relevance of FTE in public HEIs. It examines how FTE data is used in financial planning, resource allocation, and budgeting and assesses the implications of its absence or weak implementation on institutional performance and resilience.

The study is guided by three objectives: 1) to examine how FTE metrics are applied in financial planning and resource allocation within Ghanaian public HEIs, 2) to assess the relationship between FTE-based measures and financial efficiency indicators, and 3) to identify the policy and management implications of strengthening FTE reporting and application in Ghanaian public HEIs.

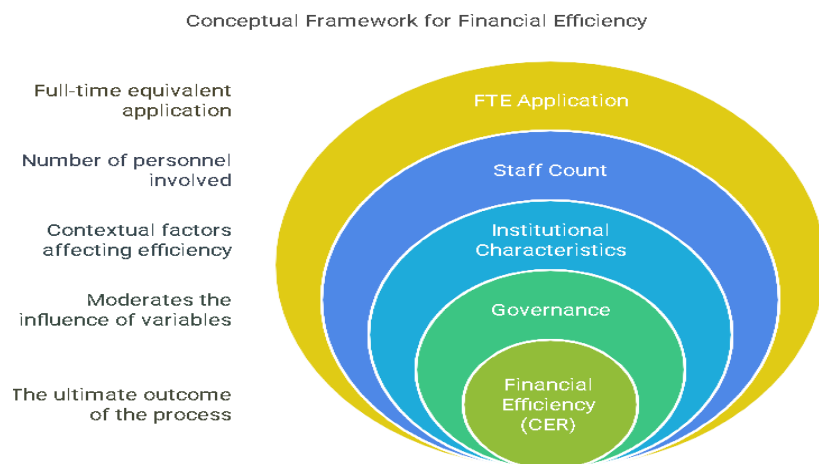
The study examines the proposition that FTE-based workload measures are systematically associated with financial efficiency in Ghanaian public HEIs and that the usefulness of such measures is conditioned by institutional and regulatory arrangements. In doing so, the study contributes to scholarly and policy debates on higher education financial governance by distinguishing the statistical relationship between FTE-adjusted measures and efficiency outcomes from the broader managerial value of FTE in planning, budgeting, and resource allocation.

Literature Review

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This study is grounded in the Resource-Based View (RBV) of the firm, as articulated by Barney (1991), which posits that sustained competitive advantage arises from the strategic deployment of valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable internal resources. RBV assumes that institutional heterogeneity and resource immobility underpin performance differentials. In the context of HEIs, FTE data represent an informational resource that, when effectively managed, becomes a capability for strategic planning, budgeting, and governance. By transforming workforce data into actionable insights, HEIs can optimize operational processes, enhance productivity, and drive financial efficiency.

Figure 1 presents the study's conceptual framework linking FTE-based workload measures, institutional resource characteristics, governance capacity, and financial efficiency. Financial efficiency is operationalized primarily through the Cost Efficiency Ratio (CER), where lower values indicate more efficient use of operational resources relative to revenue. Within the Resource-Based View (RBV), FTE data are conceptualized as an informational resource whose performance value depends on complementary institutional capabilities, including data systems, workload planning, financial management, and governance. Institutional governance is therefore expected to shape the extent to which standardized workload information contributes to more informed resource allocation and cost control (Welton et al., 2020; Fleming et al., 2024).

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Source: Author's Construct.

Financial Efficiency in Higher Education

Financial efficiency is a cornerstone for HEIs, crucial to cost management, budget control, and strategic financial planning (Baker, 2024; Delaney & Marcotte, 2024). Financially efficient institutions are better positioned to maintain educational quality, boost research productivity, and improve their reputations (Dima et al., 2024). However, HEIs worldwide grapple with inefficiencies that arise from inadequate planning, resource misallocation, and external pressures, including economic instability and dwindling government funding (Hong, 2023). As HEIs navigate an increasingly competitive global landscape, effective financial management becomes critical for sustaining competitive advantage (Ortagus et al., 2020).

FTE in International Contexts

The literature consistently highlights the role of FTE as a standardized measure in global HEI financial management. In mature systems such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, FTE is institutionalized in budget planning, staff deployment, performance assessments, and regulatory reporting (Daun-Barnett & John, 2018; Joaquim & Cerdeira, 2020). These metrics contribute to transparency and accountability, enabling HEIs to align internal operations with funding frameworks and policy objectives. Moreover, FTE supports performance benchmarking, allowing institutions to gauge relative efficiency and identify improvement areas (Jongbloed, 2022).

Despite its established role in these contexts, FTE's technical limitations are also well-documented. Its primary focus on workloads means that indirect costs, capital investments, and broader opportunity costs are often unaccounted for. Consequently, scholars have argued that FTE should be complemented by more integrative costing models to ensure financial comprehensiveness (Pilonato & Monfardini, 2020).

Costing Models in Higher Education Institutions

To address FTE's limitations, Full Economic Costing (FEC) has emerged as a complementary approach that incorporates both direct and indirect expenditures, including administrative overheads, facility costs, and long-term financial obligations (Sukenti, 2023). The integration of FEC into HEI financial management provides a more transparent and accurate representation of institutional costs, thereby supporting evidence-based decision-making and sustainability planning (Rosinger et al., 2022). Although FEC is increasingly adopted in advanced systems, its implementation remains uneven, particularly in contexts with limited financial and institutional capacity.

The literature suggests that FTE and FEC may perform complementary roles in higher education financial management. While FTE enables operational efficiency through workload alignment, FEC provides broader insights into institutional cost structures and investment planning. However, empirical evidence on how these metrics can be adapted to Ghana's regulatory and operational context remains limited, requiring further investigation. Available literature often highlights the underdeveloped state of institutional data systems, fragmented financial reporting, and the absence of standardized workload definitions. In South Africa, for example, FTE is used primarily for public funding purposes, but inconsistencies in data accuracy and reporting frequency compromise its effectiveness (Council on Higher Education [CHE], 2024). Similarly, Nigerian institutions struggle with infrastructural deficits and incompatible software systems that impede reliable FTE application (Adeusi et al., 2024).

In the Ghanaian context, Mensah (2020) identifies non-standardized FTE formulas and the lack of integrated financial systems as critical barriers to effective implementation. These challenges are compounded by broader institutional governance issues, including fragmented decision-making structures and limited capacity for data analysis and interpretation. Although Ghanaian HEIs report student and staff workloads to regulatory bodies, the absence of harmonized methodologies undermines comparability and utility. These limitations underscore the need for empirical research that

captures the nuances of FTE use within specific institutional and regulatory settings in Africa.

Ghana's Higher Education Financing Landscape

Ghanaian HEIs operate within a resource-constrained environment characterized by rising student enrolments, inadequate public funding, and limited capital investments (Oketch, 2023). These structural challenges are compounded by macroeconomic volatility, placing additional strain on institutional budgets and strategic planning processes.

Despite these constraints, institutional and policy discourses increasingly point to the need for data-driven management tools. Mensah (2020) underscores the potential role of FTE in offering reliable workload data to inform staffing and budgeting decisions. However, the operationalization of such tools remains inconsistent due to technical limitations and capacity constraints. The broader literature also identifies missed opportunities for leveraging internal data systems to align resource use with strategic priorities (Delaney & Marcotte, 2024). Notably, the intersection between internal capabilities and regulatory frameworks remains underexplored, limiting the understanding of how HEIs can mobilize internal resources to improve financial performance.

Regulatory structures influence the use of financial metrics and costing methodologies. Globally, standardized FTE measures are often mandated by national quality assurance and funding agencies to ensure transparency and accountability (Welton et al., 2020). In Ghana, however, consistent FTE application has yet to be fully institutionalized across public HEIs. A deeper understanding of how regulatory and institutional governance structures interact to shape costing practices is critical to advancing financial efficiency in Ghana's higher education system.

Synthesis and Critique of the Literature

While the literature underscores the significance of financial efficiency in HEIs globally, there remains a marked paucity of empirical studies examining the specific application of FTE metrics within Ghanaian HEIs. Existing scholarship has largely addressed broader financial management and governance themes, often overlooking the strategic value of FTE as a quantifiable indicator for resource allocation and efficiency evaluation in this context. Furthermore, although Full Economic Costing (FEC) is acknowledged as a more comprehensive framework, accounting for both direct and indirect costs, its operationalization alongside FTE in low-resource settings remains underexplored (Rosinger et al., 2022). The literature also reveals a lack of clarity on how HEIs in Ghana can leverage internal data systems and

reporting structures to implement such costing tools effectively. These gaps highlight the need for empirical research that interrogates the institutional and contextual factors shaping the use of FTE and its potential contribution to financial efficiency within Ghana's public higher education sector.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a rigorous mixed-methods design, integrating panel econometric analysis, institutional document review, and semi-structured interviews. Using a longitudinal dataset from 151 Ghanaian Public HEIs from 2018 to 2022, the quantitative analysis explored cost-efficiency dynamics normalized by FTE. Qualitative insights from policy documents and stakeholder narratives enriched interpretation. Panel techniques addressed unobserved heterogeneity across institutions. The number of observations reduced from 755 to 720 due to missing data on added control variables, Institutional Age and Student-to-Staff Ratio (STR), not consistently reported by all Public HEIs. The study does not compare institutions that formally apply FTE with those that do not. Rather, it constructs FTE-based student and staff measures from institutional enrolment and staffing records and examines how these standardized workload indicators relate to financial efficiency. This approach is appropriate because formal FTE reporting is not uniformly institutionalized across Ghanaian public HEIs, making a binary user/non-user comparison analytically unsuitable. This triangulated approach enhanced the validity, depth, and explanatory power of the findings across diverse institutional contexts.

Panel Data Variable Measurement and Model Specification

Dependent Variables

Two primary efficiency indicators were utilized:

Cost Efficiency Ratio (CER):

$$CER = \text{Operational Costs} / \text{Total Revenue}$$

FTE-Adjusted Cost Efficiency Ratio (CER_FTE):

$$CER_FTE = \text{Total Cost per FTE} / \text{Output per FTE}$$

CER is measured as the ratio of operational costs to total revenue. Lower CER values indicate greater cost efficiency because fewer operational resources are consumed relative to revenue generated. CER_FTE adjusts the efficiency measure by standardizing cost and output values on an FTE basis, thereby accounting for differences in institutional workload intensity arising from part-time enrolment, part-time staffing, and variations in delivery structure.

FTE Estimation

FTE measures were constructed with reference to established approaches to workload standardization in higher education (Altbach et al., 2019; OECD, 2016). For analytical comparability across institutions, part-time students and part-time staff were assigned a standardized weight of 0.5 relative to their full-time counterparts. This weighting is employed as an analytical conversion assumption rather than as a claim of a uniformly mandated national FTE formula:

FTE Students:

$$FTE_Students = Full-Time\ Students + (0.5 \times Part-Time\ Students)$$

FTE Staff:

$$FTE_Staff = Full-Time\ Staff + (0.5 \times Part-Time\ Staff)$$

These conversions standardized enrolment and staffing data, ensuring analytical consistency across diverse institutional formats.

Independent and Control Variables

Independent Variables:

FTE_students_it: Full-Time Equivalent Students (proxy for enrolment size)

RPS_it: Revenue per Student

EPS_it: Expenditure per Student

RPS_FTE_it: Revenue per Student (FTE-adjusted)

EPS_FTE_it: Expenditure per Student (FTE-adjusted)

Control Variables:

Institutional Age: Proxy for organizational maturity.

STR (Student-to-Staff Ratio): Captures labour intensity and institutional structure.

These variables align with resource allocation theory and higher education production functions (Teixeira et al., 2007; Johnstone, 2004).

Model Specification

Model 1: Unadjusted Cost Efficiency

Cost Efficiency Ratio (CER) for institution i at time t is modeled as:

$$CER_it = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \times \log(FTE_students_it) + \beta_2 \times \log(RPS_it) + \beta_3 \times EPS_it + \beta_4 \times Age_it + \beta_5 \times STR_it + \varepsilon_it$$

Where:

CER_it: Cost Efficiency Ratio

FTE_students_it: Full-Time Equivalent Students

RPS_it: Revenue per Student

EPS_it: Expenditure per Student

Age_it: Age of the Institution

STR_it: Student-to-Staff Ratio

β_0 to β_5 : Parameters to be Estimated

ε_it : Stochastic Error Term

Model 2: FTE-Adjusted Cost Efficiency

FTE-Adjusted Cost Efficiency (CER_FTE) for institution i at time t is modeled as:

$$CER_FTE_it = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \times \log(FTE_students_it) + \beta_2 \times RPS_FTE_it + \beta_3 \times EPS_FTE_it + \beta_4 \times FTE_Staff_it + \beta_5 \times Age_it + \beta_6 \times STR_it + \varepsilon_it$$

Where:

CER_FTE_it: Full-Time Equivalent-adjusted Cost Efficiency Ratio

FTE_students_it: Full-Time Equivalent Students

RPS_FTE_it: Revenue per FTE Student

EPS_FTE_it: Expenditure per FTE Student

FTE_Staff_it: Full-Time Equivalent Academic Staff

Age_it: Age of the Institution

STR_it: Student-to-Staff Ratio

β_0 to β_6 : Parameters to be Estimated

ε_it : Stochastic Error Term

$i \in \{1, \dots, 151\}$, $t \in \{2018, \dots, 2022\}$, ε_it represents the idiosyncratic error term.

These conversions standardized enrolment and staffing data, ensuring analytical consistency across diverse institutional formats.

Estimation Strategy

The study estimated both fixed-effects and random-effects panel regression models. Year fixed effects were included to absorb common time-specific shocks affecting all institutions. The Hausman specification test produced a borderline result, $\chi^2(7) = 13.34$, $p = 0.060$, indicating that the random-effects estimator may be statistically consistent, while fixed-effects estimates remain important as a robustness check. Accordingly, both FE and RE results are reported. Robust standard errors were applied to address heteroskedasticity and serial correlation detected in the diagnostic tests.

Sampling and Selecting Interview Respondents

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 senior financial and administrative officers across four of Ghana's largest Public HEIs. Participants

were selected purposively to ensure expertise in FTE applications, financial reporting, and institutional governance. The interviews explored participants’ lived experiences, interpretations, and policy engagements related to FTE deployment and financial efficiency.

In parallel, a systematic document review was undertaken. Institutional policy documents, governance frameworks, and financial management reports were selected based on their empirical relevance, institutional provenance, and thematic alignment with FTE implementation and financial management concerns. This qualitative component enriched the explanatory depth of the study and supported the generation of policy-relevant insights.

To preserve anonymity and maintain consistency in reporting, quotations in the thematic analysis are attributed using generic functional descriptors rather than participants’ specific institutional job titles.

Data Collection

The data collection process integrates panel data from institutional financial reports, staffing records, and enrolment figures over five years, forming the basis for quantitative analysis. The study rigorously employs a systematic document analysis to complement this data, ensuring alignment with contemporary institutional practices and policy frameworks (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2023; Yin, 2018). Document selection is based on relevance to FTE metrics, financial management, and governance structures. Institutional reports are chosen based on criteria such as their comprehensiveness, recency, and relevance to the Ghanaian context. Key documents include national reports from the GTEC and global perspectives on financial sustainability. These sources are cross-referenced to verify consistency in institutional policies and FTE applications. Table 1 outlines the documents reviewed, highlighting their institutional provenance and specific relevance to the study’s objectives.

Table 1. Key Documents Reviewed

Document Title	Source/Institution	Link to Document
Financial sustainability in higher education: A global perspective	Žalėnienė and Pereira (2021)	https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geosus.2021.05.001
Higher education report: Ghana	Mohammed et al. (2022), UNESCO World Higher Education Conference (WHEC 2022)	https://whec2022.net/resources/Country%20report%20-%20Ghana.pdf
Tertiary education statistics: Annual statistics report 2019	National Accreditation Board (2019)	https://gtec.edu.gh/download/file/TEI%20Statistical%20Report%202019.pdf
Clarity on FTEs	Council on Higher Education (CHE), South Africa (2024)	https://www.che.ac.za/sites/default/files/FTEs%20calculation.docx
Distance education policy audit: Survey among Ghana’s tertiary education institutions	Ghana Tertiary Education Commission (GTEC) (2026)	https://gtec.edu.gh/download/file/Final%20report%20on%20DE%20-%20Phase%201%2011.08.2023%20FINAL%20FINAL%20(Done).pdf
Norms for tertiary education (universities)	National Council for Tertiary Education (2012)	https://gtec.edu.gh/downloadQuestionnaire/12
A review of the multiple regulatory regime in tertiary education in Ghana	Newman (2023)	https://www.ajol.info/index.php/gjhe/article/view/273056

Source: Author’s Analysis

Data Integration and Analytical Tools

Findings from the quantitative and qualitative analyses were triangulated to assess convergence, complementarity, and divergence across data sources. This integration strengthened interpretive validity by linking statistical patterns with institutional experiences and documentary evidence.

Thematic Analysis of Qualitative Data

A deductive thematic approach was adopted because the study was guided by predefined theoretical and conceptual categories derived from the Resource-Based View and the research objectives. This enabled systematic

examination of how FTE metrics relate to financial efficiency, governance structures, and institutional resource management.

Validity, Reliability, and Integrity

The study employed robust diagnostic tests to ensure validity. The Hausman specification test did not reject the null hypothesis at the 5% significance level, $\chi^2(7) = 13.34$, $p = .060$, indicating that the random-effects estimator may be consistent. Given the borderline probability value and the substantive importance of controlling for time-invariant institutional heterogeneity, both random-effects and fixed-effects estimates were retained, with the latter serving as a robustness check.

Reliability was ensured through consistent data cleaning, coding, and FTE computation protocols. Triangulation of panel data, institutional documents, and interviews enhanced validity. Ethical standards were strictly followed, including informed consent, anonymity, and secure data handling. These procedures strengthened the credibility, transparency, and methodological robustness of the study in examining financial efficiency and FTE metrics in Ghanaian Public HEIs.

Results and Discussion

Panel Data Results

A comprehensive examination of institutional performance across 151 public higher education institutions (HEIs) in Ghana over a five-year period (2018–2022) provides foundational insights into cost efficiency and its determinants. The analysis employs panel data, capturing annual variations across both structural and performance-related variables. Key variables of interest include cost efficiency (CER), a normalized version adjusted for full-time equivalent enrolment (CER_FTE), financial performance proxies (EPS and RPS), institutional size (ln FTE Students), and operational characteristics such as student-to-staff ratio (STR) and institutional age.

Panel Data Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive statistics reveal notable variation in institutional performance and characteristics. The mean cost efficiency index (CER) is 2.05 (SD = 0.54), with values ranging from 0.66 to 3.94, suggesting considerable heterogeneity in resource utilization across institutions. A similar pattern is observed in the FTE-adjusted efficiency measure (CER_FTE), which ranges from 0.003 to 0.093. Enrolment size, measured by the log of full-time students, averages 8.13, corresponding to approximately 3,400 students, with a distribution reflecting both small and large HEIs. Revenue per student (RPS) and EPS also show substantial dispersion, underscoring differences in financial capacity and input allocation. These descriptive insights, presented in the

panel summary statistics, serve as a foundational context for subsequent econometric analysis (see Table 2).

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics

Variable	N	M	SD	Min	Max
Cost Efficiency (CER)	720	2.05	0.54	0.66	3.94
FTE-Adjusted Cost Efficiency (CER_FTE)	720	0.018	0.011	0.003	0.093
Full-Time Enrolment (ln FTE Students)	720	8.13	0.51	6.74	9.21
Revenue per Student (ln RPS)	720	5.56	0.57	3.8	6.87
Expenditure per Student (EPS)	720	98.36	19.82	43.96	152.82
EPS per FTE (EPS_FTE)	720	0.85	0.53	0.25	3.73
RPS per FTE (RPS_FTE)	720	2.03	0.47	0.86	3.15
Institutional Age	720	33.1	14.67	5.3	62.86
Student-to-Staff Ratio (STR)	720	26.04	2.83	19.02	49.65

Source: Author's Analysis

Correlation Analysis

The correlation analysis reveals substantial variation in the relationships among institutional scale, financial inputs, and the two efficiency measures. Enrolment scale is strongly and positively associated with revenue per student ($r = 0.89$, $p < 0.01$), indicating a close relationship between institutional size and financial scale. Expenditure per student is positively associated with CER ($r = 0.42$, $p < 0.01$). Given that higher CER values represent a larger operational-cost burden relative to revenue, this association suggests that greater expenditure intensity may place upward pressure on the cost-to-revenue ratio rather than automatically generating efficiency gains.

CER and CER_FTE are positively but moderately associated ($r = .28$, $p < .01$), indicating that FTE normalization produces an efficiency measure that is related to, but empirically distinct from, the unadjusted CER. Particularly strong correlations are observed between ln FTE Students and EPS_FTE and between ln RPS and EPS_FTE, indicating that scale-related variables and their FTE-derived measures require careful treatment in multivariate estimation. These relationships reinforce the importance of diagnostic assessment and robust estimation in interpreting the regression results (refer to Table 3).

Table 3. Correlation Matrix

Variable	CER	CER_FTE	ln FTE_Stu	ln RPS	EPS	EPS_FTE	RPS_FTE	Age	STR	M	SD
CER	-	0.28**	0.18**	0.17**	0.42**	-0.01	0.05	0.05	0.07	2.05	0.54
CER_FTE	0.28**	-	-0.76**	-0.72**	0.05	0.90**	0.04	-0.06	0.43**	0.018	0.011
ln FTE_Stu	0.18**	-0.76**	-	0.89**	0.17**	-0.82**	0.02	0.09*	-0.05	8.13	0.51
ln RPS	0.17**	-0.72**	0.89**	-	0.11**	-0.79**	0.43**	0.06	-0.18**	5.56	0.57
EPS	0.42**	0.05	0.17**	0.11**	-	0.19**	-0.04	0.02	0.06	98.36	19.82
EPS_FTE	-0.01	0.90**	-0.82**	-0.79**	0.19**	-	0	-0.07	0.43**	0.85	0.53
RPS_FTE	0.05	0.04	0.02	0.43**	-0.04	0	-	-0.02	0.08*	2.03	0.47
Age	0.05	-0.06	0.09*	0.06	0.02	-0.07	-0.02	-	0.02	33.1	14.67
STR	0.07	0.43**	-0.05	-0.18**	0.06	0.43**	0.08*	0.02	-	26.04	2.83
M	2.05	0.018	8.13	5.56	98.36	0.85	2.03	33.1	26.04		
SD	0.54	0.011	0.51	0.57	19.82	0.53	0.47	14.67	2.83		

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$ **Source:** Author's Analysis**Fixed Effects (FE) Regression Results**

Controlling for time-invariant institutional heterogeneity, the fixed-effects model identifies institutional scale (ln FTE Students), revenue per student (ln RPS), and expenditure per student (EPS) as statistically significant predictors of the Cost Efficiency Ratio (CER). Because CER is defined as operational costs relative to total revenue, lower values represent greater cost efficiency. The positive coefficients on ln FTE Students ($\beta = 0.020$, $p = 0.046$), ln RPS ($\beta = 0.080$, $p = 0.022$), and EPS ($\beta = 0.030$, $p = 0.003$) therefore indicate increases in the cost-to-revenue ratio rather than direct improvements in efficiency. The findings suggest that institutional expansion and higher financial flows may be accompanied by proportionately greater operating-cost pressures unless growth is matched by effective expenditure control and resource optimization. Institutional age and student-to-staff ratio are not statistically significant within the model.

When CER_FTE is used as the dependent variable, none of the explanatory variables attains conventional statistical significance, although enrolment scale approaches the 10% threshold ($\beta = 0.015$, $p = 0.061$). The attenuation

of effects following FTE normalization suggests that part of the variation observed in the unadjusted model reflects differences in institutional scale and workload intensity rather than persistent efficiency differentials (see Table 4).

When re-estimated with CER_FTE as the dependent variable, no predictors reach conventional significance thresholds. Although positive associations persist for ln FTE Students and STR, the results imply reduced sensitivity once normalized by FTE (see Table 5).

Table 4. Fixed Effects (FE) Regression Results-CER

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-Statistic	p-Value
Constant	0.5	0.5	1	0.317
ln FTE Students	0.02	0.01	2	0.046*
ln RPS	0.08	0.035	2.29	0.022*
EPS	0.03	0.01	3	0.003**
Age	-0.002	0.002	-1.00	0.318
STR	0.005	0.005	1	0.317
Statistic	Value			
R-squared	0.18			
Observations	720			
HEI Fixed Effects	Yes			
Year Fixed Effects	Yes			

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$ **Source:** Author's Analysis

Table 5. Fixed Effects (FE) Regression Results—CER_FTE

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-Statistic	p-Value
Constant	0.005	0.5	0.01	0.992
ln FTE Students	0.015	0.008	1.88	0.061
EPS_FTE	−0.005	0.01	−0.50	0.618
RPS_FTE	0.01	0.025	0.4	0.689
FTE Staff	0.004	0.003	1.33	0.184
Age	−0.001	0.001	−1.00	0.318
STR	0.004	0.004	1	0.317
Statistic	Value			
R-squared	0.17			
Observations	720			
HEI Fixed Effects	Yes			
Year Fixed Effects	Yes			

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Source: Author's Analysis

Random Effects (RE) Regression Results

The RE estimates largely mirror the fixed-effects findings. Both EPS ($\beta = 0.035$, $p < 0.01$) and ln RPS ($\beta = 0.060$, $p < 0.05$) significantly predict CER, affirming their robustness. While the RE model shows slightly higher explanatory power ($R^2 = 0.22$), the Hausman test ($\chi^2(7) = 13.34$, $p = 0.060$) signals only marginal support for RE consistency. Accordingly, the RE estimates are retained, while the FE estimates provide a robustness check that controls for time-invariant institutional heterogeneity (see Tables 6 and 7).

Table 6. Random Effects (RE) Regression Results-CER

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	z-Statistic	p-Value
Constant	0.4	0.08	5	0.000**
ln FTE Students	0.015	0.008	1.88	0.06
ln RPS	0.06	0.028	2.14	0.032*
EPS	0.035	0.012	2.92	0.004**
Age	−0.001	0.001	−1.00	0.317
STR	0.004	0.004	1	0.317
Statistic	Value			
R-squared (overall)	0.22			
Observations	720			
HEI Clusters	Yes			

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Source: Author's Analysis

Table 7. Random Effects (RE) Regression Results—CER_FTE

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	z-Statistic	p-Value
Constant	0.01	0.002	5	0.000**
ln FTE Students	0.007	0.005	1.4	0.162
EPS_FTE	−0.005	0.01	−0.50	0.618
RPS_FTE	0.01	0.025	0.4	0.689
FTE Staff	0.004	0.003	1.33	0.184
Age	−0.001	0.001	−1.00	0.317
STR	0.004	0.004	1	0.317
Statistic	Value			
R-squared (overall)	0.21			
Observations	720			
HEI Clusters	Yes			

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Source: Author's Analysis

Model Selection and Diagnostic Validation

Model selection was guided by the Hausman specification test, which did not reject the null hypothesis ($\chi^2(7) = 13.34$, $p = 0.060$), indicating that the random effects estimator may be consistent. However, the borderline

p -value suggests that fixed effects results should still be interpreted as a robustness check (see Table 8).

Diagnostic testing identified heteroskedasticity, $\chi^2 (150) = 1230.45$, $p < .001$, and first-order serial correlation, as indicated by the Wooldridge test, $F (1, 150) = 5.67$, $p = .019$. No evidence of cross-sectional dependence was detected ($z = 0.34$, $p = .731$), while the residual distribution was approximately normal, $\chi^2 (2) = 0.87$, $p = .647$. These diagnostic results informed the use of robust standard errors and support the appropriateness of the adopted panel estimation strategy (Table 9).

Table 8. Hausman Specification Test (Fixed vs. Random Effects)

Test	Chi ² Statistic	df	p-value	Decision
Hausman (FE vs. RE)	13.34	7	0.06	Do not reject H ₀ : RE estimator is consistent

Table 9. Panel Regression Diagnostic Tests

Assumption	Test Applied	Statistic	p-value	Conclusion
Heteroskedasticity	Modified Wald Test for GroupWise FE	$\chi^2 (150) = 1230.45$	<0.001	Heteroskedasticity detected
Autocorrelation	Wooldridge Test for Serial Correlation (AR (1))	$F (1, 150) = 5.67$	0.019*	First-order serial correlation detected
Cross-sectional Dependence	Pesaran CD Test	$z = 0.34$	0.731	No cross-sectional dependence
Normality of Residuals	Jarque-Bera Test	$\chi^2 (2) = 0.87$	0.647	Residuals approximately normal

The Predictive Model

The unadjusted CER specification identifies institutional scale, revenue per student, and expenditure per student as statistically significant determinants

of variation in the operational-cost-to-revenue ratio. The positive coefficients indicate that increases in these variables are associated with higher CER values. Since lower CER denotes greater cost efficiency, the results point to potential cost pressures accompanying institutional expansion and greater financial activity rather than to unconditional efficiency gains. The model explains approximately 18% of the within-institution variation in CER ($R^2 = 0.18$).

The FTE-adjusted specification presents a different pattern. None of the individual predictors reaches the conventional 5% significance threshold, although enrolment scale approaches marginal significance ($p = 0.061$). The model explains approximately 17% of the variation in CER_FTE. This attenuation after workload normalization indicates that FTE adjustment absorbs part of the scale-related variation observed in the unadjusted model and supports interpreting FTE primarily as a standardization and decision-support mechanism rather than as an independent source of financial efficiency.

Model 1: Unadjusted Cost Efficiency Equation (CER)

Estimated model:

$$\text{CER}_{it} = 0.500 + 0.020 \times \log (\text{FTE_students}_{it}) + 0.080 \times \log (\text{RPS}_{it}) + 0.030 \times \text{EPS}_{it} - 0.002 \times \text{Age}_{it} + 0.005 \times \text{STR}_{it} + \varepsilon_{it}$$

Where:

Estimated model:

$$\text{CER}_{it} = 0.500 + 0.020 \times \log (\text{FTE_students}_{it}) + 0.080 \times \log (\text{RPS}_{it}) + 0.030 \times \text{EPS}_{it} - 0.002 \times \text{Age}_{it} + 0.005 \times \text{STR}_{it} + \varepsilon_{it}$$

Where:

$$\beta_1 (\log \text{FTE_students}): 0.020 (p = 0.046)$$

$$\beta_2 (\log \text{RPS}): 0.080 (p = 0.022)$$

$$\beta_3 (\text{EPS}): 0.030 (p = 0.003)$$

$$\beta_4 (\text{Age}): -0.002 (p = 0.318)$$

$$\beta_5 (\text{STR}): 0.005 (p = 0.317)$$

$$R^2 = 0.18; \text{Observations} = 720; \text{Fixed Effects included.}$$

Model 2: FTE-Adjusted Cost Efficiency Equation (CER_FTE)

Estimated model:

$$\text{CER_FTE}_{it} = 0.005 + 0.015 \times \log (\text{FTE_students}_{it}) + 0.010 \times \text{RPS_FTE}_{it} - 0.005 \times \text{EPS_FTE}_{it} + 0.004 \times \text{FTE_Staff}_{it} - 0.001 \times \text{Age}_{it} + 0.004 \times \text{STR}_{it} + \varepsilon_{it}$$

Where:

β_1 (log FTE_students): 0.015 ($p = 0.061$)

β_2 (RPS_FTE): 0.010 ($p = 0.689$)

β_3 (EPS_FTE): -0.005 ($p = 0.618$)

β_4 (FTE Staff): 0.004 ($p = 0.184$)

β_5 (Age): -0.001 ($p = 0.318$)

β_6 (STR): 0.004 ($p = 0.317$)

$R^2 = 0.17$, Observations = 720, Fixed Effects included

Semi-Structured Interview Participants Demographics

Table 10 presents the demographic characteristics of the interview participants, highlighting their expertise, educational qualifications, and institutional types. The participants occupy critical administrative and financial positions, providing diverse insights into HE financial management. The "Head of Management Accounting" (11–20 years, Master's) offers insights from a comprehensive institution with over 10,000 students. The "Head of HR" (5–10 years, Master's) provides perspectives on workforce efficiency in teaching-focused institutions. The "Head of Systems Accounting" (5–10 years, Master's) focuses on financial systems in research-intensive settings. The "Finance Officer" (20+ years, Ph.D.) offers in-depth knowledge of strategic financial governance in comprehensive institutions.

Table 10. Demographics of Participants of the Semi-Structured Interview

Current Position	N	Years of Experience	Highest Educational Qualification	Size of Institution (Students)
Heads of Management Accounting	4	11-20 years	Master's Degree	More than 10,000
Heads of HR	4	5-10 years	Master's Degree	5,000–10,000
Heads of Systems Accounting	4	5-10 years	Master's Degree	More than 10,000
Finance Officers	2	20+ years	Doctorate (PhD)	5,000–10,000

Source: Author's Analysis

Thematic Analysis

This section presents the integrated findings from interviews and document reviews, structured into three overarching thematic areas: (1) Evaluation of FTE Application Practices in Ghanaian Public HEIs; (2) Relationship Between FTE Applications and Financial Efficiency; and (3) Policy and

Management Implications of Improved FTE Practices, as outlined in Figure 2. The thematic structure is grounded in both qualitative insights from key informants and supporting documentary evidence.

Theme 1: Application of Full-Time Equivalence (FTE) Metrics in Ghanaian Public HEIs

QR1: *How are FTE metrics applied in the financial planning and operations of Ghanaian public HEIs?*

The analysis reveals that FTE applications are widely recognized as essential to institutional planning and resource management across Ghanaian Public HEIs. However, the extent and consistency of their application vary significantly across institutions, departments, and reporting levels.

Interview data reflect broad agreement among administrators that accurate FTE figures enhance operational clarity. One senior financial administrator remarked, "If our FTE data is accurate, then we know how many staff we truly need. That alone saves cost and boosts productivity." This sentiment was echoed in the documents reviewed, which emphasized the role of FTE-based budgeting in aligning human resource deployment with academic demand.

Yet inconsistencies in FTE calculation methods, particularly in institutions relying heavily on part-time or adjunct staff, were repeatedly highlighted. One finance officer observed, "We have no standardized way of using FTE across departments; it's mostly improvised and reactive." Document evidence similarly revealed disparities in how teaching hours, administrative responsibilities, and research activities are weighted, leading to internal inefficiencies and unreliable benchmarks.

To address these challenges, best practices identified included centralized FTE tracking systems, standardized guidelines, and regular audits. As one senior institutional administrator noted, "We introduced a centralized tracker with automated calculations. It reduced discrepancies across departments."

The evidence therefore indicates that the application of FTE is marked by institutional efforts to improve internal controls, although these efforts remain constrained by the absence of a unified national framework for ensuring consistency and comparability across the sector.

Theme 2: Relationship Between FTE Applications and Financial Efficiency

QR2: *What is the relationship between the application of FTE metrics and financial efficiency in Ghanaian public HEIs?*

Findings from interviews and documentary analysis indicate that institutional stakeholders associate effective FTE application with more disciplined financial planning, staffing alignment, and resource allocation. Institutions with more developed FTE-related systems were perceived as better able to assess workload requirements, anticipate expenditure pressures, and align staffing and enrolment decisions.

The quantitative findings provide a complementary but more qualified perspective. Institutional scale, revenue per student, and expenditure per student significantly explain variation in the unadjusted CER model, whereas the corresponding FTE-adjusted specification produces weaker and statistically nonsignificant individual effects. The combined evidence therefore does not establish FTE as an independent determinant of financial efficiency. Rather, it suggests that FTE contributes primarily by standardizing workload information and strengthening the informational basis on which financial and operational decisions are made.

Qualitative insights reinforced this association. One senior institutional administrator referred to FTE as *‘the early warning system. If we monitor it right, we prevent overspending or overstaffing when enrolment drops.’* Similarly, another senior financial administrator stated, *‘Without FTE data, budget allocation feels like guesswork. With it, the process is defensible and data-based.’*

Document review indicated that institutions utilizing FTE-driven budgeting frameworks were perceived or reported as better positioned to manage volatility in enrolment and revenue streams. However, some concerns emerged regarding the overreliance on FTE metrics, potentially neglecting qualitative considerations such as teaching quality and research output. Stakeholders advocated for a more balanced model that integrates FTE metrics with broader institutional performance indicators.

Theme 3: Policy and Management Implications of Improved FTE Practices (QR3): What are the policy and management implications of enhancing FTE practices for financial governance in HEIs?

The third theme explores the regulatory and governance dimensions of FTE application. Both data sources highlight a critical gap in national policy frameworks regulating FTE standards, calculation methods, and reporting protocols. Stakeholders noted the lack of a centralized regulatory mechanism, which has led to inconsistencies in FTE usage and reporting, thereby impeding inter-institutional benchmarking and policy evaluation.

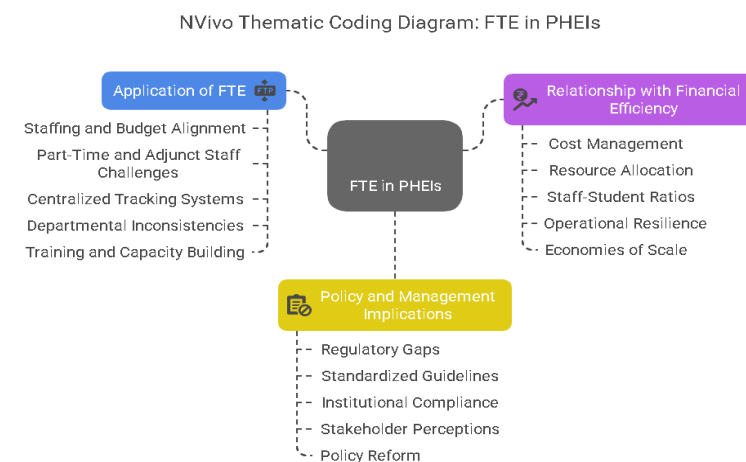
One senior institutional administrator captured this challenge, stating, *‘The absence of national FTE standards makes it difficult to compare or benchmark institutions fairly.’* Documentary evidence corroborated this view, pointing to fragmented institutional policies and unclear regulatory expectations as barriers to sector-wide efficiency gains.

Institutions with longer histories and stronger administrative capacities were better able to align their FTE practices with internal strategic goals. These institutions had instituted periodic FTE audits, integrated FTE data into financial dashboards, and ensured routine training for finance and planning staff. Conversely, newer or resource-constrained institutions often struggled with data collection, storage, and utilization—limiting their ability to leverage FTE for strategic decision-making.

Stakeholders proposed a series of policy reforms aimed at enhancing the utility of FTE applications. These include developing and enforcing national guidelines on FTE calculation and reporting; mandating sector-wide adoption of standardized FTE tracking systems; providing capacity-building support to smaller institutions for FTE integration; and embedding FTE data in funding formulae and performance-based financing frameworks.

Critically, several participants cautioned against viewing FTE as a panacea. While essential for data-driven planning, FTE must be complemented by qualitative metrics and context-specific indicators to ensure a holistic approach to institutional performance management.

Figure 2. NVivo Thematic Coding Diagram



Source: NVivo Qualitative Data Analysis

Discussion

Viewed through the Resource-Based View (RBV), the findings refine the understanding of FTE data as an institutional resource. The evidence suggests that FTE information does not generate efficiency merely by being available; its strategic value emerges when accurate workload data are combined with complementary organizational capabilities, including integrated information systems, analytical expertise, effective financial governance, and standardized reporting processes. The weaker explanatory power of the FTE-adjusted econometric specification reinforces this distinction. FTE normalization improves comparability and decision support, but efficiency outcomes remain contingent on how institutions interpret and deploy the resulting information. The study therefore extends the RBV from resource possession to resource orchestration: standardized institutional data become performance-relevant capabilities only when embedded within managerial routines that support budgeting, staffing, monitoring, and resource allocation.

This study provides a comprehensive investigation into the application of Full-Time Equivalence (FTE) and its relationship with financial efficiency within Ghanaian public HEIs. By integrating panel data results with thematic insights, the findings underscore the importance of FTE metrics in institutional financial planning and sustainability. The unadjusted CER model indicates that institutional scale, revenue per student, and expenditure per student are significant predictors of cost efficiency. By contrast, the FTE-adjusted specification produces weaker effects, with none of the predictors attaining conventional levels of statistical significance. This attenuation after workload normalization suggests that FTE is particularly valuable as a standardization and planning metric rather than evidence, in itself, of direct efficiency gains (Jongbloed, 2022).

The findings further indicate that the managerial value of FTE is conditional on institutional governance and analytical capacity. FTE measures do not translate mechanically into lower costs or stronger financial performance; rather, their usefulness depends on whether institutions possess reliable information systems, consistent workload definitions, and managerial processes capable of converting standardized data into resource-allocation decisions. Stakeholder evidence supports this interpretation, particularly in relation to enrolment planning, staffing alignment, budget formulation, and financial risk management (Pilonato & Monfardini, 2020). This reinforces the Resource-Based View proposition that information generates institutional value when it is embedded within complementary organizational capabilities and governance arrangements (Al-Filali et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, FTE applications are hindered by data inconsistencies, institutional disparities in reporting practices, and the absence of standardized guidelines (Rosinger et al., 2022; Macheridis & Paulsson, 2021). These limitations restrict its effectiveness as a financial tool, particularly in institutions lacking robust data systems. Moreover, FTE does not account for qualitative performance indicators such as academic quality and social impact (Ortagus et al., 2020; Dima et al., 2024), underscoring the need for more comprehensive performance frameworks.

Finally, the role of regulatory oversight is crucial. Variability in FTE reporting reflects uneven policy enforcement, disadvantaging younger institutions (Adeusi et al., 2024), while mature institutions with stronger governance report more consistent data and exhibit better outcomes (Salehi et al., 2023).

Conclusion

This study demonstrates the relevance of Full-Time Equivalence metrics to financial planning and resource management in Ghanaian public HEIs. The panel results show that institutional scale, revenue per student, and expenditure per student are significant predictors of unadjusted cost efficiency. However, these relationships weaken after normalization by FTE, suggesting that workload adjustment reduces some of the scale-related variation observed across institutions. Rather than establishing FTE as an independent determinant of financial efficiency, the findings position it as an important standardization and decision-support metric for comparing workloads, informing staffing decisions, strengthening budgeting, and improving resource allocation.

This distinction is analytically important because it separates the value of FTE as a normalization mechanism from the broader organizational capabilities required to convert standardized workload information into efficiency gains.

The qualitative evidence reinforces this interpretation. Institutional stakeholders recognize the value of FTE-based information for planning and financial management but identify inconsistent calculation methods, fragmented data systems, and the absence of harmonized reporting protocols as major constraints on its effective application. The policy significance of FTE therefore depends not only on its technical calculation but also on the quality of institutional data systems, managerial capacity, and regulatory coordination.

The study consequently supports the development of standardized national protocols for FTE calculation and reporting, investment in integrated institutional data systems, and the progressive incorporation of FTE

measures into evidence-based budgeting and performance-financing arrangements. Such reforms would improve comparability and transparency across public HEIs while providing a stronger empirical basis for resource-allocation decisions. Future research could extend this analysis by examining alternative FTE weighting assumptions, incorporating broader measures of institutional outputs and quality, and assessing the interaction between FTE-based workload measures and full economic costing frameworks.

Contribution to Theory and Practice

This study makes four interrelated contributions to higher education finance and institutional management.

Theoretical Contribution: The study extends the Resource-Based View by demonstrating that standardized institutional information such as FTE data should not be treated as inherently performance-enhancing resources. Their strategic value depends on complementary organizational capabilities that enable institutions to collect, integrate, interpret, and deploy such information in decision-making. The findings therefore shift attention from resource possession to resource orchestration. In the higher education context, FTE becomes strategically consequential when embedded within budgeting routines, staffing systems, governance processes, and institutional data infrastructures. This qualification is particularly important because the weaker FTE-adjusted regression results indicate that normalization alone does not produce financial efficiency.

Methodological Contribution: The study integrates panel econometric analysis with stakeholder interviews and documentary evidence to distinguish the statistical effects of scale and financial inputs from the managerial usefulness attributed to FTE within institutions. This mixed-methods approach prevents the operational importance of FTE from being conflated with direct econometric effects. It also demonstrates the analytical value of comparing unadjusted and FTE-normalized efficiency specifications in contexts where formal FTE reporting is not uniformly institutionalized.

Managerial Contribution: For institutional leaders, the findings position FTE as a decision-support infrastructure for workload planning rather than a stand-alone performance indicator. Public HEIs can use standardized FTE information to strengthen enrolment forecasting, staffing alignment, expenditure planning, budget formulation, and internal benchmarking. However, these benefits depend on integrated data systems, analytical capability, consistent institutional definitions, and governance arrangements that connect information to operational decisions. Institutions should therefore invest not only in FTE computation but also in the organizational

capacity required to translate workload information into effective resource management.

Policy and Regulatory Contribution: At the sector level, the study identifies standardization as a prerequisite for the meaningful use of FTE in inter-institutional comparison and public financing. Harmonized definitions, reporting cycles, validation procedures, and audit mechanisms would improve comparability across Ghanaian public HEIs and provide a more credible basis for evidence-informed resource allocation. The findings support the progressive integration of FTE information into budgeting and performance-financing frameworks, while cautioning against using FTE as a solitary measure of institutional performance. Any sector-wide framework should complement FTE with indicators of academic quality, student outcomes, research performance, institutional mission, and wider public value.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future inquiries should extend the temporal scope to examine the long-term implications of FTE applications on institutional financial sustainability and strategic adaptability. Longitudinal studies that capture post-reform trajectories would clarify the enduring effects of standardized FTE implementation. Comparative research involving higher education systems in other sub-Saharan African or emerging economies would also enrich understanding of contextual enablers and constraints. Further, qualitative investigations into stakeholder experiences, particularly around data governance, capacity development, and system integration, would provide nuanced insights into institutional readiness and reform pathways. Future research should also explore hybrid performance frameworks that incorporate FTE alongside indicators of academic quality, student outcomes, and social impact, thereby advancing multidimensional approaches to institutional evaluation. Finally, policy-oriented studies assessing the outcomes of regulatory reforms in FTE reporting could inform more effective governance and accountability mechanisms within the sector.

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