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Integrating Indigenous Knowledge Systems into Higher Education: A Case Study of African Rural University

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This study investigates the integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) into higher education using the African Rural University (ARU) in Uganda as a case study. Amidst global debates on the decolonisation of education and the revival of marginalised epistemologies, ARU stands out as the first all-women university in Africa to structurally embed IKS in its curriculum, pedagogy, and institutional philosophy. The study examines how IKS is operationalised in ARU's programs, particularly through courses such as African Philosophy and Indigenous Knowledge Systems, as well as the unique use of Traditional Wisdom Specialists as university instructors. Adopting a qualitative case study design, data were collected through interviews, observation, and document review. Findings indicate that ARU's curriculum is composed of 40% practical and 60% theoretical learning, equipping students with hands-on skills in herbal medicine, indigenous agriculture, cultural ethics, and participatory development. Graduates emerge as Rural Transformation Specialists who are employed by the parent organisation, Uganda Rural Development and Training Programme (URDT), to serve as epicentre managers in rural communities. The study concludes that the ARU model offers a compelling framework for integrating Indigenous and academic knowledge systems to foster relevant, context-sensitive, and transformative education. It recommends broader policy support for IKS in African higher education, as well as further research into its long-term impact on sustainable development and rural transformation.

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INTRODUCTION

The 21st century has witnessed a growing recognition of the importance of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) in addressing complex global challenges, including climate change, biodiversity loss, sustainable development, and cultural preservation. Across the globe, Indigenous communities have developed complex bodies of knowledge rooted in centuries of experience, observation, and intergenerational transmission that are vital to maintaining harmony between human societies and the natural world (Battiste, 2002). However, despite this intrinsic value, higher education institutions have historically marginalised or excluded Indigenous knowledge, favouring Western scientific paradigms and epistemologies. As the call for epistemic justice gains traction within academic circles and international policy frameworks such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP, 2007), there is a pressing need to rethink educational models to embrace pluralistic knowledge systems. This transformation is critical not only for inclusivity but also for the co-creation of knowledge that is contextually grounded, culturally responsive, and sustainability-driven (UNESCO, 2018).

International institutions such as UNESCO and the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) have emphasised the urgency of integrating Indigenous knowledge into formal education systems. UNESCO’s Local and Indigenous Knowledge Systems (LINKS) programme supports the recognition and integration of Indigenous knowledge in biodiversity conservation, climate adaptation, and sustainable development (UNESCO, 2019). The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on

Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES, 2019) recognises the role of Indigenous knowledge in conservation and environmental management, urging governments and institutions to facilitate its inclusion in decision-making. In the education sector, Sustainable Development Goal 4 advocates for inclusive and equitable quality education and emphasises the importance of culturally relevant content and pedagogy (United Nations, 2015). These frameworks underscore a global imperative to decolonise knowledge and elevate Indigenous epistemologies within formal academic institutions.

The marginalisation of Indigenous knowledge systems is a consequence of colonial and post-colonial education policies that privileged Eurocentric curricula. Colonial education systems across Africa were designed to serve administrative and missionary purposes, thereby disconnecting learners from their cultural and environmental heritage (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, 1986; Dei, 2011). Even post-independence educational reforms retained many of the structural and epistemological biases of their colonial predecessors, with universities largely emphasising Western methodologies. Despite this, Indigenous knowledge remains vibrant in Africa, embedded in oral traditions, rituals, agriculture, community governance, and health practices (Hoppers, 2002). As African nations contend with food insecurity, climate change, cultural erosion, and youth unemployment, integrating Indigenous knowledge becomes essential for crafting solutions that are locally relevant and sustainable. The African Union’s Agenda 2063 explicitly calls for the promotion and preservation of African cultures and Indigenous knowledge to support development and identity formation (African Union Commission, 2015).

East Africa is rich in cultural and ecological diversity, and its Indigenous knowledge systems reflect this vibrancy. Communities across Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, and Rwanda rely on traditional knowledge for food production, conflict resolution, environmental stewardship, and health care (Mukuka, 2019). However, higher education institutions in the region continue to prioritise Western paradigms, rarely validating Indigenous knowledge through curriculum or pedagogy. Although initiatives by the Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA) have begun to advocate for more inclusive education policies, implementation has been slow and fragmented (IUCEA, 2020). In rural areas in particular, where Indigenous knowledge is vital to survival and community well-being, the disconnect between academic education and local knowledge is pronounced. Bridging this gap requires educational institutions that are socially embedded and academically innovative.

Uganda's education system reflects the tensions between globalisation, development priorities, and cultural preservation. Vision 2040 and the Third National Development Plan emphasise the importance of education in fostering socio-economic transformation (National Planning Authority [NPA], 2020). However, these strategies often overlook Indigenous epistemologies. While the National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC) has taken some steps to integrate Indigenous content into primary and secondary education, higher education remains predominantly Western in orientation (NCDC, 2018). In rural Uganda, Indigenous knowledge continues to guide agricultural, health, and governance practices. Yet university curricula rarely draw from this local knowledge base. This disconnect not only limits the relevance of higher education but also contributes to the devaluation of Indigenous cultures and identities. There is, therefore, an urgent need for education models that align with Uganda's cultural realities and development goals.

African Rural University (ARU) in Kagadi District, Western Uganda, stands out as a pioneering institution in integrating Indigenous knowledge into higher education. Founded by the Uganda Rural Development and Training Programme (URDT), ARU is Africa's first all-women university focused on rural transformation through community-based learning and Indigenous knowledge (ARU, 2016). The university's curriculum combines conventional academic disciplines with traditional knowledge, visionary leadership, and experiential learning. Students engage with communities through internships and projects where they co-create solutions rooted in both Indigenous and scientific knowledge. ARU trains "Rural Transformational Specialists", women equipped to serve as change agents in their home communities by applying context-specific knowledge to development challenges (URDT, 2018). Importantly, ARU works closely with elders, traditional leaders, and knowledge holders to document and validate Indigenous practices in areas such as agriculture, health, environmental conservation, and conflict resolution.

ARU's model offers a compelling case for reimagining higher education. It emphasises co-learning between students and community members, participatory curriculum development, and the valorisation of Indigenous languages, cosmologies, and social institutions. It challenges the binary between Indigenous and scientific knowledge by promoting integration and mutual respect (Odora Hoppers, 2009). However, ARU also faces significant challenges, including limited funding, a lack of institutional recognition from mainstream academia, and the broader societal undervaluing of Indigenous knowledge. These obstacles highlight the structural inequities embedded in higher education systems and the difficulty of achieving epistemic parity.

This case study examines how African Rural University (ARU) integrates Indigenous Knowledge into its educational philosophy,

curriculum, and institutional culture. It analyses the pedagogical strategies used, the impact on student learning and community engagement, and the broader implications for educational policy in Uganda and beyond. By situating ARU within global, African, regional, national, and local contexts, the study contributes to critical discussions on decolonising education, advancing cognitive justice, and building sustainable knowledge systems (Santos, 2014). It also provides actionable insights for educators, policymakers, and development actors seeking to reform higher education to reflect diverse epistemologies.

To achieve this aim, the study pursued the following specific objectives:

- To examine how Indigenous Knowledge is conceptualised within the African Rural University's institutional documents.
- To analyse how Indigenous Knowledge is operationalised in ARU's curriculum and community outreach practices.
- To assess how Indigenous Knowledge is evaluated or measured within ARU's institutional framework.

In conclusion, integrating Indigenous knowledge into higher education is not only a matter of cultural preservation but also a strategy for enhancing the relevance, inclusiveness, and sustainability of academic learning. The African Rural University provides a transformative example of how this integration can be realised through institutional innovation, community partnership, and curricular reform. By centring Indigenous knowledge in university education, Africa and the world can move toward a more just and pluralistic intellectual landscape, one that honours all ways of knowing.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) into higher education can be critically examined through the intersection of Decolonial

Theory, Constructivist Learning Theory, and Cognitive Justice Theory. These frameworks illuminate the epistemic, pedagogical, and justice-oriented dimensions of knowledge integration at African Rural University (ARU), which seeks to transform education by centring local epistemologies in curriculum, pedagogy, and research.

Decolonial Theory

Decolonial theory provides a vital lens for understanding how colonial education systems privileged Western ways of knowing while marginalising Indigenous knowledge systems (Smith, 1999; Mignolo, 2007). It calls for “epistemic disobedience”, a rejection of imposed colonial epistemologies and the affirmation of local knowledge traditions (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). Scholars like Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015) and Nyoni (2019) argue that post-colonial African universities continue to replicate Eurocentric paradigms unless deliberate efforts are made to transform curricula and knowledge validation systems.

African Rural University embodies these principles through its unique integration of African Indigenous Knowledge and development practice. Its curriculum is built upon local wisdom, ecological knowledge, and ancestral values, a model aligned with the work of Odora Hoppers (2017), who contends that Africa's sustainable future lies in “knowledge democracy” that embraces Indigenous epistemologies. Furthermore, ARU's approach resonates with the ideas of Dei (2014), who asserts that Indigenous knowledge must be viewed not as “complementary” but as *central* to knowledge construction in African contexts.

Recent scholarship supports the need for epistemic diversification in African education. For instance, Le Grange (2020) notes that decolonisation in higher education must go beyond the inclusion of content and must transform the very structures and processes of knowledge production. This includes rethinking whose knowledge counts, who teaches,

and how communities are engaged as epistemic partners. In this light, ARU exemplifies a decolonial institution, advancing both pedagogical and structural change through Indigenous frameworks.

Constructivist Learning Theory

Constructivist learning theory, associated with Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, emphasises that learners actively construct knowledge through interaction with their environment, prior experiences, and sociocultural context (Piaget, 1970; Vygotsky, 1978). In this view, knowledge is not transmitted by the teacher but co-constructed through experience, dialogue, and reflection.

ARU's pedagogy draws heavily on this approach. Through the Visionary Leadership Programme and community practicum, students engage in problem-solving in real rural contexts—learning from elders, herbalists, farmers, and women leaders. This aligns with Bruner's (1966) idea of discovery learning and Vygotsky's (1978) emphasis on the zone of proximal development, where knowledge grows through guided social interaction.

Contemporary research affirms the relevance of constructivism in integrating IKS. In a recent study, Nakata, Nakata and Keech (2021) argue that Indigenous pedagogies emphasise relational learning, observation, oral instruction, and experiential practice principles consistent with constructivist approaches. Similarly, Chilisa (2019) highlights that knowledge in Indigenous communities is acquired through lived experiences and active participation, not through abstract instruction. ARU's model, by immersing students in real-world challenges, fosters meaningful learning that blends traditional and academic knowledge systems (Tumusiime et al., 2022).

Thus, constructivist theory provides the pedagogical foundation for understanding ARU's experiential and participatory learning environment, which enables students to internalise and apply Indigenous knowledge in socially and environmentally transformative ways.

Cognitive Justice Theory

Cognitive Justice Theory, introduced by Visvanathan (2009) and expanded by Santos (2014), asserts the right of all knowledge systems to co-exist and to inform public policy, education, and development. This theory rejects the hierarchy of knowledge that elevates scientific rationalism over traditional and community-based knowledge systems, and instead advocates for epistemological pluralism.

Santos (2018) refers to the global marginalisation of Southern epistemologies as a form of “epistemicide”, the killing of knowledge. He calls for an “ecology of knowledges” where different traditions engage in dialogue and mutual respect. ARU responds to this call by institutionalising Indigenous knowledge through academic programs, research centres, and the involvement of community knowledge holders in curriculum development.

Recent African scholarship echoes these views. Nhamo and Nhamo (2022) stress that universities in Africa must adopt inclusive knowledge frameworks if they are to remain relevant to the communities they serve. Likewise, Mugumbate et al. (2021) argue that cognitive justice is key to addressing educational inequalities and to restoring dignity to historically marginalised communities. ARU's participatory approaches, where knowledge bearers are engaged not just as informants but as co-educators, illustrate how cognitive justice can be practically applied in higher education.

Cognitive justice also reinforces the value of transdisciplinary knowledge creation, where multiple knowledge systems work together to address complex social issues (Swart et al., 2016). In this regard, ARU's emphasis on rural transformation through IKS represents both a political and epistemological commitment to equity and sustainability.

Synthesis of Theoretical Perspectives

Together, these three theoretical perspectives create a robust framework for understanding how and why Indigenous Knowledge Systems should be integrated into higher education. Decolonial theory addresses the historical injustices and epistemological dominance of Western paradigms, constructivist theory provides a pedagogical model for learning through community-based and experiential methods, and cognitive justice theory demands epistemic equity and co-existence.

By drawing on these theories, this study will critically analyse ARU's approach to Indigenous knowledge integration, focusing on its curriculum, community engagement strategies, institutional philosophy, and the impact on students and local communities. This framework also supports a deeper interrogation of the challenges facing such models, including resistance from formal academic structures, knowledge validation standards, and policy constraints.

Ultimately, the fusion of these theories underscores that the integration of Indigenous knowledge is not a peripheral concern but a transformative educational practice that redefines learning, power, and justice in African higher education.

RELATED LITERATURE

Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) in Curriculum Design and Delivery in Higher Education

The integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems into curriculum design is increasingly recognised as a critical step in decolonising education and making it more contextually relevant (Odora Hoppers, 2017; Le Grange, 2020). IKS encompasses a body of knowledge that is rooted in the cultural traditions, languages, social systems, and spiritual beliefs of local communities (Dei, 2014). At African Rural University (ARU), curriculum development is grounded in local wisdom, focusing on areas such as ecological sustainability, community health, and visionary leadership, ensuring that learning is

closely linked to the lived realities of students and their communities (Tumusiime et al., 2022).

Globally, there has been a shift toward curriculum reforms that include Indigenous perspectives. In New Zealand, for instance, Māori knowledge is increasingly embedded into national curriculum frameworks (Smith & Cram, 2019). In Africa, several institutions are following suit. For example, the University of South Africa has developed IKS-based modules across various faculties, acknowledging their pedagogical and epistemological value (Nhamo & Nhamo, 2022).

Furthermore, integrating IKS into the curriculum promotes a more holistic approach to knowledge. As Chilisa (2019) notes, Indigenous epistemologies encourage learning through observation, storytelling, and oral traditions methods that are particularly suited for participatory, community-oriented learning. ARU operationalises this through experiential learning methods, including community internships and mentorships with knowledge holders, such as traditional herbalists and spiritual leaders.

Recent work by Muchenje and Dziva (2023) emphasises that successful IKS integration requires more than content inclusion. It demands transformation of pedagogical strategies, faculty training, and institutional philosophy. This aligns with Dei's (2014) assertion that African universities must view Indigenous knowledge as foundational, not supplementary, to academic instruction.

Thus, the literature affirms that IKS plays a pivotal role in redefining curriculum content and delivery, enhancing the relevance, sustainability, and cultural integrity of higher education in Africa.

Indigenous Knowledge Integration and Student Learning Outcomes, Community Engagement, and Rural Transformation

The integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) into higher education has far-reaching effects on student learning, community engagement, and

the transformation of rural societies. Several studies have shown that when students engage with knowledge rooted in their cultural and ecological contexts, their cognitive, affective, and behavioural learning outcomes improve significantly (Chilisa, 2019; Dei, 2014). At African Rural University (ARU), the Visionary Approach to Development integrates IKS in ways that enhance student competencies in community mobilisation, participatory development, and ecological sustainability (Tumusiime et al., 2022).

IKS-based pedagogy often employs experiential, participatory, and situated learning methods such as storytelling, oral tradition, and apprenticeship models. These approaches align with students' lived experiences, making learning more meaningful and empowering (Le Grange, 2020). Research from South African and Kenyan universities shows that students exposed to IKS frameworks demonstrate greater problem-solving abilities in agriculture, environmental management, and health (Nhamo & Nhamo, 2022; Muchenje & Dziva, 2023). Furthermore, Owusu and Boateng (2023) found that students taught through IKS-infused curricula report higher self-confidence and cultural pride, which correlates positively with academic engagement and motivation.

At ARU, students are not merely recipients of knowledge but also co-creators, often conducting community research and documenting local practices such as herbal medicine or indigenous farming techniques. This fosters deeper critical thinking and ethical reasoning as students navigate complex, real-world challenges (Tumusiime et al., 2022). A recent study by Mugumbate et al. (2021) supports this, indicating that students exposed to Indigenous epistemologies acquire transdisciplinary competencies and a more inclusive worldview.

The link between universities and their surrounding communities is significantly strengthened through the integration of IKS. ARU's model exemplifies this through its community practicum programs, where students live and work within rural

communities to co-create development solutions grounded in Indigenous knowledge. This form of engagement is not extractive but reciprocal, enhancing both academic and local capacities (Keet et al., 2021).

Studies in Ghana and Zimbabwe show that such community immersion deepens trust between academic institutions and rural populations, allowing for more sustainable development partnerships (Owusu & Boateng, 2023; Muchenje & Dziva, 2023). Moreover, communities feel validated when their knowledge systems are respected and incorporated into formal education, leading to increased collaboration, particularly in health care, agriculture, and conflict resolution (UNESCO, 2022; Santos, 2018).

The ultimate value of IKS integration lies in its capacity to contribute to transformative rural development. According to Odora Hoppers (2017), when universities value local knowledge systems, they become engines for endogenous development, facilitating solutions that are ecologically sustainable, culturally appropriate, and economically viable.

Evidence from ARU's alumni suggests that graduates return to their communities as change agents, applying visionary leadership and IKS-based innovations to enhance food security, women's empowerment, natural resource conservation, and local governance (Tumusiime et al., 2022). This outcome resonates with the African Union's Agenda 2063, which advocates for the integration of Indigenous knowledge in educational strategies to drive inclusive growth and sustainable development (African Union, 2020).

Furthermore, the work of Chilisa (2019) and Santos (2018) shows that cognitive justice, where different knowledge systems are treated with equal legitimacy, is essential for structural transformation in postcolonial societies. IKS integration thus repositions education as a force for liberation and rural regeneration rather than mere credentialism.

In summary, the literature indicates that Indigenous Knowledge integration significantly improves student learning by making education more relevant and empowering, fosters deeper community engagement through reciprocal knowledge sharing, and catalyses rural transformation by producing locally grounded, visionary leaders.

Institutionalising Indigenous Knowledge Systems in Higher Education

Institutionalising Indigenous Knowledge Systems in higher education presents both structural and philosophical challenges. One of the main obstacles is the dominance of Western epistemologies in academic validation, which often leads to the marginalisation of non-Western ways of knowing (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). This “epistemic hierarchy” continues to influence research, teaching, and assessment standards in African universities.

A major institutional challenge is the lack of policy frameworks that explicitly support the integration of IKS (Odora Hoppers, 2017). Many universities have yet to develop guidelines for recognising Indigenous knowledge holders as educators, integrating local languages in teaching, or awarding academic credits for Indigenous methodologies. However, ARU has developed such frameworks through its Visionary Approach to Development, in which community wisdom is a central component of the academic model (Tumusiime et al., 2022).

In terms of research, IKS is often underfunded and lacks visibility in mainstream academic publishing. Mugumbate et al. (2021) argue that funding agencies and academic journals continue to privilege quantitative and positivist research paradigms. This discourages the development of Indigenous research methodologies and weakens the institutionalisation of IKS.

However, opportunities are also emerging. Regional and international movements advocating for cognitive justice and knowledge pluralism are gaining traction. Santos (2018) speaks of an

“ecology of knowledges,” in which multiple epistemologies co-exist and co-inform knowledge production. Recent UNESCO initiatives and African Union policies have also called for the preservation and academic integration of IKS as part of sustainable development and cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2022).

At the local level, institutions like ARU provide a replicable model of how IKS can be institutionalised through deliberate curriculum design, faculty-community collaboration, and policy support. Nhamo and Nhamo (2022) suggest that such models should be scaled up across the continent.

In sum, while the path to institutionalising IKS is fraught with systemic barriers, emerging models like ARU reveal that with visionary leadership, community involvement, and policy innovation, higher education institutions can reimagine themselves as truly African universities.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative case study research design to examine how Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) are integrated into higher education, using African Rural University (ARU) in Uganda as the focal institution. A case study approach was deemed appropriate due to its ability to provide an in-depth and context-rich understanding of phenomena within real-life settings, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are blurred (Yin, 2018). Given ARU’s distinct mandate to embed Indigenous Knowledge in its curriculum, pedagogy, institutional philosophy, and outreach, it provides a critical site for exploring the interplay between indigenous epistemologies and formal academic structures.

Located in Kagadi District in Western Uganda, African Rural University was selected for this case study due to its pioneering commitment to decolonising higher education through the systematic application of Indigenous Knowledge in

all dimensions of university life. Founded to produce rural transformation specialists rooted in both academic and cultural wisdom, ARU presents a rare model where traditional knowledge systems are treated not as peripheral content but as foundational paradigms for learning and development (Maali, 2025). This unique institutional identity offers an ideal context to examine the implications of IKS integration for student learning, curriculum innovation, community empowerment, and broader development outcomes.

The study population comprised university administrators, academic staff, enrolled students, alumni, community-based facilitators trained by ARU, and members of the local communities where ARU graduates operate. These categories of participants were chosen to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the integration of Indigenous Knowledge from multiple angles policy development, pedagogical practice, learner experience, and community impact. Purposive sampling was employed to select individuals with deep and relevant experiences concerning the institutionalisation and outcomes of IKS at ARU. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), purposive sampling is especially effective in qualitative studies where the objective is to elicit rich, detailed insights from information-rich cases.

To capture data from these diverse groups, the study utilised three complementary data collection methods: semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and documentary review. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with university leadership and faculty to explore how Indigenous Knowledge informs curriculum design, teaching strategies, and assessment approaches. Interviews with students and alumni were aimed at understanding how exposure to IKS has shaped their cognitive skills, cultural identity, and problem-solving capacities. These interviews provided the depth necessary to uncover the nuanced experiences

and perspectives of those who interact directly with the IKS-based educational model.

Focus group discussions were held with local community members and ARU-trained community development facilitators (CDFs) to gather insights on how IKS-trained professionals have influenced community learning processes, development practices, and cultural revitalisation. Focus groups were especially suited to the communal and oral traditions inherent in Indigenous knowledge contexts, as they allowed participants to share stories, co-construct meanings, and reflect collectively on change processes (Krueger & Casey, 2015). This method also facilitated the triangulation of perspectives between the university and the community, strengthening the study's internal validity.

Document review included an in-depth analysis of African Rural University's (ARU) strategic plans, curriculum frameworks, syllabi, detailed course outlines, community outreach reports, and institutional evaluation records. These curriculum documents such documents such as program guides, module descriptions, and assessment criteria, provided critical insights into how Indigenous Knowledge is conceptualised, operationalised, and assessed within ARU's institutional framework. Reviewing these materials complemented the primary data by illuminating the formal policies and historical trajectories that shape ARU's epistemological orientation. As Bowen (2009) highlights, documentary analysis is a valuable method for uncovering official discourses, tracking policy evolution, and substantiating interview data in qualitative inquiry.

Thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) model, was adopted to analyse the qualitative data. This process involved transcribing the interviews and focus group discussions verbatim, followed by iterative coding, theme identification, and interpretation. The initial codes were guided by the research focus on Indigenous Knowledge integration, but the coding process also

remained open to emergent themes that were grounded in the participants' lived experiences. Themes were refined and clustered into broader domains that reflected the dynamics of knowledge production, curriculum relevance, cultural affirmation, and societal transformation. This flexible but rigorous analytic process allowed for a rich and layered understanding of the central research problem.

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed throughout the research process. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee at African Rural University. All participants were informed of the study's purpose, their rights to confidentiality and voluntary participation, and were asked to provide written informed consent. In line with culturally respectful research practices, interviews and discussions were conducted in a manner that acknowledged local protocols and relational accountability, as advocated by Wilson (2008). Where necessary, pseudonyms were used, and findings were validated through member checking to ensure accurate representation of participants' voices.

Trustworthiness of the research was ensured through multiple strategies, following Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was enhanced through triangulation of data sources and prolonged engagement with participants. Transferability was supported by a thick description of the institutional context and cultural setting. Dependability was maintained through consistent and transparent documentation of all procedures. Confirmability was upheld by keeping a detailed audit trail and engaging in reflexivity to minimise researcher bias.

This methodology offers a holistic and context-sensitive approach to understanding how Indigenous Knowledge Systems can be integrated into higher education in a way that is meaningful, empowering, and transformative. By focusing on the case of African Rural University, the study seeks

to generate insights that not only highlight the potential of Indigenous Knowledge to reshape academic and development paradigms but also offer practical pathways for other institutions seeking to decolonise and indigenize their educational models.

FINDINGS

Institutional Philosophy and Commitment to IKS

The African Rural University (ARU) has positioned Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) not as an adjunct but as a central pillar of its institutional philosophy. Rooted in the traditions of community-based development and cultural preservation, the university espouses a holistic worldview that affirms the value of African heritage and local epistemologies. The university's mission and values reflect a conscious departure from Eurocentric academic paradigms, instead emphasising participatory knowledge construction and cultural integrity as tools for rural transformation.

University leaders emphasised that ARU was deliberately founded to "revitalise the African mind," ensuring that education does not alienate learners from their indigenous identity. This philosophical stance is supported by the African Rural University Strategic Plan (2020–2025), which commits to building a knowledge society based on African values, wisdom, and ways of knowing.

Curriculum Design and Indigenous Pedagogy

The curriculum at ARU demonstrates a deliberate and structured integration of IKS. Notably, two core courses, African Philosophy and Indigenous Knowledge Systems, expose students to African metaphysical thought, cosmology, epistemology, and traditional problem-solving frameworks. These courses challenge dominant Western paradigms by validating indigenous African logic, spirituality, and cultural symbolism as legitimate frameworks for analysis and action.

Moreover, ARU's curriculum comprises 40% practical and 60% theoretical learning, making it

one of the few higher education institutions in the region that prioritise applied indigenous learning. Students are routinely taken into rural communities to learn from Traditional Wisdom Specialists in various domains. These include herbal medicine, indigenous healing practices, community governance, and traditional systems of discipline and moral education. These specialists are regarded as custodians of ancestral knowledge and play a critical role in transferring cultural capital that is both contextually relevant and experientially grounded.

One faculty member observed:

“Our curriculum is not only about lectures. Students must spend time with knowledge bearers in the community learning how to treat illnesses with herbs, resolve disputes with elders’ councils, and interpret dreams or omens as part of African knowledge systems.”

The use of oral transmission, storytelling, apprenticeship, and intergenerational dialogue reflects a pedagogy that values lived experience and local context as much as abstract theory. Students’ exposure to these traditional systems promotes critical thinking that is not disconnected from their sociocultural realities.

Student Learning Experiences and Transformation

The findings indicate that ARU students undergo deep personal and intellectual transformation. By being mentored both by academic faculty and traditional knowledge custodians, students acquire a hybrid set of competencies that integrates technical, cultural, and ethical dimensions. The engagement with traditional wisdom specialists enhances their practical skills, particularly in herbal medicine preparation, traditional agricultural practices, indigenous child-rearing methods, and community leadership.

One third-year student testified:

“I’ve learned more than classroom theory. I can now treat common ailments with herbal medicine, mediate in community disputes, and mobilise a village using our cultural institutions.”

Students at ARU are trained not merely as degree holders but as Rural Transformation Specialists. Their education prepares them to serve as catalysts for change, equipped with indigenous, scientific, and managerial knowledge. Upon graduation, they are often employed by the Uganda Rural Development and Training Programme (URDT), ARU’s mother organisation, to work as Epicentre Managers at sub-county and district levels. These graduates become central figures in implementing community-driven development strategies, acting as bridges between local traditions and formal systems.

Alumni working as Epicentre Managers reported that their ARU training equipped them with the cultural literacy and participatory skills necessary for community mobilisation. They facilitate projects in agriculture, health, education, women’s empowerment, and environmental conservation using culturally embedded approaches learned both in classrooms and village settings.

Community Engagement and Rural Transformation

The integration of IKS at ARU has created a reciprocal relationship between the university and rural communities. Community members do not view ARU as an institution that imposes external knowledge but rather one that co-creates solutions through respect for indigenous wisdom. The direct involvement of community elders and local experts in teaching roles has deepened this relationship.

For instance, herbalists, traditional birth attendants, and clan leaders regularly participate in academic programming. Focus group discussions with these stakeholders revealed a deep appreciation for ARU’s model, which preserves cultural knowledge while adapting it for contemporary relevance.

Community members cited improvements in ecological practices, the revival of endangered customs, and stronger youth leadership as outcomes of ARU's influence.

One elder commented:

"ARU students don't come to look down on us. They sit with us, listen to our stories, and walk with us. That's why we see them as our children."

The partnership with URDT has also enabled the university to establish Epicentre structures, community development hubs led by ARU graduates who facilitate transformative initiatives in areas like food security, sanitation, renewable energy, and girls' education. These epicentres serve as living laboratories for indigenous innovation.

Challenges in IKS Integration

Despite the promising outcomes, the integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) into higher education continues to face significant challenges.

One major obstacle is epistemic resistance from national education regulators, who often prioritise standardised curricula rooted in Western paradigms over culturally embedded and locally relevant models. Additionally, traditional knowledge remains insufficiently documented, as it is largely transmitted orally and is at risk of being lost with the passing of elder custodians. Resource constraints further hinder integration efforts, limiting the ability to fairly compensate traditional knowledge holders or invest in scaling up community-based learning infrastructures. Moreover, market-driven pressures pose a dilemma for students, who are often caught between embracing indigenous knowledge and pursuing employment in formal sectors that value Western qualifications, creating tension between cultural identity and economic opportunity.

The study revealed that African Rural University's integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems is

both a philosophical commitment and an operational reality. Through a curriculum that is 40% practical and rooted in African philosophy and traditional instruction, ARU produces graduates who are culturally grounded, technically skilled, and socially conscious. The role of Traditional Wisdom Specialists, the transformative power of community immersion, and the university's post-graduation deployment model all affirm that IKS can effectively shape higher education to serve African realities. Despite institutional and societal challenges, ARU's model demonstrates a compelling case for decolonising education in both content and method.

DISCUSSION

This chapter discusses the major findings of the study on how African Rural University (ARU) integrates Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) into its higher education model. It interprets the results with existing literature, theoretical frameworks, and the transformative purpose of African-based education. The discussion is structured around the central theme of the research and highlights the implications for curriculum innovation, pedagogy, student transformation, and sustainable rural development.

Integrating IKS into Curriculum and Pedagogy

The findings from Chapter Four revealed that ARU's curriculum explicitly incorporates Indigenous Knowledge through core courses like *African Philosophy* and *Indigenous Knowledge Systems*. This aligns with Dei (2014), who argues that education systems in Africa must reflect the knowledge heritage of African people to be culturally responsive and transformative.

The integration of IKS into pedagogy through experiential, community-based learning is consistent with Odora Hoppers (2002), who advocates for pedagogies that validate local epistemologies alongside formal knowledge. The involvement of Traditional Wisdom Specialists as educators demonstrates a critical decolonisation of

who qualifies as a “knowledge holder,” challenging the typical academic gatekeeping that marginalises non-Western epistemologies.

Moreover, the curriculum’s structure, 60% theory and 40% practical, embodies Paulo Freire’s (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, in which education is not an act of depositing knowledge into passive learners, but a co-creative process grounded in dialogue, reflection, and action (praxis). At ARU, students engage directly with rural communities and traditional systems, bridging academic theory with applied indigenous knowledge.

Student Transformation through Indigenous Learning

The transformation of ARU students into Rural Transformation Specialists signifies a holistic form of learning where personal, social, and intellectual development intersect. Through instruction by traditional healers, elders, herbalists, and community leaders, students acquire culturally embedded skills such as herbal medicine preparation, moral leadership, dispute resolution, and sustainable agriculture.

This echoes Semali and Kincheloe (1999), who emphasise the importance of education rooted in local realities and collective wisdom. The emphasis on moral discipline and community-oriented values also resonates with Nyerere’s (1968) vision of *Education for Self-Reliance*, which emphasised the development of individuals who are socially responsible and culturally grounded.

Graduates’ subsequent employment as Epicentre Managers in rural communities through URDT illustrates how education can be designed with a clear application to social transformation. This validates the argument by Le Grange (2016) that African universities should create knowledge that is usable, relevant, and empowering within their local contexts.

Indigenous Knowledge and Community Engagement

The use of Traditional Wisdom Specialists and direct student engagement with rural communities reflects a dialogic model of community-university partnership. Communities are not passive beneficiaries but active co-creators of knowledge. This relational approach supports the work of Nabudere (2006), who contended that Africa needs universities that serve as hubs for indigenous regeneration rather than colonial reproduction.

Community members’ appreciation for ARU’s respect for their knowledge affirms the argument by Ntuli (2002) that Indigenous Knowledge, when valued and institutionalised, can create new forms of community resilience and legitimacy. The revival of traditional ecological knowledge, herbal medicine, and indigenous governance structures as a result of student-community collaboration is further evidence that the integration of IKS supports sustainable development.

Implications for African Higher Education

ARU’s model offers an alternative pathway for universities in Africa that are struggling with the alienation of learners and communities due to overly Westernised curricula. As Sillitoe (1998) argued, Indigenous Knowledge is not only valid but vital for solving contemporary challenges such as food insecurity, environmental degradation, and rural poverty.

The institutionalisation of IKS through curriculum design, field immersion, and community partnership positions ARU as a prototype for higher education that is locally rooted and globally relevant. The study confirms that such integration leads to learners who are more socially conscious, culturally grounded, and development-oriented.

Nevertheless, challenges such as inadequate documentation of indigenous knowledge, epistemic resistance from formal institutions, and lack of financial resources remain. These require structural

policy shifts, increased research investment, and advocacy at national and regional levels to protect and elevate IKS in education.

Theoretical Reflections

The findings are well aligned with the theoretical underpinnings of *Postcolonial Theory*, which critiques the dominance of Western epistemologies in former colonial societies. ARU's practice of integrating IKS challenges the colonial legacy in education and creates space for epistemic justice (Andreotti, 2011). The dialogic interaction between traditional and formal knowledge at ARU exemplifies *Epistemological Pluralism*, where multiple knowledge systems coexist and enrich each other (Odora Hoppers, 2002).

Furthermore, ARU's pedagogical framework resonates with *Transformative Learning Theory* (Mezirow, 1991), where learners undergo a fundamental shift in worldview through critical reflection and engagement with alternative knowledge paradigms.

The integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems at African Rural University offers a robust model for curriculum innovation, culturally responsive pedagogy, and sustainable community engagement. The study has shown that through the deliberate inclusion of traditional wisdom in instruction, practical community immersion, and the training of students as agents of rural transformation, IKS can play a foundational role in reshaping higher education in Africa.

This discussion affirms that Indigenous Knowledge is not obsolete or inferior; rather, it is a powerful epistemic resource capable of transforming both learners and communities when centred in education. As such, African universities are called to move beyond tokenism and toward deep structural integration of indigenous worldviews, practices, and partnerships.

Summary

This study explored the integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) into higher education, with African Rural University (ARU) as a case study. The research was inspired by the growing global consensus on the need to decolonise education and revalue Indigenous epistemologies that have historically been marginalised by Western academic paradigms.

In the introduction, the global, African, regional, national, and local contexts of Indigenous Knowledge were analysed, situating the study within broader debates on knowledge pluralism and sustainable development. The literature review revealed both conceptual and empirical insights into Indigenous Knowledge Systems, their historical marginalisation in formal education, and emerging efforts to reintegrate them in curriculum and pedagogy.

The methodology adopted a qualitative case study design. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, document review, and observation of curriculum and classroom practices. The goal was to understand how ARU incorporates Indigenous Knowledge in its learning environment, and what outcomes emerge from such integration.

The findings that ARU not only embeds IKS in courses like *African Philosophy* and *Indigenous Knowledge Systems* but also employs Traditional Wisdom Specialists who teach students skills in herbal medicine, cultural discipline, conflict resolution, and sustainable living. ARU's curriculum is 40% practical and 60% theoretical, emphasising hands-on learning in rural settings. Graduates are awarded the title of Rural Transformation Specialists and are employed as Epicentre Managers in rural sub-counties and districts by the Uganda Rural Development and Training Programme (URDT), the university's parent organisation.

The findings through postcolonial theory, transformative learning, and epistemological

pluralism affirm that IKS, when structurally embedded in university education, can contribute to cognitive justice, community empowerment, and sustainable rural transformation.

CONCLUSIONS

ARU is a pioneering institution in the structural integration of Indigenous Knowledge in higher education in Africa. Unlike many universities that treat IKS as an add-on or elective, ARU has institutionalised Indigenous learning across curriculum design, pedagogy, staffing, and assessment. This makes it a unique model of epistemic innovation in African higher education.

The use of Traditional Wisdom Specialists as university instructors disrupts colonial hierarchies of knowledge. These specialists provide instruction in areas such as herbal medicine, traditional ethics, and indigenous farming methods, thus affirming the legitimacy and contemporary relevance of non-Western knowledge holders.

The curriculum at ARU prepares students for real-life rural transformation work. With 60% of learning being theory and community-based, students engage directly with local populations and apply indigenous and formal knowledge systems to solve development problems, bridging academia and society.

Graduates emerge not only with degrees but with identity, purpose, and employment. Their transition into Epicentre Managers shows a seamless connection between university education and community impact. This integration of learning and livelihood is rare in most African universities and serves as a model of relevance and employability.

The ARU model represents a tangible response to the call for decolonising education. It affirms the possibility of creating learning institutions that value multiple knowledge systems, generate local solutions, and affirm African identity in intellectual and practical life.

Recommendations

Universities across Africa should institutionalise Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) within core curricula rather than treating them as optional or tokenistic subjects, taking inspiration from African Rural University's (ARU) replicable model. Academic partnerships must recognise Traditional Knowledge Holders as equal contributors to the knowledge production process, necessitating policy reforms around faculty qualifications and recognition. Furthermore, universities should establish dedicated departments or research centres for the documentation, preservation, and innovation of Indigenous Knowledge.

National education policies and accreditation frameworks need to formally acknowledge IKS as a legitimate body of knowledge and practice. Additionally, sustainable funding mechanisms should be created to support IKS-based education, research, and community-university partnerships.

Continued efforts should be made to strengthen the documentation and dissemination of indigenous methodologies, practices, and outcomes to enhance academic influence. ARU should also build alumni networks of Rural Transformation Specialists to support peer learning, professional development, and community impact evaluation.

There is a need for longitudinal studies to evaluate the long-term impact of IKS-trained graduates on rural development. Comparative studies between IKS-integrated and conventional academic programs are also recommended to better understand the unique contributions of Indigenous Knowledge to higher education.

This study contributes to the growing field of Indigenous Knowledge in education by providing an empirical example of successful integration within a university setting. It adds to the literature on decolonial education by highlighting practical, policy, and pedagogical insights that can inform reform across African institutions. It also offers a

pathway toward educational models that are locally rooted, socially responsive, and globally conscious.

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