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Original Article

Influence of Participatory Leadership on the Quality of Education in Higher Education Institutions in Uganda: A Case Study of Kabale University

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Keywords:

Management,
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Recommendations.

This paper examines the influence of participatory leadership on the quality of education in higher institutions in Uganda. The objectives of the paper are to (i) examine the impact of participatory leadership on education quality in higher institutions, (i) establish the challenges hindering the adoption of participatory leadership in higher institutions in Uganda, and (iii) propose evidence-based strategies to encourage participatory leadership in Uganda's higher institutions. The study was carried out using a narrative research design to gather in-depth insights into the contribution of participatory leadership to the quality of education with reflections from the Systems Theory. Findings revealed that participatory leadership in higher institutions fosters a sense of ownership, engagement, and empowerment, enhances productivity and efficiency among staff members, especially in the area of research and innovation, and increases student engagement in the learning processes. Thus, concluding with a call for a shift in the traditional leadership styles in institutions of top-down management system which has existed for a long time, cultural attitudes towards authority are entrenched in leadership styles in higher institutions of learning and need to mitigate the negative attitude in engaging in participatory leadership by students and other staff members. It is recommended that policymakers should revise institutional governance frameworks to mandate participatory leadership which will ensure that policies explicitly require student and staff involvement in decision-making. Administrators must move beyond token participation by embedding inclusive leadership into daily operations. Lecturers should adopt participatory approaches in both teaching and governance by involving students in curriculum design, assessment methods, and classroom policies.

Students should proactively seek leadership opportunities, whether through student government, feedback committees or research collaborations.

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INTRODUCTION

The quality of education in higher education institutions is a critical determinant of national development, as it shapes the skills, knowledge, and competencies of future leaders and professionals (Altbach *et al.*, 2019). Over the years, researchers and policymakers have explored various leadership styles to determine their impact on educational outcomes. Participatory leadership has gained attention due to its potential to foster collaboration, innovation, and shared decision-making (Bush & Glover, 2016). Participatory leadership, also known as shared or democratic leadership, emphasizes collective decision-making, open communication, and inclusivity Northouse, P. G. (1999). In higher education, this leadership approach encourages administrators, staff, and students to contribute to institutional policies, curriculum development, and strategic planning (Kezer *et al.*, 2016). By involving stakeholders in key decisions, higher institutions

can create a more responsive and adaptive learning environment, which in turn leads to improved academic standards and student satisfaction (Tierney, 2014). However, the extent to which participatory leadership enhances educational quality remains a subject of ongoing debate, thus necessitating further empirical investigation.

Globally, higher education systems are shifting toward more democratic leadership models to enhance adaptability and stakeholder engagement (Marginson, 2016). In Uganda, where university management has traditionally been centralized, adopting participatory leadership can help to address various challenges that affect the quality of education (Oonyu, 2017). Studies in other African countries, such as Kenya and South Africa, suggest that participatory leadership improves staff motivation and student performance (Ng'ethe *et al.*, 2012).

To attain wholesome participation, there is a need to embrace both Management and education planning, which are two interrelated disciplines that play a critical role in the development and sustainability of educational systems (Charles, M. *et al.*, 2024). When it comes to Management as a field involves the coordination of resources, people, and processes to achieve organizational goals efficiently and effectively Drucker, P F (1999). In the context of education, management ensures that institutions operate smoothly, resources are allocated appropriately, and educational objectives are met. On the other side, to enhance quality leadership, Education planning offers a systematic process of setting goals, designing strategies, and implementing policies to improve the quality and accessibility of education Holladay, S. J., & Coombs, W. T. (1994). Together, these disciplines provide the framework for creating, managing, and improving educational systems to meet the needs of learners and society.

The importance of Participatory leadership in education cannot be overstated. Educational institutions, whether schools, colleges, or universities, are complex organizations that require effective leadership, resource management, and strategic planning to function successfully (Bush, 2003). Managers in education are responsible for decision-making, policy implementation, and ensuring that educational programs align with institutional and societal goals. Without proper management, educational institutions find themselves facing different challenges to achieve their mission of providing quality education (Taaka, M. A. *et al.*, 2022).

Participatory leadership, meanwhile, focuses on the long-term development of educational systems. It involves analyzing aspects such as access, equity, and quality Malakpa, S. W. G. (2006). Education planners work with current educational practices, just like planning, identifying areas for improvement, and designing strategies to address challenges, ensuring that educational systems are

responsive to the changing needs of society, including technological advancements, labour market demands, and global trends. Effective education planning is essential for achieving sustainable development goals, particularly those related to education, such as SDG 4, which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all (Connor, R. (2015).

These equipped leaders and their traits are critical components of Uganda's efforts to improve its education system and achieve national development goals. It ensures that educational institutions operate efficiently, resources are utilized optimally, and educational objectives are met (David, M. T., *et al.*, 2025). Likewise, provides a strategic framework for addressing challenges such as access, equity, quality, and relevance of education. Uganda's approach to management and educational planning is guided by policies such as the Education Sector Strategic Plan (ESSP) and the National Development Plan (NDP), which emphasize the importance of aligning education with the country's broader socio-economic goals (Ministry of Education and Sports. 2017); Kasirye, I., & Lakal, J. 2019). These frameworks highlight the need for strong leadership, effective resource allocation, and evidence-based decision-making to drive educational improvements.

The role of Institutional managers in Uganda's education system extends beyond the classroom to include the administration of resources, policy implementation, and stakeholder engagement. School leaders and administrators play a crucial role in creating an enabling environment for teaching and learning, while district and national-level managers oversee the allocation of resources and the implementation of policies (Bush, 2003). The introduction of the Education Management Information System (EMIS) has been a significant step toward improving data collection and management, enabling policymakers to make informed decisions based on accurate and timely information Ministry of Education and Sports

(2017). However, challenges such as limited capacity, inadequate funding, and weak monitoring and evaluation systems continue to hinder effective management and planning.

The integration of management and education planning is crucial for the success of educational systems. While management focuses on the operational aspects of running educational institutions, education planning provides the strategic vision needed to guide these institutions toward long-term success (Nansubuga, O. K. *et al.*, 2019). Together, they ensure that educational systems are not only well-organized but also forward-thinking and adaptable to change. However, its applicability in Uganda's unique higher education landscape calls for more research. Given these dynamics, this study investigated how participatory leadership can strengthen the quality of higher education in Uganda using a case study of Kabale University.

Purpose of the Paper

The purpose of the study was to examine the influence of participatory leadership on the quality of education in higher educational institutions in Uganda.

Research Objectives

The study was guided by the following research objectives.

- To examine the impact of participatory leadership on education quality in higher institutions.
- To establish the challenges hindering the adoption of participatory leadership in higher institutions in Uganda.
- To propose evidence-based strategies to encourage participatory leadership in Uganda's higher institutions.

Research Questions

The study intended to respond to the following research questions;

- How does participatory leadership impact education quality in higher institutions?
- What challenges hinder the adoption of participatory leadership in higher institutions in Uganda?
- Which strategies can be adopted to encourage participatory leadership in Uganda's higher institutions?

THEORY OF THE STUDY

The study was guided by the Systems Theory. The theory states that systems are holistic entities, and the elements within a system are interdependent; the changes in one part affect the whole system. The theory was developed by Ludwig von Bertalanffy in 1937. The theory assumes that all components of a system are interrelated, a change in one element affects others, and the whole system. The theory further assumes that the system as a whole has properties that cannot be understood by analyzing parts in isolation. This theory views educational institutions as complex systems composed of interconnected and interdependent components such as students, teachers, administrators, curriculum, resources, and the broader socio-economic environment Haggis, D. (2017). Each component influences and is influenced by the others, and changes in one part of the system bring about ripple effects throughout the entire system. This theory enabled the researcher to analyze how participatory leadership influences education quality. The choice of Systems Theory was justified because it aligns well with the nature of Uganda's education sector, which operates within a context of limited resources and varying socio-economic conditions. The Systems Theory emphasizes the holistic nature of organizations, which makes it suitable for examining how participatory leadership in Uganda's education system impacts overall

performance (Demir, A., & Budur, T. 2019). Relating Systems Theory to the theme of management and educational planning in Uganda, the study demonstrated how effective participatory leadership is critical for ensuring the smooth functioning of the education system.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Education management refers to the process of planning, organizing, directing, and controlling activities of educational institutions and systems to achieve specific educational goals. According to Bush, T. (2020), education management is fundamentally about influencing and guiding institutions towards the achievement of their educational missions through strategic leadership and decision-making. Leaders inspire and motivate teachers and students to exceed expectations (Nguyen *et al.*, 2021). Educational planning is the systematic process of designing the future actions of an educational system to achieve specific goals, especially in the face of rapid social and technological changes. The reviewed literature was done in line with the main themes in the objectives of the study. These are the impact of participatory leadership on education quality in higher institutions, challenges hindering the adoption of participatory leadership in higher institutions in Uganda, and evidence-based strategies to encourage participatory leadership in Uganda's higher institutions.

Impact of Participatory Leadership on Education Quality in Higher Institutions

According to Ramsden (2003), the most notable impact of participatory leadership is the enhancement of teaching and learning processes. He indicated that when academic staff are involved in decision-making, they exhibit higher motivation and commitment to innovative pedagogical approaches (Ramsden, 2003). Universities that implement participatory leadership often report improved lecturer engagement, which leads to dynamic classroom interactions and student-centred

learning (Bolden *et al.*, 2012). In addition, involving students in curriculum reviews ensures that programs remain relevant to labour market demands, thereby improving graduate employability (Harvey & Green, 1993). This collaborative approach bridges the gap between institutional objectives and stakeholder expectations, directly enhancing the quality of education.

Participatory leadership also positively impacts research productivity, which is a key indicator of education quality in higher institutions (Bryman, 2007). Research shows that universities with inclusive leadership structures experience higher publication rates and more successful grant applications because academics feel valued and supported (Middlehurst, 2013). Furthermore, interdisciplinary collaboration, which is facilitated by participatory leadership, leads to groundbreaking research that elevates institutional reputation (Uhl-Bien *et al.*, 2007).

Astin (1993) established that student engagement and satisfaction are significantly enhanced under participatory leadership models. This is because when students are included in governance structures such as academic committees and quality assurance processes, they develop a stronger sense of ownership over their education (Astin, 1993). Universities that adopt this approach report lower dropout rates and higher academic performance because students feel their voices are heard and respected (Kuh *et al.*, 2005). Institutions with active student representation in decision-making often implement policies that improve learning facilities and welfare services, which directly contribute to a better educational quality (Lizzio, A., Dempster, N., & Neumann, R. (2011).

In addition to the above, Spillane *et al.* (2004) established that institutional governance and administrative efficiency also improve under participatory leadership. Traditional top-down management often leads to bureaucratic delays and resistance to change, whereas shared leadership

promotes agility and innovation (Spillane *et al.*, 2004). Higher institutions that embrace participatory approaches experience smoother policy implementation because stakeholders collectively own and drive reforms (Tierney, 2014). This collaborative governance model reduces conflicts and enhances institutional stability, which are vital for maintaining high education standards.

Challenges Hindering the Adoption of Participatory Leadership in Higher Institutions in Uganda

The adoption of participatory leadership in Ugandan higher education institutions faces significant challenges. According to Kasozi (2016), many universities in Uganda operate under rigid, top-down management systems inherited from colonial administrative models. These bureaucratic structures concentrate decision-making power among senior administrators and government appointees and leave little room for meaningful staff or student participation (Ssembatya, V. A., *et al.*, 2020). Resistance from university leaders who fear losing control over institutional affairs further compounds this challenge, which creates a cultural barrier to participatory approaches (Oonyu, 2017).

Limited institutional capacity and resource constraints present another major obstacle to adopting participatory leadership models (Nansubuga *et al.*, 2020). Many Ugandan universities are faced with inadequate funding, poor infrastructure, and overstretched administrative systems (NCHE, 2021). In such resource-scarce environments, university management often prioritizes immediate operational needs over long-term leadership reforms (Nansubuga *et al.*, 2020). The absence of dedicated budgets for stakeholder engagement activities further limits opportunities for meaningful participation, particularly among junior staff and students who lack platforms to voice their concerns (Kwesiga & Ahikire, 2018).

Bategeka & Okurut (2019) established that cultural attitudes towards authority and leadership hinder

the adoption of participatory approaches in educational institutions. Traditional power dynamics in Ugandan society emphasize respect for hierarchical authority and discourage questioning of decisions made by superiors (Bategeka & Okurut, 2019). This cultural norm permeates academic institutions where lecturers and students hesitate to challenge administrative decisions even when given participatory opportunities (Isabirye & Gupta, 2020). Such practices undermine trust in participatory systems because stakeholders perceive them as toxic rather than genuine attempts at inclusion.

Government policies and regulatory frameworks present additional barriers to participatory leadership in higher institutions of learning. Tumuheki *et al.* (2021) assert that the Universities and Other Tertiary Institutions Act grants significant powers to government-appointed university councils, which leaves little autonomy for institutions to experiment with alternative governance models (Tumuheki *et al.*, 2021). Frequent political interference in university affairs further complicates matters as decisions are often made to serve external interests rather than institutional needs Liang, B., van Knippenberg, D., & Gu, Q. (2021) In Uganda, the National Council for Higher Education's quality assurance mechanisms also tend to emphasize compliance with standardized benchmarks rather than encouraging innovative leadership approaches (Musisi, 2018).

Student and staff attitudes also impede the successful implementation of participatory leadership in higher institutions. Years of exclusion from meaningful decision-making have created apathy among many university stakeholders who doubt the effectiveness of newly introduced participatory mechanisms (Luescher-Mamashela, 2013). Student leaders often focus on immediate welfare issues rather than long-term institutional governance, while academic staff often prioritize

research and teaching over administrative participation (Ochieng & Nambi, 2020).

The diversity of institutional types in Uganda's higher education sector presents unique challenges for implementing participatory leadership. Public universities face different constraints compared to private institutions, with the former being more susceptible to government interference and the latter often prioritizing commercial interests over collaborative governance (Ng'ethe *et al.*, 2012). Religious-affiliated universities have additional layers of authority from sponsoring organizations, while newer institutions often lack the governance structures needed to support meaningful participation (Kasozi, 2019). This heterogeneity means that participatory leadership models cannot be applied uniformly across all institutions (Dimmock & Walker, 2005).

Evidence-based Strategies to Encourage Participatory Leadership in Uganda's Higher Institutions

According to Ng'ethe *et al.* (2012), the adoption of participatory leadership in Uganda's higher education institutions requires deliberate policy reforms that decentralize decision-making and empower stakeholders. Evidence from successful governance reforms in African universities suggests that revising institutional statutes to mandate stakeholder representation in university councils and senates can enhance participation (Ng'ethe *et al.*, 2012). For example, Kenya's University Act (2016) requires student and staff representation in governance bodies, a model which can be adopted by Uganda's higher institutions (Maractho, 2020). In addition, aligning national higher education policies with participatory principles can create an enabling regulatory environment (Tumuheki *et al.*, 2021; Tumuhimbise, J. *et al.*, 2024).

Capacity-building initiatives for university leaders and staff are critical to fostering participatory leadership. Research indicates that training programs on collaborative governance, conflict

resolution, and consensus building can equip administrators with the skills needed to facilitate inclusive decision-making (Bolden *et al.*, 2012). Similarly, peer-learning exchanges with regional institutions which have implemented participatory budgeting could provide practical insights (Liang, 2019).

Luescher-Mamashela (2013) indicates that strengthening student and staff representation platforms is another proven strategy to institutionalize participatory leadership. Studies show that functional student guilds, staff senates, and academic unions enhance stakeholder voice in institutional governance (Luescher-Mamashela, 2013). To ensure effectiveness, these platforms must be resourced with dedicated funding, clear terms of reference, and access to timely information (Ssajjabbi *et al.*, 2022). Digital tools such as online feedback systems can further broaden participation, especially in large institutions with dispersed campuses (Marginson, 2016).

In addition to the above, promoting a culture of transparency and trust is essential for sustaining participatory leadership. Evidence from Ugandan universities reveals that scepticism towards management often stems from opaque decision-making and unaddressed grievances (Isabirye & Gupta, 2020). Regular stakeholder forums, open budget disclosures, and participatory strategic planning have been shown to build confidence in leadership (Oonyu, 2017). These measures should be reinforced by leadership modelling participatory behaviours, such as actively soliciting feedback and publicly acknowledging stakeholder contributions (Uhl-Bien *et al.*, 2007).

Using technology and data-driven approaches can enhance participatory decision-making in higher education. Digital platforms like Moodle-based discussion forums or mobile apps for real-time feedback have proven effective in engaging students and staff in governance (Nansubuga *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, benchmarking participatory practices against regional standards, such as the African

Union's harmonization frameworks, can provide measurable goals for improvement (Kasozi, 2019).

Altbach *et al.* (2019) indicate that international partnerships and funding incentives can accelerate the adoption of participatory leadership. Donor-funded projects, such as the European Union's support for governance reforms in Ugandan universities, have successfully piloted participatory models like community-engaged research and curriculum co-creation (Altbach *et al.*, 2019). To ensure sustainability, these initiatives should be integrated into institutional strategic plans rather than treated as standalone projects (Barnett, 2000).

METHODOLOGY

The research adopted a narrative research design and employed data collection techniques based on interviews and focus group discussions among administrators, lecturers, and students of different courses to gather in-depth insights into the

contribution of participatory leadership to education quality. The approach was selected because it enables the researcher to describe the meaning of lived experiences of concepts or phenomena for several individuals Creswell, J. W. (2009). These interviews lasted for about 25 to 35 minutes and were audio recorded with consent, and focus group discussions were held with the students to discuss shared experiences regarding participatory leadership and education quality in groups of five to seven participants and lasted for approximately 35 minutes. The data, which later became information as told by the respondents, were re-storied by the researcher into a narrative chronology as guided by Creswell, J. W. (2009). That is stories from Administrators, lecturers, and students regarding participatory leadership were transcribed, identified, interpreted, and synthesized to answer the research questions. The participants who took part in the study are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Study Sample and Demographic Information

Category	Gender	Population	Sample size	Sampling method	Data collection method
Administrators	Male	06	02	Purposive	Interviews
	Female	06	02		
Lecturers	Male	10	03	Simple random	Focus group discussions
	Female	10	03		
Students	Male	30	10	Simple random	Focus group discussions
	Female	30	10		
Total		92	30		

Table 1 above shows the category of the respondents who participated in the study including administrators, lecturers, and students. Out of the total population of 12 administrators, 04 of them including 02 males and 04 females were selected, out of the 20 lecturers, 06 were selected for the study including 03 males and 03 females and out of the total population of 60 students, 20 were selected for the study and these included 10 males and 10 females. The administrators and lecturers were selected using a purposive sampling method, and data were collected from them using interviews,

while students were selected using a simple random sampling method and data were collected from them using focus group discussions.

FINDINGS

The findings, which were obtained during the study, are presented in this subsection. The presentation follows the main themes of the study objectives.

Impact of Participatory Leadership on Education Quality in Higher Institutions

It was in the interest of this study to establish the impact of participatory leadership in improving the quality of education in higher institutions. The findings obtained through interviews are as follows.

The study established that participatory leadership cultivates high levels of motivation among staff members and students. The respondents indicated that when leaders involve employees and students in decision-making processes, it fosters a sense of ownership, engagement, and empowerment. Staff members feel valued and more committed to institutional goals, while students become more invested in their learning experiences. In an interview with one of the administrators, he asserted as follows.

"Participatory leadership actively engages both staff and students in decision-making. This fosters a sense of ownership and commitment. When people feel heard and valued, their motivation soars. Staff become more innovative and dedicated, while the students take greater responsibility for their learning. This collaborative approach doesn't just improve morale it drives institutional excellence by unlocking the full potential of our academic community."

These findings above highlight that participatory leadership strengthens motivation by creating an inclusive environment where staff and students contribute to decision-making, which enhances their sense of belonging and purpose. This shows that when individuals feel that their voices matter, they are more driven to excel. Staff members demonstrate increased creativity and dedication, while students engage more actively in their education. Therefore, the participatory leadership style cultivates a culture of shared responsibility, leading to higher performance and institutional success.

In addition, the respondents indicated that participatory leadership enhances productivity and efficiency among staff members, especially in the area of research and innovation. The respondents indicated that when team members are involved in decision-making, it fosters a collaborative environment where ideas are freely shared, which leads to more creative and impactful research outcomes. Staff members feel more motivated and accountable, driving higher engagement and faster project execution. One of the lecturers who took part in the study said as follows.

"Participatory leadership has transformed our culture by improving productivity and innovation. Due to this leadership style, we feel more invested and motivated, which leads to faster breakthroughs and higher-quality outputs. Collaboration flourishes, resources are used more efficiently, and creative solutions emerge organically. This approach doesn't just streamline our work it elevates our entire academic mission by unlocking the collective potential of our team."

These findings demonstrate that participatory leadership creates a more dynamic and effective work environment through fostering staff engagement and shared ownership. They indicate that when team members are actively involved in decision-making, they become more motivated and committed, directly accelerating research progress and enhancing the quality of outputs. The collaborative nature of this approach promotes efficient resource use, sparks innovative thinking, and strengthens teamwork, which ultimately leads to excellence in both productivity and innovation.

Additionally, the respondents asserted that participatory leadership increases student engagement in the learning process. The respondents revealed that students feel more motivated when they take part in teaching methods and decision-making processes. This approach enhances their active participation in lessons and encourages deeper critical thinking and peer

collaboration. One of the students in a focus group discussion indicated as follows.

"This leadership style completely changes students' learning experience because when we are involved in decisions about lessons and projects, we feel heard and valued. Instead of just sitting through lectures, we now collaborate on ideas, give feedback on teaching methods, and even co-create assignments. This approach makes us more motivated to participate, ask questions, and take ownership of our learning."

These findings show that participatory leadership fundamentally transforms education by shifting students from passive observers to active contributors in their learning journey. This is because when given meaningful opportunities to shape lessons, provide feedback, and co-design assignments, students develop a stronger sense of agency and belonging in the classroom. This inclusive approach fosters intrinsic motivation because the students feel that their perspectives matter, which leads to deeper engagement, more meaningful questioning, and greater personal investment in academic outcomes.

Challenges Hindering the Adoption of Participatory Leadership in Higher Institutions in Uganda

The focus of the second objective was to establish the challenges that hinder the adoption of participatory leadership in higher institutions in Uganda. In line with this, the respondents revealed that the traditional leadership style in institutions is the top-down management system, which has existed for a long time. Therefore, higher institutions have found it very difficult to adopt a participatory leadership style. One of the administrators indicated as follows.

"For decades, higher education institutions have operated under a rigid top-down leadership model, where decisions flow from administrators to staff and students without

meaningful input. While this traditional system has been the norm, it creates barriers to adopting participatory leadership. Bureaucratic hierarchies, resistance to change, and a culture of unilateral decision-making often prevent collaborative approaches from taking root."

These findings reveal that the entrenched top-down leadership style in higher education institutions has historically centralized authority and marginalized staff and student voices in decision-making processes. The rigidity of bureaucratic structures actively impedes the implementation of participatory approaches. This resistance to change perpetuates a disconnection between leadership and stakeholders.

Furthermore, the respondents revealed that cultural attitudes towards authority are also entrenched in leadership styles in higher institutions of learning. They asserted that leaders in these institutions enjoy maintaining maximum authority over subordinates and therefore become so resistant to participatory leadership. A junior lecturer is indicated as follows.

"Many leaders in our institutions cling to traditional power structures because they derive status and control from maintaining absolute authority. They see participatory leadership as a threat to their dominance rather than an opportunity for growth. When they make decisions on their own and dismiss collaborative input, they preserve a hierarchy where only their voice matters. This resistance isn't just about habit it's about protecting privilege. Until these leaders recognize that shared governance strengthens rather than weakens their institutions, progress will remain limited."

These findings reveal that institutional resistance to participatory leadership stems from deeply entrenched power dynamics rather than mere organizational inertia. Leaders accustomed to authority perceive collaborative approaches as

diminishing their control, thus prioritizing personal dominance over institutional improvement. The analysis suggests this behaviour reflects a deliberate preservation of privilege rather than passive adherence to tradition. Without a cognitive shift, institutions remain trapped in outdated power structures that hinder their development.

In addition to the above, the respondents indicated that another challenge affecting the adoption of participatory leadership in higher institutions is a negative attitude toward engaging in participatory leadership by students and other staff members. They revealed that many students feel that their contributions are not necessary for the running of these institutions because they are not permanent members. In a discussion, a student said as follows.

"As students, we often feel hesitant about participatory leadership because we're only temporary members of the institution. Why should we invest time and effort in decision-making processes when we'll be gone in a few years? It sometimes feels like our input doesn't matter in the long-term direction of the university. We worry that participating might just be a gesture rather than genuine inclusion, especially when we see administrators making final decisions without implementing student suggestions."

The above findings mean that students' reluctance toward participatory leadership stems from their perceived transient status and doubts about the authenticity of institutional inclusion efforts. The temporary nature of their academic tenure creates a psychological barrier to engagement, making them question the value of investing time in decision-making processes with long-term impacts they won't witness. Their scepticism is compounded by observed disconnects between the participatory message and reality. This shows that when student input appears routinely overlooked in final decisions, it reinforces negative perceptions rather than meaningful empowerment.

Evidence-based Strategies to Encourage Participatory Leadership in Uganda's Higher Institutions

After establishing the challenges that hinder the adoption of participatory leadership in higher institutions, the researcher was also interested in finding out strategies that can be adopted to encourage the adoption of this style to enhance the quality of education in higher institutions. The respondents who participated in the study said that for institutions to adopt participatory leadership, there is a need to change existing policies that emphasize top-down leadership styles. They emphasized that policies should ensure that every stakeholder is brought on board and their inputs are considered. An administrator during an interview said as following.

"Our current policies that reinforce top-down leadership are outdated and counterproductive. We must reform these frameworks to mandate inclusive decision-making at all levels. New policies should institutionalize mechanisms that guarantee every stakeholder has a meaningful voice in shaping our institution's direction. When we value diverse perspectives through structured participation, we don't just improve decisions, we build collective ownership of our shared academic mission. The era of unilateral leadership is over, and our policy reforms must reflect that truth."

These findings underscore a critical recognition among administrators that traditional top-down leadership policies are no longer effective in contemporary higher education. The call for reform highlights a growing consensus that institutional policies must actively require and facilitate participatory decision-making processes involving all stakeholders.

In another development, the respondents indicated that institutions should prioritize awareness of the importance of participatory leadership and also live up to the expectations by implementing various

inputs. These respondents said that if all stakeholders are brought on board and their views are put in place, many of them will be encouraged to engage in participatory leadership. One of the lecturers during an interview said as follows.

"Higher education institutions must do more than just preach about participatory leadership; they need to actively demonstrate its value through consistent practice. This means not only organizing workshops and seminars to educate stakeholders about its benefits, but also creating tangible platforms for inclusive decision-making. When staff and student inputs are sought, they must be genuinely considered and implemented, not just collected as a formality. True change happens when awareness meets action."

These findings emphasize that promoting participatory leadership in higher education requires institutions to move beyond theoretical advocacy to practical implementation. While awareness-raising initiatives like workshops are important first steps, they must be complemented by concrete mechanisms that integrate stakeholder input into actual decision-making processes. The key insight reveals a disconnection between institutional rhetoric about participation and substantive action.

Additionally, the respondents indicated that students should be motivated to engage in participatory leadership by giving them incentives such as awards. They explained that this will encourage them to put in an effort even though they are not permanent members of higher institutions. One student indicated as follows.

"Since we students are temporary members of the university, we need real motivation to actively participate in leadership roles. If institutions offered incentives like recognition awards, leadership certificates, or even academic credits for meaningful contributions, it would encourage more of us to get involved. These tangible rewards would help compensate

for our status and show that our participation is truly valued. When students see that their efforts in shared governance leads to visible rewards, they'll be more willing to invest time and energy, even knowing they won't be around to see long-term outcomes."

These findings reveal that students perceive their temporary status as a fundamental barrier to sustained engagement in participatory leadership, creating a need for immediate, tangible incentives to motivate involvement. The suggestion of awards, certificates, and or academic credits demonstrates students' desire for institutional validation that both compensates for their role and visibly acknowledges their contributions. This perspective highlights an important psychological contract where students are willing to invest in shared governance despite not benefiting from long-term outcomes if they receive recognizable short-term rewards that affirm their efforts.

DISCUSSIONS

The discussion of the findings is also presented following the main themes in the study objectives.

Impact of Participatory Leadership on Education Quality in Higher Institutions

The findings which were obtained in line with the impact of participatory leadership on education quality in higher institutions, revealed that this leadership style fosters a sense of ownership, engagement, and empowerment, enhances productivity and efficiency among staff members, especially in the area of research and innovation and increases student engagement in the learning processes. It was established that if participatory leadership is encouraged, staff members feel valued and more committed to institutional goals, while students become more invested in their learning experiences, it fosters a collaborative environment where ideas are freely shared which leads to more creative and impactful research outcomes and students feel more motivated when they take part in teaching methods and decision-making processes.

The findings were in line with the literature by Ramsden (2003) who indicated that the most notable impact of participatory leadership is the enhancement of teaching and learning processes, Bryman (2007) said that participatory leadership also positively impacts research productivity which is a key indicator of education quality in higher institutions and Astin (1993) who established that student engagement and satisfaction are significantly enhanced under participatory leadership models.

Challenges Hindering the Adoption of Participatory Leadership in Higher Institutions in Uganda

In line with the challenges hindering the adoption of participatory leadership in higher institutions in Uganda, the findings of the study revealed that this is because of the traditional leadership style in institutions of top-down management system which has existed for a long time, cultural attitudes towards authority which are entrenched in leadership styles in higher institutions of learning and the negative attitude in engaging in participatory leadership by students and other staff members. It was revealed that the entrenched top-down leadership style in higher education institutions has historically centralized authority and marginalized staff and student voices in decision-making processes, leaders in these institutions enjoy maintaining maximum authority over subordinates and therefore become so resistant to participatory leadership while many students feel that their contributions are not necessary in the running of these institutions because they are not permanent members.

It should be noted that the findings were also in line with the literature which was reviewed. For example, Kasozi (2016) established that many universities in Uganda operate under rigid, top-down management systems inherited from colonial administrative models, Bategeka & Okurut (2019) also established that cultural attitudes towards authority and leadership hinder the adoption of

participatory approaches in educational institutions and Luescher-Mamashela (2013) noted that years of exclusion from meaningful decision-making have created apathy among many university stakeholders who doubt the effectiveness of newly introduced participatory mechanisms.

Evidence-based Strategies to Encourage Participatory Leadership in Uganda's Higher Institutions

To encourage the adoption of participatory leadership in higher institutions in Uganda, the findings of the study showed that there is a need to change existing policies which emphasize top-down leadership styles, institutions should prioritize awareness on the importance of participatory leadership and also live up to the expectations by implementing various inputs and students should be motivated to engage in participatory leadership through giving them incentives such as awards. The findings indicated that institutional policies must actively require and facilitate participatory decision-making processes involving all stakeholders, and promoting participatory leadership in higher education requires institutions to move beyond theoretical advocacy to practical implementation.

The above findings were also in line with Ng'ethe *et al.* (2012) who revealed that the adoption of participatory leadership in Uganda's higher education institutions requires deliberate policy reforms that decentralize decision-making and empower stakeholders and Luescher-Mamashela (2013) who indicate that strengthening student and staff representation platforms is another proven strategy to institutionalize participatory leadership.

CONCLUSIONS

The study concluded that participatory leadership in higher institutions fosters a sense of ownership, engagement, and empowerment, enhances productivity and efficiency among staff members, especially in the area of research and innovation,

and increases student engagement in the learning processes.

However, the study also concluded that participatory leadership has not fully been adopted in higher institutions in Uganda and this is because of the traditional leadership style in institutions of top-down management system which has existed for a long time, cultural attitudes towards authority which are entrenched in leadership styles in higher institutions of learning and the negative attitude in engaging in participatory leadership by students and other staff members.

To encourage the adoption of participatory leadership in higher institutions in Uganda, the study concluded that there is a need to change existing policies which emphasize top-down leadership styles, institutions should prioritize awareness on the importance of participatory leadership and also live up to the expectations by implementing various inputs and students should be motivated to engage in participatory leadership through giving them incentives such as awards.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Policymakers should revise institutional governance frameworks to mandate participatory leadership, which will ensure that policies explicitly require student and staff involvement in decision-making. Such policies should also incentivize participatory practices by linking them to institutional accreditation and performance evaluations to ensure compliance and accountability.

Administrators must move beyond token participation by embedding inclusive leadership into daily operations. This should include transparently incorporating stakeholder feedback into policies and publicly recognizing contributions. Leadership training programs should be implemented to equip administrators with skills in collaborative decision-making, conflict resolution, and equitable engagement.

Lecturers should adopt participatory approaches in both teaching and governance by involving students in curriculum design, assessment methods, and classroom policies. They should act as bridges between students and administration by advocating for student proposals and mentoring emerging leaders. Professional development workshops on facilitative leadership should be encouraged to help lecturers transition from authoritarian to collaborative teaching styles.

Students should proactively seek leadership opportunities, whether through student government, feedback committees, or research collaborations. They must hold institutions accountable by demanding transparency in how their input is used and advocating for incentive systems to sustain engagement. Student leaders should also educate peers on the long-term benefits of participation to foster a culture of collective responsibility.

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