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Co-Designing Higher Education Curricula Through Community Engagement: A Joint Advisory Model for Transformative Learning

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Community-Engaged Curriculum, Service Learning, Transformative Learning.

Gulu University implemented community engagement in its agricultural, medical, and business education curricula through Joint Advisory Groups (JAGs) and service-learning as part of the TESCEA Project initiative. Using a qualitative case study approach, this article examines how community involvement guided curriculum co-design and how applied field experiences enhanced student learning. Findings indicate that incorporating community insights significantly improved student employability, civic engagement, and the capacity to address regional challenges such as malnutrition and food insecurity. The study offers evidence-based recommendations for embedding participatory curriculum models in African higher education. Building on these findings, the research further explores the broader implications of community–university collaboration for transformative learning in developing contexts. Through interviews, focus groups, and document reviews, the study highlights how sustained engagement among academic staff, students, and local stakeholders fosters mutual trust, shared ownership, and the relevance of educational outcomes. The Joint Advisory Groups served as vital platforms through which farmers, health workers, business owners, and local leaders contributed to shaping course content, ensuring that theoretical instruction aligned with the socio-economic realities of northern Uganda. Moreover, service-learning projects provided students with real-world contexts to apply classroom knowledge, refine problem-solving skills, and cultivate empathy for community challenges. Such experiential opportunities not only enhanced graduate readiness for employment but also strengthened their sense of social responsibility and innovation. The research emphasises that participatory curriculum design can serve as a catalyst for institutional transformation by bridging the gap between academia and society. In conclusion, the paper calls for policy frameworks and resource allocation that support continuous dialogue between universities and their surrounding communities to sustain impact, deepen relevance, and promote inclusive, locally grounded higher education reform across Africa.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, higher education has been called upon to reimagine its role in addressing complex societal challenges such as food insecurity, health inequities, and youth unemployment. Traditional university curricula, often characterised by rigid disciplinary boundaries and limited community engagement, have struggled to equip graduates with the practical competencies, ethical awareness, and problem-solving capacities needed in an increasingly interconnected world (Preece, 2020). Scholars argue that higher education must move beyond content transmission toward transformative learning models that integrate academic rigour with societal relevance (Brew, 2019; Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011). Such approaches are grounded in the recognition that knowledge creation and dissemination are most meaningful when informed by the lived experiences and priorities of communities.

Participatory curriculum reform has emerged as a transformative strategy to bridge the gap between academia and society. By involving diverse stakeholders, students, faculty, employers, and community representatives in curriculum design, universities can develop learning experiences that are contextually responsive, inclusive, and democratically accountable (Butin, 2019; Málóvics et al., 2025). Through mechanisms such as advisory boards, community consultations, and service-learning partnerships, higher education

institutions can co-create programs that address both academic and local development goals. This study builds on such perspectives by examining how community participation, through Joint Advisory Groups (JAGs) and experiential learning, has shaped curriculum reform and pedagogical practice at Gulu University.

Gulu University's engagement in the Transforming Employability for Social Change in East Africa (TESCEA) initiative provided a strategic opportunity to operationalise community-engaged curriculum reform. The initiative introduced Joint Advisory Groups (JAGs) as participatory governance structures through which faculty, students, and community stakeholders collaboratively defined learning outcomes, course content, and assessment strategies across three key disciplines: Agriculture, Business Administration, and Medicine & Surgery. Complemented by service-learning and experiential pedagogy, these innovations sought to enhance students' practical competence, ethical orientation, and civic responsibility while simultaneously strengthening community-university linkages.

This study, therefore, examined how Gulu University's participatory approach to curriculum co-design contributes to transformative learning, institutional innovation, and sustainable community engagement. Specifically, it explores (1) the role of Joint Advisory Groups as mechanisms for embedding community priorities

in academic programs, (2) the influence of service-learning and experiential pedagogy on student development, and (3) the reciprocal outcomes for students and community partners. In doing so, the research not only contributes to the growing body of scholarship on community-engaged higher education but also provides empirical insights into how participatory curriculum design can serve as a catalyst for institutional and societal transformation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Community-engaged curriculum has become a critical strategy in higher education for aligning academic programs with societal needs, fostering student learning, and contributing to community development. This review examines the theoretical underpinnings of participatory curriculum design, Joint Advisory Groups (JAGs), service-learning, and experiential pedagogy, followed by empirical studies on their implementation and outcomes. Gaps in the existing literature are highlighted to justify the rationale for the current study.

Theoretical Review

The theoretical review provides the conceptual foundation guiding this study on community-engaged curriculum design. It draws from participatory, experiential, and transformative learning theories to explain how collaborative curriculum development enhances academic relevance and societal impact. These theories collectively emphasise shared ownership of knowledge, the integration of community experiences into learning processes, and the transformative potential of education to address real-world challenges. By anchoring the study within these theoretical perspectives, the review establishes the rationale for adopting Joint Advisory Groups (JAGs), service-learning, and experiential pedagogy as frameworks for fostering democratic, inclusive, and sustainable curriculum practices in higher education.

Democratic Curriculum Theory

Democratic curriculum theory posits that education should involve shared decision-making among multiple stakeholders, including students, faculty, and the wider community (Smith & Sobania, 2021). The theory emphasises participatory engagement, accountability, and responsiveness to societal needs, advocating that curricula should reflect both academic standards and community priorities. This study builds on democratic curriculum theory by investigating how Joint Advisory Groups (JAGs) operationalise these principles in practice, ensuring that curricula are co-designed with community stakeholders to enhance relevance and legitimacy.

Despite its strong conceptual foundation, existing applications of democratic curriculum theory often remain theoretical rather than practical, with limited empirical evidence on how universities institutionalise participatory structures over time. Few studies examine how power dynamics, resource allocation, and governance frameworks affect sustained stakeholder engagement (Ngwira & Osei, 2020). Furthermore, there is a lack of research exploring how democratic curriculum principles can be effectively adapted to low-resource or post-conflict settings, such as those in Sub-Saharan Africa, where institutional constraints may impede participatory processes.

Experiential Learning Theory

Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (1984) and its contemporary applications highlight learning as a cyclical process involving concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation. Recent studies extend this theory to higher education, suggesting that service-learning and community-engaged activities allow students to apply theoretical knowledge in real-world contexts, fostering practical skills, critical thinking, and civic responsibility (Putra, Annas, & Reni, 2024; Lin, 2025). This theoretical lens underpins the study's examination of experiential pedagogy in promoting transformative learning outcomes.

While experiential learning theory provides a strong pedagogical foundation, gaps persist in its

contextual and evaluative dimensions. Most studies emphasise classroom-based or short-term applications without adequately addressing long-term impacts on students' professional trajectories and civic engagement. Moreover, there is a limited understanding of how experiential learning operates within community-university partnerships, where learning extends beyond individual experience to collective transformation. Scholars also note a lack of assessment frameworks that capture ethical awareness, behavioural change, and social responsibility, key aspects of transformative education (Schultes, 2025).

Service-Learning Theory

Service-learning theory emphasises reciprocal benefits for students and communities, highlighting mutual learning, social responsibility, and civic engagement (Chu, 2025). It provides a framework for understanding how community-based experiences can be integrated into curricula to enhance both academic and societal outcomes. By combining democratic curriculum principles and service-learning, the study explores how universities can co-create curricula that are socially relevant and academically rigorous.

Despite its growing prominence, the application of service-learning theory still faces significant challenges. Many studies focus on student outcomes but neglect the perspectives and benefits experienced by community partners. Furthermore, limited research examines how service-learning can be institutionalised and sustained within university structures, particularly in low-resource environments. The absence of clear evaluation mechanisms for measuring community impact and the lack of policy frameworks to incentivise faculty and community participation also remain underexplored. Finally, there is insufficient scholarship on decolonial and context-specific adaptations of service-learning theory that integrate indigenous knowledge systems and local epistemologies into curriculum design.

Review of Related Literature

The review of related literature explores empirical and conceptual studies relevant to community-engaged curriculum design, with a focus on Joint Advisory Groups (JAGs), service-learning, and experiential pedagogy. It examines how these approaches have been applied in higher education to promote collaboration between universities and communities, enhance student learning outcomes, and contribute to sustainable local development. The section also highlights existing gaps in institutionalisation, assessment frameworks, and long-term sustainability of participatory models, thereby establishing the scholarly context and justification for this study.

Community-Engaged Curriculum and Participatory Models

Community-engaged curriculum models are increasingly recognised as transformative approaches that position universities as active partners in social change rather than detached institutions of elite knowledge production. These models emphasize collaboration between academic institutions and external stakeholders such as community leaders, NGOs, government agencies, and local industries to co-design curricula that directly respond to societal needs (Butin, 2019; Cipolle & Cordeiro, 2020). According to Málovics et al. (2025), such engagement enhances the social legitimacy of higher education by ensuring that learning outcomes address context-specific challenges like food insecurity, environmental degradation, and poverty reduction. By integrating the lived experiences of community actors, universities can bridge the gap between theoretical instruction and practical relevance.

Recent research further underscores the role of participatory curriculum models in advancing democratic education. Scholars argue that participatory design processes empower marginalised voices, foster social inclusion, and strengthen the accountability of educational institutions to their local communities (Kumar & Taylor, 2024; Nyanzi et al., 2025). These approaches align with democratic curriculum

theory, which posits that knowledge should be co-constructed through dialogue and mutual respect rather than dictated unilaterally by academic experts. However, despite the widespread advocacy for such participatory methods, empirical evidence demonstrating how they are institutionalised within universities remains limited. Few studies have systematically examined the internal governance structures, policy frameworks, and resource mechanisms that enable sustained stakeholder engagement beyond the life cycle of donor-funded projects.

Furthermore, the literature often neglects the power dynamics and politics inherent in participatory curriculum processes. While community engagement is frequently presented as inherently equitable, studies reveal that certain groups, particularly rural women, informal sector workers, or local minorities, may be underrepresented or marginalised in advisory structures (Amutuhaire, 2023). As a result, the inclusivity of these models can sometimes be superficial, privileging dominant voices within the community or academia. There remains a need for longitudinal, context-sensitive research exploring how participatory curriculum models navigate power relations, sustain inclusivity, and influence institutional transformation in low-resource settings.

Finally, few studies consider the sustainability of participatory curriculum approaches once external funding or facilitation ceases. Many community-engaged programs in sub-Saharan Africa, including those supported by initiatives like TESCEA, rely heavily on donor resources or charismatic leadership (TESCEA, 2022). This dependence raises questions about long-term viability, institutional ownership, and scalability. Addressing these challenges requires empirical studies like the present one that interrogate how participatory models can be embedded into university systems and sustained as core academic practices.

Joint Advisory Groups (JAGs) as Curriculum Anchors

Joint Advisory Groups (JAGs) have emerged as innovative governance structures that operationalise participatory curriculum design. Comprising faculty, students, and community representatives, JAGs provide a platform for dialogue and shared decision-making in curriculum planning (Katende & Bisaso, 2025; TESCEA, 2022). These groups help bridge the traditional gap between universities and the communities they serve by ensuring that academic programs align with local development priorities. For instance, JAGs at institutions like Gulu University have influenced the integration of topics such as climate resilience, sustainable agriculture, and public health into curricular frameworks (Amutuhaire, 2023).

Empirical evidence suggests that JAGs enhance the relevance and responsiveness of curricula by enabling feedback loops between academic content and real-world application (Ngwira & Osei, 2020). They also strengthen trust and mutual accountability, as community stakeholders become co-owners of the educational process. Nonetheless, there is limited research on how JAGs evolve over time and adapt to changing institutional and community contexts. While many studies document their establishment, few investigate the organisational processes, leadership practices, or resource mechanisms that sustain them once initial project support concludes.

In addition, the internal dynamics of JAGs remain underexplored. Studies rarely analyse how members negotiate competing priorities, reconcile divergent expectations, or address hierarchies between academic and community participants. These tensions can influence whose knowledge is valued in curriculum design and how decisions are made (Nyanzi et al., 2025). The lack of research in this area limits understanding of how JAGs can foster equitable participation and manage conflicts constructively.

Another significant gap concerns the translation of JAG recommendations into practice. While

advisory groups often generate rich insights and locally grounded recommendations, there is little empirical evidence on how these inputs influence actual curriculum revisions, course content, or pedagogical methods. Moreover, there are few established frameworks for evaluating the impact of JAGs on student learning outcomes or community development indicators. This study thus contributes by examining how JAGs at Gulu University function as institutional anchors that not only inform but actively shape curriculum content and assessment.

Service-Learning and Experiential Pedagogy

Service-learning and experiential pedagogies represent powerful tools for integrating theory with practice in higher education. These approaches immerse students in real-world problem-solving, thereby cultivating civic responsibility, empathy, and critical reflection (Putra et al., 2024; Lin, 2025). By engaging with community projects such as agricultural extension, public health outreach, or entrepreneurship, students experience firsthand the complexity of social issues and the interdependence between knowledge and action. Such experiences reinforce transformative learning by encouraging students to re-evaluate their assumptions, values, and social responsibilities.

Moreover, scholars emphasise that service-learning embodies reciprocal learning, where communities are not mere recipients of university interventions but active partners in knowledge co-creation (Chu, 2025). Through this reciprocity, both students and community members gain mutual benefits: students acquire practical competencies while communities access innovative solutions and human resources. However, while service-learning's pedagogical benefits are well documented, research on its longitudinal outcomes remains scarce. Few studies track graduates to determine whether service-learning experiences translate into sustained civic engagement, professional ethics, or community-oriented career paths.

In addition, evaluation frameworks for experiential learning remain underdeveloped. Traditional assessment methods often capture cognitive outcomes such as academic performance but overlook affective and behavioural dimensions, including empathy, ethical awareness, and collaborative skills (Peracullo, 2025). This limitation constrains the ability to measure transformative learning in its fullest sense. Furthermore, many service-learning programs remain short-term or project-based, limiting their potential for systemic impact on curricula and community development. There is a pressing need for longitudinal, multi-stakeholder studies that examine the enduring educational and societal value of experiential pedagogy.

Finally, scholars highlight contextual and institutional challenges in embedding service-learning into university structures, especially in low-resource contexts where funding, policy support, and faculty training are limited (Schultes, 2025). Without institutional frameworks to support course integration, workload recognition, and community partnership management, service-learning risks being perceived as an extracurricular or peripheral activity rather than a central academic strategy. The present study contributes to addressing this gap by analysing how Gulu University institutionalised service-learning within its curriculum and governance systems.

Student and Community Outcomes

Community-engaged curricula have demonstrated significant potential to generate symbiotic benefits for students and communities alike. Students often report enhanced motivation, critical thinking, and practical problem-solving abilities, while communities gain improved capacity, new knowledge, and sustainable development partnerships (Málovics et al., 2025; Keller et al., 2025). The TESCEA (2022) framework highlights that such collaborations not only improve educational outcomes but also foster long-term relationships rooted in trust and shared goals.

However, the sustainability and measurability of these outcomes remain major research gaps. Most existing studies are short-term evaluations that focus on immediate learning gains or project outputs, offering little insight into how community-university partnerships evolve over time. There is also insufficient understanding of the feedback mechanisms through which communities evaluate student contributions or influence future curriculum design. Consequently, the long-term reciprocity and mutual accountability envisioned in community-engaged models are not always realised in practice.

Another gap lies in the integration of local and indigenous knowledge systems within academic frameworks. Despite increasing calls for decolonising the curriculum, few studies provide empirical examples of how indigenous epistemologies can be systematically embedded into accredited programs without compromising academic rigour or international standards (Nanyanzi et al., 2025). The challenge of balancing global academic norms with local relevance remains unresolved in most university contexts.

Lastly, while some research addresses community capacity building, there is minimal focus on structural outcomes, such as policy influence, economic empowerment, or institutional learning among community organisations. This lack of evidence limits understanding of how universities contribute to broader social transformation through sustained engagement. The current study mitigates these gaps by documenting both student-centred and community-level outcomes, demonstrating how collaborative learning can produce enduring educational and societal change.

Summary of Gaps

Across the reviewed literature, several critical gaps persist that justify the focus of this study. First, while community-engaged curriculum models and Joint Advisory Groups (JAGs) are widely recognised for enhancing curriculum relevance and inclusivity, there is limited empirical evidence on their institutionalisation,

sustainability, and internal governance dynamics, particularly in low-resource university settings. The literature lacks detailed insights into how power relations, resource constraints, and policy environments influence the long-term functionality and legitimacy of these participatory structures. Second, although service-learning and experiential pedagogies are lauded for bridging theory and practice, existing studies provide insufficient frameworks for assessing transformative learning outcomes, especially those related to ethical awareness, civic responsibility, and behavioural change. Most research remains short-term and student-focused, neglecting the enduring impacts on graduates' professional conduct and community well-being. Third, evidence on student and community outcomes highlights positive short-term benefits but reveals limited understanding of sustainability, mutual accountability, and the integration of local or indigenous knowledge systems within formal curricula. Moreover, few institutional mechanisms have been developed to incentivise faculty participation, evaluate engagement quality, or monitor long-term community impact. This study, therefore, addresses these interconnected gaps by exploring how Gulu University's participatory curriculum model, service-learning integration, and experiential pedagogy contribute to curriculum relevance, transformative learning, and sustainable community partnerships in a resource-constrained context.

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This study employed a qualitative case study design following Yin's (2018) methodological framework to deeply explore curriculum redesign processes within three diverse programs: Agriculture, Medicine and Surgery, and Business Administration. These programs were purposively selected due to their varied disciplinary contexts and their central role in achieving the integrated TESCEA initiative's goals of enhancing community-engaged and transformative higher education. The case study

approach was deemed appropriate as it allowed for an in-depth, contextualised understanding of curriculum co-design processes within real-life institutional and community environments.

Target Population and Sampling Methods

The target population comprised key stakeholders directly involved in or affected by curriculum design and implementation at Gulu University. This included academic staff engaged in teaching and curriculum review, undergraduate students participating in service-learning activities, community partners (such as local farmers, health practitioners, and business owners), and district education and development officials who collaborate with the university. These groups were targeted because they represent diverse perspectives on curriculum relevance, community integration, and employability outcomes, all essential dimensions of the TESCEA initiative.

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure that participants possessed rich, first-hand experience relevant to the study objectives (Patton, 2015). Within this framework, thirty participants were selected: ten faculty members (three from Agriculture, four from Medicine and Surgery, and three from Business Administration), twelve students (four from each program), five community representatives, and three district officials. This sample size was considered adequate to achieve data saturation while maintaining depth and manageability of analysis. The purposive approach was complemented by maximum variation sampling, which ensured the inclusion of both male and female participants, individuals with different years of experience, and participants from both rural and urban communities to capture diverse viewpoints.

Sample Size

The total sample size comprised thirty participants drawn from four key stakeholder groups. These included ten faculty members, three from the Faculty of Agriculture, four from the Faculty of Medicine and Surgery, and three from the Faculty of Business Administration. In addition, twelve

undergraduate students participated in the study, with four selected from each of the three academic programs. The sample also included five community representatives and three district officials who work closely with the university on education and development initiatives. This overall composition was considered sufficient to achieve data saturation, the point at which no new information or themes emerge from additional participants (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). The size and diversity of the sample ensured adequate representation across stakeholder groups while maintaining a manageable scope for in-depth qualitative analysis. Consequently, the selected sample was deemed appropriate to yield rich, credible, and contextually grounded insights aligned with the study objectives.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected through three main qualitative methods. First, document analysis followed Bowen's (2009) systematic protocol, reviewing curriculum documents, course outlines, policy papers, and TESCEA reports to trace institutional changes and engagement practices. Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the 30 selected participants, following Kvale and Brinkmann's (2009) guidelines to elicit detailed insights into participants' experiences, perceptions, and roles in curriculum co-design. Interviews were conducted in English, recorded with permission, and transcribed verbatim. Third, participant observation (Angrosino, 2007) was carried out in classrooms, field sites, and community meetings to observe interactional dynamics and authentic engagement processes between students, faculty, and community partners. Field notes were maintained to complement interview data and triangulate findings across methods.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework. This involved familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, identification of themes, reviewing and defining themes, and final synthesis. Themes were derived both deductively

from TESCEA's theoretical framework and inductively from emergent insights during data interpretation. Coding and analysis were conducted manually and verified through peer debriefing to enhance credibility and dependability.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Gulu University Research Ethics Committee (GUREC) before data collection commenced. Informed consent was sought from all participants, who were briefed on the study's purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Confidentiality was ensured by using pseudonyms and anonymising all identifying information in transcripts and reports. Data were securely stored on password-protected devices accessible only to the research team. Special attention was given to ensuring voluntary participation, particularly among community members and students, to minimise power imbalances. The research adhered to the ethical principles of Respect For Persons, Beneficence, and Justice as outlined in the Belmont Report (1979).

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Introduction

This study explored how community engagement shapes curriculum design at Gulu University through participatory mechanisms, service-learning integration, and experiential pedagogy. Data collected from 30 participants, including faculty, students, community representatives, and district officials, using interviews, document analysis, and participant observation, as presented below.

Joint Advisory Groups (JAGs) as Curriculum Anchors

Joint Advisory Groups (JAGs) were central to institutionalising community input in curriculum design. Analysis of interviews, field observations, and policy documents highlighted three themes; inclusive stakeholder representation,

demonstrating how JAGs anchor curricula in local priorities while ensuring academic relevance.

Inclusive Stakeholder Representation

JAGs facilitated participation from diverse community and institutional stakeholders, ensuring curricula reflected multiple perspectives.

A farmer noted:

“For the first time, our concerns about crop failures and water shortages are heard by the university.”

A faculty member reflected:

“Before JAGs, the curriculum was mostly theoretical. Now, it focuses on practical issues like reducing post-harvest losses.”

Document analysis confirmed that JAG meeting minutes explicitly list representatives from agriculture, health, business, local NGOs, and district offices, illustrating formal inclusion. Observation in community meetings revealed active debate and negotiation among stakeholders, reinforcing participatory practice.

This theme demonstrates alignment with democratic curriculum theory (Smith & Sobania, 2021), indicating that participatory governance enhances both legitimacy and responsiveness of the curriculum.

Bridging Academic and Community Priorities

JAGs served as mediating structures reconciling scholarly requirements with community needs.

An extension worker noted:

“Being part of the advisory group makes me feel responsible for the success of student learning and community outcomes.”

Field observations in classroom discussions revealed faculty referencing JAG recommendations in practical project assignments.

Document review of curriculum revisions showed inclusion of modules addressing sustainable

agriculture and local health challenges, reflecting tangible integration of community priorities.

This indicates JAGs function as negotiation platforms that balance academic rigour with social relevance, addressing a key gap in participatory curriculum literature (Butin, 2010; Cipolle & Cordeiro, 2020).

Institutionalisation and Sustainability

Sustaining engagement over time emerged as a critical challenge.

A university administrator commented:

“Maintaining engagement is a challenge. We need clear policies and resources to keep JAG members motivated and active.”

Observation of JAG meetings revealed variable attendance and participation intensity, suggesting the influence of institutional support structures.

TESCEA reports documented formalised terms of reference for JAG members, outlining roles, responsibilities, and review cycles, indicating efforts toward institutionalisation.

The findings reveal that formalised governance structures, policy clarity, and resource allocation are vital for sustaining participatory curriculum mechanisms in low-resource contexts (Ngwira & Osei, 2020).

Service-Learning Integration and Experiential Pedagogy

The integration of service-learning and experiential pedagogies emerged as a strategic approach to connect classroom learning with community realities. The data highlighted three primary themes underpinning this objective; practical application of academic knowledge, mutual learning between students and community members and enhanced student motivation and engagement.

Practical Application of Academic Knowledge

Students engaged in real-world problem-solving, linking theory to practice.

A student participant shared:

“Working in the community helped me see how classroom concepts on nutrition and health actually apply to local families.”

Field observations confirmed students conducting soil testing, health surveys, and business assessments in community settings.

Document analysis of course syllabi demonstrated explicit inclusion of community-based projects as graded components, indicating curricular formalisation of experiential learning.

Experiential pedagogy not only enhances cognitive understanding but also strengthens ethical and civic engagement, echoing findings by Eyler and Giles (1999) on service-learning effectiveness.

Mutual Learning Between Students and Community Members

Service-learning facilitated reciprocal learning, where students gained practical skills while community members benefited from university expertise.

A community representative noted:

“Students bring fresh ideas, but we also teach them how things work in reality. It’s a two-way learning process.”

Observations in field sites showed students adapting project designs based on community feedback.

This theme highlights the symbiotic nature of engagement, emphasising co-production of knowledge that respects local epistemologies.

Enhanced Student Motivation and Engagement

Participation in experiential learning motivated students to pursue socially relevant projects.

Faculty observed:

“Students are more invested when they know their work has a real impact on the community.”

Documented assessment rubrics rewarded reflective reports linking service experiences to course outcomes.

Linking academic assessments to community engagement enhances learning outcomes and fosters professional and civic responsibility.

Student and Community Outcomes- A Symbiotic Relationship

The third objective examined the reciprocal benefits of community-engaged curriculum for students and local stakeholders. Data analysis identified three interrelated themes; transformative learning and civic responsibility, community capacity building and sustained collaboration Networks.

Transformative Learning and Civic Responsibility

Students reported heightened awareness of ethical, social, and environmental issues.

A student reflected:

“I now understand the real challenges our communities face. It changes how I think about problem-solving.”

Observation revealed reflective sessions where students discussed ethical dilemmas encountered during fieldwork, aligning with transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 2000).

Community Capacity Building

Community members benefited from knowledge transfer and skill development.

A district official commented:

“The university’s programs help us implement better agricultural practices and health interventions.”

Document review showed recorded impacts of student-led initiatives, such as water management workshops and post-harvest training sessions.

Sustained Collaborative Networks

Participation fostered long-term partnerships, promoting ongoing collaboration beyond the classroom.

Community representatives reported continued consultations with faculty after project completion.

Observations confirmed continued involvement of JAG members in curriculum review meetings.

These findings underscore the mutually reinforcing outcomes of community-engaged learning, confirming that participatory curriculum design produces sustained social, educational, and professional benefits.

Across the three objectives, the findings demonstrate that Gulu University’s community-engaged curriculum model, anchored by JAGs, enriched through service-learning, and evaluated through reciprocal outcomes, achieves both academic and social objectives. Triangulation across interviews, document analysis, and observations provides robust evidence that participatory mechanisms, experiential learning, and institutional commitment collectively enhance curriculum relevance, legitimacy, and sustainability.

DISCUSSIONS OF FINDINGS

Introduction

This study explored the implementation and outcomes of community-engaged curriculum at Gulu University through Joint Advisory Groups (JAGs), service-learning integration, and experiential pedagogy. Data from faculty, students, community representatives, and district officials highlighted the critical role of participatory structures in enhancing academic relevance and community impact. The following discussion interprets these findings in relation to recent scholarly literature, providing a mature analysis of the successes, challenges, and implications of such engagement.

Joint Advisory Groups (JAGs) as Curriculum Anchors

The first objective examined how JAGs serve as anchors for embedding community priorities into university curricula. Analysis revealed three themes: (1) Inclusive Stakeholder Representation,

(2) Bridging Academic and Community Priorities, and (3) Institutionalisation and Sustainability.

Inclusive Stakeholder Representation

The establishment of JAGs facilitated the participation of diverse stakeholders, including faculty, students, local farmers, extension workers, and district officials. Málovics et al. (2025) argue that stakeholder diversity enhances societal impact, ensuring curricula respond to real-world needs. Similarly, TESCEA reports emphasise that JAGs formalise collaboration between universities and external partners (inasp.info, 2021).

However, Nyanzi et al. (2025) note that stakeholder involvement is often uneven, with some voices dominating, which can undermine intended inclusivity. Observations from this study support this, as some community members attended fewer meetings than others, suggesting engagement requires ongoing attention and facilitation. Amutuhaire (2023) further cautions that universities must balance local and international community priorities to avoid reproducing inequalities, emphasising the complexity of meaningful representation.

Katende and Bisaso (2025) also report that while community engagement is formalised in Ugandan universities, the depth of actual influence on curriculum decisions varies, highlighting that inclusive structures alone do not guarantee equitable participation. Taken together, these perspectives indicate that while Gulu University's JAGs enhance inclusivity, continuous evaluation and facilitation are necessary to ensure all stakeholders contribute meaningfully.

Bridging Academic and Community Priorities

JAGs at Gulu University acted as mediators, balancing academic rigour with community-driven needs, particularly in agriculture, health, and business programs. Peracullo (2025) argues that service-learning effectively bridges this gap, fostering curricula that integrate theory with real-world problem solving. TESCEA evaluations

similarly report that JAGs promote co-created curricula aligned with local priorities (inasp.info, 2022).

Nonetheless, challenges exist. Nyanzi et al. (2025) observe that without sustained participation, community input may not fully translate into actionable curriculum changes. This study found that while JAG recommendations often informed module content, the translation into assessment and pedagogy varied across faculties. Amutuhaire (2023) emphasises that integrating local knowledge requires systemic institutional support to ensure both relevance and rigour. Katende and Bisaso (2025) also suggest that alignment between academic and community priorities is an evolving process, requiring iterative engagement.

Thus, while Gulu University has made progress in bridging priorities, literature suggests that continuous negotiation and framework development are essential to maintain equilibrium between academic standards and community relevance.

Institutionalisation and Sustainability

The long-term success of JAGs depends on institutional policies, resources, and formalised roles. Schultes (2025) notes that sustainable service-learning programs require administrative support and structured governance. TESCEA documents highlight the formalisation of JAGs as a critical factor for sustained community engagement (inasp.info, 2022).

However, challenges remain in maintaining consistent engagement. Nyanzi et al. (2025) highlight that insufficient institutional mechanisms can lead to stakeholder fatigue and inconsistent participation. This study similarly found variations in attendance and active involvement over time, emphasising the need for policies and incentives to maintain commitment. Amutuhaire (2023) underscores that institutionalising engagement must consider local-global integration to achieve equitable and lasting impact.

Katende and Bisaso (2025) also note variability in institutionalisation across Ugandan universities, suggesting that while formal structures exist, their effectiveness depends on supportive leadership and resources. These findings collectively stress that the sustainability of JAGs is contingent not only on formal policies but also on active facilitation and continuous investment.

Service-Learning Integration and Experiential Pedagogy

The second objective examined how service-learning and experiential pedagogies were integrated into the curriculum, highlighting three themes: (1) Practical Application of Academic Knowledge, (2) Mutual Learning Between Students and Community Members, and (3) Enhanced Student Motivation and Engagement.

Practical Application of Academic Knowledge

Service-learning enabled students to translate theory into practice, addressing local challenges in agriculture, health, and business. Putra, Annas, and Reni (2024) found that experiential learning improves knowledge retention, skill acquisition, and civic awareness. This study observed students implementing community-based interventions, consistent with Rodríguez-Zurita et al. (2025), who report that experiential learning fosters competencies aligned with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

However, as Lin (2025) cautions, effective translation of theory into practice requires adequate supervision and reflection mechanisms. Gulu University's structured reflective journals and community feedback sessions helped mitigate these challenges. The TESCEA learning brief further supports that intentional alignment between service activities and academic objectives enhances educational outcomes (inasp.info, 2022).

Mutual Learning Between Students and Community Members

The study found that service-learning fosters reciprocal knowledge exchange, benefiting both students and community members. Chu (2025)

emphasises that co-created learning enhances community capacity while improving students' intercultural and problem-solving skills. TESCEA reports indicate that JAG-facilitated partnerships strengthen mutual accountability and trust (inasp.info, 2022).

Nonetheless, challenges include unequal participation and limited influence of some community actors, as also noted by Nyanzi et al. (2025). Achieving effective mutual learning requires deliberate facilitation and continuous evaluation. Katende and Bisaso (2025) reinforce that sustained engagement is key to transforming reciprocal interactions into tangible benefits.

Enhanced Student Motivation and Engagement

Participation in service-learning increased students' motivation and sense of civic responsibility. Lin (2025) reports that service-learning fosters civic-mindedness and long-term engagement, while Putra et al. (2024) highlight improvements in academic persistence and personal development. Observations from Gulu University indicated students were highly motivated when they could see tangible community outcomes.

However, Nyanzi et al. (2025) caution that student engagement may wane without clear guidance, recognition, or reflection opportunities. TESCEA findings also suggest that aligning service-learning with community priorities is critical to maintaining motivation (inasp.info, 2022). Amutuhair (2023) argues for embedding service-learning in broader institutional strategies to sustain long-term engagement.

Student and Community Outcomes- A Symbiotic Relationship

The third objective explored the outcomes of community-engaged curricula for both students and community stakeholders. Themes included (1) Transformative Learning and Civic Responsibility, (2) Community Capacity Building, and (3) Sustained Collaborative Networks.

Transformative Learning and Civic Responsibility

Service-learning fostered ethical awareness and civic responsibility among students. Guanlao et al. (2025) show that community-engaged learning enhances personal, social, and citizenship competencies. Reflective journals and interviews confirmed students' enhanced understanding of societal challenges, aligning with TESCEA observations (inasp.info, 2022).

Challenges include sustaining reflective practice and translating learning into action. Nyanzi et al. (2025) note that civic outcomes require deliberate scaffolding and institutional support to maximise impact.

Community Capacity Building

Community stakeholders reported tangible benefits, including improved agricultural techniques, health awareness, and local problem-solving skills. Málovics et al. (2025) highlight that universities can strengthen community capacity by embedding engagement in institutional processes. TESCEA learning briefs similarly indicate that JAG-facilitated initiatives enhance local knowledge and resource utilisation (inasp.info, 2022).

Limitations include uneven participation and the need for sustained support, echoing concerns raised by Katende and Bisaso (2025) and Nyanzi et al. (2025).

Sustained Collaborative Networks

Long-term partnerships between universities and communities were a key outcome. Keller et al. (2025) report that enduring collaborations support continuous knowledge transfer and innovation. TESCEA documentation demonstrates that JAGs contribute to formalised and sustained networks (inasp.info, 2022).

However, sustaining these networks requires consistent institutional support and active participation from all stakeholders. Amutuhaire (2023) emphasises the importance of integrating local-global perspectives to maintain equitable and enduring collaboration.

This discussion demonstrates that Gulu University's community-engaged curriculum aligns with contemporary best practices in higher education while highlighting ongoing challenges in institutionalisation, equitable participation, and sustaining engagement. The findings are consistent with recent scholarship, providing evidence of both successes and areas for refinement in participatory curriculum design and service-learning integration.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF THIS STUDY

Contributions to Existing Theory

This study advances existing theory by providing empirical support for participatory curriculum models, particularly democratic curriculum theory, which emphasises shared ownership and stakeholder engagement. By examining how Joint Advisory Groups (JAGs) were institutionalised, negotiated power dynamics, and influenced curriculum content, the study extends theoretical understanding of how participatory approaches can be operationalised and sustained in low-resource higher education contexts. Additionally, it enriches experiential learning and service-learning theories by demonstrating how structured, community-engaged activities foster transformative learning, civic responsibility, and practical competencies, bridging gaps in theory regarding the alignment of academic outcomes with real-world community impact. The study also contributes to emerging theoretical discourse on decolonial and locally grounded approaches by showing how indigenous knowledge and local perspectives can be integrated into curricula without compromising academic rigour.

Contributions to the Existing Body of Knowledge

Empirically, the study contributes to the literature by documenting the processes, mechanisms, and outcomes of JAGs and service-learning integration at Gulu University. It provides evidence of how participatory curriculum design enhances both student learning and community development, addressing gaps related to non-cognitive outcomes, long-term civic engagement,

and community capacity building. The study also highlights practical strategies for sustaining university-community partnerships, offering insights into governance structures, policy support, and resource allocation that promote ongoing collaboration. These contributions add to the body of knowledge on operationalising community engagement in higher education, particularly in resource-constrained settings, and provide a foundation for future research and policy development aimed at institutionalising socially relevant, academically rigorous curricula.

CONCLUSIONS OF THE STUDY

Introduction

This study examined the implementation and outcomes of a community-engaged curriculum at Gulu University, focusing on the roles of Joint Advisory Groups (JAGs), service-learning, and experiential pedagogy. Drawing on perspectives from faculty, students, community representatives, and district officials, the study explored how participatory curriculum design enhances academic relevance, fosters transformative student learning, and strengthens community development. The conclusions highlight key findings, illustrate how the study mitigated previously identified gaps in the literature, and provide insights for sustainable and socially responsive curriculum practices.

Joint Advisory Groups (JAGs) as Curriculum Anchors

The study revealed that JAGs at Gulu University effectively anchored community priorities within curriculum design by engaging diverse stakeholders, including faculty, students, local farmers, and district officials, in co-creating learning outcomes and course content. This participatory approach mitigated previous gaps related to the institutionalisation and sustainability of participatory curriculum models by documenting formal governance structures, defined roles, and mechanisms to sustain engagement over time. Consequently, JAGs were shown to balance academic rigour with community relevance, ensuring curricula were

both socially responsive and academically sound. This demonstrates that formalised, well-supported participatory structures are critical for embedding community voices into higher education curricula.

Service-Learning Integration and Experiential Pedagogy

Service-learning initiatives allowed students to apply theoretical knowledge to real-world community problems, fostering practical skills, civic responsibility, and mutual learning with community members. The study addressed gaps in balancing academic and community priorities and assessing transformative learning outcomes by illustrating how student activities simultaneously met academic objectives and addressed community needs, supported by reflective practices and faculty guidance. These findings highlight that structured experiential learning bridges the gap between theory and practice, enhances student motivation, and provides measurable evidence of transformative learning, reinforcing the value of integrating service-learning and experiential pedagogy into curricula.

Student and Community Outcomes – A Symbiotic Relationship

Community-engaged curricula generated reciprocal benefits, as students developed ethical awareness, civic responsibility, and practical competencies, while communities gained capacity through collaborative problem-solving. This study mitigated gaps regarding longitudinal tracking of civic engagement, community capacity building, and sustained collaborative networks by providing qualitative evidence of enduring student-community partnerships and ongoing mutual benefits. These outcomes demonstrate that when engagement is institutionalised, contextually grounded, and actively supported, community engagement fosters a symbiotic relationship, producing both sustainable community development and transformative student learning experiences.

RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE STUDY

Policy Implementers

Policy implementers, such as university administrators and faculty leaders, should institutionalise participatory curriculum practices by embedding Joint Advisory Groups (JAGs) and service-learning initiatives into governance structures. This includes defining clear roles and responsibilities for stakeholders, allocating dedicated resources, and establishing monitoring mechanisms to sustain engagement over time. Structured reflective activities, continuous feedback loops, and faculty training programs should be implemented to ensure alignment between academic objectives and community priorities. By doing so, universities can enhance the relevance, quality, and impact of curricula while fostering transformative learning and long-term community development.

Policymakers

Policymakers at national and regional levels should develop frameworks and incentives that support community-engaged curriculum design in higher education. Policies should prioritise the integration of local knowledge systems, indigenous perspectives, and decolonial approaches to ensure curricula remain contextually relevant and socially responsible. Additionally, funding mechanisms, accreditation standards, and recognition schemes should encourage universities to sustain participatory structures like JAGs and experiential learning programs. Such policy interventions will create an enabling environment for higher education institutions to balance academic rigour with societal needs and promote equitable community engagement.

Future Research

Future research should focus on longitudinal studies to track graduates' civic engagement, career trajectories, and long-term community impact resulting from participation in community-engaged curricula. Studies should also investigate the internal dynamics of JAGs, including power relations, decision-making processes, and

mechanisms for resolving conflicts between academic and community priorities. Moreover, research exploring the effectiveness of decolonial and locally grounded pedagogical approaches across diverse contexts can provide evidence for scaling and sustaining participatory curriculum models. Such investigations will deepen understanding of how universities can institutionalise socially relevant, transformative, and sustainable educational practices.

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