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Student-Centred Changemaker Portfolios: Evaluating TESCEA's Impact on Critical Thinking, Gender Awareness, and Employability

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*Changemaker Portfolios,
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Transformative Learning.*

This study explores the effectiveness of student-centred changemaker portfolios implemented through the Transforming Employability for Social Change in East Africa (TESCEA) initiative at Gulu University. Anchored in transformative learning and gender mainstreaming frameworks, these portfolios aim to enhance students' critical thinking, problem-solving, gender awareness, and employability in a post-conflict higher education context. Employing a qualitative-dominant approach complemented by quantitative surveys, the study examines students' reflective experiences, faculty perspectives, and portfolio content. Findings indicate that portfolios foster reflective practice, gender-sensitive problem-solving, and employability skills while promoting agency and social responsibility. Challenges, including inconsistent faculty support, limited resources, and variable institutional commitment, constrain the full potential of the initiative. The study concludes that with strategic institutional support and continuous professional development, changemaker portfolios can serve as transformative pedagogical tools that bridge academic learning with socio-economic and gender equity objectives in fragile contexts.

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INTRODUCTION

Higher education globally is shifting toward student-centred pedagogical approaches that cultivate critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving, aligning learning outcomes with the demands of the 21st-century labour market (UNESCO, 2022). The TESCEA project exemplifies this approach through changemaker portfolios, which require students to engage actively with real-world challenges while strengthening gender awareness and employability competencies.

Gulu University, located in Northern Uganda, operates in a post-conflict environment with unique challenges such as youth unemployment, gender disparities, and social fragmentation. Conventional lecture-based pedagogies often fail to nurture reflective, socially responsible graduates capable of addressing these challenges. Changemaker portfolios function not only as academic tools but also as mechanisms to foster student agency, critical consciousness, and the ability to contribute meaningfully to community reconstruction.

This study addressed the following research questions:

- How do TESCEA changemaker portfolios contribute to students' development of critical thinking, problem-solving, and gender awareness?
- In what ways do the portfolios influence employability skills and preparedness for the labour market?

- How do institutional and contextual factors support or constrain the implementation of changemaker portfolios at Gulu University?

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991), which conceptualises learning as a process of deep perspective transformation through critical reflection and meaning-making. Learning is often prompted by a "disorienting dilemma," challenging prior assumptions and prompting learners to reconsider their beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours (Mezirow, 2000; Cranton, 2006).

TESCEA's changemaker portfolios operationalise transformative learning by engaging students with societal and gender-related issues. Through structured reflection, dialogue, and experiential application, students critically examine entrenched norms, reconstruct their understanding of social realities, and develop actionable strategies for community engagement (Mezirow, 1997; Bamber & Hankin, 2011). This framework is particularly suited to post-conflict higher education, where cultivating critical consciousness, agency, and social responsibility is essential.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Transformative Learning in Post-Conflict Contexts

Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991) posits that learning involves deep shifts in perspective through critical reflection, often triggered by "disorienting dilemmas" that challenge prior assumptions (Mezirow, 2000; Cranton, 2006).

In post-conflict settings, education must go beyond rote learning to foster empowerment, critical thinking, and social agency. Transformative learning emphasises experiential engagement, dialogue, and reflection as central to perspective transformation, aligning with the needs of students in fragile contexts (Cranton & King, 2003; Taylor, 2017).

In African post-conflict universities, empirical studies examining transformative learning remain limited. Most literature originates from Western adult education contexts, leaving a gap in understanding how critical reflection operates within local cultural and socio-political realities. In particular, the influence of conflict, trauma, and societal fragmentation on students' capacity to engage in reflective learning remains underexplored.

Transformative learning in post-conflict contexts also requires social engagement. While the theory emphasises critical consciousness, few studies investigate whether reflection translates into tangible social action or community impact. Evidence is sparse on how transformative learning initiatives can empower students to address systemic inequalities or contribute to social reconstruction effectively.

Gender integration is another critical area with limited evidence. Although transformative learning encourages questioning assumptions, studies rarely examine how it intersects with gender awareness and mainstreaming in fragile educational contexts. There is insufficient understanding of the mechanisms by which students develop gender-sensitive problem-solving competencies.

Finally, faculty preparedness and institutional sustainability remain underexplored. Literature notes that transformative learning outcomes depend heavily on skilled facilitation and institutional support (Bamber & Hankin, 2011). However, there is little research on faculty capacity, institutional policies, and strategies that ensure long-term

implementation in resource-constrained post-conflict settings. These gaps justify the need to examine TESCEA's changemaker portfolios in Northern Uganda as a contextually grounded application of transformative learning.

Changemaker Portfolios as Pedagogical Tools

Changemaker portfolios are reflective, student-centred tools rooted in constructivist and experiential learning principles. They bridge theoretical knowledge with practical problem-solving and community engagement, fostering learner agency, critical reflection, and social responsibility (Jackson & Mazzei, 2020). Portfolios enable students to document learning journeys, integrate personal experiences, and critically analyse challenges while experimenting with solutions.

Empirical studies show that portfolios enhance student motivation, metacognition, and problem-solving skills (Smith & Lee, 2021; Adeyemi & Yusuf, 2022). They provide a structured medium for reflection, encouraging learners to examine assumptions, assess evidence, and consider multiple perspectives. These features align closely with the objectives of TESCEA in developing critical thinking, gender awareness, and employability.

Despite these benefits, gaps remain in standardisation and assessment. Existing studies indicate that learning outcomes and grading criteria vary widely, resulting in inconsistent implementation and student experience. There is limited guidance on aligning portfolio assessment with institutional objectives or labour market expectations, particularly in African universities where contextual relevance is critical.

Faculty support and structured feedback are also underexplored. While reflective portfolios require mentorship to guide students through critical thinking and problem-solving processes, empirical evidence on faculty engagement strategies, feedback mechanisms, and professional

development is scarce. This limits the potential of portfolios to achieve their transformative aims.

Finally, evidence on scalability and sustainability is limited. Research rarely addresses how portfolios can be embedded within institutional systems, scaled across cohorts, or adapted to resource-constrained post-conflict environments. Moreover, few studies examine the long-term impact of portfolio engagement on employability and social transformation, highlighting a significant knowledge gap that this study addresses.

Critical Thinking, Gender Awareness, and Employability

Reflective portfolios promote critical thinking by enabling students to question assumptions, analyse evidence, and explore alternative solutions (Brown et al., 2021; Nguyen, 2023). By documenting problem-solving processes and self-reflection, students develop higher-order cognitive skills, adaptability, and metacognitive awareness. In post-conflict contexts, these competencies are vital for addressing complex societal challenges.

Portfolios also facilitate gender awareness by encouraging learners to reflect on social norms, power relations, and inequalities (Johnson & Clarke, 2022; Mbabazi, 2023). Students critically examine gender dynamics within community and organisational contexts, challenging stereotypes and proposing inclusive solutions. However, there is limited research on students' ability to translate gender awareness into practical interventions, leaving a gap in understanding applied outcomes of gender-sensitive reflective learning.

Employability skills represent another domain influenced by portfolios. Evidence suggests that portfolios develop communication, teamwork, leadership, ethical reasoning, and problem-solving skills, linking academic experiences to labour market needs (Tomlinson, 2020; Mwangi & Kamau, 2021). Yet, gaps exist in evaluating how portfolio-based learning translates into measurable

employability outcomes and workplace readiness, particularly in fragile post-conflict settings.

Additionally, longitudinal studies tracking skill retention and application post-graduation are scarce. Most research focuses on immediate learning outcomes, neglecting the long-term sustainability of critical thinking, gender awareness, and employability skills. This gap limits the understanding of portfolios' enduring impact on students' professional and social trajectories.

Finally, culturally sensitive assessment remains underdeveloped. Literature rarely explores how local norms, societal expectations, and post-conflict realities influence students' engagement with reflective practices. Addressing these contextual factors is crucial for optimising the effectiveness of portfolio-based pedagogy in African higher education settings.

Implementation Challenges and Institutional Factors

Successful portfolio adoption requires institutional readiness, policy alignment, faculty training, infrastructure, and monitoring systems (Evans & Graham, 2022; Njoroge & Otieno, 2023). In post-conflict universities, resource constraints, technological limitations, and uneven faculty engagement pose significant barriers to consistent implementation.

Faculty capacity is a critical determinant of portfolio success. Studies emphasise the importance of mentoring, professional development, and pedagogical support for guiding students through reflective processes. Yet, empirical evidence on sustainable faculty engagement strategies in African post-conflict contexts is limited, leaving an implementation gap.

Digital and infrastructural limitations further hinder portfolio utilisation. Access to technology, online platforms, and materials is often uneven, resulting in unequal learning experiences. Literature rarely

provides practical solutions for overcoming these resource challenges in fragile contexts.

Policy integration and institutionalisation remain weakly explored. Even where portfolios are promoted, there is limited evidence on embedding them systematically into curricula, assessment frameworks, and institutional strategies to ensure long-term adoption. This gap reduces the potential of portfolios to become mainstream pedagogical tools.

Finally, sustainability and scalability are significant challenges. Few studies investigate mechanisms for maintaining portfolio quality, monitoring impact, or expanding use across departments and cohorts. There is a pressing need for research that identifies best practices for sustaining reflective pedagogy in post-conflict African universities, which this study seeks to address.

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach

This study employed a qualitative research approach to explore the experiences of students and faculty regarding TESCEA changemaker portfolios at Gulu University. A qualitative approach was selected because the study aimed to capture the depth, complexity, and meaning-making processes inherent in reflective learning, critical thinking, gender awareness, and employability in a post-conflict higher education setting (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Unlike quantitative approaches, which prioritise measurement and generalisation, qualitative research is particularly suited to examining how individuals interpret, construct, and negotiate knowledge within their socio-cultural and institutional contexts (Patton, 2015). In this study, the approach enabled the researchers to understand not only the skills and competencies developed through portfolios but also the subjective experiences, challenges, and perceptions of both students and faculty as they engaged with this pedagogical tool.

Research Design

A descriptive qualitative design was adopted, focusing on the thematic exploration of student portfolios and faculty interviews. This design allowed the study to document, interpret, and analyse participants' experiences and reflections in relation to critical thinking, gender sensitivity, and employability skills. Descriptive qualitative research is particularly effective in contexts where phenomena are complex, context-dependent, and poorly understood, such as post-conflict higher education environments (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). In this study, the design provided a structured yet flexible framework to capture nuanced insights regarding how portfolios function as transformative learning tools while accommodating the diversity of students' experiences and faculty perspectives.

Participants and Sampling

The population included approximately 2,500 undergraduate students and 15 faculty members involved in TESCEA changemaker portfolios. Using purposive sampling, 40 student portfolios were selected based on completeness, reflective depth, and demonstrated engagement with critical learning outcomes. Additionally, five faculty members who directly supervised or assessed the portfolios were selected for semi-structured interviews. Purposive sampling was chosen because it allows researchers to focus on information-rich cases that can provide deep insights into the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2015). This sampling strategy ensured that the study captured participants who had substantive experience with portfolios, thereby enabling the exploration of meaningful patterns and themes related to transformative learning, gender awareness, and employability development.

Data Collection Techniques

Data collection relied on multiple qualitative methods to capture the richness and complexity of participants' experiences. The primary data source was student changemaker portfolios, which

provided reflective narratives documenting learning processes, critical thinking, problem-solving, and application of academic knowledge in real-world contexts. Portfolios were analysed for emergent themes using thematic content analysis, enabling the researchers to trace patterns of thought, evidence-based reasoning, and gender-sensitive reflections (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Faculty interviews complemented the portfolio analysis. Semi-structured interviews allowed faculty members to discuss their perceptions of portfolio effectiveness, challenges in implementation, and institutional support structures. The semi-structured format provided a balance between consistency in questioning and flexibility to probe deeper insights, facilitating rich narrative data that captured both intended and unintended outcomes of portfolio implementation (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis framework, which involved: familiarisation with the data through repeated readings, generation of initial codes reflecting key learning outcomes, identification and review of themes, and the development of coherent narrative accounts. This approach ensured systematic yet flexible analysis, allowing patterns to emerge from participants' reflections while maintaining analytic rigour. Iterative coding was employed to compare themes across portfolios and faculty interviews, enhancing credibility and depth by validating findings across multiple sources. Themes were then interpreted in relation to the study's theoretical framework, linking observed learning processes to transformative learning principles and gender mainstreaming objectives.

Trustworthiness and Quality Control

To ensure trustworthiness, the study employed multiple strategies aligned with qualitative research standards. Triangulation across portfolios and faculty interviews enhanced validity by confirming

patterns across different data sources (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checking was conducted, allowing participants to review preliminary interpretations and confirm that findings accurately represented their experiences. Audit trails documented the coding process, theme development, and analytic decisions, providing transparency and enabling replication in similar contexts. Peer debriefing further strengthened credibility by engaging colleagues familiar with qualitative research and post-conflict higher education to review interpretations and challenge potential biases. Collectively, these strategies ensured that findings reflected authentic, contextually grounded, and reliable insights.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical rigour was central to this study. Approval was obtained from the Gulu University Research Ethics Committee, ensuring compliance with institutional and national research regulations. Participants provided informed consent and were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation. Data were coded to remove identifiers, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw without penalty. Ethical considerations extended beyond compliance, emphasising respect for participants' autonomy, protection of vulnerable populations, and sensitivity to the post-conflict context (Israel, 2015).

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Enhancement of Critical Thinking

Analysis of student portfolios revealed substantial development in reflective and analytical thinking. Students demonstrated the ability to engage in evidence-based reasoning, consider multiple perspectives, and critically evaluate their assumptions. For instance, one faculty member noted:

“Students are now thinking beyond rote responses. They analyse problems from different angles and propose evidence-informed solutions.”

The portfolios acted as a mechanism for transformative learning, fostering metacognitive skills and cognitive flexibility. Reflection within portfolios encouraged students to identify gaps in their understanding, question assumptions, and generate alternative solutions, key elements of critical thinking (Mezirow, 1991; Brown et al., 2021). This suggests that TESCEA portfolios facilitate deeper cognitive engagement than traditional lecture-based approaches.

Development of Gender Awareness

Over 65% of the analysed portfolios explicitly engaged with gender norms and inequalities. Survey responses indicated that 70% of students perceived heightened awareness of gender issues. A student reflected:

“Through the portfolio, I learned to consider how gender shapes community problems and solutions.”

However, only 50% reported feeling confident in applying these insights in practical contexts.

While portfolios were effective in cultivating critical consciousness regarding gender norms, there is a clear gap in translating awareness into actionable strategies. This highlights the importance of structured pedagogical scaffolding and guidance to support the application of gender-sensitive insights in real-world problem-solving (Mbabazi, 2023; Johnson & Clarke, 2022).

Contribution to Employability

Portfolio entries demonstrated growth in communication, teamwork, adaptability, and self-reflection. Students applied their academic knowledge to community-based initiatives, displaying leadership and accountability. Faculty observations underscored the practical impact:

“Portfolios are producing graduates who can navigate complex real-world problems responsibly.”

However, students identified limited structured feedback as a barrier to fully developing employability-related competencies.

TESCEA portfolios serve as a bridge between academic learning and labour market skills, particularly in the development of soft skills and applied problem-solving. The reflective nature of the portfolios promotes self-assessment, adaptability, and professional readiness. Yet, the absence of systematic feedback mechanisms reduces the potential for skill consolidation and mastery (Tomlinson, 2020; Mwangi & Kamau, 2021).

Implementation Challenges

Key barriers identified included unclear portfolio guidelines, inconsistent supervision, limited faculty training, and resource constraints. Students reported variable engagement and depth of reflection due to ambiguities in expectations.

Implementation challenges underscore the critical role of institutional and faculty support in the successful adoption of student-centred tools. Without clear guidance and consistent mentorship, student engagement and portfolio quality are compromised, limiting the pedagogical impact (Evans & Graham, 2022; Njoroge & Otieno, 2023).

Institutional Support and Sustainability

Faculty perceptions of institutional support were mixed. Some acknowledged policy endorsement of portfolio initiatives, whereas others highlighted insufficient resources, limited coordination, and inadequate professional development opportunities.

Sustainable adoption of portfolios requires robust institutional frameworks, including resource allocation, continuous professional development, and strategic monitoring. The current gaps point to the need for systemic support to institutionalise reflective, transformative pedagogies in post-conflict higher education (Evans & Graham, 2022).

Overall Impact on Learning and Social Transformation

TESCEA changemaker portfolios fostered reflective practice, student agency, gender-sensitive problem-solving, and social responsibility. Students reported increased community awareness and a sense of empowerment, indicating the transformative potential of portfolios in cultivating socially engaged, critically conscious graduates.

By integrating academic learning with real-world and community challenges, the portfolios act as a transformative pedagogical tool, promoting not only individual cognitive and professional development but also societal impact in post-conflict contexts (Taylor & Cranton, 2012; King et al., 2005).

DISCUSSIONS

This study examined the impact of TESCEA's student-centred changemaker portfolios on critical thinking, gender awareness, employability, and social transformation at Gulu University, a post-conflict higher education setting. The discussion critically examines each finding in relation to prior scholarship, highlighting both the potential and limitations of portfolios as transformative pedagogical tools.

Enhancement of Critical Thinking

The findings indicate that students demonstrated improved reflective and analytical skills, evidenced by portfolio narratives showing consideration of multiple perspectives, evidence-based reasoning, and critical self-reflection. Faculty confirmed that students moved beyond rote learning to engage in analytical problem-solving, echoing the transformative learning principle that reflection on real-world dilemmas enhances cognitive development (Mezirow, 1991; Cranton, 2006).

These results corroborate prior research suggesting that portfolios effectively enhance higher-order thinking skills by creating structured opportunities for students to engage critically with complex

problems (Brown et al., 2021; Nguyen, 2023). In post-conflict Northern Uganda, where traditional lecture-based pedagogy dominates, this approach provides an essential mechanism for cultivating analytical capabilities necessary for community rebuilding (Kawesa & Mukasa, 2022).

Moreover, portfolio-based learning appeared to foster metacognitive skills, as students explicitly reflected on their reasoning processes and assumptions. This aligns with Fleming (2017), who asserts that reflection enables learners to self-monitor and adjust thinking strategies, strengthening problem-solving capabilities. Faculty observations also highlighted the emergence of peer learning and collaborative reflection within portfolio activities, suggesting that critical thinking development extended beyond individual cognition to include social negotiation of ideas—a factor noted as critical in transformative education (King et al., 2005).

However, reliance on self-reported data underscores the need for caution, as students may overestimate their analytical growth. Nevertheless, triangulation with portfolio evidence and faculty perspectives provides stronger validation of these outcomes. This suggests that portfolios are particularly effective in post-conflict settings where formal assessment methods may fail to capture complex cognitive and reflective processes.

While Brown et al. (2021) consistently found gains in critical thinking through portfolios, Fleming (2017) highlights that benefits are context-dependent and require scaffolding. The present study contributes by showing that structured, contextually relevant portfolio tasks can indeed produce meaningful critical thinking outcomes when faculty guidance and reflective prompts are incorporated.

Development of Gender Awareness

Over 65% of portfolios demonstrated engagement with gender norms and inequalities, with 70% of students reporting increased awareness of gender

issues. Faculty noted that students critically interrogated societal norms and challenged stereotypes. Despite this, only 50% of students felt equipped to implement gender-sensitive solutions practically, revealing a gap between awareness and application.

This finding aligns with previous studies emphasising the complexity of translating gender awareness into actionable skills in higher education (Mbabazi, 2023; Johnson & Clarke, 2022). Portfolios functioned as reflective spaces, prompting students to critically evaluate their assumptions about gender and consider the implications for community engagement. This resonates with Taylor's (2017) assertion that reflection on social inequities constitutes a core element of transformative learning in post-conflict contexts.

Importantly, the study also revealed that when portfolios were scaffolded with guidance from faculty, students demonstrated more nuanced understanding of systemic inequalities, indicating that pedagogy plays a critical role in facilitating gender-sensitive learning. These observations mirror Wanyama and Njeru (2022), who argue that reflective learning can foster critical consciousness, but without structured interventions, learners may struggle to translate insights into practice.

The emergent theme of critical consciousness suggests that students are beginning to internalise gender-sensitive thinking, which has implications for community-based problem-solving and social cohesion. While some scholars argue that reflective tools alone are insufficient to effect social change (Mbabazi, 2023), this study suggests that portfolios, when combined with mentorship and guided reflection, can bridge the gap between awareness and action.

While Johnson & Clarke (2022) emphasise curriculum integration for sustainable gender mainstreaming, this study shows that reflective portfolios can complement formal curricula by

fostering individualised, socially situated engagement with gender issues. The partial readiness to act on gender insights highlights the need for practical components in portfolio design, a gap noted in African higher education contexts.

Contribution to Employability

Students reported that portfolios enhanced employability-related competencies, including communication, teamwork, adaptability, leadership, and self-reflection. Portfolios allowed students to apply knowledge to community projects, thereby linking academic learning to socially relevant problem-solving. Faculty corroborated that portfolios developed graduates capable of navigating complex professional and societal contexts.

These results are consistent with Tomlinson (2020) and Mwangi & Kamau (2021), who highlight the role of reflective and experiential pedagogies in aligning graduate skills with labour market demands. The portfolios provided a platform for students to demonstrate soft skills alongside academic knowledge, which is essential in contexts where employers increasingly value adaptability and problem-solving over technical expertise alone.

However, the absence of structured feedback emerged as a significant limitation. Literature suggests that formative feedback is critical for refining competencies, reinforcing learning, and ensuring that reflective practice translates into employable skills (Smith & Lee, 2021; Evans & Graham, 2022). Without such feedback, students may not fully recognise their strengths or areas for improvement, potentially constraining skill transfer to professional contexts.

Furthermore, portfolio engagement appeared to cultivate ethical reasoning and accountability, as students reflected on the social implications of their interventions. This supports Fleming (2017), who argues that reflective tools enhance both cognitive and affective dimensions of employability,

producing graduates who are socially conscious and workplace-ready.

While Brown et al. (2021) posit that portfolios inherently enhance employability, this study emphasises that contextual factors, such as mentorship, structured feedback, and real-world project opportunities, are crucial determinants of effectiveness. Portfolios are thus necessary but not sufficient without enabling institutional and pedagogical support.

Implementation Challenges

Students and faculty reported that unclear portfolio guidelines, inconsistent supervision, limited faculty capacity, and resource constraints affected portfolio quality and engagement. These barriers are consistent with global research on portfolio adoption, which underscores the importance of clear expectations, professional development, and infrastructural support (Njoroge & Otieno, 2023; Smith & Lee, 2021).

In post-conflict settings, additional challenges such as digital access limitations, faculty workload, and fragile institutional systems exacerbate implementation difficulties. The variability in student engagement reflects the influence of these contextual factors on the depth and quality of reflective learning.

Additionally, faculty interviews revealed that inconsistent supervision undermined both student motivation and the pedagogical integrity of the portfolios. Evans & Graham (2022) emphasise that institutional readiness, including faculty training and monitoring systems, is critical for sustaining reflective practices. Without such support, the potential for portfolios to foster deep learning and social transformation is constrained.

The literature suggests a tension between portfolio potential and implementation realities. While Jackson & Mazzei (2020) argue for the transformative capacity of portfolios, this study demonstrates that systemic barriers, particularly in

resource-limited, post-conflict universities, can hinder consistent outcomes. Contextualised strategies are therefore essential for effective adoption.

Institutional Support and Sustainability

Faculty perceptions of institutional support were mixed. Some acknowledged policy-level endorsement, while others cited insufficient resources, poor coordination, and limited professional development. These findings align with prior studies emphasising the necessity of institutional commitment for the sustainability of innovative pedagogical approaches (Evans & Graham, 2022).

In fragile post-conflict universities, structural weaknesses, such as limited funding and a lack of dedicated coordination, may jeopardise the longevity of portfolios. Strengthening institutional support, including faculty training, resource allocation, and monitoring mechanisms, is thus essential to embed portfolios as central tools for transformative learning.

Furthermore, evidence from faculty interviews indicated that policy endorsement alone is insufficient. Practical investments, such as dedicated portfolio coordinators, digital infrastructure, and ongoing professional development, are critical enablers. This aligns with King et al. (2005), who argue that institutional fragility must be addressed for pedagogical innovations to achieve their transformative potential.

While some literature suggests portfolios can be self-sustaining (Smith & Lee, 2021), the findings of this study reinforce the view that institutional structures, resourcing, and faculty capacity are indispensable in post-conflict contexts. Sustainability is not merely a function of pedagogical design but of systemic support.

Overall Impact on Learning and Social Transformation

TESCEA portfolios fostered reflective practice, agency, gender-sensitive problem-solving, and social responsibility. Students reported heightened awareness of community challenges and a sense of empowerment, reflecting the transformative potential of portfolios in post-conflict higher education.

This aligns with Taylor & Cranton (2012), who highlight that transformative learning integrates cognitive, affective, and social dimensions, producing individuals capable of contributing meaningfully to society. Portfolios acted as both reflective and action-oriented tools, linking academic knowledge to social engagement and ethical responsibility.

Notably, the study illustrates that portfolios can cultivate socially conscious graduates who navigate real-world challenges with awareness of structural inequalities, a critical outcome in post-conflict contexts. This extends existing portfolio literature, which often emphasises cognitive or skill development, by demonstrating that portfolios can also enhance social agency and transformative capacity.

While much of the literature treats portfolios as assessment tools (Brown et al., 2021; Nguyen, 2023), this study emphasises their broader social and transformative function. Portfolios can serve as mechanisms for nurturing socially responsible, reflective, and adaptable graduates, particularly in contexts characterised by systemic inequities and post-conflict recovery needs.

Integrative Interpretation

TESCEA changemaker portfolios operate at the intersection of cognitive, social, and ethical dimensions of learning. While their pedagogical design aligns with transformative learning principles, their effectiveness is mediated by institutional support, faculty capacity, and structural

resources. The study contributes to scholarly debate by demonstrating that portfolios are most effective when combined with guided reflection, mentorship, and actionable opportunities for students to apply learning in socially relevant contexts.

Overall, the findings confirm that student-centred portfolios are not merely assessment tools but holistic pedagogical interventions that foster critical thinking, gender awareness, employability, and social engagement, particularly in post-conflict higher education settings.

Contributions of the Study

Contribution to Theory

This study extends Transformative Learning Theory by demonstrating its practical application in a post-conflict African higher education context, showing that structured changemaker portfolios not only facilitate reflection and critical thinking but also integrate gender awareness and community engagement. By linking perspective transformation to social responsibility, employability, and gender-sensitive problem-solving, the research broadens the theoretical framework to include ethical and societal dimensions, highlighting how transformative learning can be operationalised in fragile contexts to foster agency and socially engaged graduates.

Contribution to Existing Body of Knowledge

The study contributes empirical evidence on the effectiveness of changemaker portfolios in promoting reflective learning, critical thinking, gender awareness, and employability in a post-conflict university, addressing a gap in the literature on student-centred pedagogies in fragile contexts. It also highlights the challenges of translating gender awareness into practical action, documents institutional and resource-related barriers, and demonstrates how portfolios can cultivate socially responsible, community-oriented graduates, thereby enriching research on pedagogical innovation, employability, and social transformation.

CONCLUSIONS

Enhancement of Critical Thinking

The study concludes that TESCEA changemaker portfolios significantly improve students' critical thinking and reflective skills. Portfolio narratives demonstrated evidence-based reasoning, consideration of multiple perspectives, and critical self-reflection. Faculty observations confirmed that students are moving beyond rote learning, engaging analytically with complex problems, and proposing informed solutions. This indicates that portfolios are effective tools for fostering higher-order cognitive skills in post-conflict higher education contexts.

Development of Gender Awareness

Portfolios successfully promoted gender awareness among students. Over 65% of portfolios reflected engagement with gender norms and inequalities, and 70% of students reported heightened awareness of gender dynamics. Students demonstrated the ability to critically analyse stereotypes and consider inclusive solutions. However, only half felt prepared to implement gender-sensitive strategies in real-world contexts, highlighting the need for pedagogical scaffolding to translate theoretical understanding into practical application.

Contribution to Employability Skills

TESCEA portfolios contributed meaningfully to employability by enhancing communication, teamwork, adaptability, leadership, and self-reflection. Students applied academic knowledge to community initiatives, demonstrating problem-solving, accountability, and social responsibility. Faculty highlighted that portfolios prepare graduates to navigate complex workplace challenges responsibly. The lack of structured feedback was noted as a limiting factor, suggesting that ongoing mentorship and assessment could further strengthen employability outcomes.

Implementation Challenges

The study concludes that implementation challenges unclear guidelines, inconsistent supervision, limited faculty training, and resource constraints, affect the depth and quality of student engagement. These barriers underscore the importance of consistent faculty support, clear instructions, and adequate resources for effective portfolio adoption.

Institutional Support and Sustainability

Institutional support for the portfolio initiative was found to be inconsistent. While some faculty acknowledged policy endorsement, others reported insufficient resources, limited coordination, and inadequate professional development. The study concludes that strengthening institutional frameworks, allocating resources strategically, and promoting continuous faculty development are critical for the sustainable implementation of changemaker portfolios.

Overall Impact on Learning and Social Transformation

TESCEA portfolios foster reflective practice, student agency, gender-sensitive problem-solving, and social responsibility. Students reported increased awareness of community challenges and a sense of empowerment. The study concludes that changemaker portfolios have transformative potential, equipping graduates to contribute meaningfully to societal reconstruction, gender equity, and community development in post-conflict contexts.

Recommendations

Policy Makers

Policymakers are encouraged to strengthen institutional support for changemaker portfolios by embedding them as a core component of higher education curricula. Such integration ensures sustainability and alignment with national educational priorities while reinforcing transformative learning principles. Adequate

allocation of resources, including funding for faculty training, digital infrastructure, and portfolio implementation, is crucial to reducing disparities in access and quality across institutions. Furthermore, policymakers should actively promote gender mainstreaming in higher education policy frameworks to ensure that students are not only aware of gender dynamics but are also equipped to apply principles of gender equity effectively in both community and professional settings.

Policy Implementers

University leaders and faculty should prioritise continuous professional development to enhance capacity for supervising changemaker portfolios. Faculty training should focus on reflective pedagogy, formative feedback, and mentoring strategies that support students' development of critical thinking, employability skills, and social responsibility. The establishment of structured feedback mechanisms and clear, standardised portfolio guidelines—including expectations, assessment criteria, and submission protocols—can improve consistency, quality, and student engagement. Additionally, implementers should create opportunities for students to apply gender-sensitive and socially responsible solutions in real-world community projects, thereby bridging the gap between theory and practice and reinforcing the transformative potential of the portfolios.

Future Researchers

Future research should adopt longitudinal designs to examine the enduring impact of changemaker portfolios on students' critical thinking, employability, and social transformation outcomes. The development of culturally and contextually relevant assessment tools is necessary to measure these competencies more objectively and comprehensively. Investigating effective faculty implementation strategies, including supervision, feedback, and mentoring models, can provide insights into optimising portfolio adoption and learning outcomes. Comparative studies across

different post-conflict or resource-constrained higher education settings could illuminate best practices, scalability, and adaptability of the portfolio model, thereby contributing to a broader evidence base on student-centred, transformative pedagogies.

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