

Academic Staff Research Orientations at Makerere University

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Abstract

Governments, development partners, and other research users expect research-led universities and their disparate academic disciplines to produce scientific knowledge that is demonstrably varied in orientation so as to meet their knowledge demands. A balanced approach to knowledge production unlocks the potential for the university to produce relevant knowledge that would satisfy all the research markets, support evidence-based decision-making and effectively contribute to the country's socio-economic development. Against this backdrop, I investigated the existing academic staff research orientations, the existing disciplinary cultures and the influence of these cultures on the research orientations of academic staff at Makerere University. I was inspired by concerns raised in reports and studies that academic research across disciplinary fields seems to be more discipline centered and more understood in terms of journal articles and publications that are geared towards promotion. To carry out this study, I utilized the Hakala-Ylijoki's framework as the analytical lens and the institutional theory as an interpretive framework. I adopted a qualitative, intrinsic case study design that was rooted in social constructivism philosophy and guided by an interpretivist paradigm. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews with twelve lead researchers and two institutional-level senior research managers that were purposively selected. I then triangulated data sources with documents checks. The thematic analysis method was used to analyse data. Over all, findings show that in spite of the production of knowledge that has application to policymakers, civil society, the ordinary people, and, the corporate sector, academic research is more understood in terms of the basic research orientation across disciplinary fields because the emphasis is more on publishing in top-ranked journals. Similarly, knowledge production takes place in a highly institutionalized environment which has popularised the donor-driven research orientation. It was also revealed that the cultures of interdisciplinarity, building collaborations and partnerships, engaging in applied research, and producing knowledge at the very basic level exist and do inform academic research orientations at Makerere University. In view of the challenges posed by the dominant research orientations, the study makes recommendations for: rethinking the University promotional assessment model so that when academics are being assessed for promotion, they should be assessed on a broader criterion that should include number of publications and contribution to policy and the community; diversifying research funding sources: and collaborating with genuine international development partners to ensure that local research interests are not overridden by those of development partners.

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