

Communication as a Strategic Pivot in Managing Higher Education Institutions in Uganda: A Scoping Review

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Communication is increasingly recognised as a crucial lever for organisational effectiveness and leadership in higher education institutions (HEIs). In Uganda, public and private universities face persistent challenges, including low organisational effectiveness, weak ICT capacity, governance problems, and stakeholder dissatisfaction, many of which are closely tied to communication practices. The purpose of this scoping review was to synthesise peer-reviewed evidence on how communication underpins the modern management of HEIs in Uganda, focusing on organisational effectiveness, leadership, ICT use, organisational culture, and stakeholder engagement. **Methods:** A scoping review with narrative synthesis was conducted, drawing on empirical and conceptual studies of Ugandan HEIs and selected international comparative works. Studies were screened for relevance to organisational communication, leadership styles, digital communication, organisational culture, and stakeholder engagement in higher education management. **Results:** The review identified four main domains: (1) communication and organisational effectiveness; (2) leadership styles and organisational communication; (3) digital communication and ICT-enabled management; and (4) communication, organisational culture, and stakeholder engagement. **Conclusion:** Across these domains, effective communication structures, flows, and climates are consistently associated with higher organisational effectiveness, enhanced educational quality, and improved staff and student experiences, while opaque or centralised communication is linked to governance crises and low commitment. Rapid ICT expansion has created new communication channels but is constrained by limited infrastructure and digital skills. Communication emerges as a vital managerial pivot in Ugandan HEIs, mediating the influence of leadership, technology, and organisational culture on institutional performance. **Recommendations:** The review recommends that HEIs adopt explicit institution-wide communication strategies, invest in robust digital systems and capacity-building, and embed participatory, dialogic communication in governance, decision-making, and quality-assurance processes. **Future research** should prioritise context-specific empirical studies, longitudinal analyses of communication reforms, and mixed-method comparative investigations across public and private universities to inform evidence-based communication policies and interventions.

Keywords: Communication; Organisational effectiveness; Leadership styles; Higher Education Institutions; Digital communication.

BACKGROUND

Ugandan higher education institutions operate in an increasingly complex environment characterised by massification, resource constraints, and demands for accountability, quality, and international competitiveness

(Turyahikayo & Mugizi, 2025; Lubaale, 2020; Mikando et al., 2025; Kasule, 2025; Turyahikayo et al., 2023). Organisational effectiveness in this context includes productivity, adaptability, flexibility, quality of teaching and learning, research output, and community engagement (Turyahikayo & Mugizi, 2025; Turyahikayo et al., 2023). Multiple studies highlight that public universities in Uganda perform poorly in global rankings, have low research productivity, and face governance and leadership crises (Turyahikayo & Mugizi, 2025; Mikando et al., 2025; Kasule, 2025; Turyahikayo et al., 2023).

Communication has become a vital aspect of these challenges. Poor internal communication, weak stakeholder engagement, slow information flows, and limited use of ICT are frequently highlighted in studies of Ugandan universities (Turyahikayo et al., 2024; Lubaale, 2020; Kasule, 2025; Michael, 2019; Turyahikayo et al., 2023). Simultaneously, international literature describes HEIs as complex, networked organisations where communication systems and interfaces facilitate relationships among diverse actors and influence organisational change, culture, and performance (Mgweba et al., 2025; Machidon, 2024; Flores, 2025; Frølich et al., 2025).

Given recent empirical work on organisational communication and leadership in Ugandan public universities (Turyahikayo & Mugizi, 2025; Turyahikayo et al., 2024; Mikando et al., 2025; Kasule, 2025; Turyahikayo et al., 2023) and increasing attention to ICT-enabled management (Lubaale, 2020; Michael, 2019; Uzorka & Kalabuki, 2024), a scoping review can clarify how communication serves as a key factor in the modern management of Ugandan HEIs and identify gaps for future research and policy.

Objectives

The scoping review aimed to:

Map empirical and conceptual literature on communication and management in HEIs in Uganda.

Identify how communication is conceptualised (e.g., structure, flow, climate, ICT-mediated, stakeholder communication) and linked to organisational outcomes.

Examine how leadership styles, ICT adoption and organisational culture interact with communication in Ugandan HEIs.

Highlight research gaps and implications for policy and practice.

METHODS

Study Selection and Screening Procedures

The eligibility criteria and selection methods in the protocol are outlined in both narrative and flowchart formats (e.g., PRISMA-ScR diagram) (Peters et al., 2020; Tricco et al., 2016; Khalil et al., 2016; Gutierrez-Bucheli et al., 2022; Tricco et al., 2018; Pham et al., 2014).

The report covers: databases and other sources searched, with dates and key terms (Peters et al., 2020; Peters et al., 2022; Pollock et al., 2021; Tricco et al., 2018; Hayman & Smith, 2023). Number of records at each stage (identified, screened by title/abstract, full-text assessed, included), with reasons for exclusion at full text (Peters et al., 2020; Tricco et al., 2016; Pollock et al., 2021; Gutierrez-Bucheli et al., 2022; Pham et al., 2014; Hayman & Smith, 2023). Use of two independent reviewers for screening and how disagreements were resolved (Peters et al., 2020; Tricco et al., 2016; Pollock et al., 2021; Khalil et al., 2016; Gutierrez-Bucheli et al., 2022; Hayman & Smith, 2023).

Search strategy and sources

Peer-reviewed articles and book chapters focusing on Ugandan HEIs and addressing organisational communication, leadership communication linkages, ICT-mediated management, or related constructs were identified through academic databases and targeted searches. Key terms included combinations of

“organisational communication,” “leadership styles,” “ICT,” “management,” “organisational effectiveness,” “university,” “higher education,” and “Uganda.” To contextualise Ugandan findings, selected international papers on communication in HEI management and digital communication in leadership were also included (Mgweba et al., 2025; Obid, 2024; Machidon, 2024; Flores, 2025; Kaznacheieva, 2025; Frølich et al., 2025).

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The included documents met the following criteria: Focus on higher education institutions in Uganda or provide directly relevant comparative theoretical insights. Address communication explicitly (e.g., organisational communication, ICT-mediated communication, communication in leadership or management, communication management, communication and organisational culture). Empirical, review, or conceptual works in English published from approximately 2010 onwards. Studies that primarily examined student learning communication (e.g., classroom interaction) without a management or organisational perspective were excluded.

Data extraction and synthesis

From each included item, information was extracted regarding: study context and design; conceptualisation of communication; managerial or organisational domains examined; key findings; and implications. A narrative synthesis organised findings into four themes: (1) communication and organisational effectiveness; (2) leadership and communication; (3) ICT and digital communication in management; and (4) communication, culture, and stakeholder engagement.

To strengthen a scoping review on communication in managing higher education institutions, current methodological guidance emphasizes clear reporting of study selection and structured presentation of results (Peters et al., 2020; Tricco et al., 2016; Peters et al., 2021; Pollock et al., 2021; Tricco et al., 2018). This improves transparency, reproducibility, and usability of the review for decision-makers (Peters et al., 2020; Peters et al., 2022; Peters et al., 2021; Munn et al., 2022).

Table 1: Showing Key reporting elements for scoping review study selection

Step	What to Report Briefly	Citations
Identification	Databases, grey literature, dates, and a searcher	(Peters et al., 2020; Peters et al., 2022; Pollock et al., 2021; Tricco et al., 2018; Hayman & Smith, 2023)
Screening	Title/abstract and full-text numbers, reviewers	(Peters et al., 2020; Tricco et al., 2016; Pollock et al., 2021; Gutiérrez-Bucheli et al., 2022; Pham et al., 2014)
Eligibility/exclusion	Main reasons for exclusion at full text	(Peters et al., 2020; Tricco et al., 2016; Gutierrez-Bucheli et al., 2022; Hayman & Smith, 2023)
Included studies	Final number and types of evidence	(Peters et al., 2020; Tricco et al., 2016; Peters et al., 2021; Munn et al., 2022)

RESULTS & FINDINGS

Communication and organisational effectiveness

Recent quantitative research on Ugandan public universities provides direct evidence that communication significantly influences organisational effectiveness. A correlational study of 231 managers across four public universities found high levels of communication but only moderate organisational effectiveness; structural

equation modelling indicated that communication structure, flow, and climate have significant positive effects on indicators such as productivity, adaptability, and flexibility (Turyahikayo & Mugizi, 2025). A clear communication structure, smooth information flow, and a supportive communication climate were emphasised as essential priorities for management (Turyahikayo & Mugizi, 2025).

Complementary studies on leadership styles and organisational effectiveness also implicitly highlight the role of communication. Transformational and transactional leadership styles in public universities are associated with higher organisational effectiveness, whereas laissez-faire leadership has no significant impact (Turyahikayo et al., 2023). These leadership styles are characterised by more active, feedback-rich, and performance-oriented communication, indicating that communication practices are one pathway through which leadership influences effectiveness (Turyahikayo et al., 2024; Mwesigwa et al., 2020; Turyahikayo et al., 2023).

Beyond Uganda, research shows that sustained, high-quality communication and organisational culture together underpin staff cooperation, trust and organisational commitment in HEIs (Syakur et al., 2020). These findings collectively support the view that communication is not merely an operational tool but a core determinant of organisational capacity in higher education.

Leadership styles and organisational communication

The relationship between leadership styles and organisational communication in Ugandan universities has been thoroughly analysed. A study across four public universities revealed that both transformational and transactional leadership styles had positive, significant effects on organisational communication, whereas a passive-avoidant (laissez-faire) style did not (Turyahikayo et al., 2024). Although universities had invested in ICT platforms and communication officers, organisational communication remained relatively limited, hindered by leadership issues, including the absence of a shared vision, undemocratic governance, and maladministration (Turyahikayo et al., 2024; Kasule, 2025; Turyahikayo et al., 2023).

These findings align with broader research on adaptive and participatory leadership in Ugandan higher education institutions (HEIs). A systematic literature review on adaptive leadership found that such leadership is generally lacking in public universities, which contributes to ongoing organisational problems; effective adaptive leadership requires clear communication channels, collaboration across units, and responsive decision-making structures (Kasule, 2025). Narrative research on participatory leadership indicates that more inclusive, dialogue-based practices improve staff ownership, engagement, and productivity, thereby enhancing research, innovation, and student participation in learning activities (Mikando et al., 2025).

International literature similarly argues that modern higher education leadership increasingly relies on sophisticated communication, especially through digital channels, to maintain transparency, inclusivity, and networked forms of leadership (Obid, 2024; Machidon, 2024; Frølich et al., 2025). The Ugandan evidence indicates that when leadership styles are transformational, transactional, and participatory, they promote stronger organisational communication; conversely, authoritarian or passive leadership hampers communication, participation, and institutional performance (Turyahikayo et al., 2024; Mikando et al., 2025; Kasule, 2025; Turyahikayo et al., 2023).

Digital communication and ICT-enabled management

ICT has transformed communication possibilities in Ugandan HEIs, but its implementation remains uneven. A mixed-methods case study of Kyambogo University identified ICT as essential for teaching, learning, and management, including admissions, registration, results management, transcript processing, and daily correspondence via portals, social media, email, and websites (Lubaale, 2020). Students reported that advertising, online applications, online selection and feedback, and ongoing communication through portals and social media had become vital to their engagement with the institution (Lubaale, 2020).

At the national level, ICT policies and sector strategic plans position ICT as a key driver of improved service delivery, including in education (Lubaale, 2020). Makerere University and other public institutions have

adopted ICT as a strategy for more effective management of educational services (Michael, 2019). However, multiple studies highlight that HEIs in Uganda lag behind international standards in ICT access and utilisation, with poor infrastructure, high student–computer ratios, limited bandwidth, and staff capacity hindering effective ICT-mediated communication and management (Lubaale, 2020; Michael, 2019).

Recent research on technological advancements in educational leadership across Ugandan universities highlights that digital platforms have transformed learning environments, data-driven decision-making, remote and blended learning models, and collaboration and communication (Uzorka & Kalabuki, 2024). Educational leaders utilise data analytics to inform interventions and depend on digital communication tools to support more adaptable, student-centred learning environments (Uzorka & Kalabuki, 2024). However, leaders' digital literacy and institutional investment in ICT infrastructure and support systems remain highly variable, which limits the full realisation of these benefits (Lubaale, 2020; Michael, 2019; Uzorka & Kalabuki, 2024).

Beyond Uganda, work on modern communication technologies in educational management highlights benefits such as increased efficiency, transparency, expanded interaction channels, and networked leadership, while also emphasising the need to develop digital competence among managerial staff (Obid, 2024; Machidon, 2024). Together, these studies suggest that digital communication is now fundamental to modern management in HEIs, but Ugandan institutions must address ongoing infrastructural and capacity challenges.

Communication, organisational culture and stakeholder engagement

Communication also closely interacts with organisational culture and stakeholder relationships. In Ugandan public universities, undemocratic governance structures, limited staff participation, bureaucratic red tape, and inconsistent application of human resource policies have fostered climates of mistrust and low commitment among academic staff (Kasule, 2025; Mwesigwa et al., 2020; Turyahikayo et al., 2023). These governance and cultural issues are conveyed and reinforced through opaque or top-down messaging, limited consultation, and inconsistent feedback mechanisms.

Studies of institutional culture and effectiveness in Ugandan universities reveal that supportive cultures characterised by collegiality, shared vision, and ethical behaviour are linked to improved organisational performance; such cultures are maintained through inclusive and consistent communication practices (Kasule, 2025; Mwesigwa et al., 2020; Turyahikayo et al., 2023). International research on communication management within HEI corporate culture further contends that innovative communication methods and integrated “single chain” communication systems help coordinate internal and external stakeholders and facilitate smoother educational processes, especially in remote and hybrid work environments (Machidon, 2024; Takhtarova, 2022; Kaznacheieva, 2025).

Stakeholder-focused studies outside Uganda highlight that effective communication among university leadership, staff, students, alumni, employers, and government improves student performance, institutional reputation, and graduate employability (Mahbubi et al., 2025; Syakur et al., 2020). Regular academic forums, open dialogues, and structured feedback channels support curriculum relevance, collaborative networks, and quality improvement (Mahbubi et al., 2025). These insights are highly relevant to Ugandan HEIs, where employer expectations, student success, and internationalisation pressures are rising.

Emerging conceptual lenses

Several conceptual frameworks are relevant for understanding communication in HEI management. Gatekeeping theory has been used to analyse how information is filtered, framed, and disseminated in universities, highlighting the influence of communication structures, flows, and climates on organisational outcomes (Turyahikayo & Mugizi, 2025). Systems theory underpins work on institutional communication, emphasising interdependence among organisational units and the importance of open, responsive communication channels for institutional learning and adaptation (Mgweba et al., 2025).

The idea of “interface” in organisational communication provides another perspective, highlighting communicative spaces and interaction networks among multiple actors in HEIs; these interfaces can be strategically designed to enhance organisational communication and facilitate change (Flores, 2025). International research on leadership communication during organisational transformation emphasises that digital platforms are affecting not only the reach but also the nature of leadership communication, shifting the focus towards process-oriented, sense-making approaches that assist staff in ‘living with’ and navigating unsettled situations (Frølich et al., 2025).

Applying these frameworks to Ugandan HEIs indicates that communication should be examined not only as message transfer but as a collection of structured, technology-mediated interfaces through which leadership, culture, power, and participation are enacted.

DISCUSSION

The reviewed literature supports a consensus that communication is a crucial element in the contemporary management of HEIs in Uganda. Empirical evidence indicates that communication structures, flows, and climates significantly forecast organisational effectiveness in public universities (Turyahikayo & Mugizi, 2025; Turyahikayo et al., 2023). Leadership approaches that emphasise clear, frequent, and participatory communication—transformational, transactional in a developmental sense, adaptive, and participatory—are linked to improved organisational communication, greater staff commitment, and enhanced quality of education (Turyahikayo et al., 2024; Mikando et al., 2025; Kasule, 2025; Mwesigwa et al., 2020; Turyahikayo et al., 2023).

At the same time, systemic governance issues—undemocratic decision-making, maladministration, opaque HR practices, and limited staff and student participation—manifest and reinforce poor communication, undermining institutional effectiveness (Turyahikayo et al., 2024; Kasule, 2025; Mwesigwa et al., 2020; Turyahikayo et al., 2023). This demonstrates that communication is both a symptom and a mechanism of deeper organisational problems.

Digital technologies offer opportunities to reshape communication in Ugandan higher education institutions. ICT-based systems such as academic information management platforms, portals, and social media can simplify administrative processes, increase transparency, and improve the timeliness and reach of communication with students and staff (Lubaale, 2020; Michael, 2019; Obid, 2024; Machidon, 2024; Uzorka & Kalabuki, 2024). However, unequal access, infrastructural deficits, and limited digital skills among managers and staff limit these advantages and, in some cases, generate new inequalities and frustrations (Lubaale, 2020; Michael, 2019; Uzorka & Kalabuki, 2024).

The literature also reveals significant gaps. Most Ugandan studies concentrate on public universities and employ cross-sectional, quantitative methods (Turyahikayo & Mugizi, 2025; Turyahikayo et al., 2024; Lubaale, 2020; Mikando et al., 2025; Kasule, 2025; Turyahikayo et al., 2023). There is scant research on private universities, on detailed qualitative perspectives of staff and students regarding communication practices, and on comparative analyses of different institutional types. Few studies specifically investigate institutional-level communication strategies or policies, or assess particular communication interventions. Moreover, while leadership and ICT are frequently examined, the complex interaction between communication, organisational culture, and stakeholder engagement in Ugandan HEIs remains insufficiently explored.

Theoretical approaches such as gatekeeping, systems theory, and interface analysis offer promising tools to deepen understanding of how communication mediates power relations, knowledge flows, and organisational change in Ugandan HEIs (Turyahikayo & Mugizi, 2025; Mgwebwa et al., 2025; Flores, 2025; Frølich et al., 2025). Future research that integrates these perspectives and employs mixed methods could illuminate how to design communication systems that support adaptive, ethical, and participatory governance.

Table 2: Showing Key Communication Domains in Ugandan HEIs' Management

Domain	Main Insights	Management Implications	Citations
Communication & organisational effectiveness	Structure, flow, climate predict productivity, adaptability and flexibility.	Design clear structures, support an open climate, and monitor flows	(Turyahikayo & Mugizi, 2025; Turyahikayo et al., 2023; Syakur et al., 2020)
Leadership communication	Transformational, transactional, participatory styles enhance communication; passive/authoritarian styles hinder it.	Leadership development should prioritise communicative competence and inclusivity.	(Turyahikayo et al., 2024; Mikando et al., 2025; Kasule, 2025; Mwesigwa et al., 2020; Obid, 2024)
ICT-enabled management	ICT is central to management and student services, but is under-resourced	Invest in infrastructure, digital skills, and integrated platforms	(Lubaale, 2020; Michael, 2019; Obid, 2024; Machidon, 2024; Uzorka & Kalabuki, 2024)
Culture & stakeholder engagement	Poor communication linked to undemocratic governance, low morale; inclusive communication boosts quality	Embed participatory forums, feedback systems, and transparent messaging	(Mikando et al., 2025; Kasule, 2025; Mwesigwa et al., 2020; Mahbubi et al., 2025; Takhtarova, 2022; Syakur et al., 2020)

Implications for Policy and Practice in Uganda

Develop clear institutional communication strategies that align with university missions, define communication structures and channels, and establish standards for transparency, timeliness, and stakeholder participation (Turyahikayo & Mugizi, 2025; Turyahikayo et al., 2024; Kasule, 2025; Machidon, 2024).

Enhance leadership communication skills through ongoing professional development in digital communication, dialogic leadership, crisis communication, and stakeholder engagement for senior and middle managers (Turyahikayo et al., 2024; Mikando et al., 2025; Kasule, 2025; Obid, 2024; Frølich et al., 2025).

Invest strategically in ICT infrastructure and support to ensure reliable, accessible digital platforms for administrative and academic communication, combined with training for staff and students (Lubaale, 2020; Michael, 2019; Obid, 2024; Machidon, 2024; Uzorka & Kalabuki, 2024).

Embed participatory communication practices in governance, including regular consultative forums, feedback mechanisms, and inclusive decision-making structures that involve academic staff and students (Mikando et al., 2025; Kasule, 2025; Mwesigwa et al., 2020; Mahbubi et al., 2025; Syakur et al., 2020).

Monitor and evaluate communication systems through staff and student surveys, analytics on digital platform usage, and qualitative feedback, connecting findings to quality assurance and strategic planning processes (Turyahikayo & Mugizi, 2025; Lubaale, 2020; Uzorka & Kalabuki, 2024; Flores, 2025).

Limitations of the Current Evidence

The evidence base is limited by its focus on public universities, predominant reliance on self-reported survey data, and a shortage of longitudinal or intervention studies (Turyahikayo & Mugizi, 2025; Turyahikayo et al., 2024; Lubaale, 2020; Mikando et al., 2025; Kasule, 2025; Turyahikayo et al., 2023). Many studies consider communication as one variable among others rather than as a primary focus, and there is limited coverage of the perspectives of private HEIs and non-academic staff. International comparative studies offer useful conceptual tools but may not fully capture the specific context of Ugandan HEIs (Mgweba et al., 2025; Obid, 2024; Machidon, 2024; Takhtarova, 2022; Flores, 2025; Frølich et al., 2025).

CONCLUSION

Existing research on Ugandan HEIs and related international literature agree that communication is crucial in modern higher education management. In Uganda's public universities, the structure, flow, and climate of communication significantly affect organisational effectiveness and influence leadership styles and institutional culture. Rapid but unequal ICT development has created new opportunities for digital communication and management, although infrastructural, capacity, and governance challenges restrict its full potential. Therefore, strengthening communication systems structurally, culturally, and technologically should be a key part of reforms aimed at enhancing quality, effectiveness, and stakeholder satisfaction in Ugandan HEIs.

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