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Perspectives from the Local Community on Strategies for Community Transformation in Uganda's Public Universities

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Several Universities in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) rarely have a clearly defined strategy for transforming communities. This is partly because some are still built on colonial models, which place a strong focus on theory, rote learning, and memorisation, where learners duplicate the content during examinations with little or no impact on the community. As a result, the surrounding communities continue to grapple with high levels of poverty, illiteracy, poor housing, disease, and poor-quality health and hygiene. This study explores the strategies Gulu University is using to transform the post-conflict community of Gulu City, northern Uganda. A cross-sectional research design was used involving 390 households. Self-administered questionnaires were employed to collect data on community perceptions of the operationalisation of the different strategies employed by Gulu University to transform the community. Descriptive statistics was used to determine the most outstanding strategies and their associated variables, while chi-square test was performed to assess the relationship between community perception of the existence of Gulu University and the strategies of community transformation. Findings revealed that, first, Gulu University's strategy of knowledge application has been perceived by the surrounding community to have worked well by increasing employment opportunities, providing young people with opportunities for meaningful livelihood activities, reducing crime, and fostering enterprise development in the surrounding community. Second, the strategy of partnerships and community projects has paid off by providing scholarships to help community members further their education. However, there is still more to be done in terms of knowledge generation strategy through skill training, knowledge transmission strategy through technology transfer, primary health care, better farming engagements, and innovative business services, as well as partnerships and community projects strategy via enterprise development. Furthermore, findings indicated that there was a significant association between community perceptions of transformation and the existence of Gulu University. The findings highlight potential areas of focus for Gulu University and other Ugandan universities for formulating policies that higher institutions of learning can employ to transform communities. Besides, future research should explore the dimensions of community transformation that influence the role of higher institutions of learning in transforming communities.

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INTRODUCTION

Universities in developing countries seldom have a clearly defined strategy for community transformation (Cloete et al., 2011; Adyanga et al., 2022). Fleming (1999) and MacCowan (2016) refer to strategies as knowledge tasks used to effect community transformation. These tasks include knowledge generation, transmission, and application. Primarily, the application of knowledge constitutes a deliberate strategy for engaging in community transformation service (McCowan, 2016). However, Hudson (2013) investigated a federal comprehensive community transformation strategy known as the Promise Neighbourhood programme in the United States of America and found that it was community partnership strategy that was used to achieve community transformation. This corroborates with a report by Nanyazi (2023), who asserts that community partnerships yielded a tremendous bridge between academic institutions, stakeholders, and the community. Additionally, Daniel and Irene, (2017) studied the strategies and approaches along with the experiences of EARTH University in Costa Rica in restructuring their training curriculum, which resulted in a strong commitment between the institution and local communities (Morphew et al., 2018). The university's strategies involved experiential learning courses, including entrepreneurial projects, a unique student entrepreneurial course

where students start a real-world business, a work experience programme, a service-learning community development programme, and an internship programme. The strategies produced highly motivated, hands-on graduates and also promoted community transformation, even in rural areas.

In the context of universities in SSA, although many attempts have been made to fulfil the objectives of research, knowledge generation, transmission, and application (Coy et al., 2022; Banya, 2001), the surrounding communities continue to grapple with high rates of poverty, illiteracy, poor housing, disease, poor quality health and hygiene. This is partly because, as reported by Adyanga et al. (2022) and Blythe et al. (2018) in the East African region, some universities have persisted in using colonial models that place a strong emphasis on theory, rote learning and memorisation—where learners duplicate the content during examinations. Teferra and Altbach (2004) further argue that while Africa may lay claim to a long history of academia, the continent's traditional sites of transformative learning were largely destroyed by colonisation. The establishment of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 presented an opportunity for higher education institutions, especially universities in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), to pursue their third mission of transforming their communities.

However, not many of these universities have taken advantage of this chance (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020; Leal et al., 2019).

Failure to explore the opportunity means their strategies for helping the world achieve the 2030 goal of community transformation may be inadequate (Arches et al., 1997). Yet, in order to meet contemporary societal needs, universities should provide myriads of trainings that lead to the social and economic transformation of the surrounding communities (Albulescu & Albulescu, 2014). The term strategy has been understood in different ways. Barnes and Fairbank (1997) explained that strategies refer to approaches, methods, techniques and processes used to achieve desired targets. In this current research epoch, we largely borrow the definition of strategies from Hudson (2013) and Fleming (1999), who refer to strategies as models and approaches for community transformation. These are the functions that are proposed for higher education institutions and are measured by knowledge generation (e.g., skill training workshops for income generation, research for social change, training workshops for moral and spiritual change), knowledge transmission (i.e., technologies imparted to the community by staff and students, new and improved farming methods, new and better ways of doing business); knowledge application (i.e., providing youth with opportunities to engage in meaningful livelihood activities, reducing crime rates, creating job opportunities, and enterprise development), and partnerships and community projects (i.e., sharing resources, community collaborative projects, university donations and scholarships for community members).

In the context of Uganda, Openjuru and Ikoja (2012) focused on studying Makerere University-community engagement activities and some other universities in the USA. Their investigation gave a flavour of the variety of activities undertaken in the University community engagement processes. Kolawole and Ajila (2015) on the other hand, reported that rural entrepreneurship development and employment creation are essential for universities to do in order to enhance local-

community transformation. They believe that the promotion of gainful employment among rural communities can significantly contribute to the enhancement of the potential of people living in remote communities. This is inconsistent with the findings of Kalule et al. (2016), who noted that one of the ways used to achieve community transformation was the student-centred approach, where a student is attached to a farmer so that the student continues to impart agricultural skills to the farmer throughout the study period. Additionally, Ofoyuru et al. (2019) showed that there is a strained university-community relationship due to theoretical teaching and limited funding, which disables these institutions of higher learning in their attempt to transform communities.

Note withstanding, Barifaijo et al. (2012), based on their study of the community service function of higher education in Uganda, clearly demonstrate that the contribution of universities through direct training, role modelling, research and innovation and students' internship towards local socio-economic development is not necessarily explicit in the communities. Community service of higher institutions of learning is not deliberately linked to the socio-economic development of localities. Beleke and Ofoyuru (2021) analysed the strategic plans of 30 institutions in 14 countries in order to explore new avenues for university-society partnerships and links in Africa. They reported that universities have well defined strategies for knowledge generation and transmission for forming networks and partnerships in decision-making. An analysis of the aforementioned studies indicates that there is a limited understanding of the strategies Gulu University is using to transform the post-conflict community of Gulu City established with the purpose of transforming the community. Therefore, this study aimed to explore the strategies and perceptions of the community towards the current community transformation strategies employed by Gulu University. This is crucial in unearthing areas in which the university has excelled and where more attention is required. Thus, this will inform university policies and

strategic planning as well as higher education policies in Uganda. In order to champion community development, Gulu University was established as a public university in war-torn Northern Uganda by Parliamentary Statutory Instrument Number 31 (Statutory Instrument No. 31, 2003). Consequently, the university adopted a motor, “For Community Transformation” (Ongeng et al., 2018).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Area

The study was conducted in the city of Gulu in northern Uganda, where Gulu University is situated. Gulu City consists of two divisions (i.e., Pece-Laroo and Bar Dege-Layibi), and Gulu University is located in the Pece-Laroo Division. Gulu City was chosen because it forms the immediate surrounding community of Gulu University. Additionally, the area was chosen due to its location in a region that was plagued by

Table 1: Sample size determination

Study area	Sub Counties	Parishes	Population of persons above 18 years	Sample size @ 5% margin of error
Gulu City	Laro-Pece	Pece-Prison	3060	97
		Agwee	3571	107
	Bardege-Layibi	Labour line	1530	47
		Kanyagoga	4628	128
Total Population/ sample			12713	390

Sampling Technique and Procedure

Multi-stage sampling (Bennett & Iyanagec, 1988) was used to select representative sample sizes. This was based on its cost-effectiveness, flexibility and more than two sampling stages used. In this study, the first stage involved stratified sampling of the two divisions, i.e., Laro-Pece and Bardege-Layibi in Gulu City. The second stage involved sampling two parishes from each division. These divisions consist of 21 parishes. However, only four parishes were sampled, i.e., Pece-Prison and Agwee in Laro-Pece Division, and Kanyagoga and Labour line parishes in Bardege-Layibi Division. These four parishes were purposively selected based on their proximity to the university. Finally, 390

respondents (household members) were randomly selected from the chosen parishes.

Study Design and Population

A cross-sectional research design was used to capture data on economic and demographic characteristics and data on the dimensions of community transformation. The target population was the community surrounding Gulu University (within a 6-kilometre radius) because the study's issues were centred on the university's contribution to community transformation while the unit of analysis was the household.

Sample Size Determination

The sample size was computed from the household population above 18 years of age based on the procedure used by Israel (1992) (*Table 1*).

Data Collection

Data on community perceptions of the operationalisation of Gulu University's strategies of community transformation (*Table 2*) were collected using self-administered questionnaires. The self-administered questionnaires consisted of mainly closed-ended questions administered to respondents at their homes after seeking their consent. Closed-ended questions were majorly used because they offer a quick tool for data collection, coding, interpretation and quantification of outcomes (Jones & Tanner, 2015).

Table 2: Community perceptions on Gulu University's operationalisation of strategies and variables for community transformation

	Independent	Code
Community Transformation: Generally, do you think the existence of Gulu University has transformed the surrounding community?	No=0 Yes=1	
Strategies and their Variables (Dependent)		
Knowledge Generation		
Are there any skill training workshops organised by Gulu University within the community geared towards income generation?	No=0 Yes=1	
Are there any Gulu University research activities within the community geared towards positive social change?	No=0 Yes=1	
Are there any Gulu University skill training workshops within the community geared towards moral change?	No=0 Yes=1	
Are there any religious meetings/workshops organised by Gulu University within the community geared towards spiritual change?	No=0 Yes=1	
Knowledge Transmission		
Are there any technologies being imparted by university staff or students to the community?	No=0 Yes=1	
Have you ever benefitted from the university programme of community primary health care service?	No=0 Yes=1	
Have you ever learnt any new and better ways of farming through Gulu University's engagements?	No=0 Yes=1	
Have you ever learnt any new and better ways of doing business as a result of Gulu University outreach services?	No=0 Yes=1	
Knowledge application		
Has there been any increase in opportunities for youth to engage in meaningful livelihood activities due to the presence of Gulu University?	No=1 Yes=1	
Has the presence of the university helped to reduce crime?	No=0 Yes=1	
Has the existence of the university led to an increased generation of employment opportunities in the community?	No=0 Yes=1	
Are there any enterprises developed within the community as a result of Gulu University community engagement?	No=0 Yes=1	
Partnerships and community projects		
Are there any partnership projects between the university and the community?	No=0 Yes=1	
Are there any donations that the university has made to benefit the surrounding community?	No=0 Yes=1	
In your opinion, has Gulu University supported some community members to pursue further education?	No=0 Yes=1	

Data Analysis

To establish Gulu University's strategies that are perceived to be working well by the surrounding community, the study used descriptive statistics while Chi-square test was performed to assess the association between community perceptions of strategies of community transformation and the existence of Gulu University.

RESULTS**Perceptions of Communities on the University's Community Transformation Strategies**

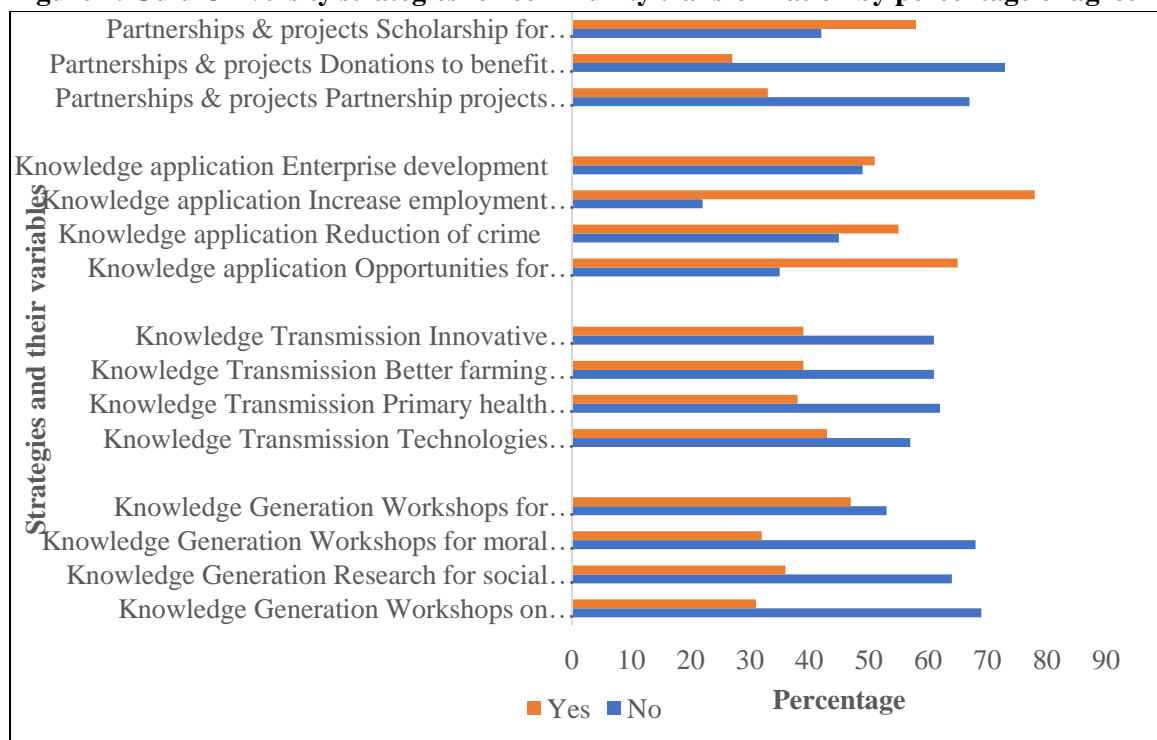
Perceptions on the operationalisation of the strategies Gulu University is using to transform the community are presented in Figure 1. In terms of knowledge generation and how it has been operationalised in the surrounding community,

the majority of the respondents indicated a lack of skill training workshops intended for income generating (69%), positive social change (64%), moral change (68%), and spiritual change (53%). However, in the context of knowledge transmission, the majority indicated that there are no technologies being imparted by the university staff or students to the community (57%), no primary health care services (62%), no new and better ways of farming through Gulu University's engagements (61%), and no better ways of doing business have been learnt as a result of Gulu University outreach services (61%). Meanwhile, in terms of knowledge application, the majority revealed that the presence of Gulu University has led to an increase in opportunities for youth to engage in meaningful livelihood activities (65%), helped to reduce crime in the community (55%), led to an increase in employment opportunities (78%) and promoted enterprise development through its engagement (61%). Finally, in terms of partnership and community projects, the community acknowledges that there are scholarships given by Gulu University to support community members to pursue further education

(58%). However, the majority indicated a lack of donations to benefit the community (73%) and a lack of partnership projects (67%).

Summarily, Gulu University's strategy of knowledge application has been perceived by the surrounding community to have worked well through an increase in employment opportunities, providing opportunities for youth to engage in meaningful livelihood activities, crime reduction, and enterprise development. Furthermore, Gulu University's strategy of partnerships and community projects has also been perceived to have worked well by offering scholarships for further education of the community members. However, there is much more to be done by the university in terms of knowledge generation (skill training for income generation, social, moral, and spiritual change), knowledge transmission (technology transfer, primary health care, better farming engagements, and innovative business service); and in partnerships and community projects (partnership projects and donations to the community).

Figure 1: Gulu University strategies for community transformation by percentage of agreements



Association between community perceptions of strategies of community transformation and the existence of Gulu University

Findings on the association between community perceptions of strategies of community transformation and the existence of Gulu University (Table 3) revealed that in terms of knowledge generation, community perception of the university’s activities geared towards community social, moral, and spiritual change had statistically significant (all $p < .05$) association with the existence of Gulu University. However, community perceptions of the university’s activities geared towards income generation did not have statistically significant ($X^2(1) = .09, p = .098$) association with the existence of Gulu University. Additionally, in the case of knowledge transmission, community

perceptions of the university’s activities of imparting technologies, better ways of farming and better ways of doing business to the community, and primary health care had statistically significant (all $p < .05$) association with the existence of Gulu University. More still, regarding knowledge application strategy, community perceptions of the university’s activities on increasing youth engagement in meaningful livelihood activities, increasing jobs, crime reduction, and enterprise development had statistically significant (all $p < .05$) association with the existence of the university. Finally, in terms of partnerships and community projects strategy, community perceptions of university activities of sharing projects with the community, giving donations, and education scholarships to community members had statistically significant (all $p < .05$) association with the existence of Gulu University

Table 3: Association between community perception of the strategies and the variables of community transformation and the existence of Gulu University.

Strategies for Community Transformation		The existence of Gulu University has transformed the surrounding community			Chi-square value & p-values
		No	Yes		
Knowledge generation (KG)	KG.1 Are there any skill training workshops organised by Gulu University within the community geared towards income generation?	No	48	236	$X^2(1) = 3.09, p = .098$
		Yes	13	114	
	KG.2 Are there any Gulu University research activities within the community geared towards positive social change?	No	48	212	$X^2(1) = 7.34, p = .006$
		Yes	13	138	
	KG.3 Are there any Gulu University skill training workshops within the community geared towards moral change?	No	49	230	$X^2(1) = 6.86, p = .010$
		Yes	10	119	
	KG.4 Are there any religious meetings/workshops organised by Gulu University within the community geared towards spiritual change?	No	45	169	$X^2(1) = 14.34, p < .001$
		Yes	15	179	
Knowledge transmission (KT)	KT.1 Are there any technologies being imparted by university staff or students to the community?	No	45	188	$X^2(1) = 8.26, p < .003$
		Yes	16	160	

Strategies for Community Transformation		The existence of Gulu University has transformed the surrounding community			Chi-square value & p-values
		No	Yes		
	KT.2 Have you ever benefitted from the university programme of community primary health care service?	No	44	188	$X^2(1) = 4.62,$ $p < .042$
		Yes	15	160	
	KT.3 Have you ever learnt any new and better ways of farming through Gulu University engagements?	No	47	202	$X^2(1) = 8.99$ $p < .003$
		Yes	13	147	
KT.4 Have you ever learnt any new and better ways of doing business as a result of Gulu University outreach services?	No	45	201	$X^2(1) = 6.24$ $p < .015$	
	Yes	15	146		
and Knowledge application (KA)	KA.1 Has there been any increase in opportunities for youth to engage in meaningful livelihood activities due to the presence of Gulu University?	No	40	99	$X^2(1) = 34.53$ $p < .000$
		Yes	19	248	
	KA.2 Has the presence of the university helped to reduce crime?	No	38	143	$X^2(1) = 10.74$ $p < .002$
		Yes	21	202	
KA.3 Has the existence of the university led to an increased generation of employment opportunities in the community?	No	37	50	$X^2(1) = 67.17$ $p < .000$	
	Yes	23	294		
KA.4 Are there any enterprises developed within the community as a result of Gulu University community engagement?	No	46	152	$X^2(1) = 22.11$ $p < .000$	
	Yes	14	195		
projects	PCP.1 Are there any partnership projects between the university and the community?	No	47	177	$X^2(1) = 19.42$ $p < .000$
		Yes	10	169	
Partnerships community	PCP.2 Are there any partnership projects between the university and the community?	No	50	223	$X^2(1) = 9.60$ $p < .002$
		Yes	9	124	
	PCP.3 Are there any donations that the university has made to benefit the surrounding community?	No	52	241	$X^2(1) = 8.45$ $p < .003$
		Yes	7	104	
PCP.4 In your opinion, has Gulu University supported some community members to pursue further education?	No	45	123	$X^2(1) = 38.14$ $p < .000$	
Yes	12	224			

DISCUSSION

Results show that Gulu University's strategy of knowledge application has been perceived by the surrounding community to have worked well through an increase in employment opportunities, offering young people opportunities for meaningful livelihood activities, reduction in crime, and fostering enterprise growth. While in the strategy of partnerships and community projects, Gulu University has done well in scholarships for furthering the education of community members. It is likely that Gulu University is doing well in terms of increasing employment opportunities and providing opportunities for youth to engage in meaningful livelihood activities because, first, institutionally, most of the people that Gulu University employs at the lower ranks of support staff and administrative come from the nearby communities. Secondly, as the university annually graduates students with different qualifications, such graduates are in a position to easily secure job opportunities in the labour market; thirdly, a number of university staff are likely to set up personal business projects which create jobs of varying nature for the community members to take up. The study finding agrees with Di Cataldo and Rodríguez-Pose (2017), who reported that among the factors associated with faster employment growth in Europe was a relatively higher endowment of skilled workers from the universities, especially in less developed regions. Similarly, Eriksson and Forslund (2014) clarified the importance of universities in creating employment opportunities in the community they are located. The study finding, however, conflicts with a report by Nogales et al., (2020), which found no relationship between the presence of institutions of higher learning and the growth of employment in Bolivia.

The perceived reduction in crime in the community surrounding Gulu University is likely to be due to the establishment of Gulu University police station, where the security officers regularly patrol the campus at night to curb crime, the installation of security lights and closed-circuit television (CCTV) cameras around the

university, and publicising of crime cases whenever they occur. The study's findings disagree with a report by Allen (2021) that claimed higher crime rates at US universities with a religious affiliation.

Gulu University has also registered progress in enterprise development likely because of some projects such as the tamarind production project between the Faculty of Agriculture and Environment and the community, the Takataka project of recycling plastic bottle wastes originated by a former student of Gulu University from the surrounding community, and other enterprises which have developed due to increased demand for goods and services with the presence of Gulu University could be the reason for the community's perceived progress in enterprise development. The study's finding corroborates with a report by Tung et al. (2020), who found that university-based entrepreneurial education in Vietnam and the Philippines led to the growth of multiple community-based enterprises. Similarly, Rae (2010) found a positive relationship between university-based enterprise education and the growth of businesses in the United Kingdom.

Additionally, Gulu University has also been perceived to have performed exceptionally in scholarships for local community members to pursue higher education. This may be the case due to the fact that a large number of the lower-level support and administrative staff members at Gulu University are local residents who have been granted tuition waivers to pursue their studies, and the community seems to appreciate this development. Furthermore, the spread of information through local councils and the media about a memorandum of understanding (MOU) between Gulu City Local Governments and Gulu University to offer scholarships to local government employees may have had an impact on community perceptions. This finding concurs with a report by Stanton (2012), who noted that the University of California, Los Angeles, initiated a fund to support the education of students in the surrounding community.

However, the university still has a lot to do in terms of knowledge generation (skill training for income generation, social, moral, and spiritual change). It is likely that Gulu University is struggling in these aspects because, as noted by Kurbanov et al. (2016), universities all over the world place a lot of emphasis on research, outreach programmes and academic teaching while devoting little time to social, moral and spiritual facets of life. Even though the religious organisations are making every effort to help, it appears that more counselling, seminars and crusades geared towards teaching and enacting moral, social and spiritual change within the community surrounding Gulu University are needed.

Similarly, it is possible that the poor performance of Gulu University in skilling the local community for income generation stems from the university's lack of emphasis on this aspect in the curricula. This study's findings contradict those reported by Marais and Botes (2007) in South Africa, where the universities established income-generating projects in collaboration with the Free State Provincial Government to help the local community become self-reliant. More still, a study by Egeru et al., (2018) revealed that Egerton University in Kenya offered opportunities for skill training to the grass-root communities. Additionally, it is highly probable that Gulu University's poor performance in terms of technology transfer is probably due to the faculty's limited ability to create and disseminate new technologies. It is also possible that the Faculty of Education's only department of technology closed, and the Department of Bio-systems Engineering, which is core in technology creation and dissemination, was recently established in the Faculty of Agriculture and Environment. However, given that this is still a relatively new department faced with many challenges, the creation and transfer of new technologies to the surrounding communities is still slow. The finding contradicts what is reported by Markman (2005), which suggested that some universities, such as Stanford University and

Boston University, had achieved remarkable success in technology transfer.

Furthermore, primary health care services by Gulu University are likely not much felt by the community due to the existence of regular government primary health care programs that are always implemented in the community. This finding is consistent with a report by McCann (2010) that demonstrated how Rush University Colleges of Nursing, Medicine, and Health Sciences in Chicago established a community-academic collaboration partnership. Through these partnerships, monthly healthcare workshops were held, but the effectiveness of the programme was hampered by funding constraints.

Similarly, improved farming engagements were likely not felt much by the larger segments of the community due to limited coverage by the university staff and students. The results align well with the findings of Islam and Grönlund (2011) in Bangladesh, where they report that the university community farmer improvement project used mobile phones, radio announcements, and community education, but the project's effectiveness was hampered by a number of challenges. Again, it is likely that innovative business services by Gulu University may not be felt much in the community due to lack of funding, which limits the scope of the engagement. Similarly, it is possible that the university is still grappling with community donations and partnership projects, most likely due to resource inadequacies. The finding disagrees with a report by Carney (2011) about an Aboriginal community project known as the sustained community-academic partnership that succeeded in achieving its goals.

Lastly, the study findings demonstrate a highly significant association between the existence of Gulu University and perceptions of community transformation strategies. The significant association between community perceptions of community transformation strategies and the existence of Gulu University may stem from the fact that in Uganda, universities follow National Curriculum Development Centre guidelines when

formulating curricula in an effort to generate knowledge that should be transmitted to see its applicability in communities. They require that every curriculum be able to impart knowledge that is applicable and relevant to the needs of society and, consequently, be able to bring transformation in the economic, physical, social, and spiritual spheres of life in the communities. Literature converges on the notion that for decades, university strategies of knowledge generation, transmission, application, partnerships and community projects have a direct association with the transformation of communities (Fleming, 1999; McCowan, 2015; Kolawole & Ajila, 2015). This is because higher institutions of learning are centres of knowledge, and knowledge can only be disseminated for societal change through well-thought strategies. This study, therefore, proposed that for communities to be transformed, knowledge should first be generated in universities and other higher institutions of learning. Once knowledge has been generated, it ought not be stored in libraries but rather, it should be transmitted to the relevant stakeholders who can apply it to their advantage. Higher education institutions and local communities can work together to create partnerships that will enable the developers of this knowledge to guide the final users. The developers need to guide the final users in this case, the community, on how to apply the knowledge for societal transformation.

CONCLUSIONS

Findings revealed that Gulu University's strategy of knowledge application has been perceived by the surrounding community to have worked well through an increase in employment opportunities, offering young people opportunities for meaningful livelihood activities, reduction in crime, and fostering enterprise growth. While in the strategy of partnerships and community projects, Gulu University has done well in scholarships for furthering the education of community members. Overall, the study findings demonstrate a significant association between Gulu University's presence and the community's perceptions of its transformation strategies. However, much remains to be done in terms of

knowledge generation through skill training for income generation and for fostering social, moral, and spiritual change; knowledge transmission through technology transfer, primary health care, better farming engagements, innovative business service; and partnerships and community projects. The findings highlight potential areas where Gulu University and other universities in Uganda can focus, thus informing policies geared towards community transformation in higher institutions of learning. However, future studies need to explore the dimensions of community transformation that influence the role of higher institutions of learning in transforming communities.

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