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# Connecting Local Realities to Global Goals by Exploring Students' Perceptions of the Quality of Higher Education in Uganda

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## Abstract

This descriptive study explored the perceptions of higher education quality among students in Uganda. This paper connects insights to the strategic framework for the transformation of Africa (Agenda 2063) and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Agenda 2030) with a focus on Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4). Drawing on semi-structured interviews ( $n = 19$ ) and online survey data ( $n = 70$ ), the study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods approach. It examined how students perceive higher education quality in relation to SDG 4 dimensions (e.g., equity, teaching and learning environments and support). The mixed-method study revealed four key themes, namely resilience, contradictions in perceptions, strengths, and inequalities in Uganda's higher education quality. The participants demonstrated remarkable resilience in navigating challenges despite systemic constraints. While institutions like the host higher education institution (HEI), where the research study was conducted, were perceived as spaces of autonomy, gaps in pedagogical quality, curriculum relevance and equity indicate a disconnect between policy aspirations and lived realities. We advocate for more responsive, student-prioritizing strategies for achieving the global goals and aligning higher education outcomes with the attainment of market-driven employability skills required for success in the 21st-century workplace, since students are the future.

**Keywords:** Agenda 2030; Agenda 2063; Higher Education Institutions (HEIs); Quality Education; Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4); Uganda

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Sub-Saharan Africa's population is projected to grow at 2.5% per annum, making it the largest region, accounting for around 28% of the world's population [27,28]. This demographic growth is accompanied by increased urbanization, many young people and natural resources, making it a region with great potential for industrial and entrepreneurial growth [1].

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) outlined by the United Nations [26] and Agenda 2063, which is a strategic framework adopted by the African Union Commission (AUC) [2], emphasize the need for inclusive and sustainable industrial development, quality education and innovation-driven economies. In this context, higher education institutions (HEIs) play a pivotal role in equipping students with the necessary skills and knowledge to contribute to economic and societal transformation [16,17]. Therefore, this study was conducted during a project trip in which master's students from the Management Centre Innsbruck (MCI) were hosted by a HEI in Uganda to participate in think tanks to explore the potential for people of Africa and Europe to build partnerships in business, education and sustainable development innovations.

The host HEI is Uganda's oldest and largest degree-granting institution, founded in 1922 as a vocational technical school and evolving into one of Africa's most prestigious HEIs. It comprises nine departments—including Health Sciences, Engineering, Agriculture, Natural Sciences, Business,

Humanities, Education, Computing and Veterinary Sciences—and offers around 145 undergraduate programs along with over 139 postgraduate degrees. This HEI systematically uses multiple mechanisms to maintain and enhance instructional quality, including student evaluation, peer monitoring, pedagogical development, and aligning teaching assignments with lecturer expertise [10].

During this collaboration, the quality of education in Uganda was investigated in the context of Agenda 2063 and Agenda 2030. This collaboration between Africa and Europe could indirectly support the aim to achieve these agendas.

## **2. AGENDA 2063, AGENDA 2030 AND COLLABORATIVE INITIATIVES**

Agenda 2063 [2] deems global partnerships essential for: (i) a shared vision for development to achieve sustainable economic growth, social inclusion and environmental sustainability, (ii) resource mobilization such as access to funding, technology and expertise, (iii) knowledge and best practices in educational, business, health, agricultural and governance sectors, (iv) addressing global challenges, (v) strengthening trade and investments to create jobs and stimulate local economies, (vi) promoting peace and security to support conflict resolution, peacekeeping efforts and the promotion of human rights, contributing to a stable environment for growth, and (vii) alignment with global goals such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – also known as Agenda 2030 [26].

Engaging in international partnerships aligns with global initiatives from Agenda 2030 and Agenda 2063. For the study, the focus is specifically on quality education (SDG 4), which aims to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” [26, p. 19] to investigate quality education in Uganda. UNESCO’s International Institute for Capacity Building in Africa [21] and other literature [6,22] highlight the essence of international partnerships that support equity, education and alignment with global goals in Africa. These insights on elevating global partnerships inspired collaborations between HEIs in Innsbruck, Austria and similar HEIs in Uganda.

## **3. QUALITY EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

Quality education is widely recognized as a fundamental element of sustainable development, social equity and individual empowerment [9]. Education focused on sustainable development extends beyond mere access to schooling. It focuses on greening schools, integrating real-life problems into the curriculum, training the teachers with the necessary competencies and collaborating with communities. When quality education is focused on sustainable development, it equips learners with the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes necessary to overcome challenges and contribute to an increasingly complex world [23]. Quality education must be inclusive, equitable and responsive to the diverse needs of learners across different social, economic and cultural contexts [14,26].

Global and continental frameworks have recognized the transformative power of education and embedded it in their strategic visions [20]. Notably, the United Nations’ Agenda 2030 emphasizes quality education through SDG 4, while the AUC’s Agenda 2063 positions education as a catalyst for Africa’s self-determined growth and integration. These frameworks could simultaneously support initiatives on the local level to advance quality education on a global level.

### **3.1. Quality Education in the Context of Agenda 2030 (SDG 4)**

Quality education is the pillar of the United Nations’ SDG 4, which forms part of Agenda 2030. This goal expands the scope of global education efforts beyond access alone and includes learning outcomes, equity, teacher quality and infrastructure development. According to UNESCO [19], countries have been committed to enhancing various aspects, including school enrollment and access to early childhood education in low-income countries, as well as teacher training. However, in 2023, it was reported that 20% of African children did not complete primary school [24]. Furthermore, UNESCO et al. [19] report that many children worldwide complete basic schooling without acquiring essential skills due to a shortage of teachers trained to impart these skills. SDG 4 addresses this by promoting lifelong learning, inclusive education systems and policy frameworks that strengthen educational equity and quality. Therefore, this agenda and the progress reports are essential in driving

African education goals. Overall, Agenda 2030 emphasizes education as both a fundamental right and a strategic enabler for sustainable development.

### **3.2. Quality Education in the Context of Agenda 2063 (Africa's Strategic Vision)**

Launched by the AUC in 2015, Agenda 2063 presents education as a transformative force for Africa's long-term development. Aspiration 1 of Agenda 2063 envisions "a prosperous Africa based on inclusive growth and sustainable development" with quality education playing a vital role in achieving that vision [2, p. 13]. In line with this, the AUC promotes technical skills development, STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics), and the harmonization of higher education across countries through initiatives [2]. Education is regarded not only as a means for employment and innovation but also as essential for fostering African identity, unity and self-reliance [2]. The second Ten-Year Implementation Plan (2024–2033) emphasizes the importance of engaging all key stakeholders, research, aligning National Development Plans (NDPs) with regional and continental frameworks, building a competent workforce and strengthening institutions at all levels [3]. While aligned with Agenda 2030's SDG 4, Agenda 2063 emphasizes a uniquely African-led vision of quality education as a driver of transformation at national, regional and continental levels.

## **4. PROJECT BACKGROUND**

With the abovementioned insights in mind, the MCI, in collaboration with HEIs from Sub-Saharan Africa, has developed a unique educational initiative under the Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) framework. This initiative integrates interdisciplinary and intercultural problem-based learning approaches, enabling students from Africa and Europe to work together on real-world industry challenges. The framework utilizes structured boot camps, hackathons and semester-long projects to provide students with valuable hands-on experience and market-relevant training. Through the program, students gain this experience by acting as consultants for companies addressing challenges in business development and sustainability through for example think tanks between European and African Universities.

This initiative aligns with SDG-driven educational models by fostering competencies in entrepreneurship, digital literacy, sustainability and cross-cultural collaboration. It offers students the opportunity to analyze market potentials, develop business plans and engage in projects that enhance value generation within local economies. A key component of the initiative is the emphasis on industry partnerships, ensuring that projects are not only academically enriching but also have tangible impacts on business and economic ecosystems.

The study that this paper reports on is part of the described project whereby students of MCI who follow a Master's Program in Industrial Engineering visited a host HEI in Uganda as an elective module to participate in think tanks on entrepreneurship and sustainability. While they were at the host HEI in Uganda in February 2025, the master's students from both HEIs collaborated on assignments for innovative solutions in support of the Agenda 2063.

## **5. METHODOLOGY**

The descriptive study used a convergent mixed-method approach to collect and analyze quantitative and qualitative data in parallel to be integrated in the interpretation phase. The research questions guiding the investigation included:

1. How do students in Uganda perceive the quality of higher education they receive?
2. What factors play a role in their higher education experience?

Random convenience sampling was used for the semi-structured interviews ( $n = 19$ ). One of the think tanks consisted of four master's students and two researchers (from the MCI and the University of Innsbruck). The think tank had to develop interview questions, conduct and analyze the interviews, and gain perspectives on quality education at the host HEI. Due to time constraints, this group conducted interviews on campus and randomly selected participants based on convenience. Additionally, snowball sampling was employed for an online Microsoft Forms Survey ( $n = 70$ ). The survey was sent out to the Ugandan students who participated in the think tank. These students and the

lecturers involved forwarded it to more students in Uganda. The participants included current and former students from public and private HEIs in Uganda, primarily located in Kampala. More than 90% of the interview participants were students from the host HEI, whereas 60% of the survey students were from private HEIs, and the rest were either at the host HEI or other HEIs. The semi-structured interviews were analyzed in MAXQDA using thematic analysis based on inductive in-vivo coding [5], where themes were constructed after coding and categorization. The online survey data were analyzed using frequency descriptive statistics [8], which included measures of central tendency in some cases (including mean, median, mode and cross-tabulation) in Microsoft Excel. The quantitative data were grouped into relevant themes that were integrated with the qualitative results in the Discussion Section.

The researchers aimed to ensure adherence to ethical guidelines. Before participants were interviewed, they had to sign informed consent forms, while the online survey included the information outlined in the description of the Microsoft Form. By proceeding with the online survey, participants confirmed that they read and understood the purpose of the study, agreed to participate voluntarily and gave informed consent for their responses to be used in this research. The participants' responses remain strictly confidential and will only be used for research purposes. No personally identifiable information will be shared and all data will be anonymized to ensure privacy. Participation was entirely voluntary and the participants had the option to withdraw from the research. During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used ChatGPT-4o for the purposes of identifying relevant literature (after which all sources were located, read and fact-checked). Grammarly was also used for grammar and language editing support (after which the authors and a professional language editor revised). The authors have reviewed and edited the output and take full responsibility for the content of this publication.

## 6. QUALITATIVE RESULTS

The interview data were analyzed qualitatively with reflexive thematic analysis [5] and allowed for the following four themes to be constructed: (1) resilience as a tool for higher education, (2) contradictions in the perceived quality of higher education in Uganda, (3) perceived strengths of the host HEI, and (4) inequity in HEIs in Uganda.

### 6.1. Resilience as a Tool for Higher Education

The results of the reflexive thematic analysis indicate that resilience (as defined by the researchers based on their understanding of the term) is key to many participants' lives. They persist with their higher education despite physical, emotional and financial barriers. Reflecting on their upbringing as an orphan in Ethiopia, one of the students described 'adapting' in terms of seeking community and remaining focused: "I am an orphan in Ethiopia. Okay, I grow with young people here and there [...] but I am very committed to my job" (Interview 1, pos. 43, 2025). Their resilience is not simply resisting or adjusting to challenges, but continuing to strive for education and expression, even without a traditional support system. Another participant emphasized that overcoming challenges like hunger or financial stress comes down to mindset:

So, it comes down to character and putting first things first. It is now education, put it first, go for it and making sure that good is at the center of everything. Because trust me, if you have good [education], you'll be able to achieve everything you want, regardless of the challenges you face. (Interview 5, pos. 267, 2025).

This illustrates how prioritizing education and integrity can sustain a person through challenges. Similarly, a student with a chronic illness highlighted the struggle of inadequate schooling and support, but urged others to "look at the brighter part [...] not about me being sick" (Interview 15, pos. 1, 2025). They showed resilience by focusing on education rather than the illness. Finally, another interviewee recalled doing physically demanding construction work while studying, noting the toll it took:

When I was studying, first of all [...] there was support from home but it was not enough to [...] satisfy most of the needs. So, I had some casual work and this casual work was basically in construction [...] the work was a bit heavy [...] plus the studies. (Interview 18, pos. 62, 2025).

Despite this burden, this student persisted in studying while working part-time. Collectively, these example statements demonstrate that resilience is a vital tool for young people seeking to transform their lives amidst adversity.

## 6.2. Contradictions in the Perceived Quality of Higher Education in Uganda

Contradictions emerged in participants' statements regarding perceptions of quality education in Uganda. The quality of education in Uganda is perceived as fair or proper, yet contradictory experiences highlight disparities in infrastructure, technology and support. Some students described the system positively: "In Uganda, I am seeing in Uganda, the system of education has quality" (Interview 1, pos. 20, 2025), and another affirmed that "I would say it's fair. Why I'm saying fair is because right now they're trying to introduce a new curriculum." (Interview 5, pos. 73, 2025). Theoretical and practical integration was also viewed as positive: "Practically. Theoretically. It is mutual parallel... you learn, you get a lot of diversity, people, cultures" (Interview 1, pos. 25, 2025). Others highlighted positive aspects, such as access to libraries, projectors and group learning (Interviews 2, 3, 4). Another participant mentioned:

At [the host HEI], the best part of being a student here is just the quality education that the lecturers give. The lecturers are always very committed to their work and their duties. Yeah, not like other universities where you hear, oh, for us we relax a lot, sometimes they do not teach us, but here we are always studying when the timetable is showing this lecturer teaching, he or she is always in class. Okay, so they are really dedicated. (Interview 17, pos. 9, 2025).

However, contradictions emerged. A student noted: "It's basic [...] you have a table, a chair, a pen, then a teacher" (Interview 5, pos. 121, 2025), indicating minimal learning tools. Another participant highlighted limited access to technology and massification:

Laptops, no, but we have a computer lab. But the computer lab can't accommodate each and every person in the university. So, for instance, if there are over 20,000 students, and your computer lab can accommodate only 100 students, you see there's a gap. So, I think there needs to be an expansion when it comes to the facilities that are provided to the students, learners. (Interview 14, pos. 60, 2025).

Other aspects, such as limitations, were also discussed. Participants described overcrowded lecture halls, outdated equipment and limited computer lab access:

We have the facilities, we have some equipment, but some of them are outdated [...] and for example [...] we have some computer laboratories, but that they're not open to all [...] we don't have like many equipment [to] help the lecturers to help us. (Interview 15, pos. 1, 2025).

Others reported minimal faculty presence: "You actually get to see a lecturer like maybe four or five times [per semester]" (Interview 10, pos. 40, 2025). Financial burdens are another concern: "Less than 5% of university students are government-sponsored [...] the majority are privately funded" (Interview 10, pos. 109, 2025). Teaching methods also lag: "The approaches used by lecturers are old style" (Interview 12, pos. 52, 2025). These mixed experiences reflect a system that is functional and appreciated by most, but is constrained by uneven resource distribution, infrastructure gaps and limited student support. Only 2 of the 19 participants interviewed stated that the overall quality of education in Uganda is good, with most indicating that the host HEI offers the best quality education in Uganda.

## 6.3. Perceived Strengths of the Host HEI

The host HEI's quality education is highly regarded by students, particularly for its emphasis on autonomy. The host HEI's broad academic offerings were seen as a marker of quality: "[The host HEI] has many professions. So, it has quality education compared to other universities" (Interview 3, pos. 6, 2025), while another student was confident that "[the host HEI] offers ... the best quality education [...] we are top 10 [in Africa]" (Interview 6, pos. 36, 2025). Several participants expressed satisfaction with the academic environment. One of the participants enthusiastically stated:

I will give it an eight or a nine out of 10, because now we have different innovation hubs here in the university. So, some of the knowledge and information I'm getting from class and from my research, I would come and implement it in my own innovation projects. (Interview 15, pos. 1, 2025).

The HEI's learning model also encourages students to become autonomous in their learning. One participant explained: "They will give 30% and the 70% is yours ... They made us, like, do more research on our own" (Interview 9, pos. 103, 2025). Another confirmed this approach: "It gave me like

only 30% of the skills... the rest that I got were self-taught" (Interview 10, pos. 49, 2025). Despite the limited direct instruction, these students saw value in being challenged to take ownership of their education. However, some noted that the system could still improve. One student reflected that he believes his HEI only equips him with 30% of the necessary skills for the workplace, suggesting "let them push to 40, 50, or 60 [percent]" (Interview 10, pos. 49, 2025).

#### 6.4. Inequity in HEIs in Uganda

While meritocratic principles exist within Uganda's higher education, students also experience inequalities shaped by economic background, bureaucratic barriers and social connections. Financial challenges persist as a significant barrier. One student noted that "there needs support [...] maybe sponsorship to help those students" (Interview 5, pos. 179, 2025), and another reflected that "the fees might be steep ... most [citizens] are below the poverty line" (Interview 8, pos. 220, 2025). Government sponsorships were viewed positively as rewards for academic excellence: "If you passed well in your academics, you get a chance to get a scholarship if your points are up [...] some parents get less of the weight" (Interview 2, pos. 38, 2025). This reflects a merit-based opportunity structure. However, the same respondent also noted advantages tied to family ties within the HEI:

There is another group of students who, if you have a parent that is part of the administration of the university, there is [...] a waiver, where [...] the money is cut in half for your parents, so you pay half the money and the university caters for the other half. (Interview 2, pos. 38, 2025).

This introduces an element of privilege. Broader affordability concerns reinforce financial disparities, because although scholarships help some, others remain excluded due to systemic financial hardship. Additionally, students mentioned navigating bureaucratic systems: "We have a lot of bureaucracy here." (Interview 6, pos. 183, 2025). In such an environment, personal networks become crucial: "You have to network with people. That is the only way you will get a place somewhere" (Interview 7, pos. 102, 2025). These experiences suggest that success is not determined solely by academic merit but also by social positioning and institutional access. A concern over unequal treatment across disciplines further complicates ideas of fairness:

For me, I think as a person, these two people should be compensated equally and again, all these subjects should be treated equally shouldn't say that maybe it is better to do sciences than to do arts, because after all, neither can work independently. (Interview 18, lines 97–100, 2025).

Together, these accounts illustrate that while meritocracy is promoted, inequalities persist through financial barriers, systemic inefficiencies and preferential advantages, undermining the principle of equal opportunity. Together, these four themes reveal a complex and nuanced picture of higher education experiences in Uganda, which the quantitative analysis further explore.

### 7. QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

This study presents a set of frequency-descriptive quantitative variables [8] that offer insight into participants' higher education experiences. The quantitative data were thematically grouped and aligned with the qualitative findings during interpretation. First, indicators of emotional and financial challenges include questions such as:

- Do you depend on family members for financial support to cover tuition and living expenses?
- Does your need to support your family financially affect your studies?
- Do you receive any emotional support from your family regarding your education?

Second, infrastructure and technology-based disparities are assessed through responses to:

- Do you have reliable internet access for study purposes?
- What challenges related to technology affect your studies?

Third, the theme of strengths amid limitations is explored through student perceptions of relevance and quality:

- How relevant is the curriculum to your future career?
- How would you rate the quality of education in your current study mode?
- What improvements would you like to see in your current study environment?

Finally, variables addressing structural challenges and inequity include:

- How challenging is it to afford tuition and other fees?
- How would you rate the availability of financial aid or scholarships for your education?

These variables provide a quantitative lens to complement and contextualize (the Discussion Section) the lived experiences described in the qualitative data. The emotional and financial challenges will be discussed first.

### 7.1. Indicators of Emotional and Financial Challenges (Leading to Resilience)

Table 1 presents the extent to which students have received or continue to receive emotional support from their families during their studies in Uganda. Of the participants, 65.8% felt they had emotional support from their families, while the rest (34.2%) rarely or never felt emotional support.

**Table 1.** Emotional Support from Families During Higher Education Studies in Uganda

<b>Survey question: Do you receive any emotional support from your family regarding your education? (n = 70)</b>		
<b>Response Option</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Very supportive	30	42.9
Somewhat supportive	16	22.9
Rarely supportive	13	18.6
Not supportive	11	15.7

Apart from emotional support, financial assistance is crucial for higher education since it is not free in Uganda. Table 2 presents the extent to which students have received or continue to receive financial support from their families during their studies in Uganda. Only 52.9% of the participants indicated receiving some financial support from their family. Whereas, 47.1% of the participants have to either pay for their own studies or find funding to cover tuition and living expenses.

**Table 2.** Financial Support from Families During Higher Education Studies in Uganda

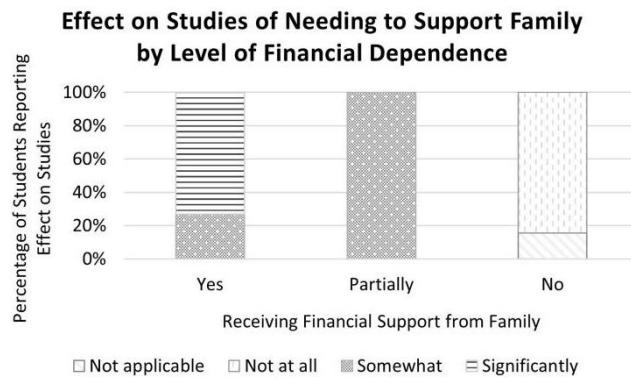
<b>Survey question: Do you depend on family members for financial support to cover tuition and living expenses? (n = 68)</b>		
<b>Response Option</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Yes	26	38.2
Partially	10	14.7
No	32	47.1

Since not all participants receive financial support for their studies from their families, the question arose whether supporting their families (including parents, children, or other family members) financially affects their academic performance (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Impact of Family Financial Support Responsibilities on Students' Studies in Uganda

<b>Survey question: Does your need to support your family financially affect your studies? (n = 68)</b>		
<b>Response Option</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Significantly	19	27.9
Somewhat	17	25
No	17	25
Not at all	10	14.7
Not applicable	5	7.3

The results indicate that 39.7% of participants who financially support their families do not experience this to affect their studies. Some students (n = 5) selected 'Not applicable', indicating that family-related financial responsibilities did not apply to their situation. This leaves 52.9% of participants reporting that the need to support the family financially affects their studies.



**Figure 1.** Relationship Between Financial Dependence on Family and the Impact of Providing Family Support on their Studies

The cross-tabulation (using a 100% stacked column chart in Microsoft Excel) in Figure 1 revealed an association between students' financial dependence on their families and the perceived impact of supporting their families on their studies. Students who received no financial support were more likely to report that supporting their families had no impact on their studies. Some indicated it did not apply to them. In contrast, students who were fully financially dependent on their families were most likely to report a significant impact on their studies due to family support responsibilities. Those receiving partial support mainly reported a somewhat significant impact. These results suggest that the level of financial dependence on one's family correlates with the impact of family responsibilities on their studies.

## 7.2. Infrastructure and Technology-Based Disparities

Infrastructure and technological aspects were investigated because these aspects are also known to contribute to the quality of education. Only approximately one-eighth of participants reported always having reliable internet access for their studies (Table 4).

**Table 4.** Student Access to Reliable Internet for Study Purposes in Uganda

**Survey question: Do you have reliable internet access for study purposes? (n = 70)**

Response Option	Frequency	Percentage
Always	9	12.9
Often	19	27.1
Sometimes	25	35.7
Rarely	14	20.0
Never	3	4.3

From the survey responses, Table 4 shows that 24.3% of participants reported never or rarely having reliable internet access for study purposes, indicating that infrastructure-related challenges affect them. Of those who do have access, 40% always or often have access, while 35.7% indicated they sometimes have access. To understand the technological limitations affecting internet access, the challenges related to technology were explored (Table 5). The main challenge reported was limited internet data, followed by limited internet access, and 18.6% participants reported inadequate access to technological devices. Only a few participants experienced difficulty with the platforms and a lack of Information technology (IT) support.

**Table 5.** Challenges Related to Technology Affecting Students' Studies in Uganda

**Survey question: What challenges related to technology affect your studies? (n = 70)**

Response Option	Frequency	Percentage
Limited internet data	25	35.7
Limited internet access	22	31.4

**Table 5.** Challenges Related to Technology Affecting Students' Studies in Uganda (continued)

**Survey question: What challenges related to technology affect your studies? (n = 70)**

Response Option	Frequency	Percentage
Inadequate access to devices	13	18.6
Difficulty with platforms	4	5.7
Lack of IT support	3	4.3
Other	3	4.3

Three responses under “other” included: “inadequate access to devices, difficulty with platform and lack of IT support”, “cost of internet” and “inadequate access to devices, limited internet data”.

### 7.3. Strengths Amid Limitations

Around 70% of participants view the curriculum as relevant, while fewer than 6% indicate it is not relevant to their future careers (Table 6).

**Table 6.** The Relevance of Uganda Higher Education Curriculum to Future Careers

**Survey question: How relevant do you feel the curriculum is to your future career? (n = 70)**

Response Option	Frequency	Percentage
Very relevant	15	21.4
Relevant	11	15.7
Somewhat relevant	25	35.7
Neutral	15	21.4
Not relevant	4	5.7

Table 7 presents the results on the quality of higher education in Uganda. Consistent with positive views of the curriculum, only 8.5% of participants considered it poor or of inferior quality.

**Table 7.** Quality Of Education in Uganda

**Survey question: How would you rate the quality of education in your current study mode? (n = 70)**

Response Option	Frequency	Percentage
Excellent	10	14.3
Good	27	38.6
Average	27	38.6
Poor	5	7.1
Very poor	1	1.4

The majority of students (more than 90%) rated the quality of education in their current study mode as good or just below good (Table 7). However, there is still significant room for improvement, as indicated in Table 8, which allowed the students to highlight areas that need improvement. Only one participant believed that nothing should be improved.

**Table 8.** Student-Identified Areas for Improvement in the Current Study Environment

**Survey question: What improvements would you like to see in your current study environment? (n = 70)**

Response Option	Frequency	Percentage
Clear tasks and objectives	16	22.9
Job market-oriented lessons & certificates	36	51.4
Strong mentorship & support	16	22.9
None of the above	1	1.4
Other	1	1.4

According to the participants, the main issue is job-market-oriented lessons and certificates, which contradict the positive view of the curriculum's relevance in preparing them for their future jobs (as indicated in Table 6). Clear tasks, objectives, strong mentorship and support are equally identified as aspects to be addressed (Table 8). One participant responded with "the first three" under the option "other". Besides the curriculum and study environment, the next topic is the discussion on inequity in financial aid.

#### 7.4. Structural Challenges and Inequity

Regarding structural and inequity aspects, unfortunately, there was only a focus on the financial aspects, but understanding these factors delivered interesting insights. Only 10.3% of participants reported that affording tuition and other fees was not challenging, while 26.5% found it manageable. Despite this, 63.3% found it challenging to afford tuition and other fees (Table 9).

**Table 9.** Student Perceptions of the Financial Difficulty in Affording Tuition and Other Fees

**Survey question: How challenging is it to afford tuition and other fees? (n = 68)**

Response Option	Frequency	Percentage
Extremely challenging	22	32.4
Challenging	21	30.9
Manageable	18	26.5
Not challenging	7	10.3

When the availability of financial aid or scholarships for their education was assessed (Table 10), a contradiction emerged: fewer than 25% of participants reported poor funding availability. More than 75% found the availability satisfactory.

**Table 10.** Perceived Accessibility of Financial Aid and Scholarships Among Students in Uganda

**Survey question: How would you rate the availability of financial aid or scholarships for your education? (n = 68)**

Response Option	Frequency	Percentage
Brilliant	14	20.6
Good	13	19.1
Acceptable	2	2.9
Fair	24	35.3
Poor	15	22.1

For the analysis and presentation of the quantitative results, the survey items relevant to the study's research questions and emerging qualitative themes were integrated.

## 8. DISCUSSION

The four emergent themes from the qualitative results highlight resilience, contradictions in perceptions, strengths and inequalities in Uganda's higher education quality. Integrated with the quantitative findings, these themes collectively illustrate how students strive to succeed in a system that aspires to deliver quality education yet remains constrained by systemic disparities, inconsistent infrastructure and financial challenges. This tension reflects broader challenges outlined in global education, where the ideal of quality education is widely promoted but often unevenly realized in practice [19,24].

Even though challenges are faced in Uganda's HEIs, as identified in both qualitative and quantitative data, resilience as a tool for higher education emerges as a prominent theme as participants navigated overlapping personal and structural challenges, including a lack of emotional and financial support, illness, caregiving duties and part-time employment. Resilience in the academic context is defined in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) as "the capacity of disadvantaged students to achieve higher levels of performance than would be predicted by their family background"

[13, p. 31]. Although participants face challenges identified in this study, most reported successfully focusing on their studies. These findings align with broader research on resilience in higher education, emphasizing that individual perseverance often compensates for institutional shortcomings, particularly in low-resource settings [13]. Agenda 2063 aims to reach its goals on regional and continental levels [2] with a focus on engaging all key stakeholders, research, aligning NDPs frameworks, building a competent workforce and strengthening institutions at all levels [3]. Agenda 2030 further focuses on aspects such as capacity-building, eradicating poverty and hunger, promoting inclusive societies and building resilient infrastructure. As UNESCO [19] states: reaching SDG 4 “requires a holistic, lifelong approach, focusing on individual and societal well-being” (p.4). Therefore, the study advocates that resilience is not only for students to fend for themselves and their studies, but should also be a collective goal for the government and HEIs to support them.

Contradictions in perceived quality of higher education are another central theme in the study, supported by both quantitative and qualitative data. The majority of students rated their educational experience as good or slightly below (Table 7). Yet, disparities in infrastructure and teaching approaches persist (see Sections 6.2, 6.4, 7.2 and 7.4). These results reinforce the idea that while students appreciate their education, there is still significant room for improvement. The contradictions in perceptions of quality highlight the disconnect between policy aspirations and student realities. Many pointed to deteriorating infrastructure, outdated equipment and unreliable access to learning technologies.

The concerns (discussed above) are not isolated; UNESCO et al. [20] report on challenges faced regarding governance and management of education systems. Inadequate internet, limited device access and lack of IT support, as reported in the current study, confirm a persistent digital divide—a critical barrier to equity and modern pedagogical practice. This is reinforced by the UNESCO et al. [20] and AUC [3] call for investment in digital learning platforms. The participants also indicated that tasks and objectives, along with strong mentorship and support, need improvement. However, according to 51.4% of the participants, there was a greater focus on support for job market-oriented lessons and certificates. The findings suggest that the participants may have a limited understanding of what high quality of higher education looks like. Consequently, it is imperative to elucidate the concept of quality education within this context.

An apparent mismatch between academic preparation and labor market needs was observed by Bagonza et al. (2021), who surveyed 244 lecturers, academic leaders and employers from Uganda. They found that graduates often lacked adequate practical skills, which was associated with longer times to secure employment. The authors concluded that Ugandan HEIs need to realign their curricula to the demands of the job market. Furthermore, an international literature review (covering studies from 2020–2024) identified a persistent skills gap in many countries, noting that graduates often “lack market-driven employability skills” required for success in the 21st-century workplace [18, p. 1]. This skills mismatch has been observed in diverse contexts worldwide (from Australia, the U.S., the U.K. and China to South Africa, Vietnam, Spain, Malaysia, India and beyond), indicating a systemic issue rather than an isolated regional problem.

Despite such constraints, the host HEI in Uganda is frequently portrayed by students as a space with quality education and autonomy. Although the host HEI is frequently praised and even ranked among the top HEIs in Uganda, this study identifies gaps. It becomes apparent in responses that highlight persistent issues in teaching, research productivity and graduate competencies. Research from Bwenvu [7] and Nabaho et al. [11] of HEIs in Uganda supports these responses by noting continued shortcomings in teaching quality. These shortcomings include pedagogical quality, poor interprofessional education and engagement, administrative issues that cause campus-wide strikes, and graduates entering the workforce without sufficient practical skills due to weak curricular implementation.

One main perceived strength of the host HEI is that the sense of autonomy in higher education aligns with the resilience theme, as students recognize what is important and overcome challenges to achieve the excellence required for success in life. This further aligns with the vision in Agenda 2063; education is not only a means to employability but also a catalyst for innovation, identity, self-reliance and identity development in Africa [2]. The HEI’s emphasis on independent learning reflects global educational trends that advocate for learner-centered approaches, especially in higher education [15].

Since SDG 4, specifically target 4.7, focuses on education for sustainable development [26], aspects such as improving thinking and understanding information, building social skills, empathy and emotional intelligence, and encouraging positive actions and behaviors [20] should be emphasized, not only allowing students to learn to be independent. The researchers advocate that while autonomy is important and valuable, it can lead to a lack of guidance, hindering students' academic development and workplace readiness.

Finally, the theme of inequity and meritocracy exposes enduring barriers to educational equity. Students' concerns about tuition affordability, limited financial aid and bureaucratic favoritism mirror global financial challenges of higher education systems [20]. The results in Figure 1 highlight the complex relationship between financial dependence and family obligations. While it may seem counterintuitive that students receiving full financial support from their families also report a significant impact on their studies, supporting their families. This likely reflects situations where students both rely on and contribute to their households (whether financially, emotionally or through caregiving roles). The results suggest that students in fully dependent positions may face a double burden: relying on family support while also feeling obligated to support. In contrast, students with no financial dependence might have greater independence, reducing the risk of academic disruption due to family responsibilities. However, this does not mean that the financial burden of paying for their studies does not disrupt their academic performance. The strong link between financial dependence and perceived study impact emphasizes the need for HEIs to recognize the hidden responsibilities many students manage.

Although Agenda 2030 and SDG 4 emphasize the importance of inclusive and equitable quality education [26], implementation remains inconsistent [20]. Differences in access to financial aid, combined with the influence of social capital, illustrate the interaction of economic and cultural capital in shaping students' educational trajectories, as Nash [12] describes. As such, while academic ability remains crucial, success is often mediated by socioeconomic position, a reality that undermines the ideals of equal opportunity and necessitates structural reform.

## 9. LIMITATIONS

A limitation of this study is that only 68-70 of the 78 invited participants completed the survey, which may affect the comprehensiveness of the findings. Additionally, the final sample reflects the think tank participants' network due to snowball sampling and a lack of stratification or diversity quotas. This may not fully represent the broader student population. Furthermore, not all survey results were discussed in the paper, as the study covered only aspects related to higher education quality in relation to SDG 4 dimensions. The necessity for follow-up interviews to clarify survey responses is another limitation, as responses may have been misinterpreted due to cross-cultural differences. To improve future research, it is recommended that the survey be more carefully developed based on the research questions to identify the necessary questions and to consider the need for follow-up interviews for clarification before data collection. Furthermore, the survey format constrained participants' responses, whereas in-depth interviews could yield richer insights into strategies to improve higher educational quality moving forward.

## 10. CONCLUSION

The findings from this study add empirical depth to existing literature on the challenges and potentials of quality higher education in Uganda. The experiences of students at the host HEI and other HEIs in Kampala show that Uganda's higher education system attempts to reach the global and continental goals. The system currently faces inequalities that demand targeted policies, investments and institutional transformations to address its limitations. By connecting local realities to global goals when exploring students' perceptions of higher education quality in Uganda, we conclude that the students have developed resilience as a result of hardships and the autonomy-supported teaching methods used by HEI lecturers. While resilience and autonomy are valuable characteristics, it remains to be explored whether these traits lead to a lack of guidance hindering academic growth and readiness

for the 21st-century workplace, especially in the context of empirically evaluating the quality of higher education in Uganda.

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