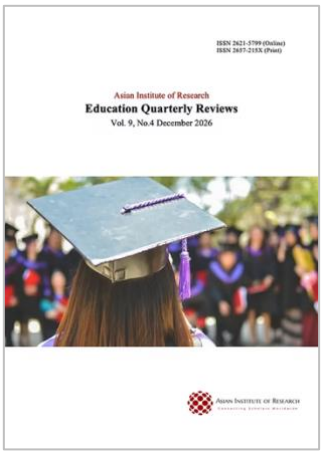

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Scholars or Citizens? Interrogating the Nexus Between Academic Excellence and Civic Engagement in Postgraduate Education at Makerere University

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Abstract
Postgraduate education has traditionally been evaluated through the lens of academic excellence, measured by dissertation/thesis quality, publication output, and disciplinary expertise. However, concerns about educational deficiency arising from the separation of academic development from civic formation are increasingly taking center stage. Using a qualitative, embedded single-case study framed within the civic learning spiral model, this paper examines the nexus between academic development and civic engagement in postgraduate education at Makerere University. We examined how postgraduate students develop self-knowledge; knowledge of communities, cultures, and values; knowledge and skills for civic inquiry; and knowledge of public action, which are essential for civic engagement, alongside academic development. Thematic analysis of data from semi-structured interviews with 10 postgraduate students and nine academic managers, purposively selected across the University, reveals that academic development and civic engagement were not mutually constitutive. Self-knowledge development was credentialist; knowledge of communities, cultures, and values developed incidentally; critical thinking, collaboration, and communication skills developed through research were not used for civic engagement; understanding of social issues and civic processes was narrow; and public action was understood narrowly through the linear academic research cycle rather than recursive civic engagement. Constraints to civic engagement included credentialism, fear of repression, limited time, and a lack of institutional scaffolding. Therefore, the University risks producing highly credentialed graduates with civic disposition but without civic engagement competency, and expertise that remains disconnected from the community. This paper provides policy and practice recommendations to integrate academic development and civic engagement structurally in postgraduate education.

Keywords: academic excellence, civic agency, civic engagement, scholars, citizens, common good, postgraduate education

1. Introduction

A nation's greatness lies in its civil society's ability to contribute to the greater good of humanity (Harkavy & Hodges, 2024). Education at all levels plays a crucial role in unlocking civil society's capabilities through personal development, labor-market preparation, an advanced knowledge base, and preparation for life as active citizens in democratic societies (Council of Europe, 2021, p.5). However, a recurrent concern is that universities have a

skewed focus on academic development; the civic dimension, that is, developing students' civic mindedness and competences for civic engagement, has been comparatively neglected (Taylor et al., 2020; Teixeira & Klemenčič, 2021). Research on civic engagement has largely focused on the undergraduate level (van den Wijngaard et al., 2024), leaving practical gaps in postgraduate students' ability to enact their civic agency. While mechanisms for cultivating academic excellence have been extensively researched, the development of civic engagement competences among postgraduate students remains unclear (Albulescu, 2024).

In Uganda, the foundation for university education was shaped by colonial legacy and unique historical events (Mandela et al., 2024). Makerere University, Uganda's flagship university, holds historic significance in developing students' academic and civic engagement competencies. The University declared an aspiration to become research-led (Makerere University, 2020). Research-led universities were founded with a civic mission and, as they provide the bulk of postgraduate education, can serve as a major pipeline for leadership development for civic engagement (Ransom, 2024). However, trends in students' civic engagement at the University over recent decades show a fading of hope due to an uncertain institutional environment (Felde, 2025). Like other African countries, and following European models, more focus is placed on elite education measured by academic excellence (Owusu-Agyeman & Fourie-Malherbe, 2021).

Universities aspiring to become research-led, such as Makerere University, hold a unique position as hubs of knowledge, innovation, and leadership development that not only prepare students for academic and professional success but also shape their character as socially conscious and responsible citizens. However, in the context of Uganda's development priorities, the Fourth National Development Plan (NDPIV) 2025/26–2029/30 identifies inadequate civic responsibility and limited civic engagement as factors that complicate overall development efforts in Uganda. Against this background, this paper interrogates the nexus between academic excellence and civic engagement in postgraduate education at Makerere University. Drawing from the civic learning spiral model (Musil, 2009), we examine mechanisms for developing postgraduate students' self-knowledge; knowledge of communities, cultures and values; civic inquiry knowledge and skills; and public action knowledge, alongside academic knowledge development. The paper proceeds through an introduction and key concepts, a review of related literature, methodology, findings, discussions, conclusions, and recommendations.

2. Conceptualization

This paper focuses on the nexus between academic excellence and civic engagement in postgraduate education at Makerere University. This section provides a snapshot conceptualization of the two terms.

2.1 Civic Engagement

Civic engagement is a multifaceted concept, often used interchangeably with terms such as community engagement, community outreach, public participation, and citizen participation (van den Wijngaard et al., 2024, p.53; Trappett, 2023). Ehrlich (2000, p. vi) defines civic engagement as "working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values, and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community through both political and non-political processes." Jacoby (2009, p.59) defines it as "acting on a heightened sense of responsibility to one's communities that encompasses the notions of global citizenship and interdependence, participation in building civil society, and empowering individuals as agents of positive social change to promote social justice locally and globally". In essence, civic engagement is a pathway to cultivate social change and the common good.

Teixeira and Klemenčič (2021) conceptualize civic engagement as an overarching learning process. The outcome encompasses multiple forms: volunteerism, service-learning or course-based civic engagement, community-based experiential learning and internships, and community-based or engaged research, each usually beginning as a pedagogical approach or inquiry paradigm for examining community issues, with the ultimate aim being "to bolster the socioeconomic, environmental, political, and physical health of individuals and groups within communities at local, national, and global levels" (p.184). As Albulescu (2024) notes, civic engagement spans a

wide spectrum, from conventional participation, such as volunteering and membership in local associations, to more assertive activism, including advocacy, protest, and organized collective action.

Drawing on Albulescu (2024), Teixeira and Klemenčič (2021), Trappett (2023), and van den Wijngaard et al. (2024), this paper defines civic engagement as an overarching learning process and outcome of education. As a process, it encompasses volunteerism, service-learning, community-based experiential learning, and engaged research. As an outcome, it is active participation in the public life of a community or society in an informed, committed, and constructive manner, focused on the common good. This conceptualization resists the common tendency to equate civic engagement narrowly with electoral or political participation. It is argued here that postgraduate education should develop students' civic engagement competencies (knowledge, skills, values) alongside academic excellence, enabling students to succeed in public life, lead social change, and undertake actions that positively impact the quality of life in society.

2.2 Academic Excellence

Nurturing academic excellence is a fundamental universal given in postgraduate education, though the term is defined differently because it is imprecise. The most widely used parameters for academic excellence are quantitative scientometric measures, ranging from publication counts and various forms of the h-index to more complex measures such as the g-index, the scientist impact factor, and the u-index (Rosenfled et al., 2025). To counter such purely quantitative scientometrics, Rosenfled et al. introduce a measure of researchers' propensity to produce highly cited publications, the "academic midas touch" (AMT).

In postgraduate education, originality is considered the cornerstone of academic excellence, understood as a valuable contribution to existing knowledge through novel insights, theories, and disruptive science. A key indicator of originality is the ability to publish in recognized peer-reviewed outlets, which Ngulube (2025) calls "publishability". However, calls continue to move away from purely quantitative metrics (Yu et al., 2026). Ngulube argues that originality should be measured by creativity and inventiveness as well as novelty, while Rosenfled et al. (2025) contend that the integration of teaching, research, and engagement, not research output alone, is pivotal in nurturing academic excellence with wider societal impact.

In essence, this paper defines academic excellence in postgraduate education as a product of an environment in which teaching, research, and community engagement are interdependent and mutually beneficial. Excellence is measured not only by established academic norms of originality, but also by the ability to respond to societal needs, a nexus we argue can be attained only when civic engagement is structurally embedded in postgraduate education. Postgraduate education is defined, per the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED), as Levels 7 and 8: master's degree or equivalent and doctoral degree or equivalent (UNESCO-UIS, 2012).

3. Review of Related Literature

The review first examines the global discourse on the nexus between civic engagement and academic development in higher education, then situates it within the Ugandan context.

3.1 The Global Context

For many decades, there has been a lopsided emphasis on academic excellence and the individualized pecuniary benefits of university education; the civic purpose has not received the attention it deserves. Historical roots of university education's role in civic engagement trace to the rise of the "civic universities" in the nineteenth-century US, "from Thomas Jefferson's University of Virginia, to the Land Grant Universities" (Annette, 2010, p. 453), and to the pragmatic ideals of John Dewey, Ernest Boyer, Robert Putnam, and African-American educators and activists (Boyer, 1996; Ehrlich, 2000; Putnam, 2000). Jane Addams's settlement houses in the 1800s laid early foundations for civic engagement in higher education (Daynes & Longo, 2004), and US universities developed comparatively elaborate approaches to civic engagement by the nineteenth century (Cress & Stokamer, 2020; Hartley & Saltmarsh, 2016; Hoyt, 2014), though mainly at the undergraduate level.

These developments culminated in re-examination of traditional pedagogy, scholarship, and disciplinary reward systems both in the US and worldwide. In the UK, the civic idealism of the Scottish Enlightenment influenced the undergraduate curriculum in the late nineteenth century, seen in the "civic universities" founded by reforming elites in England's industrial cities (Annette, 2010, p.454). Nevertheless, a lopsided academic focus remained a key feature of policy across the US, Canada, the UK, Australia, and New Zealand for decades, and the social, public, or common good of higher education continued to be neglected (Marginson, 2024), so civic engagement did not receive the scholarship it deserves.

In sub-Saharan Africa, colonial legacies, independence movements, and socio-political change shaped higher education development (Hoyt, 2014). In the pre-colonial era, communities emphasized transmitting sage knowledge and developing leadership through elders and councils, training young people in decision-making and social service. Between the 1880s and 1960s, Africa's first-generation universities, following European models, focused on elite education measured by academic excellence rather than civic engagement (Owusu-Agyeman & Fourie-Malherbe, 2021).

By the late 1980s, universities in Africa struggled for academic freedom and institutional autonomy under repressive governments, pushing academics and students into political debate for functioning democracy. Nevertheless, student activism declined under government repression, limiting leadership development for civic engagement. Lack of synergy between the university's historical teaching-and-research role and its socio-economic development role resulted in weak impact on the immediate community and wider society (Bekele & Ofoyuru, 2021; Ransom, 2024). As Molebatsi (2022) notes, the difficulty of balancing the instrumental role against the vision of an intrinsic public good, such as free speech and critical scholarship, continues to undermine civic engagement.

3.2 Ugandan Context

Uganda's National Development Plan Four (NDPIV) 2025/26–2029/30 identifies inadequacy of "civic responsibility, limited civic engagement, a culture of dependency, harmful social and cultural norms, poor information and health-seeking behavior, limited or uncoordinated information, extremely colonized mindset, and weak community mobilization structures at the grassroots" as factors which "complicate overall development efforts" in Uganda (Republic of Uganda, 2025, p. 197). Despite efforts to mobilize communities for development, responsiveness is low. Government programs such as PDM, EMYOOGA, Universal Primary Education (UPE), Universal Secondary Education (USE), the Uganda Women Empowerment Program (UWEP), the Youth Livelihood Program (YLP), and the Youth Venture Capital Fund (YVCF) have not been fully utilized by the targeted population (p. 197). This scenario points to gaps in leadership development for civic engagement in Uganda's education system, yet civic engagement plays a critical role in driving social change (Albulescu, 2024; Marginson, 2023, 2024).

Makerere University, as a research-led flagship university, is uniquely positioned to contribute to leadership development for civic engagement in Uganda. Since declaring its research-led aspiration in 2008, the University has been consolidating that status by addressing emerging societal needs through skilling, research, and innovation, and by influencing policy in NDPIV priority areas. A major thrust of the strategy is educating students to be local, national and global citizens (Makerere University, 2026; 2020). Although some academic units organize open days and participate in public debates (Amutuhaire, 2023), existing initiatives focus narrowly on undergraduate-level community outreach, and the 2024 graduate handbook of policies, guidelines, and procedures includes no plans for civic engagement (Makerere University, 2024).

Research-led universities hold a unique position as hubs of knowledge, innovation, and leadership development, not only preparing students for professional success but also shaping their character as socially conscious citizens and accelerating higher education's return to its civic mission (Ransom, 2024; Teixeira & Klemenčič, 2021). However, Makerere University prioritizes engagement with industry, taking a "technology first" approach (Makerere University, 2020, p. 11); civic leadership development has not been given the weight it deserves, though

it forms part of the sub-themes envisioning students as local, national and global citizens (p. 13). The strategic plan uses the terminology "community outreach" (p. 19), not civic engagement. Against this backdrop, we examine the nexus between civic engagement and academic excellence in postgraduate education at Makerere University.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study adopted an embedded single case study design, enabling in-depth exploration of the nexus between leadership development for civic engagement and academic excellence in postgraduate education. The design enabled examination of multiple units (the Colleges) nested within a single bounded case (Makerere University), as suggested by Yin (2018), capturing both institutional complexity and the contextual richness of specific Colleges as sub-units.

4.2 Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, eliciting rich, first-hand insights from lived experience, and documentary review of institutional and policy documents, which corroborated, contextualized, and triangulated the interview data. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, a non-probability technique enabling identification of individuals with relevant knowledge or expertise, in line with Creswell and Poth (2018). Nine academic managers at the college and department levels, and 10 postgraduate students were selected across the constituent colleges of Makerere University: College of Computing and Information Sciences (COCIS), College of Humanities and Social Sciences (CHUSS), College of Education and External Studies (CEES), College of Business and Management Sciences (COBAMS), College of Health Sciences (CHS), College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences (CAES), College of Veterinary Medicine, Animal Resources and Biosecurity (COVAB), College of Engineering, Design, Art and Technology (CEDAT), and the School of Law.

Trustworthiness was ensured by following Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria: credibility through methodological triangulation of interviews and documents; transferability through thick, detailed description of context, participants, and processes; dependability through transparent, systematic documentation of procedures; and confirmability through reflexivity and an audit trail of raw data, field notes, and analytical decisions. We adhered to ethical principles by seeking informed consent, informing participants of their right to voluntary participation, and using pseudonyms to protect participants' identity. Table 1 presents the pseudonyms used to represent participants.

Table 1: Pseudonyms for Participants

College	Academic Managers	Postgraduate Candidates
College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences (CAES)	AMCO1	PSCOA
College of Engineering, Design, Art and Technology (CEDAT)	AMCO2	PSCOB
College of Health Sciences (CHS)	AMCO3	PSCOC
College of Humanities and Social Sciences (CHUSS)	AMCO4	PSCOD
College of Business and Management Sciences (COBAMS)	AMCO5	PSCOE
College of Computing and Information Sciences (COCIS)	AMCO6	PSCOF
College of Natural Sciences (CONAS)	AMCO7	PSCOG
College of Veterinary Medicine, Animal Resources and Biosecurity (COVAB)	AMCO8	PSCOH
College of Education and External Studies (CEES)	AMCO9	PSCOI
School of Law		PSCOJ

Note. The suffix "AM" denotes academic manager, "PS" denotes postgraduate candidate, and "CO" denotes college. Source: Authors.

4.3 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed thematically, following Bryman's (2012) phases of qualitative data analysis: familiarization through reading and rereading, inductive generation of initial codes, collation of codes into candidate themes, review and refinement against the coded extracts and entire dataset, and definition, naming, and organization of themes into a coherent narrative. This study draws its analytical lens from the civic learning spiral model, developed under the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) and articulated by Musil (2009). The civic learning spiral model advances a dynamic, non-hierarchical understanding of civic development applicable at all levels of education. At its core lie six interwoven "braids": self, communities and culture, knowledge, skills, values, and public action. According to the model, these braids develop simultaneously; each turn of the spiral illustrates how civic learning deepens and matures progressively rather than at a single fixed point.

The civic learning spiral model was a suitable analytical lens for this study because it conceptualizes civic learning as inseparable from academic development, positioning both as mutually constitutive processes within the broader mission of higher education. It frames civic learning as the attainment of the knowledge, skills, values, and capacities students need to be actively and purposefully engaged in society. This makes it theoretically well suited to examining the interplay between civic engagement and academic development in postgraduate education. We adapted the model by combining the communities and cultures braid with the values braid, and the knowledge braid with the skills braid, as these are inextricably related. We examined how postgraduate education at Makerere University cultivates students' self-knowledge development (self-awareness, identity and role, intercultural knowledge, personal agency); knowledge of communities, cultures and values (awareness of diverse communities, commitment to civic values such as justice, integrity, and responsibility); knowledge and skills for civic inquiry (critical understanding of social issues; critical thinking, collaboration, and communication); and public action knowledge (translating knowledge and values into volunteering, advocacy, and engagement in public debates and forums).

5. Findings

The findings reveal a structural asymmetry between academic development and civic engagement in postgraduate education at Makerere University. Civic engagement is consistently subordinated to academic development across curricular design, pedagogical practice, and institutional priority. Interpreted through the civic learning spiral, this asymmetry indicates incomplete enactment of the model's central thesis, that academic development and civic development advance through mutually reinforcing, recursive cycles. Where civic development did occur, it was not codified within program structures, supervision frameworks, or assessment criteria, suggesting its structural disconnection from academic development. The following sections present findings according to the four constitutive elements examined: self-knowledge development; knowledge of communities, cultures and values; knowledge and skills for civic inquiry; and public action knowledge.

5.1 Self-Knowledge Development in Postgraduate Education

Across all the constituent colleges of Makerere University, participants described a hybrid or layered self, combining scholarly, professional, and quasi-parental or civic roles that postgraduate study helped them develop and legitimize. For instance, one student described his identity as follows: "I look at myself from three angles: teacher, parent, and agent of socialization" (PSCOD). Similarly, another student described her identity, saying, "my identity is that of a bridge builder. . . connects technical knowledge with practical social techniques" (PSCOF). Similarly, another student described a multiple identity, expressing that: "I see myself maybe as a population scientist or specialist with a dual identity. . . more in scholarship or writing, also a practitioner" (PSCOE). Thus, postgraduate education appears to develop self-knowledge less by giving students a new identity than by helping them integrate and reposition identities they already hold.

The postgraduate status served as a source of expert power; self-identity came from the qualification itself. One of the PhD students had this to say: "With the social status of being a PhD candidate, people listen to you. . . I've

tried to share the knowledge I've acquired in the simplest way possible (PSCOD). Similarly, a master's student expressed that, "When someone hears that a person is a master's student, they presume you have a lot of knowledge and a lot of wisdom. . . it has really placed me somewhere in society (PSCOI). This suggests that self-knowledge development among postgraduate students was credentialist.

The status conferred by self-identity was seen as double-edged**;** it can open paths to civic engagement or detach scholars from their communities, as seen in the expressions of the participants, such as: "PhDs in Uganda are being trained to become a problem, not a solution. . . I create my own island" (PSCOD). Relatedly, PSCOJ stated that:

> The current education system is focusing more on delivering academics or academicians, people that can sit in class, do exams, pass, and then go and seek employment and do technical work. . . It is mainly now an individual effort to ensure that you build your capacity in that line as well. . . to engage.

Further, the findings show that self-knowledge among postgraduate students was shaped relationally through engaging with difference, dialogue and support within cohorts, forums and supervisory relationships. Notably, one of the PhD candidates voiced that;

> We are confronted with differences in cultural context, data interpretation, and lived experiences... but it builds us, like you have to know yourself; I can call it self-awareness, that you will get to know yourself and have that empathy towards others. (PSCOE)

Self-knowledge development was therefore largely an unintended by-product of postgraduate study rather than a planned outcome**. As a result**, self-knowledge developed unevenly among postgraduate students and was not linked to civic engagement leadership.

5.2 Development of Knowledge of Communities, Cultures, and Values in Postgraduate Education

The findings show that cultural diversity is experienced as a backdrop; postgraduate students come to understand it by encountering it in mixed classes and field research work; data collection, community-based research, and attachments put students among communities. Thus, intercultural learning and diversity awareness emerged as attitudinal civic learning outcomes that shifted postgraduate students from ascriptive judgments based on tribe and ethnicity toward an individuating, objective stance. For instance, a PhD student said: "Graduate education has helped me understand that we go beyond our culture. . . I should not exclude people from other cultures or communities, but come learn from them. .. Being objective" (PSCOI). Another student expressed that: "The graduate program, especially during activities like data collection and all these things, allows us to learn about how diverse our country is" (PSCOB). This shift was credited to lived experiences in research during data collection. Field research enabled the development of cultural neutrality and understanding of community challenges, needs, and values.

Intercultural knowledge development occurred largely through peer learning during seminars, workshops, group discussions, cross-cutting courses, and informal interactions. Students built their own infrastructure, such as associations and WhatsApp platforms, to fill the institutional gap. Respect for beliefs emerged as the core of what students learn about other cultures, as expressed in this illustrative excerpt:

> So, you have to consider that with respect. You do not impose on them your thoughts. But you try to bring them to understanding... First, understand what the person believes in. Why do they believe it like that? And how can you help them? And maybe you can also learn from them; you could be the one who's wrong. (PSCOH)

Intercultural learning occurs through fragile student-initiated mechanisms, not formal institutional arrangements. Informal interactions during research work enabled students to develop humility, building their disposition for

respect, listening, and non-imposition toward communities. However, this was not directly linked to civic engagement leadership.

Postgraduate students' knowledge of civic values developed implicitly and incidentally. Civic values are encountered when one's research happens to touch them. One of the students had this to say:

> The course is not so direct about this. But in one way or the other, it is usually when we are conducting this research that we do that; you might meet some of these things. . . It's up to you as a person to go to the community. (PSCOH)

Thus, informal relationships, sense of personal responsibility, and logic account for the development of civic values among postgraduate students in the absence of formal institutional mechanisms. Inadequate knowledge of communities, cultures, and values among postgraduate students was attributed to a lack of intentional mechanisms, overburdened, isolated students with no meeting spaces:

> Students have limited participation in these mechanisms. At some point, I'm thinking the mechanisms are not well communicated... and students are overburdened... If the university had spots or spaces where students can meet, sit, eat, drink, and share problems and solutions here and there, that would be the first mechanism. (PSCOB)

Students from the natural sciences described learning about communities, cultures and values as largely disconnected from their training, and incidental to fieldwork logistics, such as needing community trust for sample collection, not as a stated curricular goal. Humanities participants frame learning intercultural knowledge and civic values through logic and ethical reasoning applied to daily judgment. Thus, students internalized intercultural knowledge and civic values differently: reasoned personal ethics in the humanities, research ethics in STEM. This shows that postgraduate students developed knowledge of communities, cultures, and values through informal learning.

5.3 Development of Civic Inquiry Knowledge and Skills in Postgraduate Education

The findings show that critical thinking, collaboration and communication skills develop strongly through the mechanics of postgraduate research, but understanding of social issues and civic processes among postgraduate students was weak. Most participants attributed their understanding of social issues to lived experience, noting that postgraduate training leaves no time for civic life because students are over-engaged with academic knowledge and examinations, which they linked to a lack of institutional commitment to civic engagement. For example, one manager said, "For me, I think there is no dedicated commitment to this. Because usually people are minding about exams, academics, and all that" (AMCO1). This illustrates disjunction between academic development and civic formation in postgraduate education.

The findings revealed a shrinking space for civic inquiry. The postgraduate research process was the most prominent avenue for developing critical thinking; data analysis, literature review, publishing, and critiquing others' papers were the key mechanisms through which students learn to think critically. However, its transfer to civic reasoning was not explicit:

> I think we have remained more theoretical rather than engaging with real community issues in our societies... we no longer have those strong academic and civic discussions at Makerere... Even in the classes where we go to teach, sometimes the government has spies. You can't rule that out, so sometimes there's a tendency to teach in terms rather than go straight to the point. (AMCO2)

Collaboration and communication skills developed unevenly as practiced skills. Collaboration was learned through group work, multi-institution research teams, partnerships, work with communities, and peer networks. Similarly, communication skills developed among postgraduate students as practiced skills through presenting and defending

their dissertations and theses, rather than through deliberate instruction in formal, structured communication skills training. Thus, the skills developed were purely academic, not for civic engagement.

Generally, the findings show that critical thinking, collaboration, communication skills, and knowledge of civic processes and issues develop among postgraduate students incidentally through research and lived experiences, not through any dedicated formal curriculum. However, the translation of this knowledge and these skills from academic reasoning to civic inquiry for civic engagement was not explicit. Thus, the focus was on academic knowledge and skills development; development of students' civic agency remained peripheral.

5.4 Development of Public Action Knowledge in Postgraduate Education

The findings reveal that postgraduate students acquire public action knowledge largely through the mechanics of doing research, but the space for public action was constrained. Public action was largely interpreted as citizens demanding services, collectively owning problems, contesting dominant groups' oppression, or raising alarms during disasters such as pandemics. This means that postgraduate students draw their understanding through their own lived experiences, not any organized curricula or civic engagement:

> Graduate education has clarified to me the relationship between knowledge and action, and I now appreciate that research and academic inquiry are not the ends in themselves, but should ultimately inform better decisions and interventions in the real world. (PSCOF)

Practice- and product-based translation of knowledge for public action occurred through three routes: research outputs that programs expect, namely publications, policy briefs and community dissemination; practice-based work, most fully developed in clinical programs where students work on hospital wards, through placements, partner projects and local meetings, mainly at master's level; and newer routes such as the innovation hub and media. However, these routes are embedded in academic programs purely for academic development, not deliberate civic engagement programs such as service learning and volunteering. This demonstrates a disjunction between academic development and civic development in postgraduate education at the University.

These findings show that postgraduate education at Makerere University provides purely academic avenues for translating knowledge into public action. Dedicated avenues for civic engagement such as volunteering and service learning were absent. This places postgraduate students, the group expected to lead knowledge production, farthest from practice for public action. Credential-seeking inclination among postgraduate students and fear of repression when engaging in public action, particularly engaging in public debates on civic and social issues, were the prominent constraints, as expressed by this academic manager:

> One of the biggest challenges we have with our graduate students is the fact that many of them return here to do graduate studies to get certificates to protect their jobs. . . They are here only to get the papers to protect their jobs. (AMCOB)

Lamenting the constrained civic space at the University and fear of repression, one of the students had this to say;

> The University community as it is right now favors a person that is aggressive enough... but for an introvert, I don't think... the civic space in the university itself has greatly declined... There's an unawareness problem which we cannot overlook. Still, there is also a lack of interest from the current breed of students... a country which does not actually appreciate dissent. . . so students have learned to settle for less. . . once they are maybe getting a meal a day and being able to sleep, they're like that's enough. (PSCOJ)

Thus, the absence of deliberate structures accounts for why students experience civic engagement leadership as a personal undertaking. Participants suggested engineering public action as an unprompted intervention to optimize institutional processes for public action leadership development among postgraduate students at the curricular and structural levels. At the curricular level, they suggested developing cross-cutting courses in civic or political

education, leadership and communication skills training, and civic engagement pedagogy such as service learning and volunteering, and embedding them in curricula, as well as implementing competence-based curricula in postgraduate education. At the structural level, they proposed inclusive induction of doctoral students and promotion criteria that reward civic engagement. This demonstrates participants' positive disposition towards public action.

Overall, the findings show that public action is understood among postgraduate students narrowly through the linear academic production cycle; that is, do research, publish, disseminate, maybe influence policy; rather than through recursive civic engagement which entails organizing public debates, advocacy, voting, community engagement, volunteering, and service learning. This suggests that academic discipline expertise developed during postgraduate education does not translate well into contributing to the common good in society.

Discussion of Findings

The findings illuminate a structural asymmetry between academic development and civic engagement in postgraduate education at Makerere University. Musil's (2009) civic learning model conceives civic learning as a recursive, non-hierarchical process in which knowledge of self; communities, cultures, and values; knowledge and skills for civic inquiry; and public action knowledge continuously inform and deepen one another. In contrast, this study finds that academic development advances through formalized mechanisms, while knowledge of civic engagement develops largely outside formal structures, sustained by individual initiative. This finding extends existing scholarship on the neglect of civic engagement in higher education (Taylor et al., 2020; Teixeira & Klemenčič, 2021). The findings show active neglect of knowledge and skills development for civic engagement at the postgraduate level, where academic metrics are structurally privileged as markers of success, corroborating Rosenfeld et al. (2025) and Ngulube (2025).

This study found that postgraduate students' self-knowledge development was credentialist and self-authorized. Participants described a hybrid identity that draws its legitimacy from the postgraduate status rather than from any deliberate curricula or pedagogical processes that cultivate structured reflection. This aligns with Molebatsi (2022), who observed tension between the university's instrumental and public-good functions. Equally, the findings corroborate Marginson (2026), who questions the neglect of the public good of higher education in favor of the instrumental value. This study reveals that credentialing gives postgraduate students identity and social standing, but the capacity to use that self-identity for the common good remains underdeveloped.

The findings show that postgraduate students develop knowledge of communities, cultures, and values incidentally through encounters with peers or as a by-product of disciplinary research. This confirms the global literature on universities' civic mission that experiential, field-based learning can shift attitudes toward diversity (Hjortsø et al., 2026). Participants converged on the observation that no structured mechanisms existed for learning about communities, cultures, and values, and that, without such mechanisms, postgraduate education can detach students from communities. This finding offers empirical support for Ransom (2024), who argued that research-led universities risk producing socially disconnected expertise unless they develop deliberate structures for engaged scholarship. Bengtsen & Barnett (2020) explain that cultural formation rests on the possibility and ability of academics and universities to intersect and contribute to public debates, events, and initiatives that mediate and resolve conflicts between value and belief systems in culturally complex societies.

This study found that knowledge and skills such as critical thinking, collaboration, and communication were strongly cultivated through research, but largely as by-products of academic development rather than civic competences. Students' understanding of social issues and civic processes was underdeveloped. This finding resonates with Taylor et al. (2020) and Teixeira and Klemenčič (2021), who raise concerns that universities have neglected their civic duty to develop students' civic mindedness and civic engagement competences. Equally, the findings align with Van den Wijngaard et al. (2024), who note that the focus on civic engagement has largely been at the undergraduate level, as an outcome of learning. Similarly, Albulescu (2024) argues that while the processes by which universities cultivate academic development are well established, how universities empower students to enact their civic agency remains insufficiently understood.

This study unveiled a disconnect between academic development and public action. Participants equated translating knowledge into public action with the linear academic research cycle, a technocratic conception divorced from the notion of the common good. Ehrlich (2000), Jacoby (2009), and Teixeira and Klemenčič (2021) note that public action encompasses advocacy, organizing, and sustaining public participation. This study finds that structural and political barriers, along with fear of repression, constrained students' active participation in public action. However, students had a civic disposition; this suggests that the deficit in students' public action is not due to a lack of motivation, but to a deficit in institutional design. This aligns with McKenna et al. (2025), who argue that many African universities have adopted a market-oriented understanding of their purpose over the common good. These findings also align with Sam et al. (2019), who found that perceived barriers were a significant factor in university students' political participation in Ghana and Kenya.

Overall, this study unveiled the underdevelopment of postgraduate students' civic agency. Consequently, the disciplinary expertise developed in postgraduate education does not translate into public action for the common good. These findings carry weight beyond Makerere University. Uganda's fourth National Development Plan (NDP IV) identifies weak civic responsibility and limited civic engagement as factors that "complicate overall development efforts" (Republic of Uganda, 2025, p. 197). If research-led universities such as Makerere do not deliberately cultivate civic engagement competencies alongside academic excellence at the postgraduate level, they risk producing highly credentialed graduates with civic disposition but without civic capacity, and expertise disconnected from the communities they are meant to serve. Addressing this gap is therefore not only an institutional responsibility for Makerere University, but a matter with implications for national development.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined the nexus between academic excellence and civic engagement in postgraduate education at Makerere University. The study unveiled a deficit in knowledge and skills for civic engagement among postgraduate students due to a skewed focus on academic excellence. The study concludes that the deficit in civic engagement competency among postgraduate students is not attributable to a lack of civic disposition. Still, it results from institutional design that privileges academic development. Therefore, the University risks producing highly credentialed graduates who possess civic disposition without civic engagement competency, and expertise that remains disconnected from the communities it is meant to serve.

Based on the findings and their implications, the following recommendations are proposed for Makerere University and, by extension, other research-led universities in similar contexts: First, the University should embed civic engagement in curricular and policy frameworks. Civic engagement should be explicitly defined and scaffolded structurally in postgraduate education. Secondly, the University should introduce dedicated cross-cutting, credit-bearing courses in civic engagement, civic engagement pedagogy, and public communication. Civic engagement should be integrated into postgraduate supervision and assessment. Supervision frameworks and assessment criteria should include explicit expectations for community-based research and public dissemination, translating the linear academic production cycle into a more recursive model that includes advocacy and sustained community partnership. Collectively, these recommendations point to a single overarching principle: academic excellence and civic engagement should be structurally interdependent in postgraduate education. This can be achieved only through deliberate institutional scaffolding that nurtures both academic excellence and the common good.

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