

Institutional Practices for Internationalization of Research at the University of Juba, South Sudan

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Abstract

Internationalization of research is a key pillar for a university's global engagement. However, the extent of internationalization at the University of Juba remains unclear. This article examines institutional practices for research internationalization, gathering data from 14 knowledgeable participants. Findings identify a lack of resources, clear guidelines, and policies, with research largely limited to international collaborations and partnerships. The University of Juba should focus on developing comprehensive policies and guidelines that define a clear strategy, goals, and objectives for internationalizing research.

Keywords: University of Juba, international, research, collaboration, partnership, networking

1. Introduction

Worldwide, the internationalization of higher education has been positioned as an important development element in the advancement of higher education (De Wit, 2023). Currently, universities use internationalization as a means of status building by enhancing the institution's profile and ranking, graduate employability, quality of teaching and learning, research outputs and collaborations, and generation of revenue by admitting international students, among others (De Wit & Altbach, 2021; Marginson, 2023).

Like other universities worldwide, the University of Juba aspires to become an internationalized University. This is seen in the vision and mission expressed in the Juba University Master Plan (Akec, 2014). The university has established a directorate for international and alumni affairs, but anecdotal evidence points to the inadequacy of operational practices to comprehensively approach internationalization at the University (Akec, 2016).

The internationalization of research is considered one of the major pillars of the internationalization of universities. However, for the University of Juba, the extent of the institutional practices for the internationalization of research is not yet well understood. This scenario may retard the attainment of the university's aspirations of internationalization. This study therefore purposed to assess the institutional practices for the internationalization of research at the University of Juba.

In the conceptualization of the internationalization of research, scholars make a distinction between two basic dimensions: the international content or topics of research, and international networks or research collaborations (Rostan & Höhle, 2014). Internationalization through research collaboration is seen as a process of exchange of knowledge, values, and ideas across borders (Haley et al., 2024).

Van Den Besselaar et al. (2012) identified five dimensions of internationalization of research: flow of resources from abroad, a measure of how much of an institution's research budget is financed from foreign sources; knowledge production, or the number of internationally coauthored publications as a proxy for international research collaboration; knowledge circulation, referring to the shared experiences and practices of research undertaken with others; collaboration and networking, as measured by the budget available for joint research and the capacity to share infrastructure and other resources; and governance and processes, meaning the extent to which researchers and experts from other countries are involved in activities such as recruitment committees and panels of review in evaluation. Haley et al. (2024) added the dimension of organization of research fora, characterized by participation in knowledge exchange opportunities organized by the institution to provide opportunities for new ideas to be created, shared, and developed into collaborative research projects. In this study, the practices of internationalization of research at the University of Juba were examined regarding the international networks and research collaborations along the six dimensions identified by Van Den Besselaar et al. (2012) and Haley et al. (2024).

This study adapted Theodore Schatzki's principles of practice as a theoretical framework to examine the institutional practices for internationalization of the curriculum at the University of Juba. Schatzki defines practice as a temporally evolving, open-ended set of doings and sayings linked by four principles: practical understanding, rules, tele-affective structure, and general understanding (Schatzki, 2002).

Practical understanding comprises the know-how and implicit knowledge of those responsible for internationalization to conduct, recognize, and react to other activities presumed necessary in the internationalization of a university. Rules, in this context, refer to policies, strategies, governance, procedures, and statements that will make internationalization possible. Tele-affective structure refers to the goals to be achieved through internationalization and how these goals are shaped by various emotional components and motivations (Clegg & Cunha, 2019). The goals of internationalization, such as enhancing the institution's profile, improving graduate employability, and improving the quality of teaching and learning, are shaped by the institution's vision, mission, and policies. The last principle, general understanding, refers to the values that shape practices; in this context, the values of a university as expressed through its vision, mission, and policies must be upheld in the university's drive for internationalization.

The study has generated useful information for policy makers at the University of Juba which they can use to develop sound policies on internationalization of research. The findings and recommendations of the study may guide planning and practice by administrators and managers of activities for internationalization research at the University of Juba.

2. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research approach, specifically utilizing phenomenology design. Phenomenology design, as suggested by Denzin and Lincoln (2011), and Merriam and Tisdell (2015), allowed for a rich and nuanced understanding of the participants' experiences and perceptions of the institutional practices for the internationalization of research at the University of Juba, which is particularly relevant in this context given the university's unique historical and cultural context.

The study was conducted at the University of Juba in South Sudan. Both primary and secondary data were collected through interviewing and review of relevant documents, such as university policies, strategic plans, and reports on internationalization initiatives. These provided a contextual understanding of the university's practices for internationalization research. Data collection encompassed the period from the start of the implementation of the current strategic plan for the University of Juba to date, which corresponds with the period when the university is implementing its strategic direction of becoming an internationalized university.

Through purposive sampling, primary data was collected from a total of 14 participants who partook in the study. These included two participants from top management; one participant each from the Directorates of International Relations and Alumni Affairs, Academic Affairs, Human Resource Management, Internationally Funded Projects and University Enterprise Development, and the research department; and six participants from the university board. The selection of these participants was based on their positions and the special roles they play within the university, which are critical to understanding institutional practices and decisions related to the internationalization of research (Creswell, 2013).

To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to represent the participants. Those from top management were represented as TM1, TM2, TM3; directors of the units were represented as PD1, PD2, PD3, PD4, PD5; while members of the university board were represented as UB1, UB2, UB3, UB4, UB5, UB6. Participants were asked about their experiences and views on institutional practices for the internationalization of research in terms of flow of resources, knowledge production, knowledge circulation, collaboration, partnerships and networking, research governance and processes, and organization of research fora.

Thematic content analysis was used to analyze qualitative data obtained from key informant interviews and using Atlas.ti 9 software, allowing for the extraction of meaningful patterns, themes, and relationships from the data.

3. Findings

This section contains findings on institutional practices for the internationalization of research at the University of Juba in South Sudan. Participants were asked about their experiences and views on institutional practices for the internationalization of research in terms of flow of resources, knowledge production, knowledge circulation, collaboration, partnerships and networking, research governance and processes, and organization of research fora.

The views expressed by the participants based on their lived experiences show that there was limited research collaboration between the University of Juba and other institutions, both locally and internationally; limited research funding available for academic staff to conduct research; limited support for research activities and access to research facilities and equipment; limited publication outputs of academic staff; and inadequate research quality assurance mechanisms.

The participants acknowledged the need for the university to expand its research networks and revealed that the university was increasingly establishing international partnerships with multinational bodies to leverage funding for research and international collaborative research partnerships with other universities, as noted by TM3:

I am proud to say that we have established partnerships with several international organizations such as the African Union, the United Nations, and the World Bank. We also have partnerships with universities in countries such as South Korea, China, and India. These partnerships have enabled us to collaborate on research projects, exchange students and faculty, and share best practices in areas such as curriculum development and teaching methods.

Participants expressed optimism about elevating the university's global standing through international research partnerships. For instance, PD6 expressed a strong sense of optimism about the impact of these collaborative activities stating that:

Collaborations will elevate the university's global standing and research capabilities by fostering more joint research projects, co-authored publications, and co-supervised graduate students, the University of Juba will be able to make significant strides to becoming a more prominent and influential institution on the world stage. They will provide valuable opportunities for knowledge exchange, skills development, and exposure to diverse research methodologies for the university's faculty and students, and enhance the university's research infrastructure and expertise.

Similarly, PD5 explained that the University of Juba is establishing many international partnerships, citing examples of some of these partnerships:

We have established partnerships with several universities in the USA. We have joint research projects, skills transfer programs, and seminars and workshops. . . for example, we have a research collaboration with a university in South Korea, Dominica University, and another university in California. . . also, a project collaboration with a professor from York University in Canada, we have also signed MoUs to formalize these agreements.

In the same line, PD1 gave examples of international partnerships and collaborations the University of Juba has established, stating that:

The university has established partnerships and signed MoUs with several international institutions, including an Israeli university that led to the building of a greenhouse facility, two American universities for a project called Building High Education for Agriculture for Food Security and Peace, a university in Spain (Catalonia), the Inter-University Council of East Africa.

The views expressed by the participants show that the University of Juba pursues international research partnerships and collaborations as a means of status-building and to leverage and widen funding sources for the university. However, the partnerships and collaborations are still limited, constrained by scant funding, inadequate buy-in by the staff, and a lack of a comprehensive policy and framework to guide the internationalization of research. This can be seen in this representative extract, (UB3):

We have some partnerships, but we're not as active as we could be. We're working on strengthening our partnerships and seeking new opportunities. We have a policy on internationalization, but it's not as comprehensive as it could be. We need to update our policy to better reflect our goals and strategies. Funding is a major challenge, but also a lack of support from some faculty members. They're not convinced of the benefits of internationalization.

The participants identified several challenges limiting the internationalization of research at the University of Juba. Among the challenges, funding was the most prominent challenge, this can be seen in the expressions made by the participants. For instance, UB3 said, "[I]t's difficult to secure adequate funding to support these initiatives, especially when we are competing with other universities for limited resources. However, we're working to address this challenge by seeking external grants and partnerships." PD5 confirmed this, adding, "It's difficult to secure adequate funding to sustain these initiatives and projects, we are exploring various strategies to secure funding, including seeking external grants and partnerships." The funding challenges were compounded by gaps in financial management. PD4 noted that "the university has a financial manual in place, but it is often not properly followed or enforced, this indicates a disconnect between the established financial policies and the actual financial management practices surrounding the international projects."

These comments confirm that the university is making efforts towards internationalization of research, but that the efforts are primarily focused on international collaborative partnerships. These collaborations involve skills transfer, joint research, and project-based initiatives. However, funding remains a significant challenge in maintaining and expanding these international partnerships. The university continues to pursue partnerships as a means to secure funding, as expressed by TM3: "[W]e are working to address this challenge by seeking external grants and partnerships." TM1 agreed: "[W]e have allocated funds in our budget to support these initiatives, we also seek external grants and partnerships to supplement these funds."

Apart from funding, participants explained several other challenges affecting the internationalization of research at the University of Juba. PD4 explained that the siloed approach is a major hindrance to actualizing the internationalization of research at the University of Juba, saying, "[I]ndividual schools within the university tend to isolate themselves and manage their own designated international projects, this siloed, decentralized approach can lead to inefficiencies, duplications, and a lack of coordination across the university's various internationalization initiatives."

Inadequate management capacity was also identified as one of the key challenges limiting the internationalization of research at the university, PD4 noted that "[a] shortage of qualified management staff is another key challenge; this lack of specialized expertise and capacity to oversee the international project collaborations can hinder their effective implementation and monitoring."

The absence of research quality assurance management mechanisms was another challenge affecting the internationalization of research at the university. Participants raised concerns about the consistency and rigor of research conducted at the university, noting that without proper quality assurance, the credibility of research outputs can be compromised.

From the review of documents, it was established that the university lacks comprehensive policies and frameworks to guide the various aspects of the internationalization of research. There was no comprehensive research policy in the university. Policies on intellectual property management, research integrity, ethics, grants management, and data management were non-existent, though a general research ethics committee exists; this limitation can potentially hinder the university's ability to attract international collaborations and gain recognition in the global research community.

The findings show that institutional practices for the internationalization of research at the university are skewed toward pursuing international collaborations and partnerships, mainly as a means of expanding research funding opportunities, and as a means of status building. Other aspects of the internationalization of research, such as the internationalization of knowledge production, knowledge circulation, research governance and processes, and organization of research fora, have been neglected. Research funding challenges emerged as a major theme in the views expressed by the participants.

4. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that institutional practices for the internationalization of research at the University of Juba were limited to only international collaborations and partnerships, and therefore not comprehensive. Practices for the internationalization of research were skewed to pursuing international collaborations and partnerships, mainly as a means of expanding research funding opportunities, and as a means of status building.

However, partnerships for research between the University of Juba and other institutions, both locally and internationally were limited due to a lack of adequate research funding. The flow of research funds came from outside collaborations; as such, there were limited support for research activities, limited access to research facilities and equipment, and limited publication outputs of academic staff, which may limit the visibility and impact of their research. Woldegiyorgis et al. (2018) show that access to funding enhances the feasibility of internationalization of research. They note that researchers with access to funding (from their institution or other sources) are more likely to be involved in international collaborations. The limited internationalization of research at the University of Juba indicates a missed opportunity to leverage resources, expertise, and funding. This may have negative implications for the university's reputation, visibility, and international status.

The findings revealed that the University of Juba lacks comprehensive policies and frameworks to guide the various aspects of the internationalization of research. There was no comprehensive research policy at the university; policies on intellectual property management, research integrity, and ethics, grants management, and data management were non-existent, though a general research ethics committee exists. This can potentially hinder the university's ability to attract international collaborations and gain recognition in the global research community.

Comparing these findings to previous studies, it is evident that the research collaboration practices at the University of Juba are not as extensive as those reported elsewhere, but the university experiences similar challenges to other institutions. For example, Auanassova (2023) identified challenges and opportunities in international research collaborations, such as language barriers, cultural differences, funding issues, and intellectual property concerns. This is consistent with the current findings in the context of the University of Juba, where inadequate research funding and lack of intellectual property management policy hinder research collaborations.

The limited research collaborations at the University of Juba led to low publication output by the staff; this finding confirms those of the study by Kong et al. (2019), who found a positive relationship between collaboration and research productivity, suggesting that individuals involved in collaborative research tend to be more productive in terms of their research output. Zhang et al. (2022) explored the role of social networks in facilitating research collaboration and found that strong social ties and cohesive networks positively affect collaboration. This study highlights the significance of considering social networks in research collaboration and suggests avenues for further investigation. In the context of the University of Juba, security concerns limited the inbound mobility of staff, which could limit social networks in research collaborations.

In light of these previous studies, the findings of the current study suggest that the University of Juba should consider strategies to enhance research collaboration practices by addressing language barriers, cultural differences, and funding issues. Moreover, it is essential to account for individual and contextual factors that may influence the relationship between collaboration and research outcomes. Haley et al. (2024) noted that the structural and cultural conditions of universities and research collaboration determine both individual academics' participation in research collaboration and the overall outcomes of the collaboration; they found that structural conditions that limit the initiation of international research collaboration support from university leadership resulted from a lack of understanding of internationalization.

Another crucial aspect highlighted by the study is the absence of specific policies on research integrity, intellectual property, data management, and institutional review board (IRB) procedures. The lack of a research integrity policy raises concerns about the consistency and reliability of research methods and data collection, which can erode trust and hinder international collaborations. Moreover, the absence of clear guidelines on intellectual property ownership and usage may create ambiguity and hinder effective collaboration with international partners. Additionally, the lack of a data management policy raises the risk of inconsistent practices in collecting, storing, and sharing research data, potentially impeding international research collaborations.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the institutional practices for internationalization of research at the University of Juba are limited and not comprehensive, as they are skewed to pursuing international collaborations and partnerships, both as a means of expanding research funding opportunities and as a means of status-building. Other aspects of the internationalization of research such as the internationalization of knowledge production, knowledge circulation, research governance and processes, and organization of research have been neglected.

The limited internationalization of research at the University of Juba translates into missed opportunities to leverage resources, expertise, and funding to improve the quality and quantity of research at the university. The skewed focus on collaborations mainly resulted from a lack of adequate research funding. The university did not have a comprehensive research policy, nor policies on intellectual property management, research integrity and ethics, grants management, or data management, though a general research ethics committee exists. This can potentially hinder the university's ability to attract international collaborations and gain recognition in the global research community. This may have negative consequences on the university's reputation, visibility, and international status.

6. Recommendations

The University of Juba should prioritize the development of comprehensive policies and guidelines that outline clearly a strategy, goals, and objectives for research—most vitally, an intellectual property management policy that clarifies ownership and usage rights of research outputs is crucial for fostering effective collaborations. A research integrity policy should be developed to define expected standards for research methods and data collection, ensuring transparency and reliability. Similarly, a data management policy is needed to establish consistent practices for collecting, storing, and sharing research data.

To ensure ethical research practices, the university should establish an institutional review board or ethics committee responsible for reviewing research proposals and ensuring compliance with ethical standards. This would provide a framework for safeguarding the rights and well-being of human subjects involved in research. Lastly, developing a patent and copyright policy would address issues related to ownership and usage rights of research outputs, facilitating international collaborations by providing clarity and legal protection.

The university should diversify its funding sources for research—for example, by allocating endowment funds and other internally generated funds. By providing resources, incentives, and a supportive research environment, the university can enhance the publication output and visibility of its academic staff, fostering a culture of research excellence and international recognition.

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