



Rethinking Academic Reward Systems: The Perceptions of University Staff on Recognizing and Instituting Teaching Excellence in Research Intensive Universities in Uganda

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Abstract: Higher education institutions have become part of performance-oriented environments in which the outputs from research and publications determine how the institution is recognized and how academic careers progress. In spite of increased scholarly production, there is still a problem of teaching excellence not receiving adequate attention in the reward systems of universities. Although existing literature on the topic of teaching recognition has concentrated on conceptual and policy issues, very little empirical research has been done on university staff attitudes on the matter; particularly in research-intensive universities in Sub-Saharan Africa. The present paper explores perceptions about teaching excellence and recognition of teaching excellence in research-intensive universities in Uganda using an exploratory sequential mixed method design. Findings indicate that teaching excellence is largely dependent on recognition practices, workload arrangements, and promotion in the institutions more than any teaching practices in class. There are very strong correlations between institutional recognition, academic identity, and teaching excellence. Institutional Teaching Recognition Framework was proposed.

Keywords: Teaching excellence; academic reward systems; institutional recognition; university staff perceptions; higher education; Uganda.

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1. Introduction

Universities around the world are going through massive transformations due to responses to competition, international rankings, accountability, and knowledge-based economy development. Within this transformation, research productivity has increasingly become the most important indicator of prestige and academic achievement. Universities compete with each other based on the number

of publications, citations, research funding, and global indicators (Altbach et al., 2019; Marginson, 2016). This has led to academic promotion and reward systems increasingly focusing on measuring research outputs. Although this transformation has helped improve scientific productivity and international competitiveness of universities, doubts continue to arise as to whether such recognition systems take into account the teaching mission of universities.

Recent research claims that the overemphasis on research performance makes it possible to create an environment where teaching is devalued despite being crucial for students' education and graduates' employment (Steinert et al., 2016; Hénard & Roseveare, 2012). Yet, scholars disagree about whether teaching recognition should mean reduction of research focus or rather a need to redesign reward systems that would take into account both dimensions. Teaching excellence has thus become one of the most pressing issues among debates in higher education. Although it is widely promoted within the majority of universities, there is no consensus about how to define teaching excellence and how to recognize it. Some authors understand it as related to student learning outcomes, effective instruction, and alignment between curriculum and learning outcomes (Biggs & Tang, 2011), while others believe that teaching excellence goes beyond the scope of classroom and includes such elements as pedagogical innovation, reflective practice, graduate supervision, mentoring, and development of institutional learning culture (Kreber, 2002; Shulman, 2004).

Mechanisms such as teaching awards, peer review, teaching portfolios, professional development programs, and differentiated academic promotion paths have been developed in response to the above problem. Still, there is little evidence that such mechanisms are embedded within institutional reward structures and can affect promotion decisions as much as research outputs do (Chalmers & Gardiner, 2015; Gibbs, 2013). This situation makes us wonder about how academic staff understands current recognition practices and what they think about them. The problem of recognizing teaching excellence becomes especially relevant in case of research-intensive universities where identities of academics are increasingly influenced by institution-specific requirements related to publication and research funding. According to the results of previous studies, reward structures affect the way academics use their time, prioritize various activities, and understand success (Henkel, 2005; Ramsden, 2003). Thus, in this context, teaching may become considered as routine work instead of scholarly activity to be recognized. At the same time, university continues relying on excellent teaching in order to educate successful graduates. As a result, researchers still continue debating whether better quality of teaching requires development of new recognition mechanisms or rather complete transformation of reward structures. Despite the above progress, a considerable part of research conducted so far focused on Western countries, leaving little evidence about how teaching recognition is understood in African universities.

Ugandan universities have also rapidly developed over recent years. There is increased pressure to demonstrate **international competitiveness**, improve productivity in research and increase quality. In such conditions,

universities need to not only make their research visible but also improve teaching quality and graduate outcomes. However, promotion and reward systems tend to focus strongly on such aspects of academics' performance as publications, doctoral completions, and externally funded research while paying relatively little attention to teaching practice and pedagogical leadership. Policy discourses are becoming increasingly oriented towards promoting teaching excellence in universities. However, empirical evidence that would help understand the way university staff perceive recognition of teaching excellence remains scarce. Previous studies have mainly focused on reforms in policies, quality assurance frameworks, or performance measures. Little is known about how recognition is practiced in Ugandan universities and how academics perceive it. This study explored perceptions of teaching excellence and institutional recognition in research-intensive universities in Uganda using a sequential exploratory mixed methods design. It developed evidence explaining the relationship between recognition practices and academic work and proposed a framework to support sustainable teaching excellence.

1.1 Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions;

1. How do university staff perceive teaching excellence within research-intensive universities in Uganda?
2. How do institutional reward and recognition systems shape academic engagement with teaching excellence?

1.2 Problem Statement

Research-intensive universities in Uganda are increasingly expected to improve both research productivity and teaching quality in response to growing competition, quality assurance demands, international rankings, and accountability requirements. However, institutional reward and promotion systems continue to place greater emphasis on measurable research outputs such as publications, externally funded research, doctoral supervision, and citation impact than on teaching excellence. Consequently, teaching-related contributions, including pedagogical innovation, curriculum development, student mentoring, provision of academic feedback, and continuous improvement of learning experiences, receive comparatively limited institutional recognition despite their central role in achieving quality learning outcomes. This imbalance may encourage academics to devote greater effort to activities that attract institutional rewards

while reducing the visibility and value attached to teaching excellence. As universities continue to advocate for student-centred learning, graduate employability, and improved educational quality, the apparent disconnect between institutional expectations and recognition practices raises concerns about the sustainability of teaching excellence within Uganda's research-intensive universities.

Although previous studies have examined teaching excellence, academic reward systems, quality assurance, and higher education reforms, much of the available evidence is derived from Western contexts and has largely focused on conceptual models, policy frameworks, or institutional performance indicators rather than the lived experiences and perceptions of academic staff. In Uganda, research has predominantly concentrated on governance reforms, research productivity, and institutional quality assurance, leaving limited empirical evidence on how university staff perceive teaching excellence, how institutional reward and recognition systems influence their engagement with teaching, and how these systems shape their academic priorities within research-intensive universities. Without such evidence, universities may continue implementing recognition policies that inadequately support teaching excellence and fail to achieve an appropriate balance between research productivity and quality teaching. Therefore, this study investigates university staff perceptions of teaching excellence and examines how institutional reward and recognition systems shape academic engagement with teaching excellence in research-intensive universities in Uganda, with the aim of proposing an Institutional Teaching Recognition Framework to strengthen institutional recognition of teaching excellence.

2. Literature Review

The discussion of teaching excellence nowadays becomes increasingly popular and controversial. Recent studies show that different models of teaching excellence serve as part of institutional policies aimed at demonstrating their teaching quality and accountability. However, it has not been possible to come up with common definitions of teaching excellence and ways of recognizing it. For instance, in a recent study of Chan and Chen (2024) which reviewed 95 teaching excellence models implemented in universities, the researchers concluded that definitions of excellence in teaching were becoming more inclined to impact, innovation, inclusiveness, scholarship of teaching and learning, and student-centredness. In addition, Moore et al. (2024), evaluating TEF 2023, found out that university teaching excellence was increasingly integrated into their institutional quality assurance and professional development strategies. Nevertheless, researchers still

question whether university definitions of teaching excellence are based on the views of academics or represent managerial understanding of the concept. The thing is that, although the scholarly community is convinced of the necessity to abandon old-fashioned approaches to defining teaching quality in favour of new ones, very little research can be found on the perception of teaching excellence by academics.

The second aspect of the debate associated with teaching excellence relates to the matter of evaluation criteria. Outcome-oriented scholars assert that one can determine excellent teaching with the help of certain objective measures of educational outcomes, which may include, for instance, student achievement, graduate performance, satisfaction rates, or education gain. In turn, as mentioned by Hayes and Garnett (2024), existing approaches to teaching excellence evaluation appear to be too reductionistic since they reduce complicated teaching relationships to performance indicators. To address this shortcoming, the researchers proposed developing a relational approach to the problem of excellence in teaching, which presupposes recognition of contextual and interactional nature of this issue. Additionally, the work of Shortell et al. (2024) revealed that, while recognizing the teaching excellence of their educators, students rely on certain non-objective criteria, such as accessibility, responsiveness, and sustainability. Even though the presented sources add to our knowledge of the issue, it should be noted that there are practically no empirical data regarding the perceptions of university staff toward the problem.

One of the aspects of the current debate about teaching excellence associated with its interpretation deserves special attention. As for earlier research, it often focused on lecturer characteristics and competencies as the basis for excellence. At the same time, the focus of modern research seems to shift towards exploring organizational factors that facilitate excellence in teaching. Thus, for instance, Chan and Chen (2024) showed that recognition systems at universities often reward broad-based forms of pedagogical contribution, such as development, engagement, and professionalization. The same conclusion was made by Saenen et al. (2024) in their examination of inclusiveness and cooperation as tools of promoting positive organizational environments in order to facilitate excellence in teaching. At the same time, it is unclear whether this recognition affects academic practices or serves merely to create a positive image of the institution. No empirical data on this question are provided by existing sources since there is no information about the meanings that university staff attributes to their working conditions.

In view of the above, it becomes evident that reward systems among academics have become one of the main

themes in discussions regarding excellence in teaching. Initially, it was suggested that universities encouraged the development of balanced academic identities in which teaching, researching, and other forms of service had equal value. As far as accountability and ranking priorities have been shifted, more attention has started being paid to the researchers' performance. According to Førland & Roxå (2024), despite the existing pressures, reward systems designed to support teaching in terms of offering fellowships, opportunities for career promotion, and pedagogical merits have recently appeared in universities. Moreover, a reward system may be useful in promoting teaching as a profession, as well as widening an institutional network. Nevertheless, Førland & Roxå (2024) state that such reward systems have no influence on academic performance.

Recognition as an important mechanism for improving academic teaching deserves further exploration because some scholars believe that these mechanisms are capable of promoting teaching excellence by boosting motivation, reinforcing professional identity, and legitimizing pedagogical investments. According to reports from TEF 2023, the increasing number of universities develop systems of teaching promotion, structured training and professional development programs, and recognition-based advancement in order to improve educational quality (Moore et al., 2024). Nonetheless, the opinion that recognition is a meaningless formality and that publication performance is far more influential is widespread in academia. Current scholarship contributes much knowledge about institutional initiatives but pays less attention to staff perception of these mechanisms. Another unresolved issue is how institutional recognition affects academic identity. Contemporarily, academics are expected to succeed in their work in teaching, research, supervision, administration, and dissemination of knowledge. Higher education studies show that recognition is one of the factors affecting staff perceptions of their professional role and future career plans. Preliminary evidence demonstrates that there is often a conflict between professional demands and personal interests in the field of education. However, little scholarly effort has been devoted to studying how recognition of teaching influences the formation of academic professional identity.

Furthermore, perception may be very important in studying institutional teaching excellence. According to Shortell et al. (2024), staff perception becomes a way to explore various aspects of teaching excellence that remain unnoticed during regular assessments. At the same time, as stated by Hayes & Garnett (2024), holistic approaches to the study of teaching excellence imply that the attention is turned away from the institution to staff perception. However, although both papers make some significant contributions to the concept analysis, it should be pointed

out that these works pay no attention to Africa when dealing with this issue. The formation of teaching excellence in universities of Uganda and other similar institutions involves balancing visibility and quality of education. In spite of the fact that current discourse is concerned with teaching excellence, there is not much information about the opinions and attitudes of staff towards teaching excellence. Currently, studies of the Ugandan higher education system are mostly interested in governance reforms, quality assurance, and institutional performance. As a result, little information is available on how academic staff perceive teaching excellence and how reward mechanisms work in universities. This gap needs to be addressed and is the main contribution of the current study.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framing *Theoretical Framing*

This is based on two approaches – Institutional Theory and Expectancy Theory. The choice of theories was driven by the specific focus of the study on perceptions of teaching excellence and influence of institutional recognition systems on academic behaviour. As a consequence, the theories complement each other by explaining the relationship between organisational structures and staff perceptions. To begin with, the Institutional Theory was introduced on the basis of the concept formulated by Meyer & Rowan (1977) and later developed by DiMaggio & Powell (1983). According to the theory, institutions develop their structure and procedures driven by pressures imposed upon them by external demands. As for universities, one should note that they do not act independently; rather, they tend to follow government guidelines, external evaluations, rankings, etc. Theories of institutionalism applied to the modern system of higher education claim that universities tend to make their inner policies consistent with global trends associated with excellence, responsibility, and competition (Stensaker et al., 2023). In case with research-oriented universities, the reward systems also become a constituent of the institutional logic which defines the desired activity pattern. Applying Institutional Theory to the current research context, it is necessary to assume that institutional contradictions may prevent successful establishment of recognition of teaching excellence despite the efforts related to public support. The reason for such contradiction is the existence of promotion systems that emphasise publications and research products instead of teaching activities. Thus, using the theory, it is possible to examine the ways university staff interprets institutional expectations in relation to teaching. In this regard, the application of Institutional Theory becomes particularly relevant because it explains the impact of institutional arrangements on staff perceptions of recognition and legitimacy.

Secondly, Expectancy Theory elaborated by Vroom (1964) suggests that individuals are motivated to take certain actions in the presence of a perceived link between effort, performance results and subsequent rewards. Recently developed educational applications of the theory demonstrate that expectancies determine engagement, commitment, and decision-making processes in universities (Van den Broeck et al., 2023). Thus, academic staff are engaged in certain types of activities based on perceptions of the likelihood of obtaining recognition and promotion. Using Expectancy Theory, it can be stated that academic staff are more likely to engage in pedagogical innovation and development if the corresponding activities are recognised and rewarded in their universities. Alternatively, in cases when career progression and academic success depend mainly on research production, academics choose research regardless of personal interest in teaching. The theory is highly relevant to the second objective of the study since it provides an explanation of how the mentioned processes work. In contrast to assumptions about individual characteristics, Expectancy Theory considers the role of institutional arrangements and influences.

The combination of the two theories offers a more solid framework than their separate use because Institutional Theory clarifies institutional arrangements and Expectancy Theory – staff perceptions and responses. Therefore, in the case of teaching excellence, both theories highlight that the phenomenon cannot be considered exclusively an individual trait or purely a result of institutional policies.

Conceptual Framing

Conceptually, it should be assumed that university staff perceptions of teaching excellence are influenced by institutional systems of recognition and reward functioning in research-intensive universities. Institutional recognition involves practices of promotions, workload allocation, professional recognition, career incentives, and symbolic affirmation of teaching activities. The institutional conditions affect the engagement of academics in teaching and determine the broader perceptions of teaching excellence. As a result, the study conceptualized institutional recognition as contributing to sustained engagement with teaching practice.

Conceptual Propositions

P1: *University staff perceptions of teaching excellence are shaped by institutional expectations and reward structures.*

P2: *Institutional recognition positively affects academic engagement with teaching excellence.*

P3: *Inconsistency between institutional recognition and teaching expectations leads to low staff commitment to innovation.*

P4: *Sustained teaching excellence arises when institutional reward systems correspond to academic interests and career prospects.*

3. Methodology

The current study employed a sequential exploratory mixed methods design to investigate the perceptions of teaching excellence and recognition by university staff in research-intensive universities in Uganda. This methodology entailed the use of qualitative and quantitative approaches in sequence such that findings from the qualitative method could be used to develop a survey tool and test its reliability and validity (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The study was carried out in selected research-intensive universities operating in a highly competitive environment whereby there is more pressure for the institutions to produce research, achieve institutional recognition and offer quality education.

The first stage of the research entailed qualitative data collection and comprised a selection of ten participants who comprised professors, senior lecturers, lecturers, deans and heads of departments through purposive sampling. Two focus group discussions with academic staff members and academic leaders were carried out to complement interview data and help develop shared interpretations of institutional experiences. Findings from the qualitative phase were used to develop a structured questionnaire, which was administered during the second stage through stratified random sampling to 214 academic staff. Data were collected through interviews, focus group discussions and a structured questionnaire.

Data collection was conducted in two sequential phases. The qualitative phase was undertaken first, where semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with purposively selected participants to explore their perceptions and experiences regarding teaching excellence and institutional recognition. The findings from this phase informed the development of a structured questionnaire, which was reviewed before being administered to academic staff selected through stratified random sampling during the quantitative phase. Prior to data collection, permission was obtained from the participating universities, and informed consent was sought from all participants. Completed questionnaires were checked for completeness before data analysis commenced.

Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis following the procedure recommended by Braun & Clarke (2021). Analysis of quantitative data was conducted in SPSS version 30 where frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations were computed. Statistical analyses included correlational

analysis using Pearson product-moment coefficient, ANOVA, multiple regression analysis, and factor analysis. Reliability and validity measures included expert evaluation, pilot study, content validity, and internal consistency. Credibility of qualitative data was established via member check and peer review. Survey data were considered in theme identification during data interpretation process. Measures of ethics involved informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and ethical clearance from institutions.

4. Results and Discussion

Findings derived from sequential exploratory mixed methods analysis are included in this section of the study report. Findings are presented according to the study objectives. Evidence of the findings is provided through integration of both quantitative and qualitative evidences. The presentation of the findings commences by presenting

the demographics of the participating universities and respondents in order to provide background to the findings presented. The findings are then presented for each of the objectives of the study through three steps including qualitative findings obtained from interviews and focus group discussion, quantitative findings obtained from surveys and finally the interpretation of the evidence.

4.1 Demographic Characteristics of Participating Universities and Participants

The current study was conducted in two research intensive universities in Uganda where one is a public university and the other is a private university. Selection of these particular institutions was done considering the context of growing competition in higher education institutions where there was need to promote research while still maintaining high standards in teaching and academics.

Table 1: Breakdown of Qualitative Participants according to Types of University and Academic Rank

Participant Category	Public University	Private University	Total
Professors	01	01	02
Senior Lecturers	01	01	02
Lecturers	01	01	02
Deans	01	01	02
Heads of Department	01	01	02
Total	05	05	10

Source: Field data

The qualitative research process used ten participants who were chosen equally from the two universities. These participants had an academic position which involved a

combination of duties such as teaching and decision-making. Hence, they were ideal for examining their experiences and views about teaching and excellence.

Table 2: Breakdown of Quantitative Participants according to Type of University and Academic Rank (n = 214)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
University Type	Public	118	55.1
	Private	96	44.9
Academic Rank	Professor	21	9.8
	Associate Professor	29	13.6
	Senior Lecturer	48	22.4
	Lecturer	71	33.2
	Assistant Lecturer	45	21.0
Total		214	100

The quantitative study involved 214 academics who came from various academic ranks and institutions. The large number of lecturers indicated that there was a substantial involvement of staff in teaching tasks.

4.2 How University Staff Perceive Teaching Excellence in Research-Intensive Universities in Uganda

Qualitative Findings

Data analysis from interviews and focus groups showed that participants viewed teaching excellence as a multidimensional form of academic practice which goes beyond formal teaching activity and performance indicators adopted at institutional level. All participants saw teaching excellence in relation to educational transformation, mentoring, and sustained learning engagement rather than merely good classroom performance. The two sub-themes emerged from the data analysis.

Teaching Excellence as Transformative Student Engagement

According to participants, transformative student engagement referred to a teaching approach based on meaningful student learning through critical reflection, intellectual independence, learner participation, and impact on educational outcomes rather than mere completion of course requirements. Participants stated that teaching excellence became apparent through increased awareness among students, their confidence and ability to apply acquired knowledge and skills outside classroom settings. In this regard, participants pointed out that the development of students' intellectual abilities depended on sustained staff-student interaction, mentoring, responsiveness, reflection, and redesign of learning experience. Therefore, participants considered teaching excellence to be not a single teaching activity, but a developmental process affecting students' perception and ability to apply knowledge. According to participants, institutional evaluation systems generally underestimate relational aspects of teaching because many evaluation methods are primarily focused on immediate classroom performance of teachers.

In our environment, excellence in teaching has nothing to do with the coverage of the subject matter according to the schedule. Teaching excellence becomes evident in terms of the confidence shown by students in

applying ideas independently and their willingness to learn even after exams. Many of the best teaching outcomes occur years later, while institutions tend to assess only immediate performance. (Professor, Public University)

This finding suggests that university staff see teaching excellence as an educational process of long duration rather than a measure of classroom performance. Thus, institutional strategies relying excessively on immediate classroom performance as an indicator of teaching excellence might overlook important factors considered relevant by academic staff and might have adverse effect on sustained development of pedagogical practices.

Teaching Excellence as Invisible Academic Labour

Participants understood invisible academic labour as an effort devoted to the creation of learning experience, student mentoring, curriculum revision, materials preparation, and academic support beyond formal teaching activities. Participants indicated that the above aspects formed the foundation of teaching excellence; however, such dimensions are rarely recognized within institutional reward systems. Participants mentioned that teaching excellence implied considerable invisible efforts on the part of academics. For instance, preparation, student consultation, provision of feedback and subsequent redesign of learning experiences were considered as labour-intensive tasks that received little attention during academic promotions and performance evaluations. Several participants mentioned that lack of recognition created a situation whereby teaching excellence remained symbolic rather than substantive.

Most people are only concerned about teaching happening within scheduled class times, yet teaching excellence is built upon intensive preparation, constant feedback, consulting with students, and redesigning learning experience. Most of that work is invisible and hard to document during evaluations. Staff members keep working on teaching projects primarily for personal motivation reasons. (Dean, Private University)

Thus, institutional evaluation strategies seemed to overlook important dimensions of academic work necessary for the maintenance of quality educational process. This might negatively affect motivation for pedagogical innovations and teaching.

Quantitative Results

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics on University Staff Perceptions of Teaching Excellence (N = 214)

Statement	Disagree F(%)	Neutral F(%)	Agree F(%)	Mean	SD
Teaching excellence requires continuous innovation	18 (8.4%)	16 (7.5%)	180 (84.1%)	4.42	.56
Excellent teaching improves student transformation	12 (5.6%)	15 (7.0%)	187 (87.4%)	4.51	.49
Student evaluations alone adequately measure teaching excellence	128 (59.8%)	37 (17.3%)	49 (22.9%)	2.38	.97
Teaching excellence should influence promotion decisions	15 (7.0%)	14 (6.5%)	185 (86.5%)	4.47	.58
Current institutional systems adequately recognise excellent teaching	119 (55.6%)	31 (14.5%)	64 (29.9%)	2.71	.86

Source: Field data

The results provide evidence of an extensive and internally consistent perception among university staff that teaching excellence is a concept extending beyond conventional definitions of instructional competence. In particular, respondents were most supportive of excellence with respect to the concepts of student transformation (87.4%) and innovation (84.1%). Notably, only 29.9% of respondents agreed that current institutional recognition systems appropriately acknowledge excellent teaching whereas 55.6% disagreed. Hence, these results suggest a discrepancy between institutional discourse on teaching excellence and practices in terms of rewarding academic contribution.

The low level of agreement with student evaluations as measures of teaching excellence (22.9%) also provides evidence of dissatisfaction with reductionist approaches to evaluating teaching excellence. Thus, taken together, these results suggest that university staff value broader and holistic definitions of teaching excellence than those promoted within institutional practice. This perception might affect staff readiness to invest into innovative approaches and redefine professional success.

Table 4: Pearson Correlation Coefficients for Institutional Recognition and Perceptions of Teaching Excellence

Variables	N	R	Sig.
Teaching Excellence × Institutional Recognition	214	.647	< .001

Source: Field data

The results demonstrate a strong positive relationship between institutional recognition and perceptions of teaching excellence. The coefficient shows that staff members who have higher perceptions of institutional recognition of teaching will also have significantly high levels of teaching excellence. Thus, this result suggests that

teaching excellence perceptions are formed not only through individual academic beliefs but can be strongly affected by institutional environment. Hence, universities can direct priorities within higher education by the nature of their recognition systems.

Table 5: Regression Analysis Testing Relationships between Institutional Recognition and Perceptions of Teaching Excellence

Predictor	B	Beta	T	Sig.
Institutional Recognition	.584	.593	10.87	< .001
Constant	1.216		4.91	< .001
Adjusted R ²	.402			

Source: Field data

Regression analysis demonstrated that institutional recognition was a significant predictor of teaching excellence and explained 40.2% of the variance (Adjusted R² = .402) of its variance. This result suggests that

university conditions account for the substantial portion of teaching excellence perceptions and beliefs. Hence, strengthening teaching recognition systems does not only mean encouraging existing teaching practice but can also

change cultural values and perceptions of valuable academic work at universities.

Integration of Findings

Findings from the integration of qualitative and quantitative data were found to show very high levels of convergence in terms of the research questions. Narrative analysis of qualitative data clearly indicated that teaching excellence was regarded as transformational and institutionally under-valued experience. Findings from quantitative analysis further provided evidence of concerns over recognition inadequacies and established significant statistical correlations between recognition and perceptions of teaching excellence. Overall findings from this stage confirm that teaching excellence can be seen as both educational and institutional phenomenon dependent on university definitions and recognitions.

4.3 How Institutional Reward and Recognition Systems Shape Academic Engagement with Teaching Excellence

Qualitative Findings

Findings obtained during thematic content analysis revealed that institutional reward and recognition systems greatly affected the ways in which academic staff determined priority areas of professional activity, engaged in teaching practice and evaluated their academic success. It was argued by all participants that institutional reward and recognition frameworks not only reward academic activities but also reflect and articulate organizational values. There were two dominant subthemes.

Reward Systems as Signaling Mechanisms

The term "reward systems" was used by participants to describe the mechanisms that communicated priorities of institutions in relation to different forms of academic activity. It was explained that institutions shape priorities using policies of promotions, workload and performance evaluations, and opportunities for recognition. Participants suggested that despite the official emphasis placed by universities on teaching excellence, their reward structures often focused on measurable outcomes like publications, grants, and other indicators. It was pointed out that such systems generate signals that lead to reallocation of efforts into non-pedagogic investments. While academic staff never neglect their teaching responsibilities, they

strategically allocate additional efforts in order to gain personal and professional advantages.

Institution does not openly state that research is more important than teaching. But the signals are sent through the system and people adapt their behaviour accordingly. They just need to know what kind of activities will help get recognition." (Head of Department, Public University)

These findings suggest that reward systems serve as cultural signalers and not neutral evaluators. If teaching activities are underrepresented among recognised achievements, institutions may unintentionally shift staff effort into research and diminish the importance of teaching excellence.

Recognition as a Motivator for Sustainable Teaching Engagement

Participants defined recognition as the institutional appreciation that acknowledges efforts of academic staff in developing teaching and provides opportunities for promotion, professional visibility, leadership positions, and formal appreciation mechanisms. All participants explained that recognition serves as motivator that drives academics towards sustainable commitment to teaching innovation. It was explained that staff willingness to innovate pedagogically is significantly increased by creation of visible connections between teaching performance and opportunities for promotion within the university. Participants highlighted the distinction between mere appreciation and true recognition that sustains academic efforts in teaching innovation. Participants additionally pointed out that recognition improves perceptions of teaching as scholarly and professional activity.

Recognition makes people look at teaching in a completely new way, making them realise that there is value in the time spent on pedagogic innovations. And when they see excellent teaching contributing to institutional reputation and opening up opportunities for promotion, they find motivation to engage in more innovations." (Senior Lecturer, Private University)

These findings imply that recognition may be seen as a cultural tool that motivates academics in their work.

Quantitative Findings

Table 6: Descriptive Statistics for Institutional Reward Systems and Academic Engagement (n = 214)

Statement	Disagree F(%)	Neutral F(%)	Agree F(%)	Mean	SD
Promotion systems sufficiently value teaching contributions	121 (56.5)	29 (13.6)	64 (29.9)	2.69	.88
Recognition motivates investment in teaching	18 (8.4)	20 (9.3)	176 (82.3)	4.29	.62
Staff invest more effort in recognised activities	27 (12.6)	18 (8.4)	169 (79.0)	4.11	.71
Institutional rewards encourage teaching innovation	82 (38.3)	33 (15.4)	99 (46.3)	3.16	.89
Teaching achievements influence career progression	115 (53.7)	30 (14.0)	69 (32.3)	2.83	.81

Source: Field data

The descriptive findings demonstrate a clear distinction between belief in the importance of recognition and confidence in existing institutional systems. More than four-fifths of respondents agreed that recognition motivates investment in teaching, while 79.0% agreed that staff direct greater effort toward recognised activities. These findings suggest widespread acceptance that academic behaviour responds to institutional incentives. At the same time, respondents expressed considerably lower confidence regarding whether existing promotion and reward systems sufficiently value teaching contributions. More than half disagreed that teaching achievements

substantially influence career progression. The comparatively lower mean scores for institutional reward variables suggest that respondents perceive a structural imbalance between institutional rhetoric surrounding teaching excellence and practical mechanisms of recognition. Collectively, these findings imply that staff are not resistant to investing in teaching excellence; rather, they appear responsive to institutional environments that legitimise and reward such investment. This suggests that strengthening recognition systems may have direct implications for improving teaching engagement.

Table 7: One-Way ANOVA Comparing Perceptions of Institutional Recognition across Academic Rank

Source	SS	df	MS	F	Sig.
Between Groups	12.48	4	3.12	5.82	.001
Within Groups	112.06	209	.536		
Total	124.54	213			

Source: Field data

The ANOVA results revealed statistically significant differences in perceptions of institutional recognition across academic rank ($F = 5.82$, $p = .001$). This indicates that experiences of recognition are not uniformly distributed across institutional structures. Further examination of response patterns suggested that junior and mid-career staff reported lower confidence in institutional

reward arrangements compared with senior academics. This may reflect differences in exposure to promotion systems and access to institutional opportunities. The findings imply that institutional recognition may operate unevenly across career stages and that current systems may not provide consistent motivational signals to all academic groups.

Table 8: Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Academic Engagement with Teaching

Predictor	B	Beta	T	Sig.
Institutional Recognition	.617	.611	11.42	< .001
Constant	1.083		4.26	< .001
Adjusted R ²	.431			

Source: Field data

Regression analysis showed that institutional recognition was found to be a significant predictor of academic engagement in teaching and explained approximately 43.1% of variance in the data. The positive beta coefficient confirms that high perceptions of institutional recognition are linked with higher levels of engagement with teaching-related activities. Such an explanatory power of the model

indicates that recognition may serve not only as a formal institutional process but as a mechanism used for shaping academic behavior. Such results suggest that the introduction of changes aimed at recognizing the efforts of academics can lead to noticeable gains in terms of the commitment of faculty members towards the activity of teaching.

Integration of Findings

The analysis of the convergence between qualitative and quantitative findings showed a high level of consistency between the datasets. While qualitative findings revealed the importance of rewards and recognition as signals sent by institutions regarding the priorities in professional behavior, the results of regression analyses proved that recognition serves as an important predictive factor of engagement. Despite the high commitment to teaching excellence shown by staff members, both qualitative and quantitative results suggest that there are stronger institutional signals motivating other forms of academic achievements. These findings reveal the dual nature of recognition, as it not only frames attitudes towards teaching but affects academic staff engagement and distribution of their effort. Based on these findings, the proposed Institutional Teaching Recognition–Engagement Framework (ITREF) was developed.

4.4 Proposed Institutional Teaching Recognition–Engagement Framework (ITREF)

Based on findings of the current study, an Institutional Teaching Recognition-Engagement Framework (ITREF) was developed. ITREF was created to explain the way in which reward and recognition programs affect the perception of teaching excellence among university faculty members and contribute to sustained engagement with teaching practice at universities. Instead of conceptualizing teaching excellence as a characteristic of an academic and their individual motivation, the framework sees teaching excellence as a result of the collaboration between institutional environment and academic initiative. According to ITREF, teaching excellence can be achieved through the following processes taking place within an institution. First, there is institutional signaling, i.e., the continuous assessment of institutional communication regarding what kind of academic work is considered valuable. Institutional signals come in the form of promotion criteria, workload expectations, leadership practices, performance indicators, and recognition mechanisms. Through such signals, staff members form opinions about whether teaching is recognized as a strategic priority or just an ordinary responsibility.

Second, there is the perception of the institutional legitimacy of teaching activities. When institutional signals are evaluated, there comes a judgment as to whether the teaching contribution is valued professionally or not. This judgment is shaped by the availability of promotion options, teaching awards, recognition of innovations, and integration of teaching performance in the overall performance advancement system. If recognition appears to be symbolic or unrelated to career development,

confidence in institutional commitment to teaching excellence tends to decrease. Third, there is academic engagement with teaching. Staff members react to institutional signals behaviorally, allocating their efforts according to institutional valuation of particular activities. Staff members are willing to invest considerable effort in activities if there is a recognition that they are appreciated by the institution. In turn, lack of alignment between recognition and teaching leads to behavioral responses as well, involving a more strategic distribution of academic effort. Fourth, there is sustained teaching excellence that can occur if academic engagement persists under favorable conditions. Unlike individual dedication, it can be observed through transformative student engagement, innovation in the area, reflective practice, responsiveness of the curriculum, and long-term teaching impact.

Overall, the framework rests on the assumption of recursiveness of the process rather than linearity. Thus, teaching excellence will foster institutional legitimacy, which will put pressure on staff for additional recognition and further engagement. In its turn, lack of recognition will undermine the institutional commitment to teaching investment. The framework is relevant to higher education research by changing the focus from questioning the importance of teaching recognition to examining the process through which recognition is institutionalised and translated into academic practice. In research-intensive universities located in Uganda and analogous settings, the framework illustrates the need for integration between institutional discourses, rewards, promotion, and staff experience of recognition to promote improved teaching quality.

4.5 Discussion of Findings

In this study, perceptions of teaching excellence among university staff in research-intensive universities in Uganda were investigated and the role of institutional reward and recognition systems on the engagement of academics in excellence in teaching was explored using integrated quantitative and qualitative methods. This study provided useful insights into the debate about how universities recognise and sustain excellence in increasingly results-driven academic environments. Discussion is organised according to the study objectives to facilitate interpretation of findings in the context of scholarly literature.

Objective one focused on investigating university staff perceptions of teaching excellence in research-intensive universities. The qualitative findings revealed that staff viewed teaching excellence in terms of student engagement and transformation rather than performance and content delivery in classrooms. Participants defined teaching excellence as ability to inspire independence, application

of knowledge, building confidence, and fostering student transformation. Strong support for the interpretation of findings was provided by quantitative findings, as participants indicated that excellence in teaching involves continuous innovation and transformation and that such excellence cannot be attributed to scores from student evaluations. Overall, the findings suggest that staff define excellence as a developmental and relational process and not just an instructional activity.

Such findings can be justified by a large body of recent scholarship arguing that definitions of excellence have changed in terms of the focus from instructional efficiency to student transformations and educational impact. Specifically, Chan and Chen (2024) noted that current understandings of teaching excellence emphasize transformation and educational impact and are associated with a broad scholarship of teaching. Similarly, Hayes and Garnett (2024) argue that excellence in teaching cannot be reduced to measurable indicators as important learning occurs through sustained interaction and educational relations. The current study complements this scholarly work by providing support for the fact that such perspectives are adopted by university staff and not only expressed in policies and institutional discourses.

Staff perceptions that excellence in teaching involves student transformation and not classroom performance imply that institutional practices are limited in terms of their ability to adequately evaluate excellent teaching. Indeed, staff expressed uncertainty as to whether institutional evaluation practices considered mentoring, student transformation, curriculum adaptability, and other important dimensions of excellence. Such findings are consistent with the arguments made by Shortell et al. (2024) that assessment practices of many universities tend to overlook important educational processes as they tend to favour easily measurable outcomes. On the other hand, the present study adds new evidence by demonstrating that staff dissatisfaction with institutional evaluation is not related to their dislike of evaluation but to the type of activities evaluated.

The second qualitative finding under objective one indicates that teaching excellence is invisible academic labour among university staff members. Indeed, staff reported that activities such as preparation, student consultations, curriculum revision, provision of feedback, mentoring, and others are important elements of excellence in teaching. The same idea was reinforced by quantitative findings, as staff were generally dissatisfied with the level of recognition of teaching excellence in their institutions. Regression analysis revealed that institutional recognition of teaching excellence significantly predicted staff perceptions of teaching excellence and explained a considerable amount of variation. These results indicate

that the definition and perception of teaching excellence of staff members is highly contextually bound. Theories of institutionality claim that organizations influence actions and meaning through their systems of legitimation. In this case, promotion procedures, institutional recognition, and other institutional tools play a role in shaping the definition and perception of excellence. At the same time, the current research contributes to existing knowledge in the area by showing that universities can influence staff definitions of excellence beyond regulating behavior.

Objective two addressed the question about how recognition shapes academic engagement in teaching excellence. The first qualitative finding reveals that staff perceive institutional recognition as signals of organizational priorities. Specifically, participants repeatedly stated that promotion systems and other performance incentives signal priorities of institutions regarding what kind of academic activities should be supported and invested. The interpretation of findings received support from quantitative data, as respondents agreed that they directed professional efforts towards activities that were recognised in their institutions. However, at the same time, staff expressed frustration about the lack of emphasis on teaching in promotion practices. These findings support the idea that the behavior of academics is influenced by their strategic response to the incentive mechanisms put forward by institutions (Førland & Roxå, 2024). Institutions base their motivation of professionals based on quantitative measures of performance, which may, however, make them focus on some specific actions. Nonetheless, the current research demonstrates that this approach does not lead to disengagement from teaching among academics.

Secondly, there was an understanding by the staff that recognition can serve as an important motivator that helps foster participation in teaching-related tasks. The critical difference made by the respondents in their analysis was the one between appreciation with no bearing on future educational prospects versus actual recognition linked to institutional status. It is clear from the empirical results that recognition has served as an important motivator that encouraged participation in teaching activities and accounted for almost half of variance in responses. The results confirm the validity of Expectancy Theory (Van den Broeck et al., 2023). This theory assumes that individuals will be more committed to professional activities if they expect desired performance-related outcomes. The findings show that staff are partially motivated by the expectation of institutional recognition. At the same time, the present study provides evidence that teaching-related motivation works through institutional collective meaning-making and not simple individual expectations about personal gain.

The finding that recognition explained nearly fifty percent of variation in engagement in teaching activities suggests that institutional recognition is a vital element of promoting teaching excellence. The findings indicate that universities are able to foster teaching engagement not only by encouraging individual academic values and ethical principles but also by adjusting institutional incentive and reward systems. Therefore, teaching staff engagement can be enhanced through institutional-level strategies and reforms. In general, the findings from both objectives demonstrate that teaching excellence and recognition of excellence are not independent institutional agendas. It seems that recognition systems play a fundamental role in shaping teaching excellence in terms of definition, resource allocation, and innovation. The Institutional Teaching Recognition–Engagement Framework proposed in this study helps explain such complex phenomena.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusions

University staff perceive teaching excellence as being transformative and multifaceted, encompassing not only instruction, but student development, innovation, mentoring, and sustainability in teaching over time. Yet much of these contributions continue to go unrecognized in existing institutional assessment practices. Institutional reward and recognition systems can greatly shape the engagement academics have with teaching excellence. Recognition acts as an institution's signal to staff about what is important, how motivated they are, and the resources they should invest in teaching activities. Sustainable engagement in teaching excellence thus involves more than just individual dedication

5.2 Recommendations

1. Universities should be adopting more expansive forms of assessing teaching excellence, going beyond student feedback and outcomes. Institutional policies and systems of promotion should be considering other factors such as the transforming of students, innovation, mentoring and teaching contributions over time.

2. Universities should be working to improve their systems of recognition and rewarding by including teaching excellence in promotion and career advancement. The design of more balanced reward structures will hopefully foster greater and sustained teaching engagement.

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