The Role of RENU and NITA-U in Providing Infrastructure and Online Access in Ugandan Higher Education

Andrew Ojulong
PhD Candidate of Information Science, Makerere University
andrew.ojulong@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9638-6646

Sarah Kaddu (PhD)
Dean at EASLIS, Makerere University
sarkaddu22@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6577-0941

Elisam Magara (PhD)
Professor at EASLIS, Makerere University
elisam.magara@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8959-2000

Abstract
This study investigates the role of national ICT agencies in facilitating access to digital academic content in Ugandan higher education. Specifically, it examines the impact of the Research and Education Network for Uganda (RENU) and the National Information Technology Authority-Uganda (NITA-U) on two contrasting institutions, Makerere University (public) and Kampala International University (private). Using a qualitative case study design, data was collected through semi-structured interviews with 30 participants, including ICT administrators, academic staff, and students. Observation of ICT infrastructure and Document review of institutional ICT policies and national strategic plans complemented the interviews. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the findings. Significant disparities in ICT access were found between the two institutions. Public Universities benefited from strong partnerships with national ICT agencies and robust infrastructure, while private Universities faced barriers including limited connectivity, inadequate devices, and minimal engagement with national programs. The study also revealed systemic gaps in national ICT policies, particularly the exclusion of private institutions from key infrastructure initiatives. Recommendations include expanding government funding to private universities, improving technical capacity, and developing inclusive ICT strategies that prioritize equity. The findings have critical implications for doctoral education, where digital access directly influences research quality, supervision, and academic progression. This study contributes original insights into how national ICT policies affect institutional access to online academic content in developing countries. It offers evidence-based recommendations to support digital equity and enhance doctoral education outcomes in Uganda and similar contexts.
Keywords: Digital Access, Online Content, Equity, Higher Education in Uganda

Background

In recent decades, digital technologies have become indispensable in transforming the landscape of higher education worldwide. Universities are increasingly dependent on Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) to support teaching, research, collaboration, and administration (Anderson, 2008; Bates, 2015). The ability to access, create, and disseminate knowledge online has reshaped how academic communities operate, promoting the idea of globally networked learning environments. However, this transformation has not occurred uniformly. Many institutions in low-income and developing countries continue to experience substantial barriers to digital inclusion, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa (UNESCO, 2019; van Dijk & van Deursen, 2019).

In Uganda, the higher education sector is marked by uneven access to ICT infrastructure and online content. Public universities, particularly Makerere University (Mak), have benefited from relatively sustained government and international donor investments in digital infrastructure (Makerere University, 2020; Graham, Andersen, & Mann, 2015). By contrast, private universities continue to experience chronic underfunding, unreliable internet connectivity, limited digital devices, and insufficient technical support (Bagarukayo & Kalema, 2015; Van der Westhuizen, 2016). These institutional disparities exacerbate the digital divide within the country's academic ecosystem, with direct consequences on the quality of teaching, student engagement, and research productivity.

The government of Uganda has introduced several policy initiatives aimed at reducing this divide. Notably, the Research and Education Network for Uganda (RENU) and the National Information Technology Authority-Uganda (NITA-U) were established to expand broadband infrastructure and support digital transformation across sectors (RENU, 2020; NITA-U, 2019). RENU's mandate includes providing affordable high-speed internet to research and education institutions, while NITA-U's initiatives, such as the National Backbone Infrastructure (NBI) and the Last Mile Connectivity Project, aim to extend fiber-optic access across all districts. While these efforts have seen some success in strengthening public university networks, questions persist regarding the inclusivity, efficiency, and sustainability of these interventions, particularly for private institutions (Zennaro, Pelsser, Albinet, & Manzoni, 2020).

Further complicating the digital access landscape is the lack of consistent national funding, limited technical expertise at institutional levels, and slow policy uptake among higher education administrators (Uganda National Council for Higher Education [UNCHE], 2020). This has led to a fragmented ICT environment where some institutions are well-resourced while others remain digitally marginalized. The digital infrastructure gap has wide-ranging implications for academic equity and inclusion, especially in doctoral education, where robust access to global scholarly databases and high-speed connectivity are critical for research development (Czerniewicz, 2015; Van der Westhuizen, 2016).

Problem Statement

Despite Uganda's national ICT strategies and significant investments in broadband infrastructure (NITA-U, 2019), there is a persistent digital divide that undermines the effectiveness of e-learning, impedes research capacity, and limits opportunities for international academic collaboration (van Dijk & van Deursen, 2019). While national initiatives such as RENU and NITA-U were established to democratize ICT access, their reach and effectiveness across institutional types remain unclear (Zennaro et al., 2020). Without targeted, evidence-based intervention frameworks, Uganda's higher education policy risks perpetuating structural disparities, ultimately reinforcing inequalities in access to academic content, digital research tools, and global scholarly engagement.

Purpose of the Study

This study aims to investigate the role of RENU and NITA-U in facilitating access to online content in Uganda's higher education sector. Through a comparative case study of Mak and KIU. The research explores how institutional characteristics (public vs. private status) shape online content access and utilization.

Literature Review

ICT as a Catalyst for Educational Transformation:

The global shift towards digitalization in higher education has been fueled by advancements in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), which now underpin pedagogy, content delivery, research access, and institutional management (Bates, 2015; Selwyn, 2016). ICT has become essential for promoting open learning, especially through virtual learning environments (VLEs), massive open online courses (MOOCs), and digital libraries that facilitate access to global knowledge (UNESCO, 2019). In doctoral education, where extensive research, access to scholarly databases, and collaboration across institutions are vital, reliable ICT infrastructure directly influences academic success (Anderson, 2008; Czerniewicz, 2015). However, the mere availability of digital platforms does not automatically translate to improved outcomes. The utility of ICT in higher education is contingent upon institutional readiness, digital literacy, affordability, and quality of connectivity (Van Dijk, 2020).

ICT Access in Ugandan Higher Education:

Uganda's higher education system reflects a dichotomy in ICT access, especially between public and private universities. Makerere University, as a flagship public institution, has made substantial investments in ICT infrastructure, including broadband connectivity, learning management systems (LMS), and e-library services (Makerere University, 2020; Graham, Andersen, & Mann, 2015). These advancements are supported by international collaborations and national funding mechanisms. In contrast, private institutions from low-resource settings often face persistent barriers, including outdated technology, low bandwidth, limited access to devices, and financial constraints (Bagarukayo & Kalema, 2015; Mpungose & Khoza, 2022). Students and faculty at these institutions report difficulties engaging with online academic content due to unstable internet connections and limited access to scholarly databases, which exacerbates inequalities in academic engagement (Czerniewicz et al., 2020).

National ICT Policies and Strategic Initiatives:

In response to these access disparities, Uganda has implemented several national ICT strategies aimed at fostering digital inclusion. Two of the most prominent actors in this space are the Research and Education Network for Uganda (RENU) and the National Information Technology Authority-Uganda (NITA-U). RENU, a not-for-profit

consortium, aims to provide affordable high-speed internet and related services to research and education institutions (RENU, 2020). It has enabled public institutions to significantly reduce connectivity costs and enhance their digital infrastructure.

NITA-U has taken a broader national approach through projects such as the National Backbone Infrastructure (NBI) and the Last Mile Connectivity Initiative, which aim to expand internet access to all districts and public offices, including universities (NITA-U, 2019). These efforts have been partially successful in increasing broadband availability across urban centers. However, research shows that their impact remains uneven, with limited penetration in private and rural institutions due to bureaucratic delays, inadequate funding models, and infrastructure constraints (Zennaro, Pelsser, Albinet, & Manzoni, 2020).

The Persistent Digital Divide:
Despite these national interventions, the digital divide in Ugandan higher education remains a pressing issue. Van der Westhuizen (2016) emphasizes that structural inequalities, such as outdated computers, poor maintenance, lack of skilled personnel, and unreliable electricity, continue to limit ICT adoption in many African universities. These challenges disproportionately affect private universities, which often operate with constrained budgets and receive limited government support (Czerniewicz et al., 2020). Moreover, digital exclusion is not solely a technical issue; it also has socio-pedagogical dimensions. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to own personal devices or have home internet access, further marginalizing them in digitally mediated learning environments (Selwyn, 2016; Czerniewicz, 2015). Addressing the digital divide thus requires an intersectional approach that accounts for institutional capacity, national policy, and socioeconomic inequalities.

ICT and Higher Education:
Higher education is particularly vulnerable to infrastructural limitations in digital access. Research training depends heavily on timely access to online journals, data repositories, virtual supervision platforms, and international scholarly networks (UNESCO, 2019). Inadequate ICT infrastructure can delay research progress, restrict collaborative opportunities, and increase attrition among doctoral candidates (Bagarukayo & Kalema, 2015; Anderson, 2008). For institutions aiming to enhance their research output and postgraduate training, investing in robust, equitable ICT systems is no longer optional; it is essential.

Gaps in the Literature:
Existing literature on ICT in African higher education predominantly focuses on technological adoption at public institutions and offers generalized assessments of policy outcomes. Few studies provide comparative analyses between public and private universities or critically evaluate the role of national ICT initiatives like RENU and NITA-U. In Uganda, the differential impact of these agencies across institutional types remains underexplored, particularly regarding online content access, research enablement, and postgraduate education outcomes (UNCHE, 2020; Zennaro et al., 2020).

Methodology

Research Design:

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore the challenges and opportunities related to ICT access in Ugandan higher education, with particular attention to the roles of RENU and NITA-U. The case study approach was selected due to its suitability for in-depth exploration of contextualized phenomena within their real-world settings (Yin, 2018). Given the complexity of digital access disparities and the involvement of multiple institutional actors, this design enabled a nuanced investigation of how national ICT initiatives are operationalized across different types of universities. A multiple-case approach was adopted, focusing on two contrasting institutions: Makerere University (Mak), the leading and a well-resourced public university in Uganda, and Kampala International University (KIU), the largest private university in Uganda. This contrast enabled an analysis of how institutional characteristics, including funding models, governance structures, and student demographics, influence experiences with digital access.

Sampling and Site Selection:

Purposive sampling was used to identify institutions and participants with direct experience of ICT use and infrastructure. Mak was chosen due to its status as Uganda's premier public university and its historical involvement in national ICT initiatives. KIU was selected to represent private universities, which often face unique challenges in digital access due to limited funding and policy support.

Participants were selected from three categories:
RENU and NITA-U staff (n = 8): IT Implementation teams.

University staff (n = 12): Librarians and ICT staff responsible for managing institutional content, infrastructure, and liaising with RENU and NITA-U. Faculty members who regularly use ICT tools in teaching, supervision, and research.
Students (n = 10): Undergraduate and postgraduate students who access online academic content as part of their learning experience.

This sample of 30 participants provided diverse perspectives across both institutions.

Data Collection Methods:
Data were collected using three qualitative techniques: unstructured interviews, observation, and document review. Interviews were conducted with the 30 participants mentioned above. An interview guide was developed to ensure consistency, covering themes such as digital infrastructure, access to online content, institutional partnerships with RENU/NITA-U, and perceived barriers to digital engagement. Interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and were recorded with consent. This method enabled rich, first-hand accounts of the lived experiences of ICT access. Participant observation was used to observe activities and the physical availability of devices, the quality of connectivity, and the distribution of wireless access points. Key documents were analyzed to contextualize interview data and verify institutional and national ICT strategies. These included: Institutional ICT policies from Mak and KIU; Strategic plans from RENU and NITA-U; Reports from the Uganda National Council for Higher Education (UNCHE); and Government broadband rollout progress updates. This triangulation enhanced the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data Analysis:
Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-step approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Transcribed interviews were coded inductively to identify recurring themes and subthemes. These included: Access to infrastructure; Connectivity and bandwidth constraints; Device availability; Institutional support mechanisms; and Perceptions of RENU and NITA-U. Thematic patterns were compared across the two institutions to identify similarities, divergences, and critical gaps in service provision. Document data were analyzed deductively using a content analysis framework focused on ICT policy provisions, coverage goals, and implementation outcomes. Participant observation was used to validate certain aspects of the study, such as the availability of devices, the quality of connectivity, and the distribution of wireless access points.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations:
To ensure the rigor of the research, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria were applied: Credibility was enhanced through member checking and prolonged engagement; Transferability was supported by detailed descriptions of institutional settings; Dependability was ensured through an audit trail of procedures and decision-making; Confirmability was addressed by triangulating data sources and maintaining reflective notes.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Lira University Research and Ethics Committee, and permission to conduct this study in Uganda was granted by the National Council for Science and Technology. Participants were briefed on the study's purpose and provided informed consent. Anonymity was guaranteed by coding interview transcripts and withholding institutional identifiers where appropriate.

Limitations of the Study:
While this study provides valuable insights into the facilitation of online content access in Ugandan higher education, it is important to acknowledge its limitations to contextualize the findings and suggest directions for future research. This study employed a qualitative, multiple-case study design with a purposively selected sample of 30 participants. This approach was ideal for achieving thematic saturation and obtaining rich, in-depth data relevant to the research questions. However, the sample size, while adequate for qualitative inquiry, limits the statistical generalizability of the findings. Future research could employ large-scale surveys to quantitatively measure the prevalence of the challenges and strategies identified here across a broader population of institutions.

The primary data collection method was semi-structured interviews, which inherently rely on participants' self-reported experiences, perceptions, and recollections. While this is a strength for understanding subjective realities, it introduces the potential for recall bias, social desirability bias and perceptual inaccuracies. To mitigate this, the study employed methodological triangulation by corroborating interview data with direct observation and document analysis. Nevertheless, the findings should be interpreted as representing the perspectives of key stakeholders within the studied ecosystem.

While the specific findings may not be directly transferable to other regions, the identified themes may offer valuable insights for researchers and policymakers in other resource-constrained settings facing similar digital equity challenges. The transferability of the findings is thus analytical rather than statistical.

Results

This section presents the findings from the case study analysis of Mak and KIU, based on interviews with key stakeholders, observation, and document review. The results are organized thematically to reflect the most salient issues: disparities in ICT infrastructure, challenges to internet connectivity, access to digital content, and perceptions of RENU and NITA-U interventions.

Table 1: Summary of Key Disparities between Public and Private Universities

Dimension	Public Universities	Private Universities
ICT Infrastructure	Modern computing labs, centralized LMS (MUELE), robust server infrastructure, and backup power.	Outdated computers, limited Wi-Fi coverage, and frequent power outages disrupt operations.
Internet Connectivity	Stable, high-speed broadband via RENU and NITA-U. Challenges involve peak-time network management.	Unreliable, costly connectivity from commercial ISPs is cited as a major barrier to online learning.
Access to Digital Resources	Institutional subscriptions to major databases (JSTOR, Scopus). NITA-U-supported device loan schemes.	Limited access to premium academic databases. High student reliance on under-resourced university labs.
Role of RENU/NITA-U	High awareness and utilization. RENU praised for cost-saving and stability. NITA-U provides advisory support.	Low awareness and engagement. Perceived bureaucratic barriers to accessing NITA-U services.
Technical Support & Training	A dedicated ICT directorate provides support. Digital literacy training is available, though capacity can be stretched.	Inadequate technical support staff. Minimal structured digital literacy training for staff

Source: Primary Data based on Observation, Document Review, Interviews

ICT Infrastructure and Connectivity Disparities:

The findings revealed that ICT infrastructure is not merely a technical backbone but a marker of institutional privilege and systemic inequality. Public universities, particularly Makerere, had made visible investments in modern computer laboratories, reliable connectivity, and subsidised high-speed Internet. For example, a stakeholder noted *"Makerere is a flagship university which has adopted most of RENU's services. These services include the highest bandwidth subscription and updated network devices"* (RENUSF4). These gains were tied to partnerships with RENU and NITA-U, demonstrating how national infrastructure bodies disproportionately benefit public institutions. As one systems administrator explained, *"Our bandwidth is relatively stable thanks to RENU. The issue is more about managing network demand during peak periods. We also receive training and advisory service from NITA-U."* (MAKSF 4). This reflection illustrates that for public Universities, the challenge has shifted from basic connectivity to optimising user experiences, a sign of infrastructural maturity. By contrast, the situation in private universities was characterized by ICT infrastructural limitations. The accounts of both students and staff emphasised frustration with outdated hardware and unstable Internet services. A student expressed this poignantly: *"Sometimes we go to the lab and spend an hour waiting for the computers to boot because the power is sometimes on and off, but the Internet is available, but sometimes slow"* (KIUST 5). Here, digital exclusion was not only a question of bandwidth but the cumulative effect of weak electricity supply, obsolete machines, and unaffordable data packages. The sense of being locked out of the digital academy was tangible, as access to even the most basic online resources was often determined by infrastructural failure rather than user choice. These disparities reinforce what Ssembatya (2012) describes as a structural imbalance in Uganda's higher education, where public institutions enjoy resource advantages not available to their private counterparts.

Differential Access to Resources and National Support:

The inequalities extended beyond connectivity to the realm of academic resources and national support mechanisms. For example, a stakeholder revealed, *"We have rolled out Eduroam connectivity and it's active in all public Universities, some private ones are yet to seek integration, but the technology has been deployed across the country"* (RENUSF 1). Public university staff and students had access to a wide array of subscribed databases and occasionally benefited from government-backed device loan schemes, initiatives designed to stimulate digital inclusion. For them, national infrastructure bodies such as RENU were not abstract policy actors but lived enablers of academic life. One librarian proudly remarked, *"We benefit a lot from RENU subscriptions and federated access systems. Students don't have to struggle with passwords and VPNs"* (MAKSF 2). Such testimonies

highlight how government and consortia-level programmes filter down to improve day-to-day academic practices in public universities.

The picture was starkly different in private institutions, where staff and students consistently reported feeling excluded from these national streams of support. Awareness of RENU's role was minimal, and engagement with NITA-U was limited. A faculty member underscored this exclusion bluntly: *"We've tried to engage NITA-U, but their programs mostly prioritise government institutions. There is a need to adopt an inclusive strategy so that private institutions can equally benefit from national initiatives"* (KIUSF 5). The perception of systemic marginalisation was not incidental but deeply entrenched, shaping how private institutions navigated resource constraints largely without state support. *"NITA-U currently supports the rest of the Universities with last-mile connectivity through RENU, but the rest of the services currently benefit public institutions."* (NITASF 1). Czerniewicz et al. (2020) similarly observe that digital transformation policies in African higher education often reinforce existing institutional hierarchies, with public universities positioned to benefit more readily from national ICT initiatives.

Cross-Cutting Challenges: Support and Literacy:
While infrastructural and resource disparities defined the divide between public and private universities, the findings also surfaced challenges that transcended institutional boundaries. Both public and private universities reported inadequate technical support and limited digital literacy among staff and students. A Makerere lecturer noted, *"Even when the Internet is there, many colleagues don't know how to use the databases effectively. So librarians will have to always organize trainings"* (MAKSF 7), while a private university student echoed, *"We are taught how to navigate databases, but I think there is need for continuous training on the use of proper academic tools"* (KIUST 3). These voices suggest that connectivity alone does not guarantee meaningful access; digital skills and pedagogical support are equally critical.

The shortage of ICT support staff further compounded these difficulties. A systems officer lamented, *"There are just a few of us handling all IT issues for the whole university. You can imagine the overwhelming task if most of the students and staff are to be fully supported"* (KIUSF 2). Such testimonies underscore that Uganda's universities are not only underinvesting in machines and networks but also in the human capital required to sustain digital transformation. The problem, therefore, is not simply technological but systemic, rooted in policy priorities that privilege infrastructure deployment over long-term investment in digital competencies.

Taken together, these findings illuminate a landscape of stratified digital readiness: robust but overstretched systems in public universities, fragile and underdeveloped infrastructure in private institutions, and shared gaps in literacy and technical support across both.

Discussion
The discussion of findings from the case study analysis of Mak and KIU, based on interviews with key stakeholders, observation, and document review, is hereby presented. The discussion is organized thematically to reflect the most salient issues.

ICT Access in Organizational and Environmental Contexts:
The stark disparities between public and private universities are not merely technological but are deeply rooted in organizational capacities and environmental constraints. While the superior ICT infrastructure at public universities aligns with global patterns where flagship institutions often lead digitalization (Cloete & Maassen, 2015; Lwoga & Komba, 2015), the severity of the divide in Uganda underscores a critical environmental failure: the lack of a policy framework that mandates or incentivizes equitable access across all accredited institutions. This finding contrasts with models in countries like South Africa or Kenya, where national ICT policies more explicitly aim to include a diverse range of higher education providers, though with varying success (Czerniewicz & Brown, 2014; Mutula, 2009). The situation at private universities reflects a broader trend in sub-Saharan Africa, where policy vacuums and market-driven logics often prioritize profitability over robust ICT investment (Molla, 2008). This study demonstrates that in Uganda, the organizational advantage of public institutions is compounded by an environmental context that systematically disadvantages their private counterparts.

Technological and Socio-Economic Constraints:
The identification of internet connectivity as the principal barrier confirms established literature (Van der Westhuizen, 2016). However, this study adds a critical layer by revealing the limitations of current national models. While RENU's subsidized bandwidth is effective for its members, its reach is restricted. This presents a stark contrast to the more integrated NREN models in regions like Europe (via GÉANT) or even in neighboring Rwanda, where efforts to connect a wider array of institutions are more centralized and publicly funded (Jensen,

2010; Zennaro et al., 2020). The reliance on a membership-based model for RENU, while practical, inadvertently creates a tiered system. The findings suggest that Uganda's approach, heavily reliant on organizational partnerships, needs to be supplemented by stronger environmental mandates from bodies like NITA-U and the Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) to ensure affordability and coverage transcend institutional type.

Institutional Capacity from a Dimension of Digital Inclusion:
The significant capacity gaps, especially in technical support and digital literacy at KIU, highlight a critical flaw in the assumption that providing technology leads to its effective use. This aligns with global critiques of technology-driven reform that neglect human capacity (Bates, 2015; Trotter & Hodgkinson-Williams, 2021). The findings critically extend this argument by showing that in a resource-constrained environment like Uganda, this oversight is catastrophic for private institutions. Unlike in wealthier nations, where faculty and students might compensate for institutional shortcomings with personal resources, the lack of institutional support in Uganda directly truncates educational opportunities. This underscores that digital equity is as much about building organizational human capital as it is about installing hardware.

The Asymmetric Impact of RENU and NITA-U as Key Stakeholders:
The study reaffirms RENU's positive impact but critically examines the environmental and organizational reasons for the uneven reach of NITA-U's portfolio services. The limited engagement with private universities is not simply an oversight but a result of a policy architecture that primarily focuses on public institutions as the engines of national development. This contrasts with more holistic digital transformation strategies in African higher education, which view the entire sector as a cohesive ecosystem vital for national innovation (Trotter & Hodgkinson-Williams, 2021). NITA-U's broader infrastructure focus is commendable, but the findings reveal a gap in the deployment of a wide array of services for both public and private institutions. What is prominent is the national backbone deployment and last-mile connectivity potential to all universities. The last-mile limitations within the higher education sector can be viewed on a case-by-case basis. If researched, it could reveal a manifestation of a multi-layered digital divide beyond connectivity. However, this study provides a clear case study for the implications of ICT infrastructure on access to online content for equity.

Table 2: Implications for Policy and Practice

TOE Context	Implications for Policy and Practice
Environmental Level	Policymakers must develop an equitable ICT funding model that explicitly includes private institutions in national subsidy schemes and infrastructure projects, shifting from a purely public institution focus.
Organizational Level	Mandate and support institutional capacity building. RENU and NITA-U, in partnership with NCHE, should establish ICT governance certification standards and deliver targeted training programmes for staff across all institutions.
Technological Level	Provide targeted technological support for research. This includes dedicated bandwidth for academic databases and cloud-based research tools for postgraduate students across all institutions, recognising research as a national priority.
Cross-Cutting	Formalise public–private partnerships in ICT planning. Establish a national task force involving RENU, NITA-U, UCC, and representatives from both public and private universities to build a cohesive and inclusive digital ecosystem.

Conclusion

This study set out to investigate the facilitation of access to online content in Ugandan higher education, with a specific focus on the roles of RENU and NITA-U. The findings reveal profound disparities in digital infrastructure, connectivity, and institutional capacity, but the study's primary contribution lies in explicating the systemic mechanisms behind these inequities. The most significant finding is the critical interplay between institutional typology and access to national ICT resources. While public universities have advanced by leveraging direct funding and strategic partnerships with RENU and NITA-U, private institutions remain systematically marginalized. This is not merely a funding gap but a policy and design failure in national digital inclusion strategies, which have historically prioritized public entities. The study establishes that limited access to stable internet, scholarly databases, and cloud-based collaboration tools directly impedes research productivity, quality, and timely completion for postgraduates in underserved institutions. This threatens the entire national project of building a robust knowledge economy, as a significant segment of the academic community is effectively disenfranchised. Therefore, this study's central policy implication is the urgent need to redefine "national" ICT infrastructure to include all accredited higher institutions of learning, regardless of their public or private status. Equitable access must be legislated through targeted funding models, mandatory inclusion in subsidized bandwidth programs, and capacity-building partnerships mandated for bodies like RENU and NITA-U.

Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen digital access across Uganda's higher education landscape:

1. Expand Equitable ICT Funding to Private Institutions

Stakeholders should develop funding models that explicitly include private universities. These models could involve: Co-funding schemes for infrastructure upgrades; Subsidies for broadband connectivity and equipment; Competitive grants that reward innovative digital transformation plans.

2. Enhance Institutional Capacity for ICT Support

Universities must invest in: Recruiting and training ICT professionals; Establishing help desks and support centers for students and faculty; Conducting periodic capacity-building workshops on digital literacy, cybersecurity, and scholarly resource use.

3. Bridge the Device Access Gap

To overcome the barrier of limited personal devices, institutions and national bodies should: Introduce student laptop loan schemes; Partner with tech companies for subsidized device procurement; Establish communal digital labs with extended operating hours.

4. Integrate ICT Policies into National Doctoral Training Frameworks

The Ministry of Education and UNCHE should incorporate ICT standards into national doctoral education policies by: Requiring institutions to demonstrate ICT readiness in postgraduate program accreditation; Encouraging the use of open-access platforms and research management systems; Monitoring digital equity outcomes through periodic assessments.

5. Establish Cross-Institutional Knowledge Sharing Networks

Institutions should collaborate through: Peer learning forums where best practices on ICT integration are shared; Joint workshops and symposia organized in partnership with RENU/NITA-U; Shared service agreements where well-resourced institutions support those with lower digital capacity.

Final Reflection

Ultimately, the promise of digital transformation in Ugandan higher education lies not merely in infrastructure development but in equitable access, inclusive policy implementation, and sustained capacity-building. Bridging the digital divide requires collaborative efforts that span government, universities, national ICT bodies, and the private sector. Only through such systemic and inclusive engagement can Uganda fully realize its vision of a digitally empowered academic ecosystem, one in which every student and scholar, regardless of institutional affiliation, can participate meaningfully in the global knowledge economy.

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