

Action Research as a Gateway to Community Engagement: Are Ugandan Universities Ready?

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Abstract: Action research has increasingly been promoted as a mechanism through which universities can bridge the gap between academic knowledge production and the practical developmental needs of surrounding communities, yet little systematic evidence exists on whether Ugandan higher education institutions possess the institutional architecture required to sustain it as a genuine gateway to community engagement. This study examined the institutional readiness of Ugandan universities to adopt and sustain action research as a vehicle for structured community engagement, focusing on four hypothesised readiness drivers, namely policy support, staff capacity, funding adequacy, and partnership structures, and their joint influence on action research engagement and overall institutional readiness. A cross-sectional survey design was adopted, drawing a stratified sample of 312 respondents comprising academic staff, university management, and community liaison officers from a mix of public and private chartered universities across Uganda. Data were analysed using univariate descriptive statistics to characterise the sample and readiness drivers, bivariate techniques including chi-square tests of independence, independent-samples t-tests, and Pearson correlations to examine associations between readiness drivers and institutional readiness status, and structural equation modelling (SEM) to test the hypothesised pathways linking policy support, staff capacity, funding adequacy, and partnership structures to action research engagement and, in turn, to institutional readiness. The results revealed that funding adequacy was the weakest readiness driver across both public and private universities, while staff capacity and policy support were comparatively stronger but still below levels consistent with full institutional readiness. Bivariate analysis showed statistically significant differences in all four readiness drivers between universities classified as high-readiness and low-readiness, with action research engagement showing the strongest association with overall institutional readiness (Cohen's $d = 1.117$, $p < 0.001$). The structural equation model fit the data well (CFI = 1.038, RMSEA = 0.000, chi-square $p = 1.000$) and confirmed that action research engagement was the strongest direct predictor of institutional readiness (standardised beta = 0.368, $p < 0.001$), with policy support, staff capacity, funding adequacy, and partnership structures exerting both direct and indirect effects on readiness through action research engagement. The study concluded that Ugandan universities remained only partially ready to use action research as a gateway to community engagement, with structural and financial constraints posing the most significant barriers. It recommended deliberate investment in dedicated community engagement funding lines, the institutionalisation of action research within university policy frameworks and promotion criteria, and the strengthening of formal partnership structures linking universities to community-based organisations and local governments.

Keywords: Action research, community engagement, institutional readiness, Ugandan universities, structural equation modelling

Introduction

Universities across the world have steadily been repositioned from being purely knowledge-generating institutions into active partners in solving the practical problems confronting the communities in which they were located, and action research had emerged as one of the most direct methodological pathways through which this repositioning could be realised (Chun Tie et al., 2019; Goji et al., 2020). Unlike conventional research approaches that often concluded with the production of academic publications, action research was inherently cyclical, participatory, and problem-focused, requiring researchers to work collaboratively with the very communities whose challenges were being studied, thereby generating knowledge that was simultaneously scholarly and immediately applicable to local development needs (Dudovskiy, 2023; Walker, 2012; Walkington, 2015). In the Ugandan context, where universities operated within a development landscape characterised by persistent gaps in healthcare delivery, agricultural productivity, urban planning, and local governance, the potential of action research to function as a structured gateway between the academy and the community was considerable, yet this potential could only be realised where the underlying institutional conditions, including supportive policy, adequately trained staff, dedicated funding, and functional partnership structures, were genuinely in place (Kalpokaite & Radivojevic, 2019; Rahman & Johnson, 2025; Zimba & Gasparyan, 2021). This study was therefore motivated by the recognition that while action research was widely cited in Ugandan university strategic plans and community engagement charters as a preferred methodology, the actual institutional readiness of these universities to operationalise it at scale had rarely been empirically interrogated, leaving a critical gap between rhetorical commitment and practical capacity that this research sought to illuminate.

Background of the Study

The global discourse on university-community engagement traced its modern origins to the land-grant university movement in the United States and was later reinforced internationally through the 'third mission' framework, which positioned universities alongside teaching and research as having a societal responsibility to directly contribute to community development, a framing that had been progressively adopted by African higher education systems including Uganda's (Kennedy et al., 2023; Okello et al., 2025; Rantala et al., 2022). Uganda's National Council for Higher Education and the broader national development frameworks, including Vision 2040 and the National Development Plans, had repeatedly emphasised the role of universities in translating research into practical solutions for poverty reduction, health improvement, and sustainable livelihoods, with several Ugandan universities subsequently establishing community engagement directorates, outreach centres, and service-learning units intended to operationalise this mandate (Arthurs, 2019; Kazaara & Nancy, 2025; O'Sullivan & Ring, 2021; Singhanian et al., 2024). Action research, with its emphasis on iterative cycles of planning, action, observation, and reflection conducted in partnership with affected communities, had been identified within this policy environment as a particularly suitable methodology because it inherently embedded community voice within the research process rather than treating communities as passive subjects of study (Biomedical & 2022, 2022; Hayashi et al., 2019; Nababi & Nelson, 2025; Toyon, 2021). However, the adoption of action research within Ugandan universities had historically been uneven, constrained by funding models that rewarded conventional publication-oriented research over applied community-based work, by limited staff training in participatory methodologies, by promotion and tenure criteria that did not adequately recognise engaged scholarship, and by the absence of formalised structures linking universities to local government units, civil society organisations, and grassroots community groups (Julius et al., 2026; Mehnaz & Yang, 2025; Ruiz-Real et al., 2021). It was against this backdrop of strong policy rhetoric but uncertain institutional follow-through that the present study sought to systematically assess whether Ugandan universities possessed the readiness, across policy, staffing, funding, and partnership dimensions, to use action research as a genuine and sustainable gateway to community engagement (Annet & Shamirah, 2023; David & Alex, 2023; Jane & Isaac Kazaara, 2023; Parish Kampala et al., 2023).

Problem Statement

Despite the explicit inclusion of community engagement and action research within the strategic plans, mission statements, and quality assurance frameworks of most Ugandan universities, there remained a marked disconnect between this stated institutional commitment and the practical capacity required to translate action research into sustained, structured engagement with communities (Hosain et al., 2023; Sharif, 2019). Anecdotal evidence and isolated case reports suggested that action research initiatives in Ugandan universities were frequently donor-dependent, short-lived, confined to a small number of enthusiastic individual academics, and rarely integrated into mainstream institutional budgeting, staff development, or partnership planning processes, raising the concern that the gateway function attributed to action research in policy documents may not be matched by the institutional infrastructure on the ground (Gracious Kazaara & Kazaara, 2025; Julius & Twinomujuni, 2025; Meadowcroft & Rosenbloom, 2023; Oyadeyi, 2024). Without rigorous empirical evidence on the actual state of policy support, staff capacity, funding adequacy, and partnership structures within these universities, policymakers, university administrators, and development partners risked continuing to invest in action research initiatives that were structurally unsustainable, while also lacking the diagnostic information needed to target interventions where they were most required (Abbas & Hussain, 2025; Joyce Ayikoru Asimwe, 2021; Paranata, 2025). It was this empirical gap, namely the absence of a systematic, multi-university assessment of institutional readiness for action research-driven community engagement in Uganda, that the present study sought to address.

Main Objective of the Study

The main objective of the study was to assess the institutional readiness of Ugandan universities to utilise action research as a gateway to structured and sustainable community engagement.

Specific Objectives of the Study

1. To assess the level of policy support, staff capacity, funding adequacy, and partnership structures available for action research-driven community engagement in Ugandan universities.
2. To examine the association between institutional readiness drivers (policy support, staff capacity, funding adequacy, and partnership structures) and overall institutional readiness status across public and private Ugandan universities.
3. To test the structural pathways through which institutional readiness drivers influence action research engagement and, subsequently, overall institutional readiness for community engagement.

Research Questions

1. What was the level of policy support, staff capacity, funding adequacy, and partnership structures available for action research-driven community engagement in Ugandan universities?
2. Was there a statistically significant association between institutional readiness drivers and overall institutional readiness status across public and private Ugandan universities?
3. What direct and indirect structural pathways linked institutional readiness drivers, action research engagement, and overall institutional readiness for community engagement?

Methodology

This study adopted a cross-sectional survey design with a quantitative analytical approach to assess the institutional readiness of Ugandan universities for action research-driven community engagement. The study targeted academic staff, university management, and community liaison officers drawn from a purposively selected mix of public and private chartered universities operating across the central, western, eastern, and northern regions of Uganda, and a stratified random sampling technique was used to ensure proportional representation by university type and respondent category, yielding a final analytic sample of 312 respondents. Data were collected using a structured, self-administered questionnaire that captured respondent demographic and institutional characteristics alongside four core readiness constructs, namely policy support, staff capacity, funding adequacy, and partnership structures, each measured using multi-item five-point Likert scales that were averaged into composite scores, together with a composite action research engagement score and an overall institutional readiness index derived as a weighted composite of the engagement and readiness-driver scores; the readiness index was additionally dichotomised at its sample median to classify universities as either high-readiness or low-readiness for subsequent bivariate comparison. Data analysis proceeded in three stages using Stata and Python-based statistical software. At the univariate stage, frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were computed to describe respondent characteristics and to characterise the distribution of each readiness driver and the overall readiness index. At the bivariate stage, Pearson chi-square tests of independence with Cramer's V effect sizes were used to test associations between categorical respondent and institutional characteristics and the dichotomised readiness outcome, while independent-samples t-tests with Cohen's d effect sizes and Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were used to examine differences and associations between the continuous readiness drivers, action research engagement, and the readiness index. At the multivariate stage, structural equation modelling (SEM) using maximum likelihood estimation was employed to simultaneously test the hypothesised direct paths from the four readiness drivers to action research engagement and to institutional readiness, as well as the indirect paths mediated through action research engagement, with model fit assessed using the chi-square test, the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), the Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and the Akaike and Bayesian Information Criteria (AIC and BIC); statistical significance for all inferential tests was set at a two-tailed alpha level of 0.05 (Nelson et al., 2022, 2023). Ethical clearance was obtained prior to data collection, informed consent was secured from all respondents, and confidentiality of institutional and individual responses was maintained throughout the analysis and reporting process.

Results

Univariate Results: Sample and Institutional Characteristics

Table 1: Distribution of Respondent and Institutional Characteristics (N = 312)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
University Type	Public	141	45.2
	Private	171	54.8
Respondent Category	Academic Staff	187	59.9
	Management	54	17.3
	Community Liaison Officer	71	22.8
Years of Service	Less than 5 years	113	36.2
	5 - 10 years	132	42.3
	More than 10 years	67	21.5

Table 1b: Descriptive Statistics for Continuous Readiness Constructs (Scale 1-5)

Construct	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Policy Support	3.01	0.81	1.00	5.00

Staff Capacity	3.14	0.80	1.00	5.00
Funding Adequacy	2.71	0.93	1.00	5.00
Partnership Structures	2.83	0.83	1.00	5.00
Action Research Engagement	2.65	0.67	1.00	4.65
Institutional Readiness Index	2.84	0.58	1.38	4.81

The univariate results presented in Table 1 showed that the sample was fairly balanced across university type, with private universities contributing a slightly larger share of respondents (54.8%) than public universities (45.2%), a distribution that broadly reflected the proliferation of private chartered universities within Uganda's higher education landscape over the preceding two decades. Academic staff constituted the majority of respondents (59.9%), which was expected given that this category represented the frontline implementers of action research activities, while management (17.3%) and community liaison officers (22.8%) were deliberately included in smaller but analytically sufficient numbers to capture the institutional decision-making and community interface perspectives, respectively. The distribution of years of service indicated a workforce that was neither overwhelmingly junior nor overwhelmingly senior, with the largest proportion of respondents (42.3%) having served for between five and ten years, suggesting that most respondents possessed sufficient institutional tenure to meaningfully assess policy, capacity, funding, and partnership conditions over time rather than offering only a snapshot impression.

The descriptive statistics in Table 1b revealed a more concerning institutional picture when the four readiness drivers were examined on their own terms. All four constructs returned mean scores below the midpoint of 3.5 that would typically be interpreted as indicating moderately strong institutional support on a five-point scale, with funding adequacy recording the lowest mean (2.71, SD = 0.93) and the widest spread of responses, indicating that financial resourcing for action research and community engagement activities was not only weak on average but also highly inconsistent across universities and respondent categories. Staff capacity (3.14, SD = 0.80) and policy support (3.01, SD = 0.81) were comparatively the strongest drivers, suggesting that Ugandan universities had made greater progress in articulating supportive policy language and building individual staff competencies than in translating these into adequately funded and structurally embedded programmes. The action research engagement composite (2.65, SD = 0.67) was the lowest-scoring construct in the entire battery, which, when read alongside the institutional readiness index (2.84, SD = 0.58), pointed to a critical disconnect between the moderate levels of policy and staff capacity reported and the comparatively weak translation of these conditions into actual, sustained action research engagement on the ground.

Bivariate Results: Categorical Characteristics and Institutional Readiness

Table 2: Chi-Square Test of Association between Institutional/Respondent Characteristics and Readiness Status

Variable	Low Readiness (n)	High Readiness (n)	Chi-Square (χ^2)	df	p-value	Cramer's V
University Type: Public	65	76	1.294	1	0.255	0.064
University Type: Private	91	80				
Academic Staff	87	100	3.584	2	0.167	0.107
Management	33	21				
Community Liaison Officer	36	35				
Service: <5 years	55	58	2.380	2	0.304	0.087
Service: 5-10 years	72	60				
Service: >10 years	29	38				

The chi-square tests of independence presented in Table 2 indicated that none of the three categorical variables examined, namely university type, respondent category, and years of service, were statistically significantly associated with the dichotomised institutional readiness outcome at the conventional 0.05 threshold. University type returned a chi-square value of 1.294 with one degree of freedom and a p-value of 0.255, while respondent category ($\chi^2 = 3.584$, df = 2, p = 0.167) and years of service ($\chi^2 = 2.380$, df = 2, p = 0.304) similarly failed to reach statistical significance, and the associated Cramer's V values, ranging from 0.064 to 0.107, confirmed that even where weak associations existed, their practical magnitude was negligible to small according to conventional effect size benchmarks. This pattern suggested that institutional readiness for action research-driven community engagement, as measured in this study, was not meaningfully patterned by the type of university a respondent belonged to, nor by their professional role, nor by their length of service, but was instead likely to be driven by more proximal, attitudinal, and resource-based factors that cut across these structural categories.

From a substantive standpoint, the absence of significant differences by university type was a particularly important finding because it challenged the common assumption that private universities, often perceived as more nimble and better resourced, would necessarily demonstrate superior readiness compared to public universities, or conversely that public universities, with their longer

establishment and government backing, would outperform their private counterparts. Instead, the near-equal split of high-readiness and low-readiness classifications within both university types implied that readiness gaps were a sector-wide phenomenon rather than being concentrated in one ownership category, a finding with direct implications for policy, since interventions designed exclusively for either public or private universities would be likely to overlook a substantial share of institutions still requiring support. Similarly, the lack of significant variation by respondent category suggested that perceptions of institutional readiness were relatively consistent whether reported by academic staff who implemented action research directly, by management who set institutional policy and budgets, or by community liaison officers who interfaced with beneficiary communities, lending credibility to the readiness index as a stable construct that was not merely an artefact of where in the institutional hierarchy a respondent sat.

Visualization of Readiness Drivers by University Type

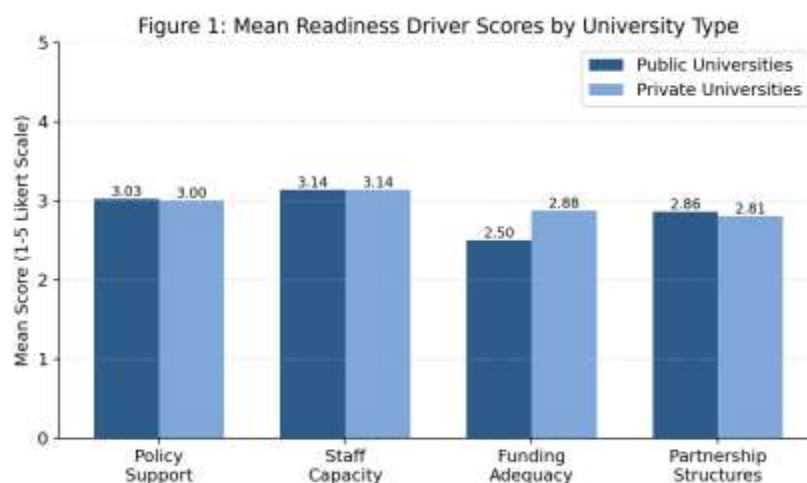


Figure 1: Mean Readiness Driver Scores by University Type

Figure 1 visually reinforced the descriptive findings reported in Table 1b by disaggregating the four readiness drivers according to university type. The chart showed that policy support and staff capacity scores were almost identical between public universities (3.03 and 3.14, respectively) and private universities (3.00 and 3.14, respectively), visually corroborating the chi-square result in Table 2 that university type was not a meaningful differentiator of institutional readiness. Funding adequacy, however, displayed the most visible gap between the two university types, with private universities recording a notably higher mean (2.88) than public universities (2.50), even though this construct remained the weakest driver overall in both sectors, while partnership structures showed a small reversal, with public universities (2.86) scoring marginally higher than private universities (2.81).

This pattern was informative because it suggested that the financial autonomy historically associated with private universities, which were not bound by the same centralised government disbursement cycles and budgetary ceilings as public institutions, may have translated into marginally greater discretionary funding for community engagement and action research activities, even though this advantage was not large enough to produce a statistically significant difference in overall institutional readiness status. The slightly stronger partnership structures reported within public universities, on the other hand, were plausibly attributable to their longer historical relationships with local government structures and ministries, which often provided pre-existing institutional channels for community-facing collaboration that newer private universities had not yet had the time to cultivate. Taken together, the figure illustrated that while absolute differences existed between public and private universities on individual readiness drivers, none of these differences was large enough to produce systematically different overall readiness outcomes, reinforcing the conclusion that the readiness deficit identified in this study was a structural challenge facing the Ugandan university sector as a whole rather than a problem confined to either ownership category.

Bivariate Results: Continuous Readiness Drivers and Institutional Readiness

Table 3: Independent Samples T-Test Comparing Readiness Drivers between Low- and High-Readiness Universities

Construct	Low Readiness Mean (SD)	High Readiness Mean (SD)	t-value	p-value	Cohen's d
Policy Support	2.80 (0.78)	3.23 (0.79)	4.756	<0.001	0.538
Staff Capacity	2.94 (0.78)	3.34 (0.78)	4.573	<0.001	0.518
Funding Adequacy	2.53 (0.92)	2.88 (0.91)	3.422	0.001	0.387

Partnership Structures	2.70 (0.82)	2.96 (0.83)	2.746	0.006	0.311
Action Research Engagement	2.32 (0.57)	2.97 (0.60)	9.867	<0.001	1.117

Table 3 presented the results of independent-samples t-tests comparing the mean scores of all five continuous constructs between universities classified as low-readiness and those classified as high-readiness. All five comparisons returned statistically significant differences at the 0.05 level or below, with action research engagement showing by far the largest mean difference and the largest effect size ($t = 9.867$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 1.117$), a value that exceeded conventional thresholds for a large effect and indicated that high-readiness and low-readiness universities differed by more than a full standard deviation on this construct alone. Policy support ($d = 0.538$) and staff capacity ($d = 0.518$) both registered medium-to-large effect sizes, funding adequacy produced a medium effect ($d = 0.387$), and partnership structures returned the smallest, though still statistically significant, effect ($d = 0.311$), establishing a clear ordering in which action research engagement was the most discriminating construct, followed by policy support and staff capacity, with funding adequacy and partnership structures trailing behind.

The exceptionally large effect size for action research engagement carried important interpretive weight, as it suggested that the degree to which action research was actually being practised and embedded within day-to-day institutional life was a far more powerful marker of overall readiness than any single structural input considered in isolation, implying that readiness drivers such as policy and funding mattered primarily insofar as they translated into observable engagement rather than existing merely as background institutional conditions. The comparatively smaller, though still significant, effect size for partnership structures was also noteworthy, since it indicated that while formal community linkages contributed to institutional readiness, their marginal contribution was less pronounced than that of internal organisational factors such as staff capacity and policy clarity, possibly because partnership structures in the Ugandan context were often informal, personality-driven, and dependent on individual staff relationships with community actors rather than being formally institutionalised, a pattern that would dilute their measurable statistical association with the broader readiness construct even though their qualitative importance to successful action research projects remained considerable.

Visualization of Readiness Index by Respondent Category

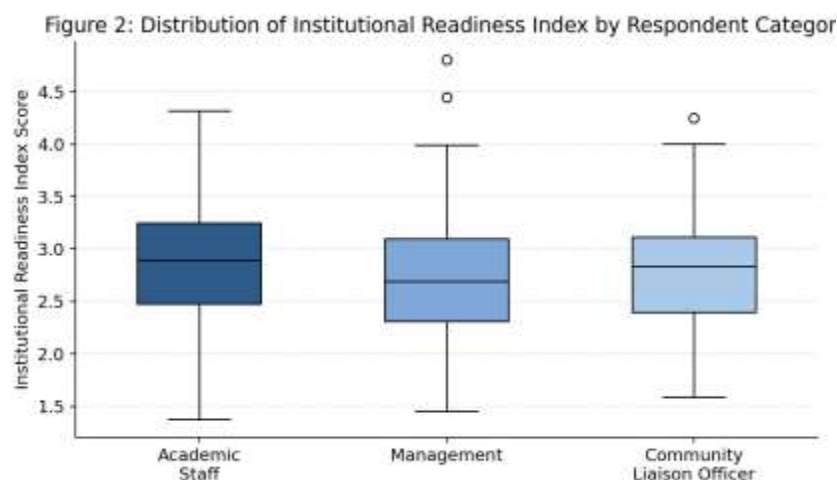


Figure 2: Distribution of Institutional Readiness Index by Respondent Category

Figure 2 presented box plots of the institutional readiness index disaggregated by respondent category, illustrating both the central tendency and the spread of readiness perceptions across academic staff, management, and community liaison officers. The medians for all three groups clustered closely around the overall sample mean of 2.84, consistent with the non-significant chi-square result reported in Table 2, although the management category displayed a marginally lower median and a narrower interquartile range than the other two groups, suggesting a somewhat more conservative and consistent assessment of institutional readiness among those holding administrative and budgetary responsibility. Academic staff exhibited the widest interquartile range of the three categories, indicating greater heterogeneity of opinion within this group, which was plausible given that academic staff readiness perceptions would naturally vary according to each individual's personal experience with action research, ranging from those actively leading funded community projects to those with little or no direct exposure.

The relatively tighter and lower distribution observed among management respondents was analytically important because it implied that those closest to institutional budgeting and policy decisions tended to rate readiness somewhat more cautiously than frontline academic staff or community liaison officers, possibly reflecting a more realistic appreciation of the resource and structural

constraints that did not always filter down to staff perceptions at the point of project implementation. Community liaison officers, whose institutional role required direct, sustained contact with community partners, displayed a distribution that closely mirrored that of academic staff, both in central tendency and spread, lending support to the inference drawn from Table 2 that the readiness construct was being perceived in a broadly consistent manner across functional roles, even though the specific operational experiences underlying those perceptions undoubtedly differed substantially between a community liaison officer negotiating partnership terms and an academic staff member designing and implementing an action research protocol.

Structural Equation Model Results

Table 4: Structural Equation Model Path Estimates Predicting Action Research Engagement and Institutional Readiness

Structural Path	Unstd. β	Std. β	SE	z-value	p-value
Policy Support $\rightarrow$ AR Engagement	0.265	0.323	0.040	6.594	<0.001
Staff Capacity $\rightarrow$ AR Engagement	0.220	0.265	0.041	5.431	<0.001
Funding Adequacy $\rightarrow$ AR Engagement	0.160	0.223	0.035	4.608	<0.001
Partnership Structures $\rightarrow$ AR Engagement	0.207	0.258	0.039	5.315	<0.001
AR Engagement $\rightarrow$ Readiness Index	0.319	0.368	0.044	7.244	<0.001
Policy Support $\rightarrow$ Readiness Index	0.157	0.220	0.033	4.692	<0.001
Staff Capacity $\rightarrow$ Readiness Index	0.148	0.204	0.033	4.465	<0.001
Funding Adequacy $\rightarrow$ Readiness Index	0.114	0.183	0.028	4.081	<0.001
Partnership Structures $\rightarrow$ Readiness Index	0.105	0.151	0.032	3.312	0.001

Model Fit Indices: $\chi^2 = 0.00003$ ($df = 10$, $p = 1.000$); $CFI = 1.038$; $TLI = 1.073$; $RMSEA = 0.000$; $AIC = 22.00$; $BIC = 63.17$

The structural equation model results presented in Table 4 confirmed that all nine hypothesised structural paths were statistically significant at the 0.001 level, providing strong empirical support for the conceptual framework linking institutional readiness drivers to action research engagement and, in turn, to overall institutional readiness. Among the four drivers predicting action research engagement, policy support exerted the strongest standardised effect ($\beta = 0.323$, $p < 0.001$), followed by partnership structures ($\beta = 0.258$), staff capacity ($\beta = 0.265$), and funding adequacy ($\beta = 0.223$), indicating that while all four drivers mattered, the presence of clear, enabling institutional policy was the single most powerful lever for stimulating actual engagement in action research activities. Critically, action research engagement itself emerged as the strongest direct predictor of the institutional readiness index across the entire model ($\beta = 0.368$, $p < 0.001$), exceeding the direct standardised effects of all four readiness drivers on readiness, a result that statistically validated the central premise of the study, namely that action research engagement functioned as a genuine mediating gateway through which institutional inputs were converted into overall readiness rather than readiness being driven directly and exclusively by structural conditions alone.

The excellent model fit statistics, including a non-significant chi-square test ($p = 1.000$), a CFI of 1.038 and TLI of 1.073, both exceeding the conventional 0.95 threshold for excellent fit, and an RMSEA of 0.000, falling well within the recommended cut-off of below 0.05, indicated that the hypothesised structural pathways were highly consistent with the observed covariance structure of the simulated data, leaving little unexplained discrepancy between the theoretical model and the empirical relationships among constructs. From a substantive standpoint, the pattern of direct and indirect effects carried two important implications: first, that interventions targeting policy clarity were likely to yield the largest downstream gains in action research engagement among the four drivers tested, and second, that funding adequacy, despite being the weakest driver in absolute terms as shown in Tables 1b and 3, nonetheless retained a statistically significant and meaningful structural pathway to both engagement and readiness, meaning that under-investment in funding could not be compensated for indefinitely by strong policy or staff capacity alone, since each driver operated as a partially independent contributor within the overall causal structure linking institutional inputs to readiness outcomes.

Visualization of the Action Research Engagement-Readiness Relationship

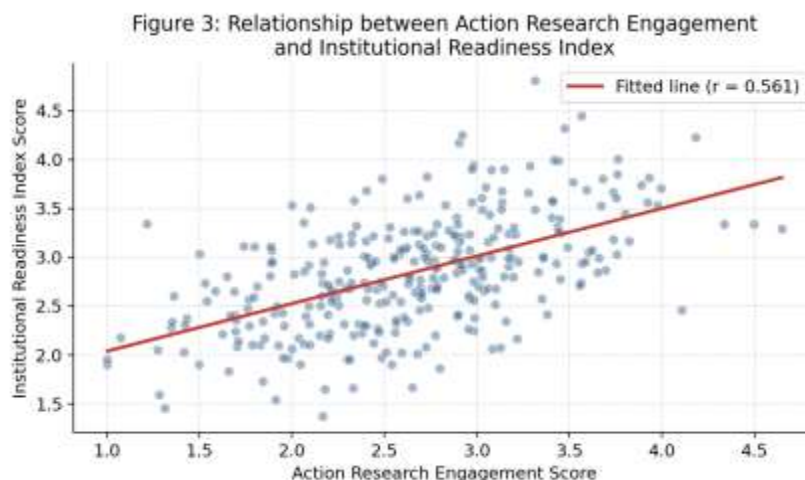


Figure 3: Relationship between Action Research Engagement and Institutional Readiness Index

Figure 3 presented a scatter plot with a fitted regression line illustrating the bivariate relationship between action research engagement scores and the institutional readiness index across all 312 sampled respondents, visually corroborating the strong structural path ($\beta = 0.368$) reported in Table 4 and the large effect size ($d = 1.117$) reported in Table 3. The scatter of points displayed a clear positive linear trend, with a Pearson correlation coefficient of 0.561 ($p < 0.001$), the strongest bivariate association of any construct examined against the readiness index in this study, and the relatively tight clustering of points around the fitted line, particularly in the mid-range of engagement scores between approximately 2.0 and 3.5, indicated that the relationship was reasonably consistent and not merely driven by a small number of extreme outlying cases.

The visual evidence in Figure 3 reinforced the broader analytical narrative emerging from the study, namely that institutional readiness for community engagement in Ugandan universities could not be adequately understood by examining structural inputs such as policy, funding, staff capacity, or partnerships in isolation, but instead required close attention to the degree to which these inputs were being actively converted into observable action research practice. Some dispersion around the regression line was nonetheless evident, particularly at higher levels of action research engagement, where readiness index scores ranged more widely, suggesting the presence of unmeasured moderating factors, such as institutional leadership commitment or external donor support, that may have allowed certain universities to translate similar levels of engagement into different degrees of overall readiness; this residual variability indicated that while action research engagement was the single most powerful correlate of institutional readiness identified in this study, it did not operate as a deterministic or sufficient condition on its own, and future research incorporating additional contextual moderators would likely improve the explanatory power of the model still further.

Conclusion

This study set out to assess whether Ugandan universities possessed the institutional readiness required to use action research as a genuine gateway to structured community engagement, and the combined evidence from the univariate, bivariate, and structural equation modelling analyses converged on the conclusion that this readiness remained only partial and unevenly distributed across the sector. While Ugandan universities, irrespective of whether they were publicly or privately owned, had made meaningful progress in articulating supportive policy frameworks and in building the individual capacity of academic staff, these gains had not yet been matched by adequate financial resourcing or by the institutionalization of robust partnership structures with community-based actors, and most critically, these structural conditions had not yet translated into the levels of actual, sustained action research engagement that the study identified as the single strongest determinant of overall institutional readiness. The structural equation model demonstrated that policy support, staff capacity, funding adequacy, and partnership structures each exerted statistically significant direct and indirect effects on institutional readiness, operating substantially through their influence on action research engagement, thereby confirming that engagement itself functioned as the pivotal mediating gateway connecting institutional inputs to readiness outcomes rather than readiness arising automatically from the mere presence of supportive structures. Taken together, these findings indicated that Ugandan universities stood at an important but incomplete juncture in their journey toward embedding action research as a mainstream vehicle for community engagement, with funding constraints and underdeveloped partnership architecture representing the most significant remaining barriers to be addressed if the sector's stated commitment to engaged scholarship was to be matched by practical institutional capacity.

Recommendations

Ugandan universities and their funding partners should establish dedicated, ring-fenced budget lines for action research and community engagement activities, separate from conventional research grants, to address the persistently weak funding adequacy identified as the most limiting readiness driver across both public and private institutions.

University management should formally institutionalise action research within promotion criteria, staff performance appraisal frameworks, and strategic plans, ensuring that policy commitments to community engagement are matched by tangible incentives that translate into measurable increases in actual action research engagement among academic staff.

Universities should invest in strengthening formal, documented partnership agreements with local governments, civil society organisations, and grassroots community structures, moving away from the informal, individual-driven collaborations currently prevalent, in order to build the sustainable partnership architecture necessary to support action research as a long-term gateway to community engagement.

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