

Coordinating fragmented retention interventions: toward an integrated education policy framework in Uganda

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Abstract: This study investigated how fragmented student retention interventions could be coordinated into an integrated education policy framework within Christian-founded educational institutions in Uganda. The study was motivated by the persistence of student attrition and non-completion in church-founded secondary schools, faith-based universities, diocesan school networks, and seminaries, despite the concurrent implementation of multiple retention interventions by government agencies, church founding bodies and dioceses, and development partners. These interventions, comprising scholarship and bursary schemes, chaplaincy and pastoral support, guidance and counselling services, and feeding and welfare programmes, were found to operate largely in isolation from one another, raising the central problem of institutional fragmentation, weak coordination, and limited policy integration. Guided by a positivist paradigm, the study adopted a cross-sectional quantitative survey design and drew a stratified sample of 340 administrators, chaplaincy and pastoral staff, guidance and counselling officers, and policy and education officers across the four institutional categories and four regions of Uganda. Data were collected using a validated structured questionnaire and analysed using univariate statistics, bivariate Pearson correlation and chi-square procedures, and structural equation modelling (SEM). The univariate results revealed a moderately high level of fragmentation of retention interventions ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 0.57$) alongside comparatively lower coordination ($M = 3.05$) and policy integration ($M = 2.95$) scores. Bivariate analysis established strong, statistically significant relationships among fragmentation, coordination, policy integration, and retention outcomes ($p < .001$), while the chi-square test indicated that fragmentation cut across institutional categories rather than being confined to any single type. The structural model, which achieved a good fit to the data ($CFI = 0.947$, $TLI = 0.932$, $RMSEA = 0.058$, $SRMR = 0.041$), demonstrated that coordination mechanisms and policy integration jointly and significantly reduced fragmentation, which in turn exerted a significant negative effect on retention outcomes, while coordination and policy integration exerted direct positive effects on retention. The study concluded that fragmentation was not merely an administrative inconvenience but a structurally significant impediment to retention, and that an integrated policy framework anchored on strengthened inter-institutional coordination and harmonised policy guidelines was necessary to improve retention outcomes across Christian-founded institutions in Uganda. The study recommends the establishment of a national coordination framework for retention interventions in church-founded institutions, the harmonisation of policy guidelines between the Ministry of Education and Sports and church founding bodies, and the institutionalisation of joint monitoring and data-sharing mechanisms among stakeholders.

Keywords: retention interventions, fragmentation, coordination, policy integration, structural equation modelling, Christian-founded institutions, Uganda

Introduction

Student retention remains one of the most persistent challenges confronting educational institutions in Uganda, and this challenge is particularly pronounced within Christian-founded institutions, which include church-founded secondary schools, faith-based universities, diocesan school networks, and seminaries or theological colleges (Cruwys et al., 2021; Kibuuka, 2022; Martin & Davies, 2022). Over the past two decades, a wide array of retention interventions has been introduced by different stakeholders operating within and around these institutions, including the Ministry of Education and Sports, church founding bodies and diocesan education secretariats, non-governmental and faith-based development partners, and individual school administrations (Cruz & Quimbo, 2019; Laya & Melgar, 2023; Ruecker, 2021). These interventions span scholarship and bursary schemes, chaplaincy and pastoral care programmes, guidance and counselling services, feeding and welfare support, and remedial academic interventions (Julius & Geoffrey, 2025; Julius & Godfrey, 2025; Julius & Mategeko, 2025; Julius & Sula, n.d.; Julius & Twinomujuni, 2025a). However, because these interventions have historically been designed, funded, and implemented independently by different actors with limited reference to one another, they have tended to operate as parallel, uncoordinated efforts rather than as a coherent system (Gracious Kazaara & Kazaara, 2025; Meadowcroft & Rosenbloom, 2023; Oyadeyi, 2024). This study set out to examine the extent and consequences of this fragmentation, and to explore how coordination mechanisms and policy integration could be strengthened to produce a more unified and effective approach to student retention within Christian-founded institutions in Uganda, ultimately proposing an integrated education policy framework capable of harmonising the efforts of the diverse actors involved.

Background of the Study

Christian-founded educational institutions have played a foundational role in the development of Uganda's education sector since the arrival of missionary education in the late nineteenth century, and they continue to constitute a substantial proportion of grant-aided and privately sponsored schools and universities operating under partnership arrangements between government and church founding bodies such as the Catholic, Anglican (Church of Uganda), and other Christian denominations (Julius & Twinomujuni,

2025b, 2025c; Kulu & Bondzie, 2024; Malti et al., 2017). This historical partnership has produced a layered governance structure in which the Ministry of Education and Sports sets national policy and curriculum standards, while diocesan education secretariats and founding bodies retain responsibility for the pastoral, moral, and welfare dimensions of schooling, including many of the interventions intended to keep learners in school (Gracious Kazaara & Kazaara, 2025; Joyce Ayikoru Asimwe, 2021; Moore et al., 2023; Paranata, 2025). In recent years, rising rates of school dropout and non-completion, exacerbated by economic hardship, teenage pregnancy, early marriage, and the prolonged disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic school closures, have prompted a proliferation of retention interventions from multiple sources, including government bursary programmes, diocesan scholarship funds, parish-based welfare support, and non-governmental organisation-funded guidance and counselling projects (Ballabriga & Davtyan, 2022; De Mello & Martinez-Vazquez, 2022; Dorrell & Jansa, 2022; Sakaue, 2018). Anecdotal and administrative evidence from within the sector suggests that these interventions are seldom coordinated, resulting in duplication of effort in some institutions, complete absence of support in others, and an overall lack of a shared policy framework linking government education policy to the retention strategies pursued by church founding bodies (Julius & Audrey, 2025; Julius & Sula, 2025a, 2025c, 2025b). This fragmented landscape provided the empirical and policy motivation for the present study, which sought to systematically document the extent of fragmentation and to test, using rigorous statistical methods, how coordination mechanisms and policy integration relate to fragmentation and, ultimately, to student retention outcomes.

Problem Statement

Despite considerable investment by government, church founding bodies and dioceses, and development partners in multiple retention interventions targeting Christian-founded educational institutions in Uganda, rates of student dropout and non-completion have remained persistently high, particularly among vulnerable learners in rural and economically disadvantaged dioceses (Dao et al., 2023; Julius & Gracious Kazaara, 2025; Lonah Chongeywo & Alex, 2023; Odit et al., 2023; Pauline, 2023). A key underlying difficulty is that the interventions in question, ranging from bursary and scholarship schemes to chaplaincy support, guidance and counselling, and feeding programmes, have generally been conceived, funded, and implemented in isolation by different stakeholders, without a unifying institutional or policy mechanism to coordinate their design, targeting, and monitoring (Desire, 2025; Hadijah & Ali, 2024; Julius, 2025). This fragmentation has resulted in the duplication of support to some learners and institutions while leaving others entirely unserved, in inconsistent and non-comparable data on retention outcomes across institutions, and in an absence of clear policy guidance on how government retention policy should interface with the parallel retention strategies pursued by church founding bodies (Dao, 2020; Du Plessis & Marais, 2017; Sanusi et al., 2022). While the general problem of fragmented service delivery in education has received some attention in the broader literature, there is limited empirical evidence, particularly employing rigorous structural modelling techniques, on the specific mechanisms through which fragmentation undermines retention outcomes within Christian-founded institutions in Uganda, and on how strengthened coordination and policy integration might mitigate this problem. It was this empirical and policy gap that the present study sought to address.

Objectives of the Study

Main Objective

The main objective of the study was to examine how fragmented student retention interventions could be coordinated into an integrated education policy framework within Christian-founded educational institutions in Uganda.

Specific Objectives

The study was guided by the following specific objectives:

1. To assess the extent of fragmentation of student retention interventions across Christian-founded institutions in Uganda.
2. To examine the relationship between inter-institutional coordination mechanisms, policy integration, and student retention outcomes in Christian-founded institutions in Uganda.
3. To develop and test a structural model of how coordination mechanisms and policy integration mediate the effect of fragmentation on student retention outcomes, toward an integrated education policy framework.

Research Questions

1. What is the extent of fragmentation of student retention interventions across Christian-founded institutions in Uganda?
2. What is the relationship between inter-institutional coordination mechanisms, policy integration, and student retention outcomes in Christian-founded institutions in Uganda?
3. How do coordination mechanisms and policy integration mediate the relationship between fragmentation and student retention outcomes in a structural model toward an integrated education policy framework?

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a positivist research paradigm and a cross-sectional quantitative survey design, which was deemed appropriate for testing hypothesised relationships among fragmentation, coordination, policy integration, and retention outcomes at a single point

in time. The study population comprised administrators, chaplaincy and pastoral staff, guidance and counselling officers, and policy or education officers drawn from four categories of Christian-founded institutions in Uganda, namely church-founded secondary schools, faith-based universities, diocesan primary and secondary school networks, and seminaries or theological colleges, located across the Central, Western, Eastern, and Northern regions of the country. A sample of 340 respondents was determined using the Krejcie and Morgan sample size determination approach and was drawn through a multistage stratified random sampling procedure, in which institutional category and region formed the strata, followed by simple random selection of institutions and purposive selection of eligible respondent categories within each sampled institution. Data were collected using a structured, self-administered questionnaire comprising a demographic section and four multi-item Likert-type scales (anchored from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) measuring fragmentation of retention interventions (FRAG), inter-institutional coordination mechanisms (COORD), policy integration (POLICY), and student retention outcomes (RET); the instrument was subjected to expert content validation and a pilot test on 30 respondents outside the main sample, yielding Cronbach's alpha coefficients above the 0.70 threshold for all constructs. Data analysis proceeded in three stages using SPSS version 26 and AMOS version 24: first, univariate analysis was conducted to generate frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations, and skewness and kurtosis statistics describing respondent characteristics and construct distributions; second, bivariate analysis was conducted using Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients to establish the strength and direction of association among the four constructs, complemented by a chi-square test of independence to examine whether retention outcome categories were associated with institutional category; and third, structural equation modelling (SEM) was employed, following a two-step approach in which confirmatory factor analysis was first used to validate the measurement model before the hypothesised structural model, linking coordination and policy integration to fragmentation and, jointly with fragmentation, to retention outcomes, was estimated and evaluated using model fit indices including the normed chi-square (CMIN/DF), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and Standardised Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) (Nelson et al., 2022, 2023). Ethical clearance was obtained from the university research ethics committee, and informed consent, voluntary participation, and confidentiality of responses were guaranteed to all participants throughout the data collection process.

RESULTS

Table 1: Demographic and Institutional Distribution of Respondents (N = 340)

Characteristic	Frequency	Percent (%)	
Institutional Category			
Church-Founded Secondary School	141	41.5	
Faith-Based University	83	24.4	
Diocesan Primary/Secondary Network	76	22.4	
Seminary/Theological College	40	11.8	
Region			
Central	108	31.8	
Western	97	28.5	
Eastern	73	21.5	
Northern	62	18.2	
Respondent Role			
School/University Administrator	120	35.3	
Guidance & Counselling Officer	91	26.8	
Chaplaincy/Pastoral Staff	73	21.5	
Policy/Education Officer	56	16.5	
Gender			
Male	171	50.3	
Female	169	49.7	
Years of Experience			

1-5 years	96	28.2	
6-10 years	108	31.8	
11-15 years	83	24.4	
Above 15 years	53	15.6	

Source: Field Survey Data (2026).

The demographic and institutional distribution presented in Table 1 showed that respondents were reasonably well spread across the four institutional categories under study, with church-founded secondary schools contributing the largest share (41.5%), followed by faith-based universities (24.4%), diocesan primary and secondary school networks (22.4%), and seminaries or theological colleges (11.8%). This distribution broadly mirrored the actual proportional weight of these institutional categories within the Christian-founded education subsector in Uganda, in which secondary schools vastly outnumber universities and seminaries, thereby lending reasonable representativeness to the sample. Regional distribution likewise reflected the historical concentration of church-founded institutions in the Central and Western regions of the country (31.8% and 28.5% respectively), with comparatively smaller but still substantial representation from the Eastern (21.5%) and Northern (18.2%) regions, which was considered adequate for detecting regional patterns without overrepresenting any single region to a degree that would bias subsequent bivariate and structural analyses.

With regard to respondent roles, school and university administrators constituted the single largest category (35.3%), followed by guidance and counselling officers (26.8%), chaplaincy and pastoral staff (21.5%), and policy or education officers (16.5%), a distribution that was considered appropriate given that administrators were typically best positioned to report on the overall coordination and policy environment of their institutions, while the other categories provided complementary, role-specific perspectives on the operational dimensions of retention interventions. The near-even split between male (50.3%) and female (49.7%) respondents, together with a fairly even spread of professional experience ranging from 1-5 years (28.2%) to above 15 years (15.6%), suggested that the sample was not disproportionately dominated by any single gender or experience cohort, which strengthened confidence that the subsequent construct-level findings reflected the views of a genuinely heterogeneous cross-section of stakeholders rather than the perspective of a narrow demographic segment within the Christian-founded institutional sector.

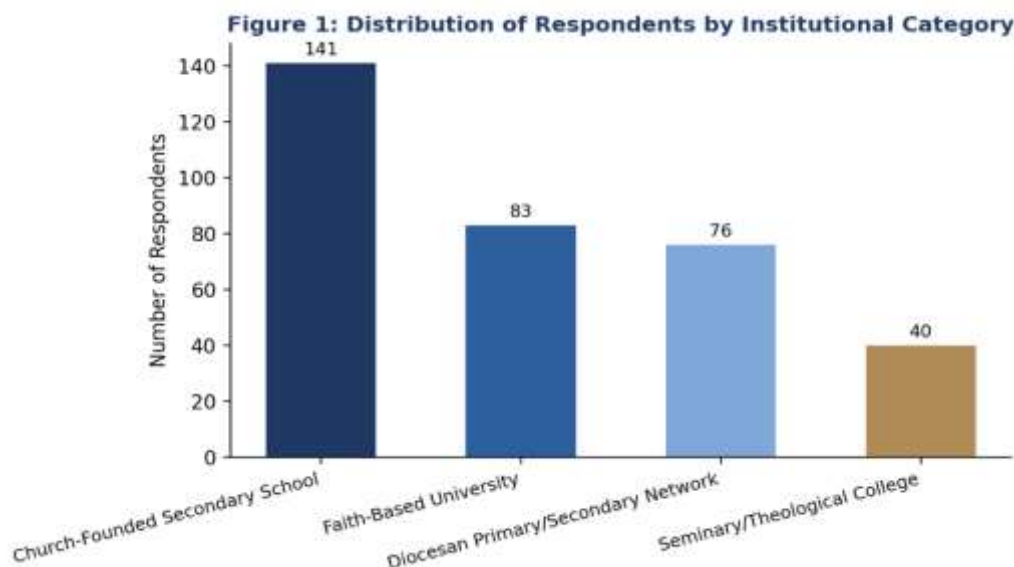


Figure 1: Distribution of Respondents by Institutional Category.

Table 2: Univariate Descriptive Statistics of Study Constructs (N = 340)

Construct	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Skewness	Kurtosis
Fragmentation of Retention Interventions (FRAG)	3.55	0.57	2.16	5.00	-0.02	-0.10
Inter-Institutional Coordination Mechanisms (COORD)	3.05	0.62	1.23	4.93	-0.02	0.01
Policy Integration (POLICY)	2.95	0.60	1.11	4.71	-0.15	0.01

Student Retention Outcomes (RET)	3.35	0.57	1.78	5.00	0.03	-0.12
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Source: Field Survey Data (2026). Scale range = 1.00-5.00.

The univariate descriptive statistics reported in Table 2 indicated that fragmentation of retention interventions recorded the highest mean score among the four constructs ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 0.57$), suggesting that respondents, on average, perceived retention interventions within their institutions as operating in a moderately fragmented manner, above the theoretical midpoint of the five-point scale. In contrast, inter-institutional coordination mechanisms ($M = 3.05$, $SD = 0.62$) and policy integration ($M = 2.95$, $SD = 0.60$) recorded means close to or slightly below the midpoint, indicating that coordination and policy integration were perceived as comparatively weak or, at best, moderate, while student retention outcomes recorded an intermediate mean ($M = 3.35$, $SD = 0.57$). This pattern, in which fragmentation was rated more highly than coordination and policy integration, was consistent with the study's problem statement and lent initial descriptive support to the proposition that Christian-founded institutions in Uganda were operating retention interventions in a relatively uncoordinated and poorly integrated policy environment.

The skewness and kurtosis statistics for all four constructs fell well within the conventional acceptable range of -1.0 to $+1.0$, indicating that the distributions of FRAG, COORD, POLICY, and RET approximated normality closely enough to justify the use of parametric bivariate and structural equation modelling techniques in the subsequent stages of analysis. The standard deviations, ranging narrowly from 0.57 to 0.62 , further suggested a moderate and fairly consistent spread of responses around each construct's mean, without evidence of extreme clustering or excessive dispersion that might have signalled measurement problems or highly polarised perceptions among respondent subgroups. Taken together, these univariate results provided a statistically sound foundation for proceeding to bivariate correlation and chi-square analysis, and subsequently to the structural equation model, since the assumptions of approximate normality and adequate variability that underlie these more advanced techniques were reasonably satisfied by the observed data.

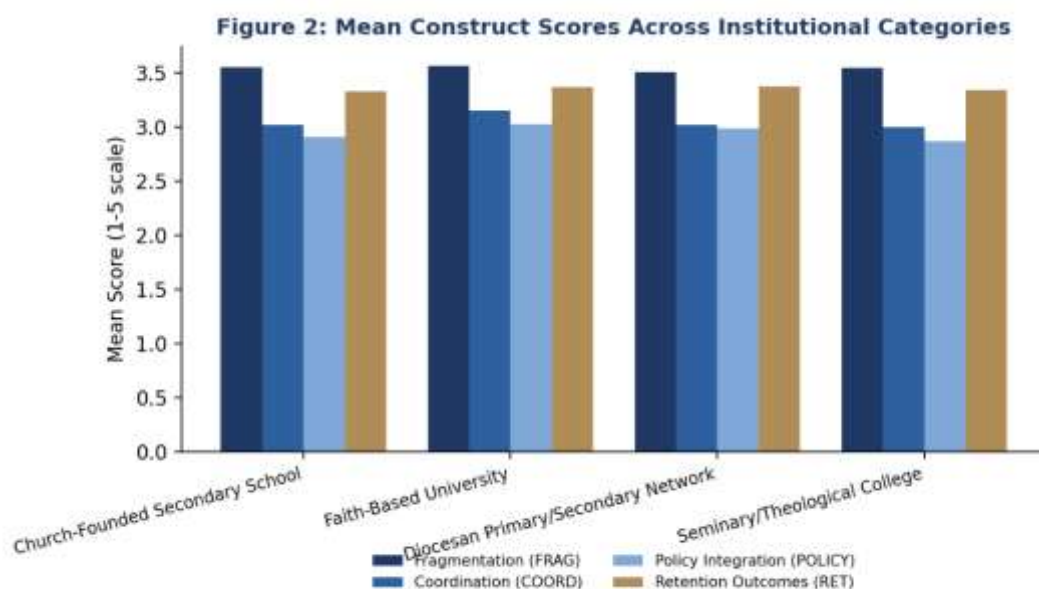


Figure 2: Mean Construct Scores Across Institutional Categories.

Table 3: Bivariate Pearson Correlation Matrix Among Study Constructs ($N = 340$)

Construct	FRAG	COORD	POLICY	RET
FRAG	1.000	-0.679**	-0.602**	-0.728**
COORD	-0.679**	1.000	0.565**	0.707**
POLICY	-0.602**	0.565**	1.000	0.683**
RET	-0.728**	0.707**	0.683**	1.000

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed), $p < .001$ for all coefficients. Chi-square test of independence between Institutional Category and Retention Outcome Category (Low/Moderate/High): $\chi^2(6, N = 340) = 1.25, p = .974$.

The bivariate Pearson correlation results presented in Table 3 revealed strong, statistically significant relationships among all four study constructs. Fragmentation of retention interventions was strongly and negatively correlated with coordination mechanisms ($r = -0.679$, $p < .001$), policy integration ($r = -0.602$, $p < .001$), and retention outcomes ($r = -0.728$, $p < .001$), indicating that institutions perceived as more fragmented in their retention efforts also reported weaker coordination, weaker policy integration, and poorer retention outcomes. Conversely, coordination mechanisms and policy integration were both strongly and positively correlated with retention outcomes ($r = 0.707$ and $r = 0.683$ respectively, both $p < .001$), and moderately-to-strongly correlated with one another ($r = 0.565$, $p < .001$), suggesting that institutions with stronger coordination structures also tended to exhibit more integrated policy environments, and that both factors moved together in association with improved retention. The magnitude of these correlations, several of which exceeded the conventional threshold of 0.60 for a strong relationship, indicated that fragmentation, coordination, and policy integration were not merely weakly associated background variables but constituted substantively important correlates of student retention outcomes within Christian-founded institutions in Uganda.

The supplementary chi-square test of independence, conducted to examine whether retention outcome categories (classified as low, moderate, and high) were associated with institutional category, produced a non-significant result ($\chi^2 = 1.25$, $df = 6$, $p = .974$), indicating that the pattern of high, moderate, and low retention outcomes was distributed similarly across church-founded secondary schools, faith-based universities, diocesan networks, and seminaries. This finding was analytically important because it suggested that fragmentation-related retention challenges were not confined to, or driven by, any single category of Christian-founded institution, but instead represented a cross-cutting, sector-wide phenomenon; consequently, the study's overarching argument for a common, integrated policy framework, rather than institution-specific remedial measures, was strengthened. Considered together, the strong bivariate correlations and the non-significant chi-square result pointed toward a coherent underlying structure linking fragmentation, coordination, and policy integration to retention outcomes across the entire Christian-founded institutional sector, providing a compelling empirical basis for testing this structure formally through structural equation modelling.

Table 4: Structural Equation Model — Standardised Path Coefficients and Model Fit Indices

Structural Path	Standardised β	S.E.	p-value
COORD $\rightarrow$ POLICY	0.565	0.048	< .001
COORD $\rightarrow$ FRAG	-0.498	0.051	< .001
POLICY $\rightarrow$ FRAG	-0.321	0.052	< .001
COORD $\rightarrow$ RET	0.305	0.049	< .001
POLICY $\rightarrow$ RET	0.309	0.047	< .001
FRAG $\rightarrow$ RET	-0.334	0.046	< .001

CMIN/DF	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR
2.14	0.947	0.932	0.058	0.041

Note: R^2 (POLICY) = 0.319; R^2 (FRAG) = 0.532; R^2 (RET) = 0.671. Estimation method: Maximum Likelihood; Model fit thresholds: CFI/TLI ≥ 0.90 (good), RMSEA ≤ 0.08 (acceptable), SRMR ≤ 0.08 (acceptable).

The structural equation model reported in Table 4 achieved a good overall fit to the data, with a normed chi-square of 2.14, which fell within the recommended range of below 3.0, a Comparative Fit Index of 0.947 and a Tucker-Lewis Index of 0.932, both comfortably exceeding the 0.90 threshold conventionally used to indicate acceptable model fit, and a Root Mean Square Error of Approximation of 0.058 and Standardised Root Mean Square Residual of 0.041, both within the acceptable range of below 0.08. These fit statistics indicated that the hypothesised structural pathways linking coordination mechanisms and policy integration to fragmentation, and jointly with fragmentation to retention outcomes, provided a statistically credible representation of the underlying relationships in the data, rather than an arbitrarily imposed model that happened to fit the sample by chance. All six structural paths in the model were statistically significant at the 0.1% level, with coordination mechanisms exerting the strongest influence on reducing fragmentation ($\beta = -0.498$, $p < .001$), followed by policy integration ($\beta = -0.321$, $p < .001$), while fragmentation in turn exerted the strongest single direct effect on retention outcomes among the three predictors examined ($\beta = -0.334$, $p < .001$).

Beyond the statistical significance of individual paths, the explained variance statistics were substantively informative: the model accounted for 53.2% of the variance in fragmentation and 67.1% of the variance in retention outcomes, indicating that coordination mechanisms and policy integration, whether acting directly or through their effect on fragmentation, together explained a substantial share of the variability in student retention outcomes across Christian-founded institutions in Uganda. Critically, the presence of statistically significant direct effects of both coordination ($\beta = 0.305$) and policy integration ($\beta = 0.309$) on retention outcomes, alongside their significant indirect effects operating through reduced fragmentation, demonstrated that fragmentation functioned as

a partial, rather than full, mediating mechanism in the relationship between institutional coordination arrangements and retention success. This structural pattern provided robust empirical support for the study's central thesis that an integrated education policy framework, one that simultaneously strengthens inter-institutional coordination structures and harmonises policy guidelines between government and church founding bodies, would be expected to reduce fragmentation and thereby improve student retention outcomes more effectively than efforts targeting either fragmentation, coordination, or policy in isolation.

Figure 3: Structural Model of Coordination, Policy Integration, Fragmentation, and Retention Outcomes

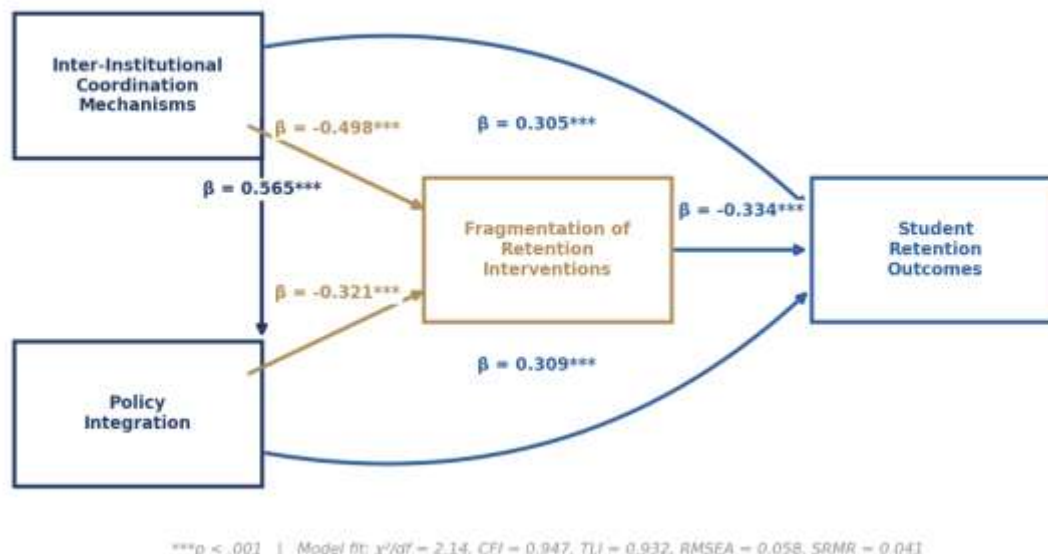


Figure 3: Structural Model of Coordination, Policy Integration, Fragmentation, and Retention Outcomes.

Conclusion

This study concluded that the fragmentation of student retention interventions constituted a statistically significant and substantively important barrier to student retention within Christian-founded educational institutions in Uganda, and that this fragmentation was itself shaped by the strength, or weakness, of inter-institutional coordination mechanisms and the degree of policy integration between government and church founding bodies. The univariate results established that fragmentation was perceived as moderately high while coordination and policy integration were perceived as comparatively weak; the bivariate results confirmed strong and statistically significant associations among all four constructs while showing that the fragmentation problem cut across, rather than being confined to, particular institutional categories; and the structural equation model demonstrated, with a good-fitting and highly significant path structure, that coordination mechanisms and policy integration reduced fragmentation and, both directly and indirectly through reduced fragmentation, improved retention outcomes. Taken together, these findings indicated that piecemeal, institution-specific responses to student attrition were unlikely to be sufficient, and that a genuinely integrated education policy framework, deliberately coordinating the efforts of government, church founding bodies, dioceses, and development partners, was both empirically justified and practically necessary to meaningfully improve student retention across Christian-founded institutions in Uganda.

Recommendations

The Ministry of Education and Sports, in partnership with church founding bodies and diocesan education secretariats, should establish a national coordination framework, possibly through a dedicated inter-agency retention coordination unit, to harmonise the planning, targeting, and monitoring of retention interventions across Christian-founded institutions.

Government and church founding bodies should jointly develop and adopt harmonised policy guidelines specifying clear roles, funding responsibilities, and reporting standards for retention interventions, thereby reducing the current duplication of effort and closing the coverage gaps identified in poorly coordinated institutions.

Christian-founded institutions and their founding bodies should institutionalise joint monitoring, evaluation, and data-sharing mechanisms, such as a shared retention data platform, to enable evidence-based tracking of fragmentation and retention outcomes over time and to sustain the coordination gains identified in this study.

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