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Leadership for University-Affiliated Think Tanks and Socio-Economic Transformation in the Ugandan Higher Education Space

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ABSTRACT

Despite the growing presence of university-affiliated think tanks in Uganda, limited scholarly attention has been paid to how their leadership enables knowledge translation and policy engagement for socio-economic transformation. This paper set out to review the role of think tanks in higher education. It explores leadership for university-affiliated think tanks and socio-economic transformation in the Ugandan higher education space. Using a qualitative narrative literature review, multidisciplinary and fragmented relevant literature across higher education leadership was reviewed to conceptualise think tanks in higher education institutions and their roles in socio-economic transformation through knowledge production and brokerage, public policy, innovation, and development studies in Ugandan universities. The review found that university-affiliated think tanks in Uganda are evolving from conventional research units into hybrid, networked and publicly engaged institutions that bridge academic knowledge, policy and practice through knowledge brokerage, innovation, stakeholder engagement and policy communication. Leadership emerged as the pivotal mechanism linking knowledge production to policy uptake, resource mobilisation, institutional sustainability and socio-economic transformation, although tensions between autonomy, accountability, academic independence and external funding persist. The study concludes that the effectiveness and sustainability of university-affiliated think tanks depend not only on research capacity but also on strategic, adaptive and distributed leadership, supportive governance and strong stakeholder networks. It therefore recommends that Ugandan universities institutionalise think tanks through clear mandates and governance frameworks, strengthen leadership and knowledge-translation capacities, diversify sustainable funding, promote interdisciplinary and stakeholder co-creation, and build national and international networks that safeguard academic independence while enhancing policy influence and socio-economic impact.

Keywords:
Leadership for university-affiliated think tanks; Knowledge brokerage; Policy engagement; Socio-economic transformation; Hybrid institutions

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INTRODUCTION

Think tanks are organisations that generate, translate, and disseminate policy-relevant knowledge to influence decision-making and address societal challenges (Kayitesi, 2024). They occupy a strategic position at the intersection of research, policy, and practice, serving as knowledge brokers that transform evidence into actionable recommendations for governments, institutions, and communities (Anderson et al., 2017; Drezner, 2015). Their significance lies not only in producing research but also in shaping policy debates, facilitating stakeholder engagement, and strengthening institutional responses to emerging development challenges (Nicander, 2015). As hybrid knowledge institutions, think tanks contribute to public education, advocacy, capacity building, and policy innovation, thereby supporting socio-economic transformation (Sua, 2016). University-affiliated think tanks are particularly important because they leverage academic expertise to address national development priorities while fostering stronger connections between higher education institutions and society (Abelson & Lindquist, 2017).

The relevance of university-affiliated think tanks has become increasingly evident in Uganda, where concerns have emerged regarding the growing disconnect between higher education training and labour market demands. Evidence from the Pedagogical Leadership for Enhancing Graduate Work Readiness and Transition to Work (Makerere University, 2020) study revealed that many university graduates struggle to meet employer expectations, with approximately 63% of graduates considered unemployable by employers due to inadequate workplace competencies (Makerere University, 2020). The study further highlighted that existing university education is insufficiently aligned with labour market requirements, resulting in a mismatch between the skills acquired during training and those demanded in the world of work. These findings raise critical concerns about the effectiveness of current approaches to curriculum design, knowledge production, and graduate preparation within Ugandan universities.

In response to these challenges, the PLASHE-WIL study (Makerere University, 2020) recommended the transformation of curricula and pedagogical capacities of academic staff to emphasise transferable skills, soft skills, and practical competencies alongside disciplinary knowledge (Tight, 2025). The study also emphasised the need to align higher education programmes with broader national development priorities and human capital goals. While these recommendations are important, they raise a number of fundamental questions regarding the role of universities in socio-economic transformation. Is curriculum review alone sufficient to address graduate employability challenges without strengthening the nexus between research, policy, and practice? Are universities producing research that is insufficiently relevant to contemporary societal and labour market needs, or does the challenge lie in the limited translation and communication of research evidence to policymakers, employers, and other stakeholders? Furthermore, how can universities effectively balance academic theory with workplace relevance while maintaining their traditional mandates of teaching, research, and community engagement?

These questions point to a broader challenge concerning the capacity of universities to generate actionable knowledge that informs policy and practice. University-affiliated think tanks offer a potentially important mechanism for addressing this challenge by strengthening evidence-informed decision-making, promoting collaboration among academia, industry, government, and communities, and facilitating the translation of research into practical solutions. Through strategic leadership, such think tanks can support curriculum innovation, labour market responsiveness, policy engagement, and knowledge mobilisation, thereby contributing to socio-economic transformation. However, limited evidence exists regarding how leadership within university-affiliated think tanks shapes their effectiveness in advancing these objectives within the Ugandan higher education context.

It is against this background that this study investigates the role of leadership in university-affiliated think tanks and their contribution to socio-economic transformation in Ugandan universities. Specifically, the study seeks to examine how leadership practices within these knowledge institutions facilitate the integration of research, policy, and practice in addressing graduate employability challenges, enhancing labour market responsiveness, and supporting national development aspirations.

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METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A qualitative narrative literature review was adopted as guided by Wiles et al. (2011) to explore how leadership shapes the effectiveness of university-affiliated think tanks and their contribution to socio-economic transformation in Uganda's higher education (HE) sector. The narrative approach was appropriate because the literature is multidisciplinary and fragmented across HE leadership, knowledge production and brokerage, public policy, innovation, and development studies. It enabled an interpretive synthesis of diverse evidence to identify recurring concepts, relationships, debates, and gaps. The review was guided by the question: How does leadership shape the effectiveness of university-affiliated think tanks in contributing to socio-economic transformation in Uganda's HE sector? The review focused on eight areas: the evolution and changing roles of think tanks; university-affiliated think tanks as hybrid knowledge institutions; leadership and institutional effectiveness; knowledge production, translation, and brokerage; innovation and entrepreneurship; resource mobilisation and institutional sustainability; policy influence and stakeholder engagement; and the contribution of HE to socio-economic transformation.

Review Protocol and Search Strategy

In reference to the ideas of Pautasso (2019), searches were conducted in Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science and ERIC, supplemented by institutional repositories, university websites and policy documents. Search terms combined concepts related to university-affiliated think tanks, leadership, knowledge brokerage, policy influence, and socio-economic transformation, including "think tanks" AND "knowledge brokerage", "think tanks" AND "policy influence", "higher education" AND "socio-economic transformation", and "Uganda" AND "think tanks" AND "higher education". Related terms such as policy research centres, research institutes, innovation hubs, and university-based policy institutions were also used. The search focused primarily on 2000–2026, with earlier seminal works included where conceptually relevant. Priority was given to Ugandan and African evidence, supplemented by international literature for comparative and theoretical insights.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Following the ideas of Booth (2016), sources that addressed think tanks or university-affiliated research and policy institutions; leadership, governance, institutional effectiveness, or sustainability; knowledge production, translation, or brokerage; the research–policy–practice nexus; or the contribution of higher education to policy, innovation, employment, and socio-economic development were included. Eligible sources comprised peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books and chapters, theses and dissertations, institutional reports, policy documents, and credible publications from universities and recognised research or development organisations. Sources were excluded if they were unrelated to the review question (Usman et al., 2025), focused on commercial or independent think tanks without relevance to the university context, duplicated other records, lacked sufficient scholarly or conceptual substance, or comprised primarily opinion, promotional, or news content. Where multiple sources addressed similar issues, preference was given to those demonstrating greater methodological rigour, contextual relevance, and recency.

Screening and Selection of Literature

Relevant publications were identified through database searches, keyword combinations, reference-list searches, and targeted searches of institutional and policy sources (Jones, 2004). Titles and abstracts were screened against the predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria, followed by full-text assessment of potentially eligible sources. Backward citation searching of key publications was also undertaken to identify additional relevant studies. Thirty-three (33) sources that met the eligibility criteria were retained for the final narrative synthesis. The selected literature addressed think tanks, university-affiliated research institutions, leadership, knowledge brokerage, policy engagement, innovation, and HE's contribution to socio-economic transformation. Retained sources were qualitatively interpreted to identify recurring patterns, relationships, tensions, and gaps relevant to the study.

Data Extraction and Analysis

A structured review matrix was used to purposively capture publication details, geographical and institutional context, with a

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theoretical and methodological focus. A qualitative narrative analysis and thematic synthesis were used. Repeated reading and coding identified key concepts and patterns, which were organised into themes including strategic leadership, management relations, knowledge brokerage, innovation, resource mobilisation, institutional autonomy and accountability, policy engagement, stakeholder collaboration, and socio-economic transformation. Convergent and divergent findings were retained to capture relationships and tensions within the literature, focusing on how leadership facilitates the translation, communication, and utilisation of research evidence by policymakers, employers, communities, industry, and other stakeholders, thus positioning university-affiliated think tanks as hybrid institutions linking knowledge production, policy, and practice.

Contextual and Comparative Analysis

The review prioritised evidence from Uganda and the wider African HE context, including university-based policy research centres, research institutes, innovation hubs, centres of excellence, and community-oriented knowledge initiatives performing think-tank functions. Focus was put on Makerere University and comparable African institutions engaged in policy research, innovation, public engagement, and knowledge translation. International literature was used comparatively to assess the applicability of broader perspectives on think tanks and leadership to Uganda's distinctive institutional, political, financial, and socio-economic context.

Quality and Trustworthiness of the Review

The credibility of the review was strengthened through multiple databases and source types, explicit search terms, predefined eligibility criteria, systematic screening, and backward citation searching. Source quality was assessed based on methodological rigour, scholarly credibility, recency, and contextual relevance (Green et al., 2006). Triangulation across scholarly, policy, institutional, and grey literature facilitated comparison of convergent and divergent perspectives. The narrative synthesis recognised disciplinary and contextual differences in the literature and developed an interpretive account of how leadership enables university-affiliated think tanks to connect research, policy, practice, and societal needs.

Ethical Considerations

The study relied exclusively on publicly available scholarly sources; it did not involve direct human participants. Nevertheless, academic integrity was maintained through accurate attribution of ideas, appropriate citation of all sources, and faithful representation of authors' arguments (Ferrari, 2015). Sources were not selectively interpreted to support predetermined conclusions; instead, contradictory and alternative perspectives were considered in developing the narrative synthesis.

ROLE OF LEADERSHIP IN UNIVERSITY-AFFILIATED THINK TANKS

Evolution of Think Tanks and the Emergence of Hybrid Knowledge-Brokering Institutions

The concept of the think tank has evolved from relatively bounded expert advisory institutions into more complex organisations that operate at the intersection of research, policy, politics, and public discourse (Drezner, 2015). Earlier conceptions emphasised the production of expert knowledge for government and other decision-makers, whereas contemporary think tanks increasingly combine research with policy communication, public engagement, advocacy, networking, and capacity development (Sua, 2016). This evolution has also produced considerable institutional diversity, including independent policy institutes, advocacy-oriented organisations, government-affiliated research bodies, and university-affiliated think tanks (Abelson & Lindquist, 2017). The significance of this evolution is not simply that think tanks perform more functions than they did previously; rather, their institutional value increasingly derives from their capacity to connect different knowledge communities and influence how policy problems are framed and addressed. This development has generated an important conceptual debate.

On one side, think tanks are understood primarily as producers of credible, policy-relevant knowledge. On the other, their influence depends on their capacity to operate within political and institutional environments in which evidence competes with interests, values, timing, and competing interpretations of policy problems (Wang et al., 2024). Consequently, policy influence cannot be explained by research quality

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alone. Knowledge must also be translated, communicated, positioned, and connected to actors who can use it. Research on knowledge brokerage similarly cautions against viewing the movement from evidence to policy as a linear process; brokerage involves relationships, communication, institutional credibility, timing, and an understanding of the political context in which evidence is used (Nkrumah & Soorymoorthy, 2024). At the same time, Nicander (2015) points to the increasing specialisation of think tanks, particularly in areas such as security and intelligence. This specialisation has enhanced their relevance in complex policy environments, where decision-makers require highly technical and context-specific expertise.

It should be noted that university-affiliated think tanks are particularly important within this debate because they occupy a hybrid institutional position. They are embedded within universities and therefore inherit norms of academic research, peer review, disciplinary expertise, and scholarly independence, while simultaneously being expected to respond to policy and societal demands. Evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa indicates that university–think-tank relationships can be complementary, with universities contributing research expertise and human capital while think tanks contribute policy engagement and knowledge utilisation. However, these relationships can also generate tensions concerning institutional roles, incentives, governance, funding, and the relative priorities of academic and policy communities (Cummings et al., 2022).

The hybrid character of such institutions is therefore analytically important. Tight (2025) argues that research organisations operating between science and society must continuously establish legitimacy across different institutional spheres. Similarly, scholarship on hybrid organisations shows that organisations combining different institutional logics must develop governance arrangements capable of maintaining their multiple commitments without allowing one logic to displace the others (Wang et al., 2024). For university-affiliated think tanks, the central challenge is consequently not simply how to produce more research, but how to sustain an organisational identity that simultaneously values academic credibility, policy usefulness, institutional accountability, and societal relevance. It is within this tension that leadership becomes analytically significant. Rather than treating leadership as one factor among many that may contribute to think-tank performance, this paper conceptualises institutional leadership as the mechanism through which the hybrid organisation is strategically coordinated. Leadership determines how competing institutional expectations are interpreted, prioritised, negotiated, and translated into organisational action. The argument developed here is therefore that the effectiveness of university-affiliated think tanks depends less on the mere existence of research capacity than on the capacity of institutional leaders to connect research production, knowledge brokerage, stakeholder engagement, organisational resources, and policy influence within a coherent institutional strategy. Therefore, as universities increasingly seek to position themselves as drivers of innovation, policy influence, and community development, leadership becomes the critical mechanism through which think tanks connect academic knowledge with societal needs. The evolving role of university think tanks as hybrid institutions that combine academic rigour with policy relevance requires leadership capable of navigating institutional, political, financial, and knowledge-production complexities.

Leadership–Management Nexus and Institutional Effectiveness

The leadership–management distinction provides an initial entry point for understanding this process. Management establishes systems for planning, budgeting, accountability, staffing, and compliance, whereas leadership provides direction, builds relationships, interprets environmental change, and mobilises people around institutional purposes (Genza, 2021). In a conventional academic department, these functions may operate largely within established university structures. In a university-affiliated think tank, however, leaders must simultaneously respond to university regulations and external policy environments. The leadership challenge is therefore one of institutional alignment, connecting the think tank's mission with university priorities while retaining sufficient autonomy to respond to emerging policy questions. This argument is consistent with evidence on university think-tank relations in Africa. Sua (2016) found that university-affiliated think tanks are often incorporated into university governance and financial systems, even though their researchers may perform functions that differ from conventional academic departments. Such

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embeddedness provides legitimacy and access to expertise but may also constrain flexibility. Similarly, Nkrumah and Soorymoorthy (2024) found that collaboration between universities and think tanks is strengthened when institutional roles and responsibilities are clearly defined. Leadership therefore becomes important in negotiating the boundary between institutional integration and operational autonomy.

The relevant leadership task is consequently not simply administrative efficiency. It is the ability to maintain the productive tension between academic integrity and policy responsiveness. Too much academic insulation can make a think tank slow, inaccessible, or disconnected from policy needs; excessive responsiveness to political or donor demands can undermine research independence and credibility. The literature on hybrid research organisations similarly identifies legitimacy and the balancing of competing institutional values as central challenges of hybrid organisations (Genza, 2021). Accordingly, this paper conceptualises institutional leadership through four interconnected functions: strategic integration, knowledge brokerage, relational/political engagement, and resource stewardship. These functions are not separate leadership traits. They represent institutional processes through which leaders enable university-affiliated think tanks to maintain their hybrid identity and convert research capacity into policy and societal value.

Strategic Leadership and Institutional Integration

The first function is strategic integration. University-affiliated think tanks operate within universities whose primary missions traditionally centre on teaching, research, and community engagement (Anderson et al., 2017). Contemporary universities, however, increasingly face expectations to contribute directly to innovation, economic development, public policy, and societal transformation. This expansion of institutional missions has produced more complex governance arrangements and greater interaction with governments, industry, civil society, communities, and international organisations (L. F. Magara, 2025). Strategic leadership is therefore required to determine how think-tank activities relate to the wider institutional mission. Leaders must decide which policy problems warrant institutional attention, how research priorities should be connected to national development needs, and how think-tank activities can complement rather than duplicate existing university functions. In this sense, leadership provides the interpretive link between the university's broad mission and the think tank's specialised role (Fraussen & Halpin, 2017).

This perspective also provides a sharper interpretation of the African context. The problem is not simply that African universities produce insufficiently relevant research. Rather, institutional arrangements do not always provide effective mechanisms for moving research across the boundaries separating academic knowledge, policy institutions, professional practice, and communities. The Think Africa Partnership, for example, explicitly emphasises the need to connect African scholars and universities, think tanks, and policymakers in order to strengthen the uptake of policy-relevant knowledge and locally generated solutions (World Bank, 2026). Thus, strategic leadership matters because it determines whether the think tank becomes an isolated research centre or an institutional bridge between the university and its external environment.

Leadership and Knowledge Brokerage

The second function is knowledge brokerage. This is the central mechanism linking research production to policy relevance. Knowledge brokerage is not synonymous with disseminating research findings. It involves identifying users' knowledge needs, translating research into accessible forms, building relationships between knowledge producers and users, and helping actors interpret evidence within particular policy contexts (Molla & Cuthbert, 2018). Effective brokerage therefore requires both epistemic competence and relational capacity. This distinction is important because the traditional university model often rewards knowledge production through scholarly publications, whereas policy actors may require shorter, timely, problem-oriented, and actionable forms of evidence. Evidence-broker organisations therefore derive influence not only from the credibility of their research but also from the utility and communication of that research. Leadership is critical because knowledge brokerage requires institutional coordination rather than simply individual communication skills. Leaders establish research priorities, create interdisciplinary teams, support policy engagement, authorise stakeholder partnerships, and determine how research findings are

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packaged and communicated. They also create organisational cultures in which researchers are encouraged to engage beyond academic audiences. This provides a more precise interpretation of the relationship between leadership and policy influence. Leaders do not necessarily "cause" policymakers to adopt particular research findings. Instead, they create the organisational conditions under which credible knowledge can enter policy conversations. Policy uptake remains contingent on political interests, institutional structures, timing, values, and the broader policy environment (Okoro, 2020). Consequently, the leadership contribution is best understood as enabling knowledge brokerage, rather than controlling policy outcomes.

Political Leadership and Policy Influence

The third function is relational and political engagement, which shapes how think tanks influence policy within complex governance systems. The ability of university-affiliated think tanks to influence policy is shaped not only by the quality of their research but also by their positioning within political and governance systems. Magara (2025) argues that policy influence depends on how institutions navigate networks of power, interests, and decision-making processes. From this perspective, leadership involves more than administrative competence; it requires strategic engagement with policymakers, government institutions, development partners, and other influential actors. For university-affiliated think tanks, effective leadership facilitates access to policy spaces and enables research evidence to inform public decision-making. Leaders play a crucial role in framing research outputs in ways that resonate with policy priorities and societal concerns. This function is particularly important given that modern university think tanks increasingly seek to democratise knowledge through media engagement, public dialogues, policy briefs, and stakeholder consultations. At the same time, leaders must carefully navigate political realities while maintaining institutional independence and academic credibility. The effectiveness of think tanks therefore depends on leadership that combines political awareness with a commitment to evidence-based policy engagement (L. F. Magara, 2025).

Strategic Leadership and Resource Sustainability

The fourth function is resource stewardship, which underpins the financial and institutional sustainability of university-affiliated think tanks over time. The sustainability of university-affiliated think tanks largely depends on strategic leadership and effective resource mobilisation. E. Magara (2009) emphasises that leaders in higher education institutions must develop innovative strategies for securing resources in increasingly competitive environments. This is particularly important in Uganda, where public universities often face financial constraints that limit research productivity and policy engagement. Strategic leadership enables think tanks to diversify funding sources, establish partnerships, attract research grants, and build collaborative networks. Such resource mobilisation strengthens institutional capacity, supports high-quality research, and enhances policy engagement activities. It also facilitates the production of policy briefs, stakeholder dialogues, media engagements, and community outreach programmes that are increasingly characteristic of contemporary think tanks. Nevertheless, reliance on external funding introduces important challenges. Donor priorities may influence research agendas, potentially compromising institutional autonomy and local relevance. Consequently, leadership must ensure that resource mobilisation strategies support rather than undermine the core mission of generating independent knowledge for Uganda's socio-economic development (E. Magara, 2009).

Leadership as a Catalyst for Socio-Economic Transformation

Taken together, these perspectives position leadership as a critical catalyst for the contribution of university-affiliated think tanks to socio-economic transformation in the Ugandan higher education space. Leadership shapes strategic direction by aligning research agendas with national development priorities. It promotes institutional integration by embedding think tanks within university systems while preserving the flexibility necessary for innovation and policy engagement. Leadership also facilitates knowledge brokerage by translating academic research into accessible and policy-relevant outputs, thereby enhancing societal impact. Furthermore, leadership supports resource mobilisation and sustainability, enabling think tanks to maintain operational effectiveness and

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expand their influence. Equally important, it enables political navigation and stakeholder engagement, ensuring that research evidence informs public policy and development practice. Through these interconnected functions, leadership transforms university-affiliated think tanks from conventional research centres into dynamic agents of socio-economic transformation. Effective leadership is therefore indispensable for strengthening the contribution of university-affiliated think tanks to knowledge production, policy influence, innovation, and socio-economic transformation in Uganda's higher education sector.

Critical Gaps in the Literature

Despite the above insights in existing literature, there is limited focus on African university-affiliated think tanks as distinct institutional forms, leading to an overreliance on generalised models. The literature also tends to emphasise individual leadership traits, neglecting the institutional and collective dimensions of leadership. Additionally, the tension between autonomy and accountability is insufficiently explored, particularly in resource-constrained contexts. Finally, there is a weak integration of leadership theory with knowledge brokerage frameworks, limiting a comprehensive understanding of how think tanks translate research into impact. However, evidence demonstrates that leadership is central to the effectiveness of university-affiliated think tanks as catalysts of socio-economic transformation. In the Ugandan context, this requires a form of leadership that goes beyond traditional academic administration to include strategic vision, policy engagement, innovation facilitation, and political acumen. Ultimately, leadership shapes how knowledge is produced, how it influences policy, and how it engages society. It is the determining factor in whether university-affiliated think tanks function as symbolic structures or as dynamic institutions capable of driving meaningful socio-economic change (Genza, 2021; Kirabira et al., 2023; E. Magara, 2009; L. F. Magara, 2025).

Universities and Socio-Economic Transformation in Africa

Universities in Sub-Saharan Africa are widely positioned within global development discourse as key drivers of socio-economic transformation; however, this expectation is often undermined by persistent institutional, financial, and political constraints that limit their practical impact (Lebeau, 2008). In the Ugandan context, particularly in debates surrounding reforms at Makerere University, this tension is evident in the struggle to align academic functions with national development priorities (Makerere University, 2020). Cloete and Maassen (2015) highlight that universities are simultaneously expected to perform multiple, and often contradictory, roles including knowledge production, skills development, social equity promotion, and economic competitiveness. These competing demands frequently lead to fragmented institutional focus, thereby weakening universities' capacity to deliver sustained socio-economic transformation. Within this context, university-affiliated think tanks emerge as strategic institutional innovations that can provide focused, policy-relevant research and act as dedicated platforms for development-oriented engagement.

The literature on the knowledge economy further reinforces the need for such intermediary structures. Molla and Cuthbert (2018) argue that African universities are increasingly expected to drive innovation, competitiveness, and economic growth, reflecting a broader shift towards knowledge-based development paradigms. In Uganda, Ndibuuza et al. (2021) emphasise the alignment of higher education with national systems of innovation and the knowledge society agenda. Yet, significant gaps persist, including weak university–industry linkages, limited commercialisation of research, and inadequate integration of academic outputs into policy processes. These shortcomings are particularly visible in Uganda's higher education reforms, where the emphasis on relevance and impact has not always translated into effective institutional mechanisms. University-affiliated think tanks can address these gaps by translating research into actionable policy and innovation, strengthening university–industry–government linkages, and enhancing the developmental relevance of higher education.

Institutional effectiveness and internal alignment also play a critical role in determining universities' transformative capacity. Niyibizi et al. (2018) demonstrate that aligned assessment systems are essential for ensuring that higher education outcomes contribute meaningfully to socio-economic transformation. This insight resonates with ongoing Ugandan debates on curriculum reform and competency-based education, which emphasise measurable impact

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and societal relevance. However, much of the literature remains focused on teaching and learning processes, with limited attention to policy engagement and knowledge dissemination beyond academia. In response, university-affiliated think tanks extend institutional impact by facilitating evidence-based policy dialogue and bridging the gap between academic knowledge and societal needs, an area increasingly emphasised in community engagement mandates across Ugandan universities.

The structural challenges facing higher education in Uganda further complicate this landscape. Kibuuka (2025) identifies key constraints including chronic underfunding, governance inefficiencies, quality concerns, and rapid expansion without corresponding resources. Similarly, Okoro (2020) highlights broader systemic barriers such as political instability, inequality, and weak institutional capacity, all of which limit universities' ability to function as effective agents of transformation. These realities are reflected in reform debates at Makerere University, where tensions between autonomy, funding models, and accountability continue to shape institutional trajectories. University-affiliated think tanks offer a strategic workaround by operating with greater flexibility, engaging directly with policymakers and development actors, and leveraging partnerships beyond traditional academic structures.

A further critical dimension concerns the need for endogenous knowledge production. Mbadlanyana et al. (2011) argue that African higher education systems must move beyond dependence on externally generated knowledge paradigms and instead promote contextually grounded research that reflects local realities. This critique is particularly relevant in Uganda, where policy borrowing and externally driven reforms have sometimes resulted in misalignment with local development needs. University-affiliated think tanks are uniquely positioned to generate locally relevant, policy-oriented research, challenge externally imposed models, and promote African-centred development frameworks that resonate with national priorities.

The role of universities in influencing public policy remains limited and often indirect. Njeru (2018), in a study of think tanks in Kenya, demonstrates that think tanks are generally more effective than traditional academic units in engaging policymakers, framing policy debates, and producing timely, accessible research. This distinction underscores a critical institutional gap: while universities excel at knowledge production, they often lack mechanisms for translating that knowledge into policy action. University-affiliated think tanks integrate these functions, thereby enhancing policy relevance, societal impact, and institutional visibility. In Uganda, where higher education reforms increasingly emphasise impact, relevance, and transformation, such hybrid structures could play a pivotal role in strengthening the link between academia and national development.

Studies consistently position universities as central to socio-economic transformation through their roles in knowledge production, human capital development, and innovation (Ndibuuza et al., 2021; Okoro, 2020). However, their effectiveness is constrained by structural inefficiencies, weak external linkages, and limited policy engagement (Kibuuka, 2025). University-affiliated think tanks emerge as catalytic institutional mechanisms that bridge the gap between knowledge and policy, enhance institutional responsiveness, and support evidence-based development interventions. Despite this potential, significant gaps remain in the literature, including limited empirical focus on university-affiliated think tanks in Africa, weak integration between higher education and policy advisory scholarship (Fraussen & Halpin, 2017), and insufficient attention to leadership and governance dynamics. Addressing these gaps is particularly important in the Ugandan context, where ongoing higher education reforms and the broader transition towards a knowledge-based economy require innovative institutional models that can strengthen community engagement and contribute meaningfully to sustained socio-economic transformation.

Think Tanks in the Ugandan Higher Education Institutions' Context

In Uganda, think-tank functions are increasingly distributed across policy research centres, university-based research institutes, innovation networks, and specialised knowledge organisations. The Economic Policy Research Centre (EPRC), for example, is an independent policy think tank that provides research-based evidence and policy analysis to support the formulation, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of government policies (Economic Policy Research Centre [EPRC], 2026). The

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Advocates Coalition for Development and Environment (ACODE) operates as an independent public-policy research and advocacy think tank, with its core activities including policy research and analysis, policy outreach, and capacity building (Advocates Coalition for Development and Environment [ACODE], 2026). University-based institutions also perform important knowledge-production and policy-engagement functions. Makerere University School of Public Health (MakSPH) undertakes public-health research and is involved in translational research and the translation of research evidence into health practice and policy (Makerere University School of Public Health [MakSPH], 2026). The Infectious Diseases Institute (IDI), a Makerere University institution, combines research, training and capacity development, laboratory services, health-systems strengthening, and global health security, with a strong emphasis on infectious diseases (Infectious Diseases Institute [IDI], 2026).

Similarly, the Centre for Population and Applied Statistics (CPAS) is a research and training centre dedicated to statistical science, population studies, and data-driven policy analysis, providing training, research, and technical support to public and private institutions (Makerere University College of Business and Management Sciences [CoBAMS], 2026). The ResilientAfrica Network (RAN) represents another institutional form through which research, innovation, and development functions are connected. RAN is a university-led research and innovation partnership that identifies, develops, and scales interdisciplinary innovations addressing community challenges (Makerere University, 2026). The Center for Health, Human Rights and Development (CEHURD) combines evidence-based research, policy advocacy, strategic litigation, and community empowerment to advance health rights and influence health-related policy and legal reforms in Uganda (Center for Health, Human Rights and Development [CEHURD], 2026). Therefore, think tanks have shifted to agenda-setting and public discourse shaping, aligning with Drezner (2015). These engage communities through research, extension, and innovation. Therefore, institutional diversification is visible in university-based think tanks (Abelson & Lindquist, 2017). It should be noted that think tanks respond to complex policy environments with deep specialisation (Nicander, 2015).

Building on the above dimensions, think tanks in Ugandan universities can be more fully understood as embedded, hybrid ecosystems that integrate knowledge production, policy influence, skills development, and societal transformation. Their contemporary form reflects both deep historical traditions of knowledge production and modern imperatives for sustainable, inclusive, and globally connected higher education systems. From early institutions such as Plato's Academy and Aristotle's Lyceum to knowledge hubs like the House of Wisdom, higher education has long served as a site of inquiry and societal advancement (Barnes & Pietsch, 2022; Qi et al., 2023). In the contemporary era, this role is being reshaped by globalisation and the demands of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (2030) (Lee et al., 2016; Li, 2020). Their shift can be viewed in the perspectives presented below:

1. From Knowledge Producers to Policy Co-Creators

Today's university think tanks in Uganda no longer operate as detached research units. Instead, they function as policy co-creation platforms, where researchers, government, civil society, and communities jointly define problems and solutions. For example, the Economic Policy Research Centre works closely with Uganda's Ministry of Finance not just to analyse economic trends, but to shape fiscal policy options in real time. Similarly, the Centre for Basic Research contributes to governance debates through collaborative research. Thus, think tanks are now integral to evidence-informed governance, aligning research with national priorities such as climate resilience and sustainable development.

2. From Elite Spaces to Public Knowledge Platforms

Contemporary think tanks have become visible actors in public discourse, democratising knowledge through media, dialogues, and policy briefs. Institutions like ACODE and the Center for Health, Human Rights and Development actively shape debates on governance, environment, and health rights. This reflects the global shift towards inclusive and participatory governance, where knowledge is co-produced and shared widely (Marginson, 2022; Westheimer, 2020).

3. From Research Outputs to Capacity and Competency Development

University-affiliated think tanks now serve as training and innovation hubs, bridging the gap

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between theory and practice. The Makerere University School of Public Health and ResilientAfrica Network exemplify this by equipping professionals with skills in public health systems and disaster resilience. Think tanks contribute to human capital development, which is central to STEM advancement and sustainable development transitions (Biswas et al., 2021; Scott, 2011).

4. Hybrid Institutional Models Anchored in Universities

Think tanks embedded in universities such as the Centre for Population and Applied Statistics combine academic rigour with policy relevance, while community engagement directorates extend knowledge into communities. These hybrid structures embody the university's "third mission" of community engagement and societal impact.

5. Specialised, STEM-Oriented Knowledge Systems

Modern think tanks increasingly focus on complex, interdisciplinary challenges, especially in STEM fields. The Infectious Diseases Institute and Environment for Development Initiative Uganda illustrate how specialisation enhances policy relevance in areas like health systems and climate policy. This implies that specialisation enables universities to contribute directly to climate resilience, innovation, and sustainable resource management.

FINDINGS

The narrative synthesis of 33 sources identified ten interrelated findings concerning university-affiliated think tanks: their evolution into hybrid policy and knowledge institutions; the central role of leadership in linking knowledge, policy and practice; the importance of innovation, resource mobilisation and institutional sustainability; and the influence of leadership on stakeholder engagement and socio-economic transformation. The review also highlighted persistent tensions between institutional autonomy, accountability, academic independence and external funding.

1. Evolution of Think Tanks from Knowledge Producers to Policy Co-Creators

The literature shows that think tanks have evolved from elite, research-focused advisory bodies into hybrid, publicly engaged institutions that combine knowledge production with policy advocacy, capacity development, stakeholder engagement and knowledge translation. In Uganda, this evolution is reflected in university-affiliated research centres, innovation hubs and specialised institutes that increasingly connect researchers, policymakers, industry and communities. Thus, contemporary think tanks function as knowledge intermediaries and policy co-creators, operating at the intersection of research, policy and socio-economic transformation (Abelson & Lindquist, 2017; Drezner, 2015; Nicander, 2015; Sua, 2016).

2. University-Affiliated Think Tanks Have Emerged as Hybrid Knowledge Institutions

The literature indicates that university-affiliated think tanks have emerged as hybrid institutional arrangements that combine academic research and expertise with policy engagement, innovation, stakeholder collaboration and societal application. In Uganda, they bridge the gap between knowledge production and policy practice, enhancing the relevance and impact of higher education. However, their hybrid nature creates tensions between academic autonomy, policy responsiveness, accountability and institutional flexibility, requiring effective leadership to manage these competing demands (Cloete & Maassen, 2015; Molla & Cuthbert, 2018; Ndibuuza et al., 2021; Njeru, 2018).

3. Leadership Is the Critical Mechanism Linking Knowledge Production, Policy and Practice

The literature identifies leadership as a central determinant of the effectiveness of university-affiliated think tanks, enabling strategic direction, resource mobilisation, partnerships and the translation of research into policy and practice. Effective leadership balances institutional accountability with operational flexibility and requires vision, influence, adaptability and ethical grounding. The evidence also highlights the importance of distributed and collaborative leadership in coordinating diverse actors and strengthening institutional responsiveness and impact (Genza, 2021; Kirabira et al., 2023).

4. Leadership Enables Knowledge Brokerage and Research Uptake

The literature shows that leadership is central to transforming academic research into policy-relevant and socially useful knowledge. Through knowledge brokerage, leaders facilitate research translation, stakeholder engagement, policy communication and evidence uptake, thereby connecting universities with government, industry and communities. Effective leadership thus acts as

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a boundary-spanning mechanism that enhances the circulation, utilisation and societal impact of locally relevant knowledge (Mbadlanyana et al., 2011; Ndibuuza et al., 2021).

5. Innovation-Oriented Leadership and the Transformative Role of Think Tanks

The literature indicates that innovation-oriented leadership strengthens the transformative capacity of university-affiliated think tanks by promoting interdisciplinary research, experimentation, partnerships and co-creation of solutions to complex socio-economic challenges. However, effective leadership must balance innovation and responsiveness with academic rigour and integrity to sustain institutional credibility and impact (L. F. Magara, 2025).

6. Strategic Leadership, Resource Mobilisation and Institutional Sustainability

The literature shows that strategic leadership is essential for mobilising and diversifying resources necessary for the sustainability of university-affiliated think tanks. Effective leaders build partnerships, secure funding and strengthen institutional capacity while safeguarding academic autonomy and research integrity. Thus, sustainability extends beyond financial resources to include human capacity, institutional legitimacy, strategic networks and intellectual independence (E. Magara, 2009).

7. Political Acumen and Stakeholder Engagement Shape Policy Influence

The literature demonstrates that effective leadership enhances the policy influence of university-affiliated think tanks through political awareness, strategic networking and meaningful stakeholder engagement. Leaders must navigate policy environments, build relationships with key actors and effectively communicate research evidence while safeguarding academic independence.

8. University-Affiliated Think Tanks Strengthen Higher Education's Contribution to Socio-Economic Transformation

The literature indicates that university-affiliated think tanks can strengthen the contribution of higher education to socio-economic transformation by bridging research, policy and practice. Through policy-oriented research, knowledge brokerage, innovation, stakeholder engagement and locally grounded knowledge production, they can address structural limitations in universities and strengthen evidence-informed policymaking, human-capital development, university–industry–government linkages and community problem-solving (Cloete & Maassen, 2015; Mbadlanyana et al., 2011; Molla & Cuthbert, 2018).

9. Ugandan University Think Tanks as Networked, Specialised and Publicly Engaged Institutions

The literature indicates that think-tank functions in Ugandan universities are increasingly distributed across research centres, centres of excellence, innovation hubs, specialised institutes and community engagement structures (Taylor & Ormeño Oviedo, 2024). These institutions combine specialised knowledge production with policy engagement, capacity development, public participation and national and global networking, reflecting the emergence of diverse and publicly engaged knowledge ecosystems rather than conventional research centres (Abelson & Lindquist, 2017; Marginson, 2022; Westheimer, 2020).

10. Critical Gaps in Existing Knowledge

The review identifies significant gaps in empirical and theoretical knowledge on university-affiliated think tanks in Africa, particularly Uganda. Existing literature gives limited attention to institutional and distributed leadership, autonomy–accountability tensions, and the integration of leadership with knowledge brokerage. Moreover, empirical evidence remains limited on how these institutions translate research into policy and generate measurable and sustained socio-economic transformation in Uganda.

CONCLUSIONS

The narrative review led to the following key conclusions: Think tanks have evolved into hybrid policy and knowledge institutions**.** Their role has expanded beyond research production to include knowledge brokerage, policy engagement, innovation, capacity development and public participation. University-affiliated think tanks provide an important bridge between academia and society. Their hybrid positioning enables universities to connect research and expertise with government, industry, communities and other stakeholders, thereby enhancing institutional relevance and societal impact. Leadership is the central driver of think-tank effectiveness. Strategic, ethical, adaptive and distributed

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leadership is essential for aligning research agendas, coordinating actors, mobilising resources and translating knowledge into policy and practice. Knowledge brokerage is a critical leadership function. Effective leaders facilitate the translation, communication and uptake of research evidence, enabling university-affiliated think tanks to operate as boundary-spanning institutions between knowledge producers and users. Innovation-oriented leadership enhances transformative capacity. Think tanks can contribute to addressing complex socio-economic challenges through interdisciplinary collaboration, experimentation and co-creation, provided innovation remains grounded in academic rigour and integrity. Institutional sustainability depends on strategic resource mobilisation.

Effective leadership must diversify resources and build strategic partnerships while protecting intellectual autonomy, research integrity and institutional legitimacy. Policy influence requires political acumen and stakeholder engagement. Research quality alone is insufficient; sustained policy influence depends on leaders' ability to navigate policy environments, build strategic networks and communicate evidence effectively. University-affiliated think tanks can strengthen higher education's contribution to socio-economic transformation. By connecting research, policy, innovation and societal needs, they can enhance evidence-informed policymaking, human-capital development, university–industry–government collaboration and community problem-solving. Ugandan think-tank functions are increasingly networked, specialised and publicly engaged**.** This suggests that university-affiliated think tanks should be understood as diverse knowledge ecosystems rather than conventional research units. Important empirical and theoretical gaps remain**; i**n particular, further research is needed on institutional and distributed leadership, autonomy–accountability tensions, leadership and knowledge brokerage, and the pathways through which university-affiliated think tanks generate measurable and sustained socio-economic transformation in Uganda.

The literature concludes that university-affiliated think tanks have evolved from conventional research units into hybrid and networked knowledge institutions that bridge research, policy and practice. In Uganda, their contribution to socio-economic transformation depends substantially on strategic, adaptive and distributed leadership that enables knowledge brokerage, stakeholder engagement, innovation, resource mobilisation and policy uptake. However, persistent tensions relating to institutional autonomy, academic independence, accountability and external funding constrain their effectiveness. Therefore, strengthening clear governance frameworks, leadership capacity, sustainable financing and stakeholder networks is essential for positioning university-affiliated think tanks as effective platforms for evidence-informed policy and socio-economic transformation in Uganda.

Recommendations

Based on the ten key findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1) Universities should establish and strengthen think tanks with explicit mandates for policy research, knowledge translation, stakeholder engagement and public dialogue, moving beyond conventional research-production functions.
2) Universities should develop governance structures that define the relationship between think tanks and parent institutions while providing sufficient operational autonomy, accountability and flexibility to respond effectively to policy and societal needs.
3) Universities should invest in leadership development for think-tank directors, researchers and managers, emphasising strategic vision, adaptability, collaboration, ethical leadership and the ability to balance institutional accountability with operational flexibility.
4) Existing think tanks should establish dedicated mechanisms for translating research into policy briefs, dialogues, media outputs and stakeholder engagements, while developing systematic linkages with government, industry, communities and other knowledge users.
5) University leaders should create enabling environments for interdisciplinary research, experimentation, entrepreneurship and co-creation with external stakeholders, while maintaining academic rigour and research integrity.
6) Think tanks should diversify funding through competitive grants, strategic partnerships, commissioned research, consultancy and

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philanthropic support, while establishing safeguards to protect research independence, institutional autonomy and local research priorities.

7) Think-tank leaders should develop structured relationships with policymakers, government agencies, industry, civil society, development partners and communities to improve access to policy spaces and enhance the uptake of research evidence without compromising academic independence.

8) Universities and policymakers should recognise and support think tanks as strategic mechanisms for linking research, innovation and higher education with national development priorities, particularly in evidence-informed policymaking, human-capital development, industry linkages and community problem-solving.

9) Ugandan universities should promote collaboration among think tanks, research centres, centres of excellence, innovation hubs and international knowledge networks to facilitate knowledge exchange, specialised expertise, joint research and broader policy influence.

10) Researchers and universities should investigate how institutional, distributed and relational leadership influences knowledge brokerage, policy uptake, institutional sustainability and measurable socio-economic outcomes, particularly within Uganda's political, financial and higher education context.

Therefore, universities should balance academic theory with workplace relevance by positioning think tanks as intermediary spaces where knowledge is co-created among researchers, policymakers, employers, students, and communities. Through such arrangements, theoretical knowledge should continuously be tested against practical realities. This integrated approach offers a more sustainable response to graduate employability challenges and strengthens the contribution of universities to Uganda's socio-economic transformation. Therefore, university-affiliated think tanks should be viewed as strategic institutional mechanisms for connecting education, research, policy, and practice.

Study Limitations

The study was subject to limitations. First, it employed a qualitative narrative literature review based on 33 sources; therefore, the findings depend on the availability, scope and quality of existing literature and do not provide the empirical depth of primary field-based evidence. Second, the literature on university-affiliated think tanks in Uganda remains fragmented and limited, particularly regarding institutional leadership, knowledge brokerage, policy uptake and measurable socio-economic outcomes. Third, the study incorporated evidence from diverse institutional contexts, including university research centres, institutes, innovation hubs and policy-oriented think tanks, whose organisational mandates and structures are not entirely comparable. This may limit the generalisability of the findings across all university-affiliated think tanks. Fourth, the review focused primarily on leadership, institutional arrangements, knowledge production and policy engagement, and therefore may not have captured all dimensions of think-tank effectiveness, including detailed financial performance, staff-level dynamics and long-term impact measurement. Finally, because the study relied on secondary literature, its conclusions should be interpreted as conceptual and analytical rather than causal, and further empirical research is needed to validate how different forms of leadership influence the sustainability, policy influence and socio-economic impact of university-affiliated think tanks in Uganda.

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Conflict of Interest Declaration

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest in relation to the publication of this manuscript.

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