The Universality of the University: Rethinking Global Ideals in African Higher Education

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Abstract

Universities perform three main functions: research, teaching, and community/societal service. As higher education institutions, they have long been associated with universal values such as academic freedom, the pursuit of truth, and the dissemination of knowledge. Rooted in European intellectual traditions, these ideals have been adopted and adapted across different regions of the world, including Africa. However, the application of such universal ideals within African higher education systems raises fundamental questions about relevance, cultural identity, and epistemic justice. This paper explored the conflict between the global idea of the university and the contextual realities of higher education in Ghana and other African countries. Using a qualitative research approach, specifically document analysis through an extensive literature review, the study found that universal academic ideals in Africa were transmitted through colonial legacies, adapted to support post-independence nation-building and developmental priorities, and contested amid political, economic, and epistemic constraints. The outcome is a hybrid model that retains the symbolic features of the "universal" university while reflecting Africa's socio-cultural realities. Nonetheless, tensions persist between international expectations and local imperatives, particularly concerning autonomy, meritocracy, funding, decolonization, and community engagement. The paper argues for a more pluralistic model of universality that accommodates local agency while maintaining global engagement.

Keywords: Universality, University, Universal Academic Values; Indigenous Knowledge; Decolonisation

Introduction

Universities as institutions of higher learning play a critical role in the production and transmission of knowledge. They are spaces for intellectual advancement, engines for national development, cultural preservation, and societal transformation. Research (Barro & Lee, 2013) shows that quality research and university education are directly linked with the socio-economic development of countries globally. These institutions have traditionally and historically been conceptualized as a "universal", promoting academic

freedom, critical inquiry, and the pursuit of knowledge for the good of the entire society (Altbach, 2001; Marginson, 2016).

The concept of the universality of the university is primarily embedded in European intellectual discourse, most notably Wilhelm von Humboldt's vision of the research university and John Henry Newman's conception of liberal education. Wilhelm von Humboldt's 19th-century model of the research university particularly emphasized the integration of teaching and research, while John Newman's (1852/2008) idea of liberal education promoted intellectual cultivation and moral reasoning. These European models have significantly influenced the global architecture of higher education, often through rankings, accreditation systems, and policy transfer.

In recent times, the conceptualisation of the universality of the university continues to shape university policies and practices through mechanisms such as international rankings, quality assurance systems, and policy transfers across national borders (Teichler, 2004; Shahjahan & Morgan, 2016). The framework often advances a uniform model of the university that privileges research production, global competitiveness, and institutional prestige, frequently at the expense of local relevance, contextual responsiveness, and indigenous knowledge systems.

In the African higher education context, particularly in Ghana, the adoption of these universal models poses significant challenges. Universities in Africa are embedded in historical and socio-political contexts shaped by colonial legacies, postcolonial nation-building, and ongoing struggles for autonomy and development (Teferra & Albach, 2004; Zeleza, 2006). The institutions are simultaneously expected to meet global academic standards and address local developmental needs, all within environments marked by limited resources, political interference, and structural dependency on international donors (Mamdani, 2007; Langa, 2010).

Despite widespread aspirations to align with global benchmarks, the uncritical applications of the "universal" university model in Africa often mask profound asymmetries and epistemic exclusions. The continued emphasis on external validation through rankings, donor funding criteria, and Western-defined measures of academic excellence has contributed to a growing tension between global expectations and local realities. African universities, including those in Ghana, struggle to reconcile inherited Eurocentric structures with the demands of postcolonial transformation, resulting in what may be described as an institutional identity crisis. Issues such as curriculum alienation, linguistic exclusion, and marginalization of indigenous knowledge systems reveal the inadequacy of one-size-fits-all models in diverse socio-cultural environments (Odora Hoppers, 2002; Nyamjoh, 2012).

This tension raises critical questions: To what extent is the university in Africa, and Ghana in particular, truly universal? Whose knowledge is produced and valorized in these institutions? Moreover, how do African universities engage with, adapt to, or resist

dominant global academic paradigms while remaining responsive to their immediate contexts?

This paper employed a qualitative, interpretive methodology using document analysis and thematic synthesis to critically interrogate the concept of "universality" of the university. It examined how it has been interpreted, contested, and transformed. Focusing on Africa as a case study, it sought to uncover the historical, structural, and epistemological complexities that shape the university's role in society. By doing so, it aimed to contribute to ongoing efforts to decolonize higher education and imagine the more context-sensitive, pluralistic, and inclusive models of the university in Africa.

Purpose of the Study

This study aimed to critically evaluate the concept of the "universality" of the university as it has been historically constructed, globally disseminated, and locally contested, with a specific focus on the African and Ghanaian higher education contexts.

Research Questions

1. What core values and principles define the idea of a "universal" university across historical and philosophical traditions?
2. How have these universal academic ideals been transmitted, adapted, or contested in African higher education systems, particularly in Ghana?
3. What tensions exist between global expectations and local imperatives in African universities?

Conceptual Framework

The analysis is guided by a dual framework combining historical-interpretive and critical-constructivist perspectives. The historical-interpretive lens allows for an examination of the evolution of university ideals from medieval Europe to the present. Meanwhile, the critical-constructivist approach questions the ideological underpinnings of global higher education norms and advocates for context-sensitive models rooted in local realities. Together, these frameworks facilitate a nuanced understanding of how African universities negotiate the tension between global expectations and local imperatives.

Literature Review

The scholarly literature on the idea of the university is both broad and contested, encompassing philosophical, historical, organizational, and postcolonial perspectives. At the normative core are accounts that treat the university as a distinctive social institution with three interlocking functions: knowledge production, teaching (formation of persons),

and service to society. Barnett's work (2000) is representative of this strand: he emphasizes the university's multiple functions and the complexity of contemporary higher education's purposes, arguing that universities must balance epistemic commitments with social responsibilities. Similarly, Altbach's analyses of global higher education (2004; see also Altbach & Knight, 2007) highlight how research, scholarship, and global academic norms shape university missions, while Marginson (2008) maps how globalization has promoted convergence in institutional designs and performance metrics across jurisdictions.

Classical accounts trace the origins of the modern university to medieval universitas and the studium generale (Rashdall,1895), while the Humboldtian model (Humboldt, early 19th century) is widely cited as the philosophical ancestor of the modern research university. This model stresses academic freedom, unity of research and teaching, and the formation of the autonomous scholar. Organizational analyses such as Clark's "triangle of coordination" (Clark, 1983) and the world-society / world polity school (Meyer, Ramirez, Schofer, and colleagues) explain why similar institutional forms (degrees, peer review, governance norms) diffuse transnationally.

Postcolonial and critical scholars argue that the "universal university" too often masks Eurocentric epistemologies and reproduces asymmetrical power relations in knowledge production. Mamdani (2007) interrogates the impact of neoliberal reforms and the marketisation of African universities; Nyamnjoh (2012) and Mbembe (2016) critique the lingering colonial legacies embedded in curricula, research agendas, and institutional hierarchies, calling for epistemic pluralism and the decolonisation of knowledge. These critiques stress that universality can be a veneer for domination when local knowledge, languages, and priorities are marginalised.

The theme of tension between internationalisation and national development recurs in country-level studies. In Ghana and other African states, Sawyerr (2004) and Atuahene (2011) (among others) documented how national development priorities, relevance to labour markets, local research needs, and capacity building, sometimes conflict with universities' adoption of international benchmarks, rankings, and credential structures. These tensions produce ambivalent policy choices: while internationalization brings research collaborations and visibility, it can also divert resources and attention away from locally salient missions.

Trow (1974) and later scholars chart the transition from elite to mass higher education, with consequences for quality assurance, differentiation of institutions, and governance. Bourdieu and Passeron's sociological analyses (e.g., reproduction theory) further show how higher education systems can reproduce social inequalities even as they claim meritocratic ideals. Contemporary critiques of rankings, audit cultures, and the managerial university (e.g., Henkel; Slaughter & Rhoades) show how new governance logics reshape academic work and institutional priorities.

Methodology

The study used the qualitative research approach (i.e., content analysis of documents through literature review). By using this approach, the researcher was able to thoroughly scrutinize past related literature and documents relevant to the topic, which is not possible in quantitative research. The method that was adopted in the review process was the scoping review method. The aim of adopting this method was to develop a comprehensive and systematic approach for examining past and present literature on the university, which swiftly connects the significant variables and key phrases driving the review to the important sources of the literature.

Content analysis was used to identify the key themes or structures resonating throughout the body of literature available, and compare and integrate data from prior research (Kibuku et al., 2020). Stepanyan, Littlejohn, and Margarita (2013) contend that the scoping review helps analyze trends. In contemporary fields like universal ideals of the university, where ideas are still developing. The review was guided by research questions in line with the recommendations of Arksey and O'Malley (2005), who contend that researchers need to identify and formulate research questions, identify relevant studies in line with the purpose of the study, study selection, data collection, summary, and synthesis of results, and consultation. The research questions on page 2 guided the search.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The following inclusion and exclusion criteria were devised to guide the study.

Inclusion Criteria

The researcher used topic relevance, geographical scope, publication type, time frame, and language to determine what should be included in the scoping review.

1. *Topic Relevance*
   a. The document, article, or paper must have focused on the concept of the university in historical, philosophical, sociological, or policy contexts.
   b. The document, article, or paper must have explored universal academic ideals (e.g., institutional autonomy, academic freedom, service to society, and knowledge production).
   c. The document, paper, or article must have discussed the transmission, adaptation, or contestation of these ideals in African higher education, with particular relevance to Ghana.
   d. The document, paper, or article must have interrogated the conflict between global norms and local imperatives in universities.
2. *Geographic Scope*

a. The document, paper, or article must have discussed international perspectives that inform the universality of the university.
b. The document, paper or article must also have investigated African and especially Ghanaian higher education contexts.

3. *Publication Types*
    a. Peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books and chapters, policy documents, conference papers, and reputable think-tank or NGO reports.
    b. Grey literature (government reports, UNESCO/World Bank/AAU publications, institutional strategy documents).

4. *Time Frame*
    a. Historical works that define and trace the origins of the university's ideals (medieval to present).
    b. Contemporary studies (preferably from the last 20 years, 2005–2025) that evaluate how these ideals are applied or challenged.

5. *Language*
    a. The language in the article or paper must have been in English for a more straightforward interpretation.

Exclusion Criteria

Studies, reports, or documents were excluded from the study if they

1. *Lacked topical relevance*
    a. Discussed only operational/technical aspects of universities (e.g., campus infrastructure, IT systems) without connecting to universal academic ideals.
    b. Focused on higher education only in vocational or non-university settings, unless linked to the broader university concept.

2. *Geographic Mismatch*
    a. They are unrelated to Africa or the global conceptual framing of the university.
    b. It has no relevance to Ghana or African comparative analysis.

3. *Were non-scholarly / low credibility sources*
    a. Popular media, blog posts, or unverified online content without scholarly or institutional credibility.

4. *Language Barrier*
    a. Publications in languages other than English

5. *Irrelevant Time Frame for Contemporary Context*
    a. Historical works lack conceptual or analytical connections to current African higher education issues.

Search Strategy

The researcher reviewed empirical studies related to the universality of the university and the implications of the global ideals within the context of African Higher Education. Three electronic databases — Scopus, Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), and Google Scholar — were searched using the keywords presented below, combined with the Boolean operator "OR".

A. *University / Higher education (structure)*
   university* OR "higher education" OR "tertiary education" OR "postsecondary education" OR "academic institution*" OR "HE sector" OR "HE system*" OR "HEI" OR "HEIs"

B. *"Universal" academic ideals (content)*
   "academic freedom" OR "institutional autonomy" OR "university autonomy" OR "knowledge production" OR "knowledge creation" OR "truth-seeking" OR "civic engagement" OR "service to society" OR "public mission" OR "third mission" OR "scholarly community" OR collegiality OR "shared governance" OR "scientific universalism" OR cosmopolitanism OR "world-class university" OR "global rankings" OR "quality assurance"

C. *Africa / Ghana (context)*
   Africa OR African OR "Sub-Saharan Africa" OR SSA OR ECOWAS OR Ghana OR Ghanaian OR "West Africa" OR "Anglophone Africa" OR "Francophone Africa"

D. *Transmission/adaptation/contestation (processes)*
   transmi* OR diffusion OR "policy diffusion" OR adoption OR adaptation OR localis* OR indigeni* OR glocali* OR "policy transfer" OR appropriation OR hybrid* OR contest* OR resist* OR decolon* OR "postcolonial" OR "knowledge decolon*" OR "Africanization" OR "Africanisation"

E. *Global vs local alignment (tension dimension)*
   tension* OR friction* OR strain* OR misalignment* OR divergence* OR disjuncture* OR contradiction* OR "global expectation*" OR "global norm*" OR "local imperative*" OR "local context*" OR "world polity" OR isomorphism OR "neoliberal reform*" OR marketization OR massification

The search was undertaken between January 19, 2025, and August 20, 2025, to identify research publications and related documents on the universality of the university.

Findings and Discussion
Core Values and Principles of the "Universal" University: Historical and Philosophical Foundations

The term university derives from the Latin universitas, meaning "the whole" or "a totality." In medieval Latin, it referred primarily to a corporate body or community (universitas magistrorum et scholarium — "community of teachers and scholars") (Cobban, 1988; Rashdall, 1936). Initially, universitas denoted any legally recognized guild or corporation, such as a universitas civium ("body of citizens") rather than a place of learning per se.

As a corporate entity recognized by sovereign authority, the medieval university enjoyed legal personhood, enabling it to own property, enter contracts, and enact statutes independent of its members (Leff, 1968; Verger, 2000). This autonomy ensured continuity despite personnel changes and underpinned its capacity for self-governance. By the 11th to 13th centuries, two principal forms emerged:

1. *Universitas scholarium* — A student-governed model, exemplified by the University of Bologna (1088), where students hired and regulated teachers.
2. *Universitas magistrorum* — A faculty-governed model, exemplified by the University of Paris (mid-12th century), where masters exercised collective authority and defended academic freedom.

The corporate status of the university then brought tangible benefits. For instance, it offered protection from local interference (Ridder-Symoens, 1996), negotiation of privileges such as tax exemptions and safe passage, and jurisdictional autonomy. Pope Innocent III's recognition of the University of Paris in 1200 granted it the authority to act as a legal entity, confer degrees, and have its qualifications recognized across Christendom (Thorndike, 1944).

By the 13th century, universitas became firmly associated with higher learning institutions through papal and royal charters granting the *ius ubique docendi*, the right to teach anywhere (Rashdall, 1936). The related concept of the *studium generale* designated universities open to students from all regions and acknowledged across Europe (De Ridder-Symoens, 1996).

The Renaissance and Enlightenment further embedded the idea of the university as a space for the pursuit of universal knowledge (Perkin, 2007). The 19th century then produced two highly influential models: The Humboldtian model in Germany — uniting teaching and research for knowledge's sake (Ash, 2006; Humboldt, 1810/1970) — and Newman's model in Britain, which emphasized liberal education for moral and intellectual cultivation (Newman, 1852/1996). Both models profoundly shaped global higher education policy and institutional design (Altbach, 2015; Marginson, 2016). From these

developments, the "universal" university rests on four interrelated pillars:

1. *Core Academic Values*: academic freedom, autonomy, and meritocracy (Altbach, 2015; UNESCO, 1997; Neave & van Vught, 1994; Shils, 1997).
2. *Knowledge Mission*: universality of knowledge, interdisciplinarity, and integration of research and teaching (Nussbaum, 2010; Frodeman, 2010; Ash, 2006).
3. *Civic and Global Role*: service to society and cultivation of global citizenship (Boulton & Lucas, 2008; UNESCO, 2015).
4. *Institutional Traditions*: shared academic practices (peer review, scholarly publication) and participation in global academic networks (Ziman, 1994; Hénard & Mitterle, 2010).

The African Adaptation: Universal Ideals in Context

African universities inherited the core ideals of the modern university through colonial legacies and global academic exchange. However, their expression has been shaped by the continent's distinct political, economic, and socio-cultural realities. The result is an adaptation that is dynamic and innovative, but often uneven in implementation.

Academic freedom, for instance, is constitutionally or statutorily guaranteed in most African systems. However, its practical realisation is frequently constrained by political interference, financial dependence on government, and restrictions on dissent (Mamdani, 2007; Luescher, 2016). Episodes in Uganda, Ethiopia, and Zimbabwe underscore the fragility of this principle when state interests clash with critical scholarship.

Similarly, institutional autonomy is tempered by centralized governance structures. Ministries of Education often retain the authority to appoint vice-chancellors or council members, politicising decision-making processes (Teferra & Altbach, 2004). In Ghana, for example, the Universities Act grants partial autonomy but preserves significant state influence over appointments and funding (Manuh, Gariba, & Budu, 2007).

Meritocracy also remains more aspirational than fully realised. While competitive programmes largely adhere to merit-based selection, recruitment and admissions are sometimes influenced by political patronage, ethnic affiliation, or social networks (Oanda, Chege, & Wesonga, 2008). This tension between formal meritocratic systems and informal considerations illustrates the ongoing negotiation between ideals and realities.

The principle of the universality of knowledge is fostered through African participation in international research networks, scholarly exchanges, and open access initiatives (Trotter et al., 2014). However, limited resources, brain drain, and donor-dependency can skew research priorities towards external agendas (Zeleza, 2016), raising questions about epistemic sovereignty.

Interdisciplinarity is gaining prominence in response to cross-cutting challenges such as climate change, public health, and sustainable development. Nonetheless, rigid departmental boundaries and entrenched disciplinary hierarchies continue to impede its full

adoption (Mkosi & Magadlela, 2018).

The Humboldtian vision of integrating research and teaching faces similar constraints. Heavy teaching loads, inadequate research infrastructure, and low postgraduate enrolment often undermine the synergy between these two core functions (Teferra, 2014).

In contrast, service to society is an area of relative strength. Universities in Ghana, Kenya, and South Africa engage actively in community outreach, agricultural extension, and policy advisory work (Cloete et al., 2011). Even so, translating research into actionable policy and practice remains inconsistent, in part due to resource and capacity limitations.

Global citizenship education has gained traction, with curricula incorporating themes such as human rights, sustainability, and African integration (AU, 2015). However, these initiatives are often donor-driven rather than institutionally embedded, limiting their long-term sustainability.

Foundational academic traditions, including peer review, scholarly publishing, and degree conferral, remain intact. However, African universities face persistent quality assurance challenges, the proliferation of predatory publishing, and underdeveloped institutional repositories (Asubiaro, 2019).

Finally, participation in global academic networks is expanding, with platforms like the African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA) enhancing collaboration. Nevertheless, disparities between flagship universities, such as the University of Cape Town, Makerere University, and the University of Ghana, and resource-poor regional institutions perpetuate a multi-tiered higher education landscape (Cloete et al., 2015).

In sum, while the university as an institution has evolved over centuries, its universal ethos endures in Africa through a fusion of historical legacies, philosophical ideals, and global responsibilities. These values are continually reinterpreted and recalibrated, producing a higher education landscape that is globally connected and locally responsive, yet persistently challenged by structural, political, and resource constraints.

The Transmission, Adaptation, and Contestation of Universal Academic Ideals in African Higher Education Systems, with Particular Reference to Ghana

The transmission, adaptation, and contestation of universal academic ideals in African higher education, particularly in Ghana, have unfolded along a complex historical and socio-political trajectory. Scholars have noted that modern universities in Africa, and elsewhere, were often complicit in and benefited from processes of colonisation and racialisation. Smith (2012) argues that many Western institutions were deeply involved in the colonial cataloguing of non-Western knowledge and in producing knowledge that legitimised scientific racism and other racialised and colonial classifications. These were used to justify forced assimilation, military occupation, and, in some cases, the annihilation of non-white populations.

In the present era, higher education institutions frequently reproduce

epistemological hierarchies in which Western knowledge is assumed to be universally relevant and valuable, while non-Western knowledge is either patronisingly celebrated as a commodified "local culture," appropriated for Western benefit, or excluded from the category of legitimate knowledge altogether (Quin & Senekal, 2020). University curricula remain heavily dominated by Western epistemologies, particularly Western sciences and technologies, and research in these domains often attracts the most significant institutional rewards, including grants and prestige. This dynamic reinforces the perception of Western universities as the model of the "ideal" university (Nandy, 2000).

Transmission through Colonial Legacies and Post-Independence Reforms

In Ghana, the earliest universities, such as the University College of the Gold Coast (now the University of Ghana, established in 1948), were modelled on the British system. They inherited governance structures (university councils, senates), ceremonial traditions, examination systems, and curricula patterned after metropolitan institutions (Bame, 1991; Teferra & Altbach, 2004). Academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and meritocracy were codified in Acts, statutes, and charters. The University of Ghana Act, for example, reflected the governance style of British civic universities, maintaining a clear separation between academic and administrative functions.

During the colonial period, universities were designed primarily to train a small administrative and professional elite for the colonial bureaucracy. Following independence in 1957, the priorities of the Ghanaian state shifted markedly. National development needs demanded a broader orientation, producing a large cadre of skilled professionals in education, health, engineering, agriculture, and public administration. Ghana's first president, Kwame Nkrumah, envisioned universities as engines of modernisation and nation-building rather than mere centres of elite scholarship. His educational policies and speeches, such as those at the University of Ghana, emphasised that higher education should serve social, political, and economic transformation. This vision is closely aligned with the "developmental university" model that emerged across Africa in the post-independence era, as described by Yesufu (1973)

Today, Ghana has 16 public universities and 10 technical universities. Their functional orientation has increasingly focused on addressing immediate national challenges. Enrolment has expanded significantly to democratise access and meet labour market demands. Research priorities emphasise applied areas such as agriculture, industry, and public health, often over purely theoretical inquiry. Outreach activities, such as extension services, literacy campaigns, and policy advisory roles, have been integrated into university mandates. Curricula have also been redesigned to foreground practical skills relevant to national development, including agricultural science, engineering, and educational administration.

Adaptation to Local Realities and Policy Priorities

While Ghanaian universities maintain the symbolic and structural features of the "universal" university, they have adapted these ideals to reflect local realities and national policy priorities:

1. *Governance structures*: The principle of autonomy persists, but the Universities Act permits state involvement in appointing chancellors and council members. This represents an adaptation in which self-governance is balanced with political oversight and developmental imperatives (Manuh, Gariba, & Budu, 2007).
2. *Research agendas:* The Humboldtian integration of research and teaching is applied unevenly. Resource limitations, donor funding patterns, and policy priorities often channel research toward agriculture, health, and education. While aligning with national needs, this narrows the universality of research themes (Zeleza, 2016).
3. *Curricular localisation*: Degree structures follow global conventions (credit systems, levels, thesis requirements), but there is growing integration of indigenous knowledge systems, African history, and local languages, blending global academic norms with cultural specificity (Mkosi & Magadlela, 2018).
4. *Service to society*: Universities have embedded outreach functions—for example, agricultural extension programmes at the University for Development Studies and community legal clinics at the University of Ghana Law Faculty, thus localising the civic mission in ways directly tied to community development.

Contestation: Tensions between Ideals and Constraints

Despite these adaptations, tensions remain between universal academic ideals and the political-economic realities of Ghana's higher education landscape:

1. *Academic freedom*: Although constitutionally protected (1992 Constitution, Article 21), academic freedom is periodically tested when research or public commentary challenges political authority. State efforts to influence research priorities or restrict sensitive publications illustrate these tensions (Mamdani, 2007; Luescher, 2016).
2. *Meritocracy versus patronage*: While merit-based entry predominates in competitive programmes, instances of political and ethnic patronage influence appointments and admissions, undermining the universal principle of advancement by merit (Oanda, Chege, & Wesonga, 2008).
3. *Funding dependency*: Heavy reliance on government subventions and donor funding can compromise institutional autonomy, as external priorities may override internally determined agendas (Teferra, 2014).
4. *Global citizenship education*: Although increasingly present in curricula (e.g.,

environmental sustainability, African integration studies), such initiatives are sometimes donor-driven rather than institutionally embedded, raising concerns about sustainability and ownership.

In Ghana, universal academic ideals have been transmitted primarily through colonial inheritance and global academic norms, adapted to fit post-independence nation-building goals and socio-economic priorities, and contested in contexts where political authority, resource constraints, and cultural relevance intersect. The result is a hybrid model, retaining the structural and symbolic hallmarks of the "universal" university while reflecting Ghana's distinctive historical, cultural, and developmental trajectory.

Global Expectations and Local Imperatives in African Universities

The analysis of the literature further reveals that African universities navigate a complex set of tensions as they seek to meet global higher education expectations while fulfilling local developmental mandates.

First, global rankings and internationalisation pressures often pull universities toward performance indicators such as citation counts, publication in high-impact English-language journals, and international student recruitment. While these metrics enhance international visibility, they can marginalise local priorities such as widening access, strengthening community engagement, and developing contextually relevant curricula (Bunting et al., 2020; Teferra, 2021). In Ghana, for example, the pursuit of "world-class" status is evident in strategic plans that prioritise research outputs and accreditation for international competitiveness, sometimes at the expense of local engagement (Atuahene & Owusu-Ansah, 2021).

Second, donor and project-based funding, such as the World Bank's Africa Centres of Excellence (ACE) initiative, has provided substantial resources for research infrastructure, postgraduate training, and regional collaboration. However, scholars note that such funding often comes with thematic or programmatic conditions, which can shift institutional priorities away from broader teaching needs or locally identified research agendas (Materu et al., 2024; Mohamedbhai, 2020).

Third, there is a persistent epistemic tension between decolonising knowledge systems and conforming to global epistemic norms. Calls to embed African epistemologies and community knowledge in curricula and research face resistance from incentive structures that reward alignment with Northern paradigms and publication in mainstream international journals (Nyamnjoh, 2019; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020).

Fourth, language policy presents an apparent tension between local inclusion and international visibility. While teaching and research in indigenous languages can broaden access and relevance, the dominance of English, French, and Portuguese remains tied to international collaboration and rankings. Ghana's universities continue to operate

predominantly in English, even as policy discourse increasingly acknowledges the value of indigenous language scholarship (Bamgbose, 2021; Prah, 2018).

Fifth, the massification of higher education has improved access but has also strained quality. Rapid enrolment growth across Africa, coupled with limited staff expansion and infrastructural investment, has prompted the development of the African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ASG-QA) to provide a continental quality framework (Materu, 2020; Shabani, 2021).

Sixth, academic talent mobility remains a double-edged sword. While international academic mobility brings valuable networks and training opportunities, it also contributes to the "brain drain," reducing teaching and supervisory capacity at home. Dual-affiliation and diaspora engagement schemes are emerging as partial solutions (Tijssen et al., 2021; Docquier & Rapoport, 2012).

Finally, university–community engagement is widely endorsed in policy rhetoric but under-rewarded in promotion and ranking systems. This gap limits the institutionalisation of research and teaching that directly address local socio-economic challenges (Boshoff, 2023; Cloete et al., 2018).

Toward a Plural Universality: Africanisation of Higher Education

Beyond adaptation, findings reveal active efforts to Africanise higher education, aiming to reframe universal ideals through local epistemologies. This is evident in the promotion of indigenous knowledge systems, curriculum reforms, and the integration of local languages into teaching and research.

Institutional Models

The University for Development Studies (UDS) in Ghana exemplifies this approach. The Third Trimester Field Practical Programme immerses students in rural communities to apply academic knowledge in addressing locally identified needs (University for Development Studies, 2025)—the S.D. Dombo University of Business and Integrated Development Studies similarly houses a Department of African and Endogenous Studies, embedding indigenous perspectives in its academic programmes.

The University of Ghana's Institute of African Studies (IAS), established in 1961 under Kwame Nkrumah, remains a continental leader in African-centred scholarship (Institute of African Studies, 2025a). Recent IAS events—such as the February 2025 workshop on *Advancing Decolonial Knowledge Production* and the June 2025 panel on *Indigenous Knowledge and Innovation*—have addressed language politics, curriculum decolonisation, and African-driven climate resilience strategies (Institute of African Studies, 2025b, Institute of African Studies, 2025c).

Curricular Innovations

Research by Addae, Amponsah, and Frimpong Kwapong (2023) argues for embedding indigenous knowledge in global citizenship education as a strategy for enhancing curriculum relevance and fostering contextually grounded learning. These findings align with broader Africanisation strategies advocated by Woldegiorgis and Doevenspeck (2023), who emphasise the importance of cultural identity, local language, and indigenous epistemologies in higher education reform.

Barriers to Implementation

Despite progress, implementation faces systemic challenges. These include bureaucratic inertia, insufficient funding for curriculum innovation, heavy teaching workloads, and weak institutional policy frameworks (Ssempebwa, Teferra, & Ouma, 2023; Owusu-Mensah & Asare, 2024)—additionally, donor-driven projects—while resource-rich—can impose external priorities that risk diluting locally defined objectives.

Overall, the findings show that African universities are not merely passive inheritors of universal academic ideals; they are active interpreters and, in some cases, transformers of these ideals. The Africanisation of higher education, particularly in Ghana, represents a deliberate move toward plural universality—a model that remains globally connected while being deeply rooted in local realities. However, the sustainability and depth of this transformation will depend on more substantial institutional commitment, supportive policy frameworks, and targeted investment in indigenous knowledge systems.

Conclusion, Implications, and Recommendations

The concept of a universal university remains compelling. However, its classical conception, founded in Western historical and philosophical traditions, needs critical reimagining to reflect the diversity of contexts in which universities operate today. In the African higher education context, and particularly in Ghana, the constraint lies in moving beyond imitation of dominant global models toward innovation that is responsive to local needs and aspirations.

Within this conceptualisation, universality should not be understood as uniformity, but rather as contextual pluralism, a shared commitment to core academic values such as intellectual rigor, academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and service to society, expressed in ways that are shaped by local histories, epistemologies, and developmental priorities. A truly universal university is open to global dialogue while deeply rooted in its community, drawing strength from indigenous knowledge systems and addressing pressing regional challenges.

To realize this vision, the study points to several implications and recommended

actions:

1. *Reconceptualise universality as contextual pluralism*: Higher education authorities, especially university authorities, should formulate definitions and strategies that allow for diversity in institutional missions, governance models, and curricula while maintaining core academic principles.

2. *Strengthen indigenous knowledge integration*: Universities should embed local epistemologies, languages, and cultural practices into teaching, research, and outreach to ensure relevance and inclusivity.

3. *Promote globally engaged, locally rooted curricula*: Universities should develop programs that prepare graduates to navigate both global knowledge economies and local development priorities.

4. *Champion context-driven innovation over replication of dominant global models*: Universities should formulate models of governance, pedagogy, and scholarship that emerge from African socio-cultural and economic realities rather than replicating external templates.

5. *Promote Equitable Global Partnerships*: University management should ensure that international collaborations are mutually beneficial, support capacity building, and allow African universities a substantive role in agenda-setting.

6. *Embed Community Engagement in the University's Core Mission*: University authorities should promote the civic role of universities by aligning research and knowledge dissemination with the needs of surrounding communities.

7. *Ensure Policy Support for Autonomy and Academic Freedom*: Governments should provide enabling environments that safeguard the independence and integrity of higher education institutions.

8. *Expand Comparative Research*: Undertake further cross-regional studies to identify adaptable best practices for reconciling global academic ideals with diverse local contexts.

By embracing a plural and dialogical vision of universality, African and Ghanaian universities can position themselves not as passive recipients of global norms but as active co-creators of the future idea of the university, one that is both globally resonant and locally grounded.

Limitations of the Study

Even though the study focused on global perspectives on the concept of the university, the empirical and contextual emphasis is on Africa, with a particular focus on Ghana. Therefore, the focus may limit the generalizability of the findings to other regional contexts. The review included only literature published in English due to interpretation constraints. Consequently, relevant scholarship and policy documents in French,

Portuguese, and Arabic, which are significant in certain African higher education contexts, might have been left out.

Furthermore, the concept of "universality" in the university encompasses multiple philosophical, historical, and sociopolitical dimensions. The broad scope of this scoping review means that some themes are covered in less depth than would be possible in a more narrowly focused study. Additionally, while a systematic approach was used for literature selection and thematic synthesis, interpretation of the "universal" ideals and their adaptation in African contexts remains partly influenced by the researcher's analytical perspective.

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