

Examining the Relationship between Institutional Culture and Mission Identity at Bugema University, Uganda

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Abstract

This study explored the relationship between institutional culture and mission identity at Bugema University, Uganda. The university is characterized by its commitment to integrating academic excellence with religious values, spiritual development and moral formation. However, contemporary challenges, such as secularization and increased competition in higher education, have raised concerns about the preservation of mission identity within Christian institutions. The study employed a qualitative research approach, using a literature review to examine scholarly works on higher education institutional culture and mission identity. Relevant literature was obtained from academic databases and analyzed using the thematic analysis approach in order to identify relevant patterns and themes. The findings show that institutional culture plays a fundamental role in shaping and sustaining mission identity at Bugema University. Shared institutional values, traditions, leadership practices and organizational norms help translate mission statements into practical institutional behavior. The integration of faith and learning, leadership commitment to mission-centered values and institutional traditions, such as spiritual programs and community service initiatives, significantly contribute to strengthening mission identity. The study concludes that maintaining a strong alignment between institutional culture and mission identity is essential for preserving the distinctive character of Christian higher learning institutions like Bugema University. It recommends that Bugema University administrators intentionally strengthen institutional culture through mission-centered leadership, faith integration in academic programs and preservation of spiritual traditions in order to sustain the university's religious identity.

Keywords: Institutional Culture; mission identity; higher education; faith integration; Bugema university.

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Introduction

Bugema University is a higher learning institution whose operations, values, and mission are grounded in the religious beliefs and traditions of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, which guide its activities and objectives (Badagawa, 2013). This University plays a critical role in shaping higher education by integrating academic excellence with religious values and moral formation. Unlike secular universities that primarily emphasize academic outcomes, Bugema University adopts a holistic educational philosophy that deliberately integrates spiritual development, ethical formation, and

service to society as core components of the learning experience (New Vision, 2026).

Institutional culture refers to the shared values, beliefs, traditions, norms and practices that shape the behavior and identity of members within an institution. In higher education, institutional culture influences leadership styles, governance structures, teaching practices and relationships within the academic community (Coman & Bonciu, 2016). Mission identity, on the other hand, refers to the foundational purpose and distinctive characteristics that define an educational institution and guides its

educational philosophy and institutional practices (Daniels & Gustafson, 2016).

According to Melé (2022), religiously affiliated universities deliberately integrate their missions into academic structures, ceremonies and institutional traditions in order to reinforce their distinctive identity within the higher education landscape. In Uganda, Bugema University has historically contributed significantly to national development through moral education, leadership training and holistic education that integrates intellectual, spiritual and social development (Nelson, 2021). However, with the increasing secularization and competitive academic environments, Bugema University faces challenges in maintaining a strong mission identity while adapting to modern educational demands. In response, this study sought to explore the relationship between institutional culture and mission identity at Bugema University. Understanding this relationship is essential for ensuring that the university maintains her distinctive identity while remaining academically competitive and socially relevant.

Bugema University has played a significant role in the development of higher education in Uganda by providing holistic education that emphasizes character formation, ethical leadership and spiritual growth alongside intellectual development (Writer, 2014). Despite these important roles, there is a growing concern among some stakeholders that the institutional culture within the university may not fully reflect its founding religious mission (New Vision, 2016).

According to Daniels and Gustafson (2016), although mission statements in many faith-based universities remain formally acknowledged, they are not consistently enacted in institutional practices, policies and behaviors. This inconsistency is largely attributed to growing competition and the increasing adoption of secular academic models, which tend to dilute the integration of faith within university operations. As a result, the alignment between institutional culture and mission identity becomes weakened, often leading to mission drift and a diminished spiritual ethos.

Although several studies (Fielden, 2008; Materu, 2007; Saint, 2009) examined governance, quality assurance and academic performance in faith based universities, limited scholarly attention has been given to the relationship between institutional culture and mission identity, particularly within

faith-based institutions. The lack of empirical and conceptual exploration of this relationship makes it difficult for university leaders, policy makers and faith communities to understand how institutional culture either strengthens or undermines the mission identity of these institutions.

Literature Review

This section seeks to explore existing scholarly perspectives on institutional culture and mission identity, examining how these concepts are defined, developed and sustained within higher education contexts. It further reviews empirical and theoretical studies that illuminate the relationship between culture and mission, with special attention to faith-based institutions. By synthesizing relevant literature, this study establishes a conceptual and analytical foundation for understanding how institutional culture influences, shapes and potentially challenges the mission identity of Bugema University.

Faith-based universities have historically played a significant role in shaping higher education systems around the world (Daniels & Gustafson, 2016). These institutions are characterized not only by their academic functions but also by their commitment to religious values and mission-driven education. For example, the identity of Bugema University is expressed through its mission statement, educational philosophy, institutional traditions and organizational culture. Institutional culture and mission identity therefore become central components in understanding how the university operates and sustains its religious heritage while engaging contemporary academic environments (Badagawa, 2013).

Institutional culture refers to the shared values, beliefs, norms and practices that shape behavior within an organization. In universities, this culture influences leadership, decision-making, teaching approaches, and the overall academic climate (Taye et al., 2019). Mission identity, on the other hand, represents the foundational purpose and guiding principles that define an institution's reason for existence. In faith-based universities, mission identity is usually grounded in religious traditions and spiritual commitment that shape institutional priorities and community life (Daniels & Gustafson, 2016).

According to Tierney (2008), institutional culture is essential to the interpretation and preservation of the mission of higher education institutions. It

shapes how mission statements are understood, implemented, and sustained over time. Where institutional culture is aligned with the mission of a faith-based university, the institution is better positioned to maintain a strong identity, uphold its core values, and sustain its sense of purpose. Conversely, when cultural practices diverge from mission commitment, institutions may experience identity drift (Tierney, 2012).

In higher education institutions, culture influences how universities define success, how faculty interact with students and how institutional goals are pursued. It also emphasizes that universities develop unique cultural identity through their traditions, leadership styles and governance system (Schein, 2010). These cultural elements shape institutional identity and influence the interpretation of mission statements (Tierney, 2008). Institutional culture is also expressed through symbols, rituals, language and institutional traditions. Ceremonies, religious practices and community service activities, in particular, embody and reinforce the underlying values of a faith-based university (Coman & Bonciu, 2016). In many institutions, culture and mission are deeply interconnected, making it difficult to separate one from the other (Tierney, 2023). In faith-based universities, institutional culture often integrates academic excellence with spiritual formation. This integration creates an environment where intellectual development and moral values are pursued simultaneously (Tierney & Lanford, 2020).

Mission Identity in Faith-Based Universities

Mission identity refers to the distinctive purpose and guiding values that define an institution. For faith-based universities, mission identity is rooted in religious beliefs, theological commitment and spiritual traditions (Melé, 2022). These institutions aim not only to provide academic education but also to nurture moral character, spiritual development and service to society. Mission statements serve as formal expressions of institutional identity and values. They articulate the institution's goals, educational philosophy and commitments to society. According to Daniels and Gustafson, (2016), the institutional mission is a crucial factor influencing how universities contribute to the public good and address societal needs. Mission statements often shape institutional priorities, including curriculum design, research agendas and community engagement activities.

Religiously affiliated universities typically integrate their mission into multiple aspects of institutional life. They include academic programs whereby most religious universities include mandatory general education courses that reflect their faith tradition or moral framework (Richardson, 2019), symbolic representations, such as logos, mottos, chapels, sacred spaces and official ceremonies, to embody the identity and religious rituals (Johnson & Laurence, 2012).

Finally, institutional traditions, such as convocations, mission weeks and community service initiatives, function as symbolic and participatory mechanisms through which shared meanings are constructed and sustained. These practices not only foster community cohesion but also operationalize institutional values by embedding them within routine institutional life (Weeks et al., 2017). In this way, the deliberate integration of traditions into the institutional framework reinforces identity formation and ensures that the mission is continuously enacted and made visible in everyday practices (Gu & Kim, 2024).

Characteristics of Faith-Based Higher Education

Faith-based universities differ from secular institutions primarily through their integration of faith and learning. These institutions seek to combine academic excellence with spiritual and moral development. They often operate under the sponsorship or influence of religious organizations and maintain commitment to specific religious traditions (Daniels & Gustafson, 2016). Another defining characteristic is the integration of religious values into institutional practices. For example, religiously affiliated universities often incorporate faith-based perspectives into teaching, research and community service initiatives. This integration helps reinforce institutional identity and ensures that educational programs remain aligned with the institution's mission (Melé, 2022).

Faith-based universities often promote community engagement and social responsibility. According to Staup and Phillips (2026), Community service and outreach activities constitute a core dimension of the identity of many Christian institutions of higher learning. These initiatives reflect the belief that education should contribute to the welfare of society and promote social transformation. Faith-based universities often maintain strong institutional traditions and symbolic expressions of their values. These may include chapel services,

religious ceremonies, spiritual mentoring programs and codes of conduct based on religious principles (Melé, 2022)

Institutional Culture and Mission Identity

The relationship between institutional culture and mission identity is a central theme in higher education research. Institutional culture provides the context in which mission statements are interpreted and implemented. When culture aligns with mission, institutions are more likely to maintain strong organizational identity and coherence (Tierney & Lanford, 2020). Taye et al. (2019) argue that mission statements alone are insufficient to sustain institutional identity unless they are supported by a corresponding organizational culture. Culture ensures that mission values are translated into everyday practices, policies and decision-making processes. This alignment between culture and mission is particularly important for faith-based universities, where religious identity must be reflected in academic and administrative practices.

Leadership plays a critical role in maintaining alignment between culture and mission. Institutional leaders shape organizational culture through policies, strategic planning and communication of institutional values. Effective leadership ensures that mission commitment remains central to institutional operations and decision-making. Institutional culture further influences how students and faculty perceive and engage with the mission of the university. When institutional culture actively promotes religious values and spiritual formation, members of the

university community are more likely to embrace the mission identity of the institution (Schein, 2010). Conversely, misalignment between institutional culture and mission identity can lead to mission drift. This occurs when institutions gradually move away from their founding religious principles due to external pressures, such as market competition, secularization or changing social expectations (Reddy, 2024).

Institutional Culture and Identity in Ugandan

Uganda has a growing number of faith-based universities established by religious organizations as shown in Table 1.

These include Uganda Christian University, affiliated by the Anglican (Church of Uganda), Uganda Martyrs University, affiliated by the Roman catholic Church, Islamic University in Uganda, affiliated by the Ugandan Muslim Supreme Council, Bugema university, affiliated by the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Ndejje University, affiliated by the Anglican (Church of Uganda), African Renewal University, affiliated by the Pentecostal/ Evangelical churches, Living Stone International university, affiliated by evangelical. Interdenominational Christians, Uganda Pentecostal University, affiliated by Pentecostal churches, St. Lawrence University, affiliated by the Roman Catholic Church, Bishop Stewart University, affiliated by the Anglican (Church of Uganda), Kumi University, affiliated by the Anglican (Church of Uganda), and Ankole University, affiliated by the Roman catholic church (Uganda Ministry of Education and Sports, 2025).

Table 1: Faith-based Universities in Uganda

SN	University	Denomination / Religious Affiliation
1	Uganda Christian University	Anglican (Church of Uganda)
2	Uganda Martyrs University	Roman Catholic Church
3	Islamic University in Uganda	Islam (Uganda Muslim Supreme Council)
4	Bugema University	Seventh-day Adventist Church
5	Ndejje University	Anglican (Church of Uganda)
6	Africa Renewal University	Pentecostal / Evangelical (Watoto Church)
7	Living Stone International University	Evangelical / Interdenominational Christian
8	Uganda Pentecostal University	Pentecostal (PAOG)
9	St. Lawrence University	Roman Catholic (founded on Catholic values)
10	Bishop Stuart University	Anglican (Church of Uganda)
11	Kumi University	Anglican (Church of Uganda)
12	Ankole Western University	Roman Catholic (Ankole Diocese)

In these institutions, religious traditions are not peripheral but, they are central organizing principles. They shape what is taught (curriculum),

how it is taught (pedagogy and ethics), how people live (campus culture) and why the institution exists (mission and vision) (Nelson, 2021). Although

several studies have examined institutional culture and mission identity separately, limited research has explored the relationship between these two concepts in Ugandan faith-based universities. Existing literature (Tierney, 2012; Borthwick, 2012) focuses on Western contexts, particularly North America and Europe.

Methodology

This section describes the methodological framework in which the study was conducted. It includes research design, data analysis and ethical considerations.

Design

This study employed a qualitative research approach, using a literature review design to explore the relationship between institutional culture and mission identity at Bugema University. In this approach, researchers collect, analyze and interpret existing written sources (such as books, journal articles, reports, and documents), to understand a phenomenon in depth, rather than gathering new data from the field (Mohajan, 2018). The literature review enabled the researcher to examine existing academic works, theological perspectives, policy documents and institutional publications that discuss how institutional culture influences the preservation and expression of mission identity.

Relevant literature was accessed through academic databases, such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, EBSCOHost, and institutional repositories. These sources provided scholarly and contextual perspectives necessary for understanding how institutional culture shapes mission identity within faith-based institutions.

Data Analysis

The reviewed literature was analyzed using the thematic analysis approach, a qualitative method that involves identifying and interpreting recurring themes within the reviewed literature. The analysis followed the following steps:

1. **Reading and familiarization:** The researcher carefully reviewed the selected literature to understand the key arguments and findings.
1. **Coding of themes:** Relevant concepts related to institutional culture, mission identity, leadership influence, spiritual environment and organizational values were identified and categorized.
2. **Theme development:** Similar concepts were grouped into broader themes that explain

the relationship between institutional culture and mission identity.

3. **Interpretation:** The themes were interpreted to explain how institutional culture strengthens or weakens mission identity within faith-based universities.

This analytical process enabled the researcher to synthesize diverse scholarly perspectives and develop a coherent understanding of the phenomenon under study.

Ethical Considerations

Since the study relied exclusively on secondary data from published sources, no human participants were involved. However, the researcher ensured academic integrity by properly acknowledging all sources through APA citation and referencing. Care was also taken to accurately represent the ideas and findings of other scholars without misinterpretation or plagiarism.

Results and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the findings derived from the literature reviewed. The study employed a qualitative literature review methodology to explore the relationship between institutional culture and mission identity. The data was analyzed using the thematic analysis, a method that identifies patterns and themes across qualitative data. Through this process, major themes emerged that explain the interaction between institutional culture and mission identity at Bugema University.

Institutional Culture and Mission Identity

Literature reviewed consistently indicates that institutional culture forms the foundation through which mission identity is interpreted and practiced at Bugema University. Institutional culture consists of shared values, beliefs, traditions and behavioral patterns that shape how members of the institution think and act (Schein, 2010).

Tierney and Lanford (2020) suggest that mission statements alone do not guarantee the preservation of institutional identity. Rather, it is the organizational culture that translates mission statements into everyday practices. In faith-based universities, cultural values such as spiritual commitment, ethical behavior and service to society reinforce the religious mission of the institution.

Reviewed literature indicates that Bugema University integrates spiritual values into its

institutional culture through structured academic and co-curricular mechanisms. These include mandatory general education courses, such as GECR1101 Christian Beliefs, GECS1201 Issues in Science and Religion and GECA1201 Philosophy of Christian Education, which are studied by all students and reflect the institution's faith tradition and moral framework (Academic Bulletin, 2019 - 2024).

In addition, such practices as encouraging regular attendance at chapel services and requiring students to sign a code of conduct (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Department of Education (2021) reinforce these values. Collectively, these initiatives create an environment in which the university's mission is consistently manifested in daily experiences of both students and staff members. Therefore, institutional culture acts as the operational mechanism through which mission identity is preserved and communicated across generations of university members.

Integration of Faith and Learning

Another major theme emerging from the literature is the integration of faith and learning. Integration of Faith and Learning is the deliberate connection between religious beliefs and academic study, where faith shapes understanding and learning strengthens faith (Kaul et al., 2017), which is a defining feature of Bugema University (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Department of Education (2021). Faith-based higher education institutions aim to combine academic excellence with spiritual and moral formation (Melé, 2022; Academic Bulletin 2019 - 2024).

Leadership Role in Sustaining Mission Identity

Leadership emerged as a critical factor influencing the relationship between institutional culture and mission identity. Institutional leaders play a significant role in shaping organizational culture and ensuring that mission values remain central to institutional operations. According to Schein (2010), leaders influence culture through strategic planning, policy formulation and communication of institutional values. Effective leadership ensures that institutional decisions align with the mission and religious identity of the university. In faith-based universities, leaders are expected to model the spiritual and ethical values promoted by the institution. Their commitment to the mission significantly influences how faculty, staff and

students perceive the institution's identity (Daniels & Gustafson, 2016).

Coman and Bonciu (2016) indicate that when leaders intentionally promote mission-centered policies and programs, the institutional culture becomes more aligned with the mission identity. Conversely, weak leadership commitment to institutional mission can contribute to cultural fragmentation and mission drift. Thus, leadership functions as a bridge connecting institutional mission with institutional culture. The literature reviewed in the context of Bugema University suggests that leadership plays a visibly active and practical role in shaping both institutional culture and mission identity, largely through intentional spiritual, academic and administrative practices.

At Bugema University, leaders ranging from university administrators to faculty and chaplains consistently emphasize the integration of faith and learning as a core institutional value. For example, university leadership has to ensure that policies require participation in chapel programs and community outreach initiatives, reinforcing a culture that aligns with the Seventh-day Adventist Church mission of holistic education (Knight, 2015).

Practically, leaders at Bugema model mission identity through visible engagement in spiritual activities, such as leading devotionals, preaching during convocations and supporting student-led ministries. This modeling strengthens a shared understanding of institutional identity among students and staff. Furthermore, leadership decisions regarding staff recruitment often prioritize individuals who are not only academically qualified but also committed to Adventist beliefs and values, thereby safeguarding the mission at the cultural level. In administrative practice, strategic plans and policy frameworks at Bugema frequently reflect mission-oriented goals, such as character development, service, and evangelism (Bugema University, 2017).

Institutional Traditions and Practices

Literature (Johnson & Laurence, 2012) reveals that institutional traditions, rituals and symbolic practices play an important role in reinforcing mission identity within faith-based universities. These traditions may include chapel and worship services, religious ceremonies and convocations, community service activities, faith-based codes of conduct and spiritual mentorship programs. Such practices serve as symbolic expressions of

institutional values and help maintain a shared identity among members of the university community. For example, regular worship programs and spiritual activities at Bugema University contribute to the cultivation of a culture that reflects the religious mission of the institution (Wayback Machine, 2015). These practices reinforce the institution's identity as a Christian learning community. According to Weeks et al. (2017), institutional traditions create continuity between the founding mission of a university and its contemporary practices. They play a critical role in sustaining institutional culture and mission identity over time.

The reviewed studies (Johnson & Laurence, 2012; Happy New Year, 2015; Weeks et al., 2017) indicate that faith-based universities in Uganda continue to maintain strong mission identities through spiritual programs, community engagement initiatives and religiously inspired institutional policies. The findings demonstrate a strong interrelationship between institutional culture and mission identity. Institutional culture serves as the framework through which mission identity is interpreted, practiced and preserved. They also indicate that mission identity becomes sustainable when it is embedded within institutional culture rather than remaining only in formal mission statements. Cultural practices, such as spiritual programs, community service initiatives and leadership commitment, help translate mission values into practical institutional behavior.

Furthermore, the findings highlight that leadership, institutional traditions and faith integration play critical roles in sustaining mission identity. These elements collectively shape the cultural environment that supports the religious identity of faith-based universities. In the Ugandan context, Bugema University provides an example of how faith-based universities can integrate spiritual values with academic excellence while responding to contemporary educational challenges.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This section presents the study's conclusions and outlines the corresponding recommendations.

Conclusions

Based on the findings of the study, several conclusions can be drawn. First, institutional culture plays a fundamental role in shaping and sustaining mission identity at Bugema University. When

institutional values are consistently reflected in policies, traditions and daily practices, the mission identity of the university becomes practically embedded within the institutional community. Second, the integration of faith and learning is essential for preserving the unique identity of Bugema University. Academic programs that incorporate spiritual and moral perspectives help ensure that education addresses both intellectual development and character formation. Third, effective leadership is crucial for maintaining alignment between institutional culture and mission identity. Leaders who actively promote mission-centered values strengthen the institutional culture and ensure that the founding vision of the university remains relevant. Fourth, institutional traditions and spiritual practices play an important role in reinforcing the mission identity of faith-based universities. These practices serve as visible expressions of institutional values and help cultivate a shared sense of purpose among members of the university community.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are given. Faith-based universities must remain vigilant against the risk of mission drift. As higher education continues to evolve, the institutions must intentionally protect and promote their founding mission while adapting to contemporary academic and societal demands. Bugema University should intentionally strengthen institutional culture in ways that reinforce mission identity. This can be achieved through consistent integration of spiritual values in academic programs, institutional policies and student development initiatives. Faculty members should be oriented to the mission and values of the institution to ensure consistency in teaching and mentorship. University leadership should prioritize mission-centered leadership training and development. Leaders must be equipped to communicate and model institutional values in order to maintain alignment between institutional culture and mission identity.

Bugema University should continue to integrate faith and learning across academic disciplines. Curriculum development should incorporate ethical perspectives, community service learning and principles that support the mission of the institution. Furthermore, the University should preserve and promote institutional traditions like chapel services, spiritual mentorship programs and community outreach activities. These traditions help

sustain the spiritual identity and cultural continuity of the institution. Finally, there should be clear policies and strategic frameworks developed to ensure institutional growth does not undermine mission identity. Regular evaluation of institutional practices can help ensure that academic expansion and modernization remain aligned with founding values.

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