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Epistemic Leadership and Evidence-Based Decision-Making in Higher Education Institutions in Uganda: The Mediating Role of Knowledge Stewardship

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Abstract

Higher education institutions operate in increasingly complex environments in which institutional decisions require not only access to information but also the capacity to determine what constitutes credible, relevant, and actionable knowledge. This study examined the relationship between epistemic leadership and evidence-based decision-making in higher education institutions in Uganda, with knowledge stewardship examined as a mediating mechanism. Specifically, the study examined the relationships between cognitive integrity governance, truth-seeking orientation, intellectual humility, and critical inquiry systems and evidence-based decision-making, and assessed whether knowledge stewardship mediated the relationship between epistemic leadership and evidence-based decision-making. An explanatory cross-sectional research design was adopted. The study targeted 30 chartered universities operating in Uganda and a population of 480 eligible academic and institutional administrators, including university executives, academic registrars, quality assurance directors, deans, heads of academic departments, institutional researchers, and planning officers. A sample of 214 respondents was targeted using proportionate and purposive sampling procedures, of whom 198 returned usable questionnaires, representing a response rate of 92.5%. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire and analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson product-moment correlation, multiple regression, and bootstrapped mediation analysis based on 5,000 resamples. The findings indicated that cognitive integrity governance ($\beta = .218$, $p = .002$), truth-seeking orientation ($\beta = .245$, $p < .001$), intellectual humility ($\beta = .162$, $p = .021$), and critical inquiry systems ($\beta = .289$, $p < .001$) were each positively and significantly associated with evidence-based decision-making. Collectively, the four dimensions explained 57.4% of the variance in evidence-based decision-making ($R^2 = .574$, $F(4, 193) = 51.83$, $p < .001$). The mediation analysis further indicated a significant indirect effect of epistemic leadership on evidence-based decision-making through knowledge stewardship (effect = .291, 95% bootstrap CI [.198, .395]). Because the direct effect remained significant after knowledge stewardship was introduced, the findings indicated partial mediation. The study concluded that epistemic leadership was significantly associated with evidence-based decision-making both directly and through institutional knowledge stewardship. The study recommends strengthening epistemic governance, institutional research capacity, knowledge management systems, and evidence-utilisation mechanisms within Ugandan higher education institutions.

Keywords: Epistemic Leadership, Evidence-Based Decision-Making, Knowledge Stewardship, Cognitive Integrity, Intellectual Humility, Higher Education, Uganda

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Higher education institutions are knowledge-intensive organisations whose core functions of teaching, research, innovation, and community engagement depend fundamentally on the creation, evaluation, interpretation, and application of knowledge [1] . In

contemporary higher education environments, universities are increasingly required to make decisions under conditions characterised by uncertainty, rapid technological change, financial pressures, expanding student populations, regulatory demands, and competing stakeholder expectations [2] . These conditions have increased the importance of institutional decision-making processes that are systematic, transparent, reflective, and grounded in credible evidence. Evidence-based decision-making refers to the systematic use of empirical information, institutional data, research findings, professional expertise, and relevant stakeholder knowledge in making organisational decisions. Within universities, such decisions may concern academic programme development, student retention, staff recruitment, resource allocation, quality assurance, research investment, institutional restructuring, and strategic planning [3] . The availability of data, however, does not automatically result in evidence-based decisions. Data may be ignored, selectively interpreted, poorly governed, or subordinated to institutional politics, professional interests, established routines, or individual preferences.

This challenge raises an important epistemological question: how do institutional leaders determine what knowledge is sufficiently credible to inform organisational action? The question moves the discussion beyond conventional leadership theories towards the concept of epistemic leadership. Epistemic leadership concerns leadership practices that promote the responsible production, evaluation, interpretation, contestation, and application of knowledge within organisations [3], [4] . It emphasises truth-seeking, critical inquiry, intellectual openness, recognition of fallibility, and the responsible evaluation of competing claims. The philosophical foundations of epistemic leadership can be associated with broader debates concerning the nature and limits of knowledge. Popper's principle of fallibility, for example, emphasises that knowledge claims remain open to criticism and revision rather than being treated as permanently certain. Similarly, critical inquiry requires organisational actors to question assumptions, examine evidence, consider alternative explanations, and remain open to revising established positions [5] . These principles are particularly relevant to university governance because higher education institutions are themselves major producers and custodians of knowledge.

Four dimensions are particularly relevant to epistemic leadership in higher education: cognitive integrity governance, truth-seeking orientation, intellectual humility, and critical inquiry systems. Cognitive integrity governance refers to institutional arrangements that promote accuracy, transparency, academic freedom, and protection against deliberate or systematic distortion of information. Truth-seeking orientation reflects leaders' commitment to examining evidence and pursuing accurate explanations even when findings challenge established institutional positions [6] . Intellectual humility involves recognition of the limits of one's own knowledge and willingness to consider alternative interpretations and contradictory evidence. Critical inquiry systems refer to institutional structures and processes through which assumptions, policies, data, and strategic alternatives are systematically examined [7] .

The effectiveness of these epistemic practices may depend on how knowledge is managed within the institution. This introduces the concept of knowledge stewardship. Knowledge stewardship extends beyond conventional knowledge management by emphasising the ethical and responsible curation, preservation, sharing, protection, and utilisation of organisational knowledge. In universities, knowledge stewardship includes maintaining reliable institutional records, protecting research and intellectual assets, facilitating knowledge sharing across academic units, preserving institutional memory, and ensuring that relevant knowledge is accessible to decision-makers [8] . The Ugandan higher education sector provides an important context for examining these relationships. Universities operate within a regulatory environment that includes quality assurance requirements, institutional accreditation, programme review, financial accountability, and reporting obligations. Institutions also face pressures associated with student growth, resource constraints, technological transformation, employability expectations, research productivity, and changing national development priorities [9] . Under these circumstances, universities require decision-making systems that can convert institutional knowledge and research evidence into informed strategic and operational choices [10] . Although universities have increasingly developed institutional research, quality assurance, planning, monitoring, evaluation, and information management functions, the existence of such structures does not necessarily ensure systematic evidence utilisation [11], [12] . There is therefore a need to examine the leadership and knowledge-governance conditions that facilitate the movement from information availability to evidence-informed action. This study consequently conceptualised epistemic leadership as a leadership capability that establishes the cognitive and normative conditions for responsible institutional inquiry, while knowledge stewardship was positioned as a mechanism through which knowledge is organised, preserved, shared, and translated into decision-useful information.

1.2. Problem Statement

Higher education institutions in Uganda are expected to make increasingly complex decisions concerning academic programming, resource allocation, institutional quality, student success, research development, staffing, and strategic transformation. Such decisions require credible evidence and systematic institutional learning. However, the availability of institutional data and research evidence does not necessarily ensure that such evidence is consistently incorporated into decision-making [13], [14] . In practice, institutional decisions may be influenced by administrative hierarchy, established routines, professional interests, political considerations, resource constraints, incomplete information, or reliance on anecdotal experience. Where institutional knowledge is fragmented across faculties, departments, quality assurance units, planning offices, and research centres, decision-makers may also experience difficulties accessing and interpreting relevant evidence.

The existing higher education leadership literature has extensively examined transformational, distributed, instructional, authentic, and other leadership approaches [15], [16] . While these perspectives have contributed substantially to understanding leadership effectiveness, comparatively limited empirical attention has been given to epistemic leadership as a distinct leadership capability concerned specifically with the production, evaluation, contestation, and responsible use of knowledge [17] . Moreover, relatively

limited empirical research has examined how knowledge stewardship may explain the relationship between epistemic leadership and evidence-based decision-making, particularly within African higher education systems. Consequently, there remains a conceptual and empirical gap regarding how leaders create institutional conditions in which evidence is critically examined, responsibly governed, and translated into organisational decisions [18] . This study addressed this gap by examining four dimensions of epistemic leadership such as cognitive integrity governance, truth-seeking orientation, intellectual humility, and critical inquiry systems and their relationship with evidence-based decision-making among higher education institutions in Uganda. The study further examined whether knowledge stewardship mediated the relationship between epistemic leadership and evidence-based decision-making.

1.3. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to examine the relationship between epistemic leadership and evidence-based decision-making among higher education institutions in Uganda, with particular attention to the mediating role of knowledge stewardship.

1.4. General Objective

The general objective was to examine the relationship between epistemic leadership and evidence-based decision-making in Ugandan higher education institutions, and to determine whether knowledge stewardship mediated this relationship.

1.5. Specific Objectives

The study sought to:

1. Examine the relationship between cognitive integrity governance and evidence-based decision-making among universities in Uganda.
2. Assess the relationship between truth-seeking orientation and evidence-based decision-making among universities in Uganda.
3. Examine the relationship between intellectual humility and evidence-based decision-making among universities in Uganda.
4. Determine the relationship between critical inquiry systems and evidence-based decision-making among universities in Uganda.
5. Examine the mediating role of knowledge stewardship in the relationship between epistemic leadership and evidence-based decision-making among universities in Uganda.

1.6. Research Hypotheses

The study tested the following hypotheses:

H1: Cognitive integrity governance is positively and significantly associated with evidence-based decision-making among universities in Uganda.

H2: Truth-seeking orientation is positively and significantly associated with evidence-based decision-making among universities in Uganda.

H3: Intellectual humility is positively and significantly associated with evidence-based decision-making among universities in Uganda.

H4: Critical inquiry systems are positively and significantly associated with evidence-based decision-making among universities in Uganda.

H5: Knowledge stewardship significantly mediates the relationship between epistemic leadership and evidence-based decision-making among universities in Uganda.

1.7. Significance of the Study

The study has theoretical, practical, methodological, and policy significance.

Theoretically, the study contributes to the understanding of epistemic leadership by positioning leadership as not only a process of influencing people but also a process of governing how knowledge is generated, evaluated, challenged, and applied. The study further extends the application of Dynamic Capabilities Theory and the Knowledge-Based View to higher education by examining knowledge stewardship as a mechanism connecting leadership capabilities with evidence-based organisational decisions.

Practically, the findings provide university councils, vice-chancellors, academic registrars, deans, heads of department, quality assurance directors, institutional researchers, and planning officers with evidence on leadership practices that may strengthen institutional evidence utilisation. At the policy level, the findings may assist higher education regulators and institutional quality assurance bodies in strengthening evidence-based governance, institutional research systems, data governance, and knowledge-management practices. Methodologically, the study contributes empirical evidence on the measurement and relationships among epistemic leadership, knowledge stewardship, and evidence-based decision-making in the Ugandan higher education context.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Review

The study was guided primarily by Dynamic Capabilities Theory and the Knowledge-Based View of the organisation.

2.1.1 Dynamic Capabilities Theory

Dynamic Capabilities Theory, advanced by Teece, Pisano and Shuen (1997) and subsequently developed by Teece (2007), explains how organisations develop capabilities to sense changes in their environments, seize opportunities, and reconfigure resources in response to changing circumstances [19] . In higher education, institutions operate within dynamic environments characterised by changes in technology, student demographics, funding models, labour-market expectations, regulatory requirements, and knowledge production. Epistemic leadership may therefore be interpreted as a cognitive capability that enables university leaders to identify relevant information, evaluate competing claims, question assumptions, and adapt institutional strategies [20] . The theory was relevant because evidence-based decision-making requires more than possession of information. Institutions need capabilities that allow them to identify meaningful signals, assess their reliability, integrate knowledge, and translate evidence into institutional action.

2.1.2 Knowledge-Based View

The Knowledge-Based View considers knowledge to be one of the most strategically important organisational resources. Grant (1996) argued that organisational performance depends substantially on the integration and application of specialised knowledge held by different organisational members. This perspective is particularly relevant to universities because knowledge constitutes both an output and a strategic resource

[21] . Universities generate knowledge through research, teaching, innovation, institutional assessment, professional practice, and engagement with external stakeholders [16] . However, fragmented knowledge may have limited organisational value if it cannot be accessed, shared, interpreted, and applied. Knowledge stewardship therefore represents an important organisational capability. Through appropriate stewardship mechanisms, universities can preserve institutional memory, facilitate knowledge sharing, maintain information integrity, protect intellectual assets, and ensure that relevant evidence reaches decision-makers. The Knowledge-Based View therefore provided the theoretical foundation for examining knowledge stewardship as a mechanism connecting epistemic leadership with evidence-based
decision-making [22] .

2.2. Conceptualisation of Epistemic Leadership

Epistemic leadership was conceptualised as leadership that establishes institutional conditions for responsible knowledge production, evaluation, interpretation, contestation, and utilisation. Rather than treating knowledge as neutral information, epistemic leadership recognises that organisational actors influence what evidence is considered credible, which questions are investigated, how evidence is interpreted, and how competing knowledge claims are resolved [22] . The study operationalised epistemic leadership through four dimensions.

2.2.1 Cognitive Integrity Governance

Cognitive integrity governance refers to institutional norms, leadership practices, and governance arrangements that promote accuracy, transparency, academic freedom, responsible reporting, and protection against deliberate distortion of information [23] . In higher education, cognitive integrity is important because institutional leaders make decisions using information generated by multiple actors. If institutional information is manipulated or selectively presented, the quality of decision-making may be compromised [24], [25] .

2.2.2 Truth-Seeking Orientation

Truth-seeking orientation refers to the commitment of institutional leaders to investigate claims, examine empirical evidence, challenge unsupported assumptions, and pursue the most credible explanation available [26], [27] . A truth-seeking orientation may strengthen evidence-based decision-making because it encourages leaders to prioritise the quality and relevance of evidence rather than simply accepting information that confirms existing institutional positions.

2.2.3 Intellectual Humility

Intellectual humility refers to recognition of the limits of one's knowledge and willingness to acknowledge uncertainty, consider alternative perspectives, accept criticism, and revise one's position when stronger evidence becomes available [28] . In complex university environments, leaders rarely possess complete information. Intellectual humility may therefore facilitate more deliberative decision-making and reduce the risk of confirmation bias, overconfidence, and premature closure.

2.2.4 Critical Inquiry Systems

Critical inquiry systems refer to institutional structures and processes that enable systematic examination of assumptions, policies, evidence, and alternative courses of action [29] . These may include institutional research units, quality assurance systems, data analytics platforms, peer review mechanisms, evaluation processes, strategic review committees, and structured policy-analysis procedures. Such systems provide an organisational infrastructure through which epistemic leadership can be translated into practical decision-making [30] .

2.3. Knowledge Stewardship

Knowledge stewardship was conceptualised as the ethical and responsible curation, preservation, organisation, sharing, protection, and utilisation of institutional knowledge. Unlike a narrow technological interpretation of knowledge management, stewardship emphasises responsibility and long-term institutional value [31], [32] . In universities, effective knowledge stewardship may involve maintaining institutional repositories, protecting research data, preserving organisational memory, documenting
decisions, facilitating cross-faculty knowledge sharing, and ensuring that evidence remains accessible to authorised decision-makers. The study therefore expected knowledge stewardship to function as an intermediary mechanism through which epistemic leadership practices were converted into more effective evidence utilisation.

2.4. Evidence-Based Decision-Making

Evidence-based decision-making refers to the systematic integration of empirical evidence, institutional data, research findings, professional expertise, and relevant contextual information into organisational decisions [33] . In universities, evidence-based decision-making may involve the use of student performance data, enrolment trends, financial information, staff performance indicators, research metrics, quality assurance reports, stakeholder feedback, and external research in strategic and operational decisions [34], [35] . Evidence-based decision-making does not imply that numerical data should replace professional judgement. Rather, it involves integrating credible evidence with contextual understanding, expertise, ethical considerations, and institutional priorities.

2.5. Empirical Relationships

The four dimensions of epistemic leadership were expected to contribute to evidence-based decision-making because each addresses a different component of responsible institutional inquiry [36] . Cognitive integrity governance establishes standards for information reliability; truth-seeking orientation encourages evidence verification; intellectual humility encourages openness to alternative evidence; and critical inquiry systems provide institutional mechanisms for evaluating evidence [37] . Knowledge stewardship was further expected to facilitate the conversion of institutional knowledge into decision-useful evidence [38] . Consequently, institutions characterised by strong epistemic leadership were expected to demonstrate stronger evidence-based decision-making partly because their knowledge assets were more effectively stewarded.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The study adopted an explanatory cross-sectional research design. The design was appropriate because the study sought to examine hypothesised relationships among epistemic leadership, knowledge stewardship, and evidence-based decision-making using data collected from respondents at a single period. Because the design was cross-sectional, the statistical relationships were interpreted as associations rather than definitive causal effects.

3.2. Study Population

The study targeted 30 chartered universities operating in Uganda. The target population comprised 480 academic and institutional administrators considered to have sufficient knowledge of institutional governance, planning, quality assurance, research, and decision-making processes. The population included university executives and vice-chancellors, academic registrars and quality assurance directors, deans of faculties and schools, heads of academic departments, institutional researchers, and planning officers.

3.3. Sample Size and Sampling Procedure

A target sample of 214 respondents was selected from the population of 480. Proportionate sampling was used to ensure representation across the identified categories, while purposive sampling was applied to identify respondents with direct knowledge of institutional decision-making and knowledge-management processes. Of the 214 questionnaires administered, 198 usable questionnaires were returned, representing a response rate of 92.5%.

Table 1: Target Population and Sample Distribution

Category	Target Population	Target Sample	Actual Usable
University Executives & Vice-Chancellors	60	27	25
Academic Registrars & Quality Assurance Directors	75	33	31
Deans of Faculties & Schools	90	40	37
Heads of Academic Departments	145	65	60
Institutional Researchers & Planning Officers	110	49	45
Total	480	214	198

The distribution ensured that the major institutional leadership and knowledge-management functions represented in the study population were included.

3.4. Data Collection Instrument

Data were collected using a structured self-administered questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of items measuring cognitive integrity governance, truth-seeking orientation, intellectual humility, critical inquiry systems, knowledge stewardship, and evidence-based decision-making. Items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree.

3.5. Validity and Reliability

Content validity was assessed through expert review involving specialists in educational leadership, higher education management, research methodology, and related fields. The resulting Content Validity Index exceeded the commonly accepted threshold of .80, with an overall value above .82. Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. All constructs exceeded the recommended threshold of .70.

Table 2

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha
Cognitive Integrity Governance	.865
Truth-Seeking Orientation	.882
Intellectual Humility	.841
Critical Inquiry Systems	.894
Knowledge Stewardship	.876
Evidence-Based Decision-Making	.915

The coefficients indicated satisfactory to excellent internal consistency across the study constructs.

3.6. Data Analysis

Data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were used to summarise respondents' perceptions of the study variables. Pearson product-moment correlation analysis was conducted to examine the direction and strength of associations among the variables. Multiple regression analysis was used to examine the unique contribution of the four epistemic leadership dimensions to evidence-based decision-making. The mediating role of knowledge stewardship was examined using bootstrapped indirect-effect analysis based on 5,000 resamples. Mediation was considered statistically significant where the bias-corrected 95% bootstrap confidence interval for the indirect effect did not include zero. Multicollinearity was assessed using variance inflation factor (VIF) statistics. The reported VIF values were below 2.3, indicating that multicollinearity did not present a serious threat to the regression estimates.

4. Results

4.1. Respondent Characteristics

Of the 198 respondents, 122 (61.6%) were male and 76 (38.4%) were female. Regarding educational attainment, 118 respondents (59.6%) held doctoral degrees, 72 (36.4%) held master's degrees, and 8 (4.0%) held postgraduate diplomas. The respondents also reported substantial experience in senior academic and administrative roles, with the majority having more than seven years of relevant experience. The educational attainment and professional experience of the respondents suggested that they possessed substantial exposure to institutional governance, knowledge management, and organisational decision-making processes.

4.2. Descriptive Statistics

The mean scores ranged from 3.84 to 4.12, indicating generally favourable perceptions of epistemic leadership practices, knowledge stewardship, and evidence-based

decision-making. Critical inquiry systems recorded the highest mean score (M = 4.12, SD = .54), followed by truth-seeking orientation (M = 4.05, SD = .57). Evidence-based decision-making recorded a mean of 4.01 (SD = .59), while intellectual humility had the lowest mean score (M = 3.84, SD = .65). The relatively small standard deviations indicated moderate consistency in respondents' perceptions.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Cognitive Integrity Governance	3.98	0.61
Truth-Seeking Orientation	4.05	0.57
Intellectual Humility	3.84	0.65
Critical Inquiry Systems	4.12	0.54
Knowledge Stewardship	3.92	0.63
Evidence-Based Decision-Making	4.01	0.59

4.3. Correlation Analysis

Table 4: Pearson Correlation Matrix

Variable	CIG	TSO	IH	CIS	KS	EBDM
Cognitive Integrity Governance	1					
Truth-Seeking Orientation	.55**	1				
Intellectual Humility	.46**	.51**	1			
Critical Inquiry Systems	.58**	.61**	.49**	1		
Knowledge Stewardship	.53**	.57**	.52**	.60**	1	
Evidence-Based Decision-Making	.63**	.66**	.54**	.70**	.68**	1

Note: **p < .01.

The results indicated positive and statistically significant relationships among all study variables. Evidence-based decision-making was most strongly correlated with critical inquiry systems (r = .70, p < .01), followed by knowledge stewardship (r = .68, p < .01) and truth-seeking orientation (r = .66, p < .01). The correlations suggested that stronger epistemic leadership practices were associated with stronger evidence-based decision-making. The correlations among the explanatory variables were below the level normally regarded as indicative of severe bivariate multicollinearity, while the VIF values below 2.3 provided further evidence that multicollinearity was not a serious concern.

4.4. Multiple Regression and Hypothesis Testing

Multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the simultaneous association between cognitive integrity governance, truth-seeking orientation, intellectual humility, critical inquiry systems, and evidence-based decision-making.

Table 5: Multiple Regression Results

Predictor Variable	β	SE	t-value	p-value	Decision
Cognitive Integrity Governance	.218	.065	3.35	.002	Supported (H1)
Truth-Seeking Orientation	.245	.061	4.02	< .001	Supported (H2)
Intellectual Humility	.162	.070	2.31	.021	Supported (H3)
Critical Inquiry Systems	.289	.058	4.98	< .001	Supported (H4)

Model Summary: R = .758; R^2 = .574; Adjusted R^2 = .565; F(4, 193) = 51.83, p < .001

The multiple regression model was statistically significant, F(4, 193) = 51.83, p < .001, indicating that the four epistemic leadership dimensions jointly provided a statistically significant explanation of variation in evidence-based decision-making. The model explained 57.4% of the variance in evidence-based decision-making, while the adjusted R^2 of .565 indicated that approximately 56.5% of the variance remained explained after adjusting for the number of predictors. Critical inquiry systems recorded the strongest standardised coefficient (β = .289, p < .001), followed by truth-seeking orientation (β = .245, p < .001), cognitive integrity governance (β = .218, p = .002), and intellectual humility (β = .162, p = .021). All four coefficients were positive and statistically significant.
Consequently, H1, H2, H3 and H4 were supported.

4.5. Mediation Analysis: Knowledge Stewardship

The mediation results indicated a statistically significant total effect of epistemic leadership on evidence-based decision-making (effect = .672, 95% CI [.572, .772]). After knowledge stewardship was introduced into the model, the direct effect remained statistically significant (effect = .381, 95% CI [.271, .491]).

Table 5: Bootstrapped Mediation Analysis Based on 5,000 Resamples

Path / Effect	Coefficient	Boot SE	Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI	Decision
Total Effect (c)	.672	.051	.572	.772	Significant
Direct Effect (c′)	.381	.056	.271	.491	Significant
Indirect Effect (a × b)	.291	.051	.198	.395	Significant

The indirect effect through knowledge stewardship was .291, with a bootstrapped 95% confidence interval of [.198, .395]. Since the confidence interval did not contain zero, the indirect effect was statistically significant. The simultaneous presence of a significant indirect effect and a significant direct effect indicated partial mediation. Therefore, H5 was supported. The finding suggested that epistemic leadership was associated with evidence-based decision-making partly through knowledge stewardship, while an additional portion of the relationship remained directly associated with epistemic leadership.

5. Discussion

The findings demonstrated that the four dimensions of epistemic leadership were positively and significantly associated with evidence-based decision-making among higher education institutions in Uganda. The findings provide empirical support for the argument that the quality of institutional decision-making depends not only on the availability of data but also on leadership practices that determine how evidence is evaluated, challenged, interpreted, and applied.

Cognitive integrity governance demonstrated a significant positive association with evidence-based decision-making. This finding suggests that institutions characterised by stronger expectations concerning information accuracy, transparency, academic integrity, and responsible reporting were more likely to report stronger evidence-based decision-making. The result is theoretically consistent with the proposition that credible decision-making requires institutional environments in which knowledge claims can be examined without deliberate distortion.

Truth-seeking orientation also demonstrated a significant positive relationship with evidence-based decision-making. The finding indicates that institutional commitment to examining evidence and challenging unsupported assumptions was associated with stronger evidence utilisation. In university environments, truth-seeking may encourage leaders to consider evidence that challenges established positions rather than relying exclusively on information that confirms existing assumptions.

Intellectual humility recorded the smallest, although statistically significant, standardised coefficient among the four predictors. This finding is nevertheless important because evidence-based decision-making requires leaders to recognise that institutional problems are often characterised by incomplete information and uncertainty. Leaders who acknowledge the limitations of their knowledge may be more willing to consult alternative perspectives and revise decisions when stronger evidence becomes available.

Critical inquiry systems recorded the strongest coefficient among the four predictors. This finding suggests that institutional structures supporting systematic inquiry may be particularly important for translating epistemic principles into actual decision processes. Institutional research units, quality assurance systems, data analytics, evaluation mechanisms, peer review, and strategic review structures provide practical mechanisms through which evidence can be examined and incorporated into institutional decisions.

The mediation findings further demonstrated that knowledge stewardship constituted an important mechanism in the relationship between epistemic leadership and evidence-based decision-making. The significant indirect effect suggests that epistemic leadership may be associated with stronger decision-making partly because it encourages institutions to curate, preserve, share, protect, and utilise knowledge more effectively.

The finding is particularly relevant to universities because institutional knowledge is distributed across academic departments, faculties, research centres, administrative units, quality assurance offices, libraries, and planning departments. Without effective stewardship, valuable institutional knowledge may remain fragmented and inaccessible. Knowledge stewardship therefore provides an organisational bridge between the production and evaluation of knowledge and its application to institutional decisions.

The finding of partial mediation is also theoretically important. It indicates that knowledge stewardship did not fully account for the relationship between epistemic leadership and evidence-based decision-making. Epistemic leadership therefore appears to have an additional direct association with decision-making beyond the knowledge-stewardship pathway. This is plausible because leaders may directly influence decision processes through questioning assumptions, demanding evidence, encouraging debate, and establishing standards for institutional reasoning.

6. Conclusion

The study examined the relationship between epistemic leadership and evidence-based decision-making in higher education institutions in Uganda, with knowledge stewardship considered as a mediating mechanism.

The findings demonstrated statistically significant positive relationships between cognitive integrity governance, truth-seeking orientation, intellectual humility, critical inquiry systems, and evidence-based decision-making. Collectively, the four dimensions explained a substantial proportion of variation in evidence-based decision-making.

The mediation findings further demonstrated that knowledge stewardship significantly transmitted part of the relationship between epistemic leadership and evidence-based decision-making. The evidence therefore suggests that universities may strengthen evidence-based governance not only by developing leaders who value critical inquiry and truth-seeking but also by establishing institutional systems that responsibly manage and utilise knowledge.

Because the study used a cross-sectional design, the findings should be interpreted as evidence of statistical associations

rather than definitive causal relationships.

7. Theoretical Implications

The study makes two principal theoretical contributions.

First, the findings extend Dynamic Capabilities Theory by conceptualising epistemic leadership as a knowledge-oriented organisational capability. Universities require capabilities not only to respond to environmental changes but also to determine which information is credible, relevant, and strategically
useful.

Second, the findings extend the Knowledge-Based View by positioning knowledge stewardship as an organisational capability that facilitates the movement of knowledge from institutional repositories and individual expertise into organisational decision-making. This suggests that the strategic value of knowledge depends not only on its existence but also on how responsibly and effectively it is stewarded and applied.

The study also contributes to the philosophy of knowledge by demonstrating how concepts traditionally discussed at an epistemological level such as truth-seeking, intellectual humility, critical inquiry, and fallibility can be translated into empirically examinable organisational practices.

8. Practical Implications

The findings have several implications for university management.

First, university councils and senior management should incorporate epistemic principles into institutional governance frameworks. Leadership evaluation should consider not only administrative performance but also the extent to which leaders encourage evidence, transparency, critical questioning, and responsible knowledge use.

Second, universities should strengthen institutional research and planning units. These units should be adequately resourced to generate timely analyses that support strategic and operational decision-making.

Third, universities should strengthen mechanisms for knowledge stewardship. Institutional repositories, research databases, quality assurance records, policy archives, and management information systems should be integrated where appropriate to improve access to reliable institutional knowledge.

Fourth, leadership development programmes should include intellectual humility, critical reasoning, reflective practice, evidence evaluation, and responsible use of institutional information.

9. Recommendations

University governing councils and executive management should incorporate cognitive integrity, truth-seeking, intellectual openness, and responsible evidence use into institutional governance frameworks, leadership standards, and performance assessment systems.

Universities should strengthen institutional research, quality assurance, monitoring and evaluation, data analytics, and policy-analysis units so that decision-makers have timely and credible evidence.

Leadership development programmes should cultivate intellectual humility, reflective practice, openness to criticism, and willingness to revise decisions when credible evidence contradicts existing institutional assumptions.

Universities should establish robust knowledge stewardship protocols covering knowledge creation, documentation, storage, access, sharing, preservation, and responsible utilisation.

Institutional policies should require major strategic and operational decisions to be supported by appropriate evidence, including institutional data, research findings, quality assurance reports, stakeholder evidence, and relevant professional expertise.

10. Limitations of the Study

The study had several limitations. First, the cross-sectional design limited the ability to establish temporal precedence and causal relationships among the variables. Future studies could employ longitudinal designs to examine how epistemic leadership and knowledge stewardship evolve over time.

Second, the study relied primarily on self-reported perceptual measures. Although the instruments demonstrated satisfactory reliability and content validity, respondents may have provided socially desirable responses concerning institutional leadership and decision-making practices.

Third, the study focused on selected academic and institutional administrators. The perspectives of students, academic staff without administrative responsibilities, governing council members, and external stakeholders were not directly incorporated.

Fourth, the study focused on Ugandan higher education institutions, which may limit the generalisability of the findings to other national and institutional contexts. Nevertheless, the study provides a useful basis for comparative research across East African higher education systems.

11. Areas for Future Research

Future research should employ longitudinal and mixed-methods designs to examine the development of epistemic leadership and knowledge stewardship over time. Qualitative studies could further investigate how university leaders negotiate competing knowledge claims during major institutional decisions.

Future studies could also examine whether institutional ownership, university size, digital maturity, organisational culture, leadership tenure, or regulatory pressure moderates the relationship between epistemic leadership and evidence-based decision-making.

Comparative studies involving public and private universities could further establish whether institutional context changes the strength of the relationships identified in this study. Cross-national research across Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda, and other African higher education systems would also help determine the contextual applicability of the proposed epistemic leadership framework.

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