

Exploring institutional capacity building and training initiatives for curriculum responsiveness in Tanzanian universities. A qualitative inquiry

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the capacity-building and training initiatives for responsive curriculum development in Tanzanian universities. This is because, although there has been a growing scholarly focus on curriculum responsiveness, little research has explored how institutional capacity-building and training initiatives facilitate responsive curriculum development, especially in resource-limited university environments. Guided by Institutional Theory and Communities of Practice Theory, the study used a qualitative descriptive design and conducted in-depth interviews with 19 participants, including four quality assurance directors, four department heads, and eleven academic staff from two public and two private universities. Following the three-stage analysis model by Ary, Jacobs, Sorensen, and Razavieh, the study revealed three themes: training on curriculum development; variation and access to training; and the focus of training content. Generally, capacity-building efforts were unstructured, top-down, and inconsistently delivered, with minimal follow-up or peer learning. The study shows that coercive isomorphism pressure is associated with formal compliance without the capacity to deliver, and the lack of active Communities of Practice hinders the reflection of training in actual curriculum practices. The study extends global literature on curriculum implementation in developing countries by conceptualising capacity building as influenced by institutional pressures and social learning frameworks, rather than solely by personal skill deficits. The study recommends engaging curriculum developers more extensively throughout the entire process and exploring expert-led training options and sustained capacity-building models. It also highlights the importance of increasing both the frequency and flexibility of training sessions. Additionally, the findings offer valuable insights for higher education institutions in comparable resource-limited contexts seeking to enhance curriculum responsiveness.

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1. Introduction

Moll (2004), based in South Africa, is the first scholar to formalise and systematically apply a responsive curriculum. He proposed a layered model to understand curriculum responsiveness as a multidimensional concept instead of a simple alignment with external factors. Moll pointed out that responsiveness is assessed across four main areas: economic/policy responsiveness (alignment with Tanzanian national development goals and professional body guidelines), disciplinary responsiveness (adherence to rigorous academic standards), cultural/institutional responsiveness (consideration of local stakeholders' input), and learning/pedagogical responsiveness (matching teaching methods and practical tools, students' real-world learning needs). In this approach, it is easy to associate classroom practices with macro-level institutional and policy structures. Curriculum development remains vital for providing high-quality, relevant education that adapts to societal and global changes.

Historically, the education system has evolved from focusing solely on specific subjects to emphasising transferable skills, driven by technological, environmental, and socioeconomic changes (OECD, 2016; UNESCO, 2021). Many curriculum reforms have incorporated this competency-focused approach to better connect higher education with the labour market and practical applications (World Bank, 2020; Mulder & Winterton, 2017). While international policies consistently advocate integrating skills such as digital literacy, environmental sustainability, inclusiveness, and global citizenship into curricula (OECD, 2018; UNESCO, 2017, 2021), the literature indicates diverse patterns in how these reforms are adopted across contexts. Despite the global trend, institutional factors significantly influence the implementation of reforms. Therefore, understanding these contextual conditions, especially in developing countries, is essential.

Incorporating these innovative, complex, cross-cutting themes requires deliberate pedagogical training and organised institutional planning. Scholars widely agree that effective curriculum change must be managed through organised professional development and continuous institutional support, ensuring alignment between macro policy objectives and actual classroom practice (Darling-Hammond, Hyler, & Gardner, 2017; Fullan, 2016). Consequently, educators cannot effectively implement these modern, multi-dimensional priorities without direct access to structured training and systematic mentorship programs.

In Tanzania's context, national development philosophies and policy shifts have shaped curriculum reform (Tikly, 2019). After independence, the 1967 Arusha Declaration introduced the Education for Self-Reliance philosophy, emphasising practical skills, civic responsibility, and aligning education with socio-economic growth (Nyerere, 1968). This was among the earliest efforts to align curriculum content with national priorities. Subsequent reforms, particularly the 1999 National Higher Education Policy, focused on curriculum development, shifting from a centralised, uniform, and academically focused system to a decentralised, market-responsive model emphasising stakeholder input, labour-market alignment, program diversification, and quality assurance to produce employable graduates (URT, 1999). More recently, the 2014 Education and Training Policy (revised in 2023) have strongly emphasised ongoing professional development, competency-based learning, digital skills, and the integration of cross-cutting issues such as environmental sustainability and gender inclusivity (URT, 2023).

Despite these progressive national policy reforms, institutional capacity, particularly the preparedness of academic staff involved in curricular design and implementation, remains a critical bottleneck in achieving true curriculum change (Lupeja & Komba, 2021; Msamba, Msuya, & Anangisye, 2023). In Tanzania, scholars highlight systemic issues such as inconsistent in-service training, a lack of structured follow-up, and unequal mentoring during curriculum updates (Lupeja & Komba, 2021; Msamba, Msuya, & Anangisye, 2023; World Bank, 2020). Collectively, these studies suggest that without systematic institutional support, curriculum reforms risk becoming procedural compliance activities rather than transformative pedagogical changes.

This study investigates how institutional actors perceive capacity-building initiatives for curriculum development in Tanzanian universities and the role of these initiatives in enhancing curriculum responsiveness. It examines the characteristics, accessibility, content, and sustainability of these initiatives in the context of curriculum development. The results aim to provide insights into effective capacity-building strategies to improve responsive curriculum development in universities. The research is guided by the following question:

How do institutional actors experience the nature, accessibility, content, and continuity of capacity-building initiatives for curriculum development in Tanzanian universities?

2. Literature review

2.1 Theoretical framework

The study's theoretical frameworks include Institutional Theory (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) and Communities of Practice Theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). These frameworks complement each other analytically, with their integration purposefully designed to explore curriculum development and capacity building from both structural and social-practice perspectives.

The Institutional Theory provides a macro-level perspective on how organisational structures, regulatory frameworks, cultural norms, and policy pressures influence institutional behaviour. The Tanzanian context has integrated curriculum reform with national education policies, competency-based directives, and global accountability frameworks. The Institutional Theory describes the effects of such external forces on the training provisions, mentorship programs and formal curriculum reviews. It also sheds light on how institutions can embrace specific practices to be legitimate, meet regulatory demands, or align with global reform discourses (Scott, 2014). In this way, it makes it possible to study the structural and systemic conditions in which curriculum development takes place. In shaping higher education, macro policies often push universities to adopt new frameworks, such as Competency-Based Education and Training (CBET). However, scholars note a decoupling phenomenon in which universities superficially implement policies to appease external auditors, without changing their daily internal operations (Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

On the other hand, this study also uses Communities of Practice to explain how curriculum change occurs, suggesting that genuine pedagogical transformation happens naturally through micro-level social learning, shared practices, and informal collaboration among educators (Wenger, 1998). According to this view, teachers are unlikely to implement complex reforms unless they build active, localised networks that collaboratively develop practical curriculum knowledge. According to CoP Theory, learning is socially constructed through interaction, practice, and collaboration (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). In curriculum change processes, academic staff develop professional communities where policy directions are interpreted, modified, and operationalised. Mentorship interactions and training workshops are places of negotiated understanding, not the transmission of technical knowledge.

These perspectives together offer a complementary analytical framework for this study. Coercive isomorphism describes how universities react to external regulatory pressures. Institutional logics clarify how organisational priorities influence internal capacity-building choices. Communities of Practice illustrate how curriculum expertise develops through collaborative learning. Performativity shows how accountability requirements might lead institutions to prioritise compliance activities over deeper professional development. Altogether, these concepts create a comprehensive structure for understanding institutional capacity-building and curriculum responsiveness.

A key synthesis of these two separate bodies of literature uncovers a notable conceptual gap. While institutional scholars focus on macro-level compliance and CoP researchers examine micro-level teacher networks, the current higher education literature seldom explores how these areas intersect. Specifically, there is a shortage of critical investigation into how top-down, coercive pressures from state regulatory agencies, like the Tanzania Commission for Universities, actively disrupt or fragment internal communities of practice. By viewing training deficits simply as a lack of resources (Kavenuke, Mlyakado, & Mkumbo, 2020; Lupeja & Komba, 2021), existing studies overlook that unstructured and sporadic training actually reflects an institutional symptom of decoupling, where universities hurriedly organise superficial compliance workshops to satisfy regulators, unintentionally hindering the development of deep, sustainable communities of practice among lecturers. This study aims to directly address this conceptual gap.

2.2 Empirical literature review

Capacity building and training are increasingly being positioned as a prelude to ensuring that university curricula in Tanzania become more responsive to labour-market requirements, national development agendas, and competency-based reforms. Existing research highlights the need for systematic curriculum review, stronger quality assurance mechanisms, and industry collaboration to ensure that academic programmes respond to emerging skills demands associated with automation and globalisation (Mgaiwa, 2021; Mkulu, 2020; Mubofu & Mambo, 2023). However, studies also reveal persistent concerns among students regarding overly theoretical curricula and limited preparation for diverse employment pathways, including self-employment (Kibona, 2023; Mkulu, 2020). While previous research has effectively documented challenges in curriculum relevance, less attention has been paid to the institutional processes and capacity-building mechanisms that explain why these challenges persist despite regulatory interventions. This study addresses this gap by examining how policy environments and institutional practices shape academic staff engagement in curriculum transformation.

A central strand of the literature underscores the impact of academic staff capacity and institutional support on curriculum implementation. Quantitative data from Tanzanian higher education institutions reveal that lecturer and institutional characteristics, curriculum design, and government support significantly contribute to effective curriculum implementation, and that curriculum design is strongly correlated with institutional capacity (Kikomelo, 2024). At one university in Tanzania, large-scale competency-based reforms necessitated university-wide committees, explicit competency frameworks, stakeholder engagement, and, most importantly, skills training to develop curriculum leaders and to demonstrate that curriculum responsiveness is inseparable from deliberate capacity-building structures (Ngassapa et al., 2012). Later studies on harmonised competence-based curriculum in medicine and nursing list shortage of trained academic staff, inconsistency of teaching skills, poor prioritisation of the curriculum design, and lack of supportive systems as some of the limiting factors; it suggests explicitly that capacity building in curriculum development and pedagogical skills is a precondition to successful implementation of it (Sirili et al., 2023). Although this body of literature effectively identifies the limiting factors and statistical correlations, debates still tend to favour a functionalist view that treats capacity deficits as straightforward operational errors. This study distinguishes itself by moving beyond simple correlations to qualitatively investigate the reasons and mechanisms underlying these deficits, suggesting ways to achieve a deeper understanding of systemic inconsistencies.

Several studies conducted in Tanzania emphasise the necessity of formalised training in curriculum development. First, the study on integrating the Tuning approach within reforms in university curricula discovered that the majority of academic professionals lack training in educational theory and competence-based design; thus, it requires mandatory training of all academic personnel on teaching methodology, learning outcomes development and curriculum development in general, including reintroducing university-level teaching improvement programmes (Ishengoma, 2017). Second, analogous issues are reflected in the literature on the implementation of competence-based curricula more generally, where a lack of understanding of competence-based concepts among teachers and students impedes the desired transition from content coverage to skills development (Hamidu & Peter, 2025; Lupeja & Komba, 2021). Third, the findings are reflected in the international literature on faculty development, which suggests structured, longitudinal programmes and guiding principles (e.g., precise blueprints, building on existing networks, differentiated support, and developing curriculum leaders) as practical approaches to equip academic staff to lead and sustain curriculum reform (Kumar, 2017; Toor, Cerimele, Farnum, & Ratzliff, 2020; Van Schaik, 2020). These studies establish a strong empirical basis for the importance of targeted training for key actors in curriculum development. Building on this, the current study explores how capacity-building efforts are actively implemented, negotiated, and experienced across various levels of institutional governance. Using a qualitative approach, the study examines the temporal aspects of capacity building by monitoring the specific training received both before and during the responsive curriculum development process.

Moreover, in specific disciplines, capacity-building and training have been directly applied to improve the responsiveness of curriculum content. For example, in nursing education, an EU-Tanzania project designed and evaluated training modules on health literacy and respectful, compassionate care; student competencies in health literacy improved significantly after the programme (Kidayi et al., 2025). This shows how linking training to specific

competencies in the curriculum can address perceived gaps in skills. However, to maintain more complex affective skills, similar improvements in the learning environment are also necessary (Kidayi et al., 2025). A case study of Tanzanian universities in Library and Information Science highlights that both technical and non-technical skills need deliberate development to align curricula with global trends such as digital literacy, emerging technologies, user-centered services, and diversity. This requires practical training facilities, case-based teaching, and industry partnerships (Mubofu & Mambo, 2023). The study also investigates how training is provided and evaluates end users' satisfaction with capacity-building activities that aim to create a responsive curriculum.

While prior studies clearly show that university curriculum responsiveness depends on staff capacity, there are two main gaps in the current literature. First, most studies rely on quantitative surveys that only reveal surface-level correlations, leaving the deeper 'how' and 'why' behind capacity issues largely unexplored, since qualitative inquiry illuminates the institutional processes, experiences, and contextual factors that shape how capacity-building and training initiatives influence curriculum responsiveness. Second, despite strict national mandates, there is little examination of the timing and experience of capacity building, specifically, how training is organised and perceived before and during curriculum development. Additionally, there is a notable lack of qualitative research that captures the varied perspectives of Quality Assurance Directors, Department Heads, and Academic Staff in a single study. This research fills that gap by qualitatively exploring the lived experiences of these actors, focusing on the timing and nature of their training to better understand how capacity building functions in practice.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Research approach, design, and location

This study used a qualitative approach to examine the capacity-building and training activities that enhance the responsiveness of the curriculum development process. This method was chosen because the necessary information was socially constructed by individuals, reflecting their perceptions and experiences in real-world settings. Additionally, the study adopted a qualitative descriptive research design, which is well-suited because it provides detailed and straightforward insights into participants' experiences, opinions, and practices related to the responsive curriculum development process (Neergaard, Olesen, Andersen, & Søndergaard, 2009; Sandelowski, 2010).

The data for this study were collected at four universities: two public and two private, located in Tanzania, East Africa. Public universities are government-funded, while private universities are not. All universities in Tanzania are required to comply with the TCU accreditation process. The two public universities: one has an enrolment of over 20,000 and is the oldest, while the other has the same enrolment and is somewhat newer. Two universities are in Dar es Salaam, the commercial city and business hub of Tanzania, and the other two are located in Dodoma, the capital city and administrative city of Tanzania. These universities were chosen because variations in ownership, institutional maturity, size, and operational context likely affect how they organise and experience capacity-building efforts, staff development, and mechanisms for curriculum responsiveness. This selection allowed for an examination of diverse institutional strategies for supporting curriculum reform within the shared national regulatory framework.

3.2 Sampling

Purposeful sampling was used to select participants with sufficient practical experience in responsive curriculum development. The study involved 19 participants from different groups within the institution, including four Quality Assurance (QA) Directors, four Heads of Department (HoDs), and eleven academic staff members. All participants were adults, aged 30 to 51 years. These participants represented both the institutional leadership and teaching staff viewpoints. Selection criteria for each participant category were as follows: The quality assurance directors (n=4) were included because they oversee institution-wide curriculum approval, training policies, and TCU compliance. The heads of department (n=4) were selected from the Bachelor of Business Administration program currently undergoing review. Academic staff (n=11): Academic staff from the same departments as the heads were chosen if they had participated in curriculum committee work on curriculum development within the past five years. Sample size justification: The total sample of 19 was determined by information power. Considering the study's targeted

focus and the specific participant group, information power was deemed adequate when participants provided detailed, pertinent responses aligned with the research objectives (Malterud, Siersma, & Guassora, 2016). Additionally, later interviews did not reveal significantly new aspects related to the emerging themes. Therefore, saturation was monitored repeatedly: after 15 interviews, no new codes emerged, and four more interviews confirmed that no additional themes appeared. The distribution of participants by university is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Participant distribution across universities

University Type	QA Directors	Heads of Department	Academic Staff	Total
Public A	1	1	3	5
Private B	1	1	3	5
Public C	1	1	2	4
Private D	1	1	3	5
Total	4	4	11	19

Source: Feld data (2025)

3.3 Data collection

This study gathered data via in-depth individual interviews to explore nuanced experiences, perceptions, and understandings of responsive curriculum development. Semi-structured interviews were used as they provided both control and flexibility for probing the phenomenon (Kallio et al., 2016). A single semi-structured interview guide was used for all participants since the research question centred on experiences of capacity building across various roles. Nonetheless, the guide included role-specific probes to gather different viewpoints. QA directors were questioned about university-wide training policies, TCU requirements, and monitoring mechanisms. Heads of department discussed departmental training needs, follow-up after workshops, and resource limitations. Academic staff shared their personal participation in workshops, how they applied learning to teaching, and their peer support. The interview guide was tested with one private university outside the sample and was refined for clarity and conciseness.

The semi-structured interview guide was developed to align with the research objectives, incorporating insights from prior studies on curriculum responsiveness and institutional capacity-building, as well as the study's underlying conceptual assumptions. It was reviewed for clarity and relevance prior to data collection. All interviews were conducted in person, lasted 60–90 minutes, were audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. The data collection took place from 08/05/25 to 04/07/25. Most interviews were conducted in English, but some responses included code-switching between Swahili, an official national language, and English, the official language of instruction from secondary school through university. A professional translator translated all the Swahili segments into English. However, code-switching posed challenges like difficulty in transcribing and translating information, potential loss of meaning or nuance in English translations, and the need for careful interpretation to maintain consistency and accuracy across languages.

3.4 Data analysis

Data analysis followed the three-stage model by Ary, Jacobs, Sorensen, and Razavieh (2010), involving organising and familiarising, coding and reducing, and interpreting and representing. The data were first sorted into relevant folders and transcribed verbatim into various transcripts. MAXQDA software supported data management and analysis during coding. Transcripts from interviews were imported into the software, where initial codes were manually created and linked to corresponding text segments. The software facilitated systematic organisation of codes, without automatic coding, enabling the researcher to manually group related codes into categories and visually identify emerging themes. Where transcripts were coded systematically, codes were grouped into categories, and categories were refined into themes representing participants' experience. While MAXQDA enhanced data organisation, storage, and retrieval, all coding, theme development, and interpretative decisions were made by the researcher in accordance with the principles of inductive thematic analysis.

3.5 Ethical considerations

The study followed all necessary ethical procedures before, during, and after data collection. All ethical considerations were observed, including obtaining research clearance and permits from all relevant authorities. The University Research Ethics Committee approved the proposal and issued ethical permission. After obtaining clearance from the relevant authorities, study participants signed a consent form indicating their agreement to participate, provided they were assured that the information would be used for research purposes only and that confidentiality would be maintained during and after data collection.

The researcher ensured that data would not reveal the identity of the sources or make transcripts accessible to others. Additionally, pseudonyms and codes were used to identify institutions and participants during data collection and reporting, and informed consent was obtained from all participants.

3.6 Trustworthiness of the Study

Various methods were employed to enhance the study's trustworthiness as provided by Lincoln & Guba (1985). Readers will evaluate credibility through member checking, in which transcripts were shared with participants during data collection to validate them and through triangulation across participant roles (QA directors, heads, academic staff). Maintaining an audit trail and thoroughly documented data collection and analysis processes helps ensure the study's dependability. The detailed descriptions of the research context enabled others to assess its transferability. Also, using different participant categories enhanced transferability. Finally, reflexive journaling was instrumental in minimising researcher bias and improving the confirmability of the findings.

4. Results

4.1 Profile of Participants

The profiles of the 19 participants, drawn from four universities, are provided in Table 2. The aim of this information is to give context for the participant's information.

Table 2: Profile of Participants

S/N	Participants title	Sex	University name	University type	Years of experience	Highest qualif.
1.	QA director	M	C	Public	11-20	PhD
2.	QA director	F	B	Private	Below 3	PhD
3.	QA director	F	D	Private	11-20	PhD
4.	QA director	M	A	Public	4-10	PhD
5.	HoD	M	C	Public	21-30	PhD
6.	HoD	M	B	Private	11-20	PhD
7.	HoD	M	D	Private	11-20	PhD
8.	HoD	M	A	Public	4-10	PhD
9.	Academic Staff T1	F	C	Public	Below 3	Master
10.	Academic Staff T2	F	C	Public	31-40	PhD
11.	Academic Staff T1	M	B	Private	4-10	Master
12.	Academic Staff T2	M	B	Private	Below 3	Master
13.	Academic Staff T3	M	B	Private	11-20	PhD
14.	Academic Staff T1	M	D	Private	4-10	Master
15.	Academic Staff T2	M	D	Private	11-20	PhD
16.	Academic Staff T3	F	D	Private	31- 40	PhD
17.	Academic Staff T1	M	A	Public	Above 41	PhD

18.	Academic Staff T2	M	A	Public	4-10	Master
19.	Academic Staff T3	M	A	Public	Above 41	PhD

Source: Field data (2025)

4.2 Key findings

Three themes emerged from the analysis. Each theme is analysed in relation to when the training occurred, specifically before and during curriculum development. Generally, findings indicated that capacity-building and training initiatives were not well structured and inconsistently delivered, hindering their effectiveness in fostering responsive curriculum development. The main theme that emanated from the data is indicated in Table 3.

Table 3: Themes and coded instances from individual interview data (staff and administrators, n = 19)

S/N	Theme	Number of responses
1	Training on curriculum development	10
2	variation and access to the training	8
3	Focus of training content	7
	Total	25

Source: Field data (2025)

It is important to note that the number of responses in Table 3 exceeds the total number of participants. In qualitative analysis, data are divided into multiple meaningful units, so a single participant can provide several insights across different themes, reflecting the depth and variety of their responses. Therefore, listing the number of coded instances rather than participants offers a more accurate reflection of the analysis, which aims to identify and compare distinct meaning units within the dataset (Saldaña, 2016). This approach is common in qualitative research, as coding focuses on text segments rather than individuals, with themes emerging from repeated patterns of meaning within and across interviews (Maxwell, 2010). Thus, the total number of responses (n = 25) indicates how often a theme appears and how salient it is, rather than the number of participants interviewed. The following sections provide details of the findings in each theme.

4.2.1 Training on curriculum development

This theme concerns curriculum development training, which equips curriculum developers with the skills and understanding to develop, assess, and deliver effective curricula. Participants repeatedly reported receiving minimal or no formal training in curriculum design before joining curriculum committees or being asked to revise programmes. The following are two key categories emanating from this theme.

The first is the diversity of training providers. Participants reported that training providers included external organisations such as the Tanzania Commission for Universities (TCU) and the National Council for Technical Education (NACTE), as well as internal university-led interventions that provided training in curriculum development. It was reported that TCU organised training on aspects of the curriculum review and development. For example, a participant from University B pointed out:

Although here, TCU came and trained the department head in curriculum development, this did not result in significant improvements in the department. I remember that there was minimal follow-up on implementation, and faculty members did not actively participate in the review process. Consequently, the curriculum largely stayed the same, and anticipated improvements in course design and delivery did not occur. This outcome left many of us feeling disappointed with both the process and the results of the training. (Academic staff T3 from University B, Interview, May 2025)

Whereas another participant from University D commented:

Those who attended the TCU training later met with us to provide instructions on reviewing the curriculum. However, the meeting felt more like a one-way briefing rather than a collaborative discussion. We were informed about what needed to be done, but had limited opportunity to ask questions, share our perspectives, or tailor the guidance to our department's specific context. The instructions were broad and lacked practical clarity, causing confusion and frustration during the review process. Consequently, many of us were dissatisfied with how the post-training implementation was managed. (Academic staff T3 from University D, Interview, June 2025)

The two quotations imply that curriculum reform here was carried out in a top-down, directive manner rather than a participatory, dialogic process, thereby limiting proper responsiveness in higher education. Participants' accounts exemplify what institutional theorists refer to as coercive isomorphism, in which regulatory pressure forces universities to demonstrate compliance through evidence such as attendance records and certificates, yet this pressure does not motivate ongoing capacity development. As a result, training becomes more of a ritual, an act that indicates compliance rather than fostering durable skills.

During data collection, participants reported that the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, in collaboration with one public university, provided external specialised training. One of the participants reported attending a course and elaborated that:

The Ministry of Education, Science and Education trained us on the shift from a knowledge-based to a competence-based curriculum and on incorporating cross-cutting gender issues. Although both the competence-based approach and gender responsiveness were emphasised as important policy priorities, the training was largely theoretical and offered limited practical guidance on integrating competence-based outcomes or meaningfully embedding gender considerations into our specific courses. As a result, while we understood the concepts, we felt uncertain about implementation and somewhat dissatisfied with the overall effectiveness of the training. (Academic staff T2 from University A, Interview, May 2025)

The quotation suggests that participants perceived institutional capacity-building and follow-up support for practical application to be limited, contributing to uncertainty about implementing curriculum reforms. It accounts for the fact that while the training highlighted key policy priorities such as shifting to a competence-based curriculum and integrating gender as a cross-cutting issue, participants perceived that practical implementation lacked depth and contextual adaptation. This reveals a disconnect between policy-level reforms and classroom practice, where participants grasped the theoretical ideas but felt insufficiently supported in applying them to curriculum design, teaching methods, and assessments. From a curriculum development perspective, the response shows limited capacity-building within institutions and weak follow-up on practical application, potentially hindering effective and sustainable curriculum change.

The second finding emanating from this theme was the presence of internal and external expertise. From the interview, it was revealed that combining internal and external knowledge in training initiatives helped reconcile theory and practice. For example, one participant from University D remarked:

For those of us with experience in curriculum development, we feel we can contribute by mentoring and guiding our colleagues through the process. Rather than relying solely on external training, we believe internal mentorship can help translate policy concepts into practical steps, provide ongoing support, and build staff confidence during curriculum review and implementation. (HoD from University D, Interview, July 2025)

The other participant emphasised:

Some college members were nominated for university-level training, expecting to later train their colleagues at the college. Although intended to disseminate knowledge, this method often faces challenges because university training can be too broad, and those responsible for sharing it may lack clear guidance on tailoring it to their

college's specific needs. This can lead to inconsistent understanding, limited practical use, and dissatisfaction among staff who depend on this second-hand training. (QA director from the University C, Interview, May 2025)

These two quotes illustrate the difficulties of a cascade or “train-the-trainer” approach in curriculum development. While sending staff to university training helps develop internal skills, it can create gaps between policy understanding and actual practice, especially if guidance on adapting to local contexts is limited. As a result, relying on second-hand training, participants perceived as might bring to receiving incomplete or overly broad information, potentially causing confusion, inconsistent application, and dissatisfaction. This highlights the importance of ongoing support, mentorship, and tailored guidance to ensure that training leads to practical improvements in the curriculum.

Conversely, regarding the third category, concerns arose about the length and approach of the training. Participants appeared dissatisfied, with one participant expressing this explicitly emphasised:

We had only one day of training, and it was not at all practical. The session focused mainly on theory, with no hands-on guidance or examples for applying the concepts in our courses, leaving us unprepared and dissatisfied with the training. (Academic staff T1 from University C, interview, May 2025)

The other participant added:

I am frustrated with how the training was conducted. They were training us in innovative pedagogy but relied on traditional lectures, making it hard to see how these methods could be practically applied in a real classroom. Moreover, how will it be integrated and implemented in the curriculum development process? (Academic staff P3 from University C, Interview, May 2025)

These two quotes highlight a significant disconnect between the training's goals and its actual delivery. Participants found the sessions too short, overly focused on theory, and primarily delivered through traditional lectures, which conflicted with the innovative teaching methods being encouraged. As a result, trainees struggled to see how to apply the concepts in practice, in the classroom and in the curriculum development process. This gap can leave staff feeling unprepared for institutional change, even after training.

The findings under this theme are explained well by Institutional Theory, specifically coercive isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). TCU, as a regulatory body, applies regulatory pressure on universities to demonstrate compliance with competence-based curriculum mandates. In response, TCU and universities organise training events not because they believe these events build capacity, but to produce evidence such as attendance lists and certificates for compliance purposes. Consequently, training becomes a ritual of compliance rather than a genuine capacity-building effort. From a Communities of Practice perspective (Wenger, 1998), the lack of pre-training and follow-up prevents the formation of a sustained learning community; knowledge is neither shared nor refined over time, and each curriculum review begins anew.

4.2.2 Variation and access to the training

The second theme was discrepancies in curriculum development training due to differences in availability and access among participants, which affected the extent of knowledge and capacity built. The finding indicated that, to some degree, training was available, as a few staff, notably the heads of departments and quality assurance coordinators, were nominated to attend. In contrast, others stated they did not receive any training. The first finding concerns inconsistent participation. Participants' data showed that they faced restrictions that prevented them from attending specific curriculum-related training or joining the curriculum process after those sessions had ended. For instance, one participant said that:

We did not attend any training on curriculum development, so we lacked formal guidance on designing, reviewing, or improving our courses. Without this support, it was challenging to understand institutional expectations, apply best practices, or ensure that our curriculum met policy requirements, leaving us uncertain and underprepared. (Academic staff T2 from University C, June 2025)

Likewise, another participant stated that:

I joined the curriculum development process after the training had already taken place, so I was not involved in any formal sessions. This meant I missed the guidance and foundational knowledge provided during the training, making it difficult to understand the procedures, contribute effectively, or align my work with the intended curriculum standards. (Academic staff T3 from University A, Interview, June 2025)

These two quotes above suggest inefficiencies in the planning and implementation processes, where curriculum developers' engagement was not comprehensive, thereby affecting the overall effectiveness of the intended curriculum development process. This exclusion can result in uneven distribution of knowledge within universities, as some individuals are well prepared to take on curriculum roles, while others are not. As a result, institutional capacity relies more on a small group of trained individuals rather than being integrated throughout the broader academic community.

Additionally, the interview data indicated that no formal training was provided to the curriculum development team members, aside from peer coaching. Some universities did not have time to give formal training to the curriculum development team, but those with experience in curriculum development served as coaches for other team members. To emphasise this, one participant said,

Of course, we received informal training from colleagues who attended the meeting with TCU, particularly the department heads who participated and provided guidance on how to proceed with curriculum development. While we worked together and learned on the job, I cannot recall whether we received any specific, structured training before starting the process, which left some gaps in preparation and understanding. (Academic staff T3 from University B, Interview, May 2025)

This quote from academic staff T3 indicates participants did not receive formal training prior to beginning the curriculum development. These remarks point to inefficiencies in planning and execution, as the curriculum developers' engagement was limited, which impacted the overall success of the curriculum development process. This exclusion can result in uneven distribution of knowledge within universities, as some individuals are well prepared to take on curriculum roles, while others are not. Thus, to curb this trend and ensure equality and uniformity in the distribution of training for all educators, thereby developing a fully responsive curriculum.

Access to training varied notably by participant role and, to a lesser degree, by university type. All four Quality Assurance Directors attended national workshops organised by TCU or other universities; however, they considered these sessions mainly informational rather than skill-enhancing. The four Heads of Department mentioned occasional departmental training, typically before curriculum reviews. In contrast, the eleven academic staff members reported the least access, with one from a public university noting:

I initially learned about the competence-based curriculum from a colleague during a departmental discussion. Unfortunately, the university did not provide any formal training or workshops to help me grasp its principles and application. I then attempted to review policy documents and guidelines independently, but I remain unsure whether I am implementing the approach correctly in curriculum development and teaching. (Academic Staff T2 from University C, Interview, May 2025)

On a similar aspect, another participant added:

I have been part of the curriculum review committee for three years and have actively contributed to programme revisions. However, prior to starting the review process, I received no formal training, orientation, or capacity-building support from the university. Consequently, most of my knowledge about curriculum revision comes from practical experience and conversations with colleagues, rather than formal professional development. (Academic staff T1 from University D, Interview, May 2025)

The quotes above suggest that no participant had undergone sustained, multi-session training with follow-up. Public universities reported slightly more training events, though these were mainly compliance-driven responses to TCU circulars. In contrast, private universities reported fewer training events, with participants citing inadequate resources. This demonstrates how differences in institutional resources can influence the accessibility of capacity-building initiatives among universities.

The findings under this theme imply that the unequal distribution of access is deliberate. Institutional Theory holds that universities allocate training resources in response to external pressures rather than internal needs. QA directors are the primary recipients of TCU communications and, therefore, receive the most training, as their role involves ensuring institutional compliance. Academic staff, who are not directly accountable to regulatory bodies, receive the least training. This reflects an institutional logic (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999): the need to comply with regulations takes precedence over the development of pedagogical skills. From a Communities of Practice perspective, excluding academic staff from training prevents their integration into a curriculum community. Without shared experiences and peer learning, they remain isolated implementers, unable to foster the collective understanding necessary for responsive curriculum development.

4.2.3 Focus of training content

This theme concerns the content of the training sessions, with a focus on enhancing the relevance of the curricula, ensuring inclusivity, and ensuring that the development aligns with contemporary educational practices. Participants indicated that some of the issues included in the training were: competency-based education, cross-cutting issues, and teaching. The following are two key issues emanating from this theme.

Under this theme, the first category of findings was training in competency-based education. During data analysis, it was noted that competency-based education (CBE) was one of the issues participants identified as dominating the training. For example, one participant said;

I recall covering around three topics in one day, especially during the final review session. One of the main topics was the distinction between knowledge-based and competence-based curricula, along with strategies to improve them. However, time constraints prevented a deep exploration of each topic or a practical application of the concepts. (HoD from University A, Interview, May 2025)

On the other hand, innovative pedagogies were also essential themes of the session, with sessions designed to address active learning, problem-solving teaching, and even technology. For Instance, one participant stated that:

Training sessions are held periodically and cover both general and specific topics. Some focus on broad curriculum issues, while others target areas like innovative teaching methods. Although these trainings impart valuable knowledge, their irregular schedule can hinder continuity and practical use in daily curriculum development. (QA director from University A, Interview, May 2025)

The two quotes indicate that curriculum training is often short, focused on limited topics, and delivered quickly, which can limit participants' ability to fully understand key ideas, such as those in a competence-based curriculum. Although training sessions sometimes address both general and specific themes, such as innovative teaching methods, participants perceive that their sporadic and brief format may impede practical application and long-term retention. Overall, this underscores the need for more organised, ongoing, and contextually tailored training to support effective curriculum development.

The second finding under this theme was training on the cross-cutting issues and inclusivity. The findings indicated that one of the four institutions received a one-day training on issues such as gender, environmental values, and university values. One participant, for instance, said;

Another one-day training focused on cross-cutting issues, especially on integrating gender and diversity into the curriculum. The goal was to raise awareness and offer guidance, but the brief duration limited in-depth

discussions, practical exercises, or tailoring to specific contexts. As a result, participants gained only a basic understanding and remained uncertain about how to apply these concepts effectively in their courses. (Academic staff T3 from University A, Interview, May 2025)

On the same matter, another participant added,

We were asked to include gender issues in the curriculum, but received no specific guidance. This led to uncertainty about how to implement it, with the assumption that those in the Development Studies course would take responsibility, leaving others unsure about their role in effectively incorporating gender. (P1, Academic staff T1 from University A, Interview, June 2025)

The two quotations show that although participants recognised the importance of incorporating gender and cross-cutting issues into the curriculum, the training and guidance provided were insufficient for practical application. The short, one-day sessions left staff unclear on how to implement these concepts, creating ambiguity about roles and responsibilities and leading to dependence on specific courses or colleagues for integration. This reveals a gap between policy directives and actual curriculum practice, underscoring the need for more detailed, hands-on, and context-specific support to effectively embed gender and diversity issues.

The third aspect of the findings concerned the training's orientation. Participants noted that the training primarily concentrated on procedural compliance, including filling TCU templates, writing learning outcomes correctly, and submitting documents for approval. A Head of Department from a private university clarified:

The workshop primarily taught us how to fill out and utilise the TCU curriculum template during programme review and development. Nonetheless, there was minimal discussion about the core ideas and principles of competence-based education. We received little guidance on translating these concepts into classroom practices or adjusting teaching methods accordingly. The focus was mainly on adhering to the specified format and meeting documentation standards. (Academic Staff P2 from Public University B, Interview, May 2025)

A Quality Assurance Director from a private university further noted:

During the training, we spent about two hours practising how to create learning outcomes with action verbs and specific terminology. However, the facilitators did not clarify the overall purpose of learning outcomes or their importance in curriculum design. There was also no mention of educational theories like constructivism, nor how learning outcomes relate to teaching, learning, and assessment. Consequently, many participants merely copied action verbs from the handout without grasping their true significance. (QA director from University A, Interview, May 2025)

The quotes from academic staff P2 and the QA director indicate that the procedural focus remained consistent whether training occurred before curriculum development or during revisions. From a coercive isomorphism perspective, this is expected: regulatory authorities mandate that universities submit curricula in specific formats, prompting them to train staff efficiently on these frameworks to ensure compliance. However, more in-depth philosophical or pedagogical training, such as constructivism or experiential learning, isn't necessary for compliance and is often overlooked. This explains why participants could follow procedures but had difficulty explaining the epistemological foundations of competence-based education. From a Communities of Practice perspective, the lack of philosophical content indicates there isn't a community for practitioners to discuss and internalise these ideas. Without such a community, training stays superficial and detached from actual practice.

The findings in this theme indicate that procedural focus stems directly from coercive isomorphism. TCU requires specific documentation formats, such as templates and learning outcome statements. Universities train staff to fill out these documents because that is what regulators review. In-depth philosophical training covering constructivism, experiential learning, or the epistemology of competence is not mandatory for compliance and therefore often skipped. Institutional Theory predicts this behaviour: organisations emphasise visible symbols of compliance rather than genuine substantive change. Additionally, Communities of Practice theory adds that even if philosophical topics

were included, without an active community where members can discuss, question, and practice these concepts over time, the knowledge remains uninternalized. The lack of such a community means training, no matter how well designed, stays a single event. Collectively, these theories explain why training tends to be procedural, fails to foster conceptual understanding, and doesn't result in better curriculum practices.

5. Discussion

The findings indicate that capacity-building for curriculum development was limited and largely reactive, with little or no training before curriculum development and only sporadic training during the process. This suggests that training events are being arranged primarily to demonstrate compliance to regulators and policymakers, and to meet deadlines, rather than to develop real capacity. Institutional theory, specifically the idea of coercive isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), suggests that these symbols of conformity are visible, and that when organisations are under regulatory pressure, they will seek to display them as evidence of their conformity with regulators. Regulatory bodies and policymakers request evidence and the number of staff who have been trained, but do not evaluate the relevance of the training or the appropriateness of the results for sustained learning or for better implementation of the curriculum in universities. Thus, universities ritualistically comply (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). This aligns with other studies conducted in Africa, such as Tsevi's research in Ghana and Munene's (2013) research in Kenya, which concluded that regulatory pressures and market-driven quality mandates tend to engender symbolic compliance rather than substantive institutional capacity building (Munene, 2013; Tsevi, 2015). Similar patterns are seen in global higher education, where universities tend to adapt strategically to external accountability and reform pressures. However, these responses do not always lead to meaningful institutional change (Zapp, Marques, & Powell, 2021). But the present research extends those results, revealing that such a lack of pre-training and follow-up is not an accident; it is an expected outcome of an audit regime that emphasises compliance. From the Communities of Practice perspective (Wenger, 1998), the episodic, reactive approach to training did not create a stable community of curriculum developers, thereby preventing them from sharing problems, developing a shared language, and revising practices over time. If they are not engaged, each curriculum committee has to start from scratch and repeat the same mistakes and misunderstandings.

The second result showed that training was not shared equally across roles: Quality assurance directors received the most training, heads of department received some training, and academic staff received little or no training. This distribution follows an institutional logic (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999) in which resources are allocated to those directly accountable to the regulator. QA directors who are on the front lines of compliance are therefore well-trained, as are heads of department for programme-level implementation. Almost none was provided to most of the academic staff. While other studies conducted in developing-country contexts have documented similar patterns of unequal distribution of training opportunities across institutional roles (Munene, 2013; Tsevi, 2015), the present findings provide further evidence that capacity-building is often targeted at specific administrative actors rather than academic staff directly involved in curriculum development. The international research on higher education quality assurance indicates that accountability systems often emphasise compliance practices among designated actors, but they do not necessarily enhance overall institutional capacity for improvement (Macheridis & Paulsson, 2021). This means universities invest in capacity building in response to external pressures rather than pedagogical demand. If academic staff are not part of the training, they never become part of the community of curriculum practice from a communities-of-practice perspective (Wenger, 1998). They remain outsiders, receiving information second-hand from QA directors and department heads. If they aren't in the legitimate periphery (Lave & Wenger, 1991), they will not progress from novices to experts and cannot help build collective knowledge. This is why the academic staff in this study were unsure whether they were properly implementing competence-based education.

The third finding indicated that if training were provided, it would be very limited, mainly focusing on how to complete templates and write standardized learning outcomes, with minimal or no emphasis on philosophical or pedagogical concepts. This procedural emphasis occurs because external auditors assess the actual documents—such as templates and outcome statements—rather than the underlying understanding. Consequently, universities are trained to meet these audit standards, as described by Ball, Maguire, Braun, Perryman, & Hoskins (2012) in terms of performativity. Regulators measure the easy to measure rather than what is important (epistemological grasp). As

noted by other scholars (Chand, 2024; Hasibuan, Ledy, & Az-Zahra, 2024), transversal themes (such as digital literacy and climate change) were identified but are not included in the training and therefore remain unaddressed. The issue isn't the scarcity of topics; it's the lack of a foundational concept. From a Communities of Practice standpoint, procedural training alone doesn't establish a shared set of practices (Wenger, 1998). A community requires not just technical abilities but also a shared purpose and understanding of what competence entails and its significance. Without this, training resembles a ritual lacking real-world relevance.

Generally, the theory of coercive isomorphism explains universities' tendency towards reactive training in response to regulatory pressure. Institutional logics explain the targeting of those responsible to regulators, thereby excluding frontline workers from training. Performativity explains why training focuses solely on auditing material (procedures) rather than on conceptual issues. None of the theories alone can account for all three patterns, but their integration does. This integrated approach is the main theoretical contribution of this paper to the international literature on curriculum implementation in developing nations. The results indicate that university leaders ought to go beyond mere compliance training by establishing ongoing, inclusive professional development programs that actively involve academic staff in designing and delivering curricula. Policymakers should supplement regulatory mandates with capacity-building initiatives that promote genuine curriculum enhancement rather than concentrating solely on documentation and compliance checks.

In addition to institutional pressures, the results imply that contextual factors may have affected the availability and access to capacity-building initiatives. Participants from private universities cited financial constraints as a reason for limited training opportunities, while disparities in access among different institutional roles could also stem from conflicting academic duties and workload. Moreover, participants' limited grasp of the principles behind competency-based curricula indicates that pedagogical capacity remains a key challenge for curriculum reform. Similar findings have been reported in prior research, which highlights resource shortages, heavy academic workloads, and inadequate pedagogical training as major obstacles to effective curriculum implementation and professional development in higher education (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Fullan, 2016; Mgaiwa, 2021). These contextual factors likely interact with regulatory pressures in influencing institutional capacity-building practices.

Moreover, the current study encountered various limitations. Firstly, the sample consisted of only four higher learning institutions in Tanzania, both public and private, and the results cannot therefore be generalised across the entire Tanzanian learning environment or elsewhere, although transferability and dependability hold in this case. Secondly, the study used a cross-sectional methodology and thus does not make any causal claims, for instance, about the impact of structured learning and communities of practice on curriculum responsiveness. Lastly, at the time the study was undertaken, the 2023 Education and Training Policy had not been fully implemented.

Therefore, based on the findings and limitations of this study, the following are the suggested future research areas. First, longitudinal studies should be conducted to determine whether the combination of structured training cycles and communities of practice indeed leads to enhanced responsiveness within curricula. Secondly, comparative studies across different developing nations should assess whether the dynamics observed here hold true in other contexts where external regulatory agencies enforce curriculum reform. This would help enhance the applicability of the proposed theoretical framework. Thirdly, an intervention study that constructs communities of practice among curriculum developers and measures changes in curriculum outcomes would offer a causal approach complementary to the exploratory findings in this paper. Lastly, a study conducted after the implementation of the Education and Training Policy of 2023 would be necessary to determine whether this new policy has altered the dynamics of coercion, institutional logics, and performativity observed herein.

6. Conclusion

The findings suggest that participants perceived existing capacity-building initiatives for curriculum development as episodic, unevenly accessible, and primarily procedural, with limited follow-up support and opportunities for peer learning. The three observed patterns, reactive, episodic training; stratified access based on institutional roles; and content focused on procedures rather than concepts, are interconnected results of external regulatory influences.

Coercive isomorphism leads to ritual compliance; institutional priorities direct resources toward those accountable to regulators, leaving frontline staff out; and an emphasis on performativity limits training to audited aspects, bypassing conceptual understanding. No single theory fully explains these three interconnected patterns.

7. Recommendations

First, universities should expand training opportunities and involvement. Several members of staff did not participate in any training workshops related to the development of the curriculum, and some commenced during the reviewing process and therefore could not attend the very first training sessions of that process. Make sure that the training programs are not only adequate but also permanent and provide an opportunity to all relevant personnel regardless of when they are brought on board the process. Offer catch-up classes and brush-up courses for new staff.

Second, universities should incorporate expert-led training sessions. Also, universities should move towards sustained capacity-building models that integrate training, mentoring, peer learning, and follow-up support. Establishing Communities of Practice could offer opportunities for academic staff to collaboratively develop curriculum expertise and share implementation experiences. Furthermore, universities and policymakers should evaluate capacity-building initiatives by their contribution to improved curriculum development practices, rather than relying primarily on participation records or compliance indicators.

Third, for future research, conduct longitudinal studies to assess whether structured training and communities of practice enhance curriculum responsiveness. Carry out comparative research across multiple developing countries to identify other cases of coercive isomorphism, institutional logics, and performativity. Additionally, develop and execute design intervention studies to deliberately create communities of practice and monitor curriculum changes over time.

Fourth, Regulatory bodies should shift their focus from input-based metrics, such as training attendance lists and workshop reports, to outcome-based evidence. This could include annual summaries of community-of-practice activities, clear examples of curriculum improvements linked to training, or assessments of staff's understanding of competence-based education principles. Training should become a regular part of staff development, aligned with existing work schedules to minimise absenteeism. Incorporating online management training tools may also be beneficial, especially if training occurs during regular workweeks.

Declarations

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None.

Ethical Approval

The study followed all necessary ethical procedures before, during, and after data collection. All ethical considerations were observed, including obtaining research clearance and permits from all relevant authorities. The University Research Ethics Committee approved the proposal and issued ethical permission.

Author's Contribution

Author¹: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Data collection, Formal analysis, Writing report

Author²: Supervision, Investigation, software, Writing – review and editing

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author pending ethical approval. The data are not publicly available because they contain information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

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