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Purpose-driven learning for social transformation: A case study of the Aga Khan University Institute for educational development

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Abstract

Purpose-driven learning (PDL) has emerged as a transformative approach in higher education, aligning academic programs with societal needs and fostering social impact. While conceptually rooted in experiential, transformative, and socially constructed theories of learning, PDL requires clearer operationalization particularly in resource-constrained contexts. This study examines how the Aga Khan University Institute for Educational Development (AKU-IED) in East Africa implements PDL to address development challenges while advancing equity, sustainability, and ethical leadership. Using a qualitative design comprising interviews, focus groups, and document analysis, the study explores AKU-IED's strategies for contributing to social transformation through educator empowerment, interdisciplinary curricula, and community engagement. The findings affirm existing literature by illustrating how experiential learning, critical reflection, and purpose-aligned pedagogy enable graduates to act as change agents. Importantly, the study also extends this literature by analysing how PDL intersects with sustainability education and national development frameworks, such as Tanzania's Vision 2025. It reveals how AKU-IED operationalizes purpose not merely as institutional rhetoric but through concrete practices, including flexible access programs, long-term professional development, and context-specific mentorship. By focusing on quality and leadership impact rather than mass enrolment, AKU-IED offers a compelling model of higher education for social good. These findings offer transferable insights for institutions globally seeking to implement PDL in diverse and under-resourced settings.

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Practitioner Notes

1. When designing learning programs, prioritise long-term, context-specific mentorship to foster sustainable educator impact.
2. Align university curricula with national development goals and local community needs for greater social relevance.
3. Use interdisciplinary approaches that integrate leadership, pluralism, and policy for broader societal transformation.
4. Focus on quality over quantity-develop fewer but highly skilled graduates who can lead systemic change.
5. Forge strategic partnerships with communities, NGOs, and government to expand reach and enhance program effectiveness.

Keywords

Purpose-driven learning, social impact, resource-constrained environments, higher education, East Africa.

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Introduction

Purpose-driven learning has emerged as a transformative educational paradigm that aligns higher education with the complex challenges of the 21st century. Although associated with the principles articulated by John Dewey in his work on experiential and democratic education, Dewey (1916) did not coin the term. The concept of a purpose-driven university has gained traction more recently, referring to institutions that prioritize societal impact by embedding social responsibility, sustainability, and ethical leadership into their core mission (Leelakulthanit, 2022). This approach is characterized by a curriculum deeply rooted in societal needs, fostering interdisciplinary problem-solving, experiential learning, critical thinking, and the cultivation of ethical leadership (Astin, 1993).

A foundational element of purpose-driven learning (PDL) is social impact - defined as the positive change generated by an individual, organization, or program within society (Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015). By cantering education on real-world challenges, universities can prepare graduates to be catalysts for social transformation. In this respect, Tanzania presents a compelling context due to its ongoing developmental challenges, including poverty, inequality, and low educational attainment. Recent scholarship has emphasized the urgency for higher education institutions in Tanzania to transition toward models that support societal transformation through contextualized and purpose-driven frameworks (Maganya et al., 2020).

This conceptual paper presents the Aga Khan University Institute for Educational Development (AKU-IED) in East Africa as a case study of a university implementing a comprehensive PDL model. AKU-IED's emphasis on interdisciplinary education, access and affordability, flexible learning pathways, and sustained community engagement exemplifies how higher education can be designed to address multifaceted, real-world problems such as climate change, systemic inequities, and under-resourced schooling systems.

Longitudinal data from graduate tracer studies further demonstrate AKU-IED's impact. Graduates of its programs often assume leadership roles in initiatives focused on public health, literacy, and environmental sustainability. Many have gone on to establish local NGOs and educational projects that serve marginalized communities. Others have taken on policymaking roles or grassroots political positions centred on community welfare. In several cases, alumni have been noted for their advocacy on gender equity, inclusive education, and environmental stewardship. Collectively, these findings illustrate the long-term value of AKU-IED's leadership and community-engagement training, positioning the institution as a catalyst for socially embedded change in East Africa.

Purpose-driven universities focus on producing graduates who are equipped to lead and innovate in various sectors. By fostering a commitment to lifelong learning, universities aim to cultivate leaders who can continuously adapt to evolving global challenges, ensuring their knowledge and actions remain relevant in creating sustainable societal impacts (Probst, 2022; Rodríguez Aboytes & Barth, 2020). This comprehensive approach ensures that graduates are not only academically proficient but also socially conscious and capable of driving meaningful change in their communities.

In conclusion, Tanzanian universities, following the example set by AKU-IED, must adopt purpose-driven learning to address labor market needs while contributing to community development. AKU-IED's alignment with global frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Vision 2030, and Africa Vision 2063 highlights the critical role higher education plays in fostering sustainable development. These frameworks identify higher education as a key driver in overcoming challenges such as poverty, inequality, and unemployment in Tanzania, Africa, and globally. By focusing on innovation, critical thinking, and social responsibility, universities can ensure their graduates are not only employable but are also equipped to drive transformative change. This approach supports the broader goals of these frameworks by preparing graduates to contribute meaningfully to achieving the SDGs and Africa Vision 2063's aspirations for inclusive growth and sustainable development. Through purpose-driven education, higher education institutions can become catalysts for reducing the socio-economic challenges facing their communities and fostering a more prosperous and equitable future for all.

Despite growing recognition of the role of higher education in driving social transformation, empirical research remains limited on how purpose-driven learning is implemented in resource-constrained settings—particularly in East Africa. This study responds to this gap by critically examining the strategies, practices, and contextual factors that have enabled AKU-IED to adopt a PDL approach that generates meaningful and sustainable social impact. Specifically, the study seeks to explore:

> **Research Question 1.** How does one universities approach to purpose-driven learning in the East African context contributes to social impact.
>
> **Research Question 2**. What specific strategies have enabled one university to overcome contextual challenges and successfully implement purpose-driven learning initiatives; and
>
> **Research Question 3:** How the findings from this study can inform the development of purpose-driven learning models in other resource-constrained university settings.

Literature

Purpose-driven learning has emerged as a critical pedagogical approach to address the complex challenges facing societies globally. At its core, purpose-driven learning seeks to align higher education with societal needs, emphasizing experiential learning, critical thinking, and social responsibility (Astin, 1993; Rodríguez Aboytes & Barth, 2020). While the concept is conceptually aligned with Dewey's advocacy for experiential education, it is important to clarify that Dewey did not coin the term purpose-driven learning, nor did he write about it in contemporary contexts (Dewey, 1916). Rather, his influence lies in foundational ideas of student-centred learning and democratic education that undergird many modern interpretations of PDL. A purpose-driven university focuses on aligning education with the broader goals of individual fulfillment, social impact, and real-world application. This approach emphasizes multiple key aspects. First, these universities have a clear *mission and vision* that prioritize societal impact, ethical considerations, and personal development alongside academic excellence.. Second, courses and programs are designed to connect academic learning with real-world problems and societal needs. This

includes interdisciplinary approaches, experiential learning opportunities, and a focus on solving contemporary issues. Third, active collaboration and engagement with communities, industries, and organizations to ensure that education is relevant and beneficial beyond the university's boundaries. This includes service-learning, internships, and community-based research projects. Fourth, universities have an emphasis on developing the whole person, including leadership skills, emotional intelligence, ethical reasoning, and a sense of purpose in both personal and professional life.

Fifth, universities have an emphasis on global perspective, encouraging students to think globally and understand their role in a larger context. This might include international partnerships, study abroad programs, and a focus on global challenges such as sustainability, health, and equity. Sixth, universities focus on sustainability and social responsibility, with a commitment to sustainability practices and social responsibility within the university operations and culture, promoting these values among students and staff. Seventh, universities adopt innovative pedagogy that utilizes innovative teaching methods that engage students actively in their learning process, including project-based learning, collaborative projects, and the use of technology to enhance learning experiences. Finally, universities focus on measuring success not just by academic achievements but also by the impact students have in their communities and industries, and how well they live out their purpose-driven goals after graduation. This purpose-driven approach is grounded in several educational theories and frameworks that highlight the importance of aligning educational practices with real-world issues to foster social impact.

Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory underscores the importance of learning through experience, which is central to purpose-driven learning. This theory posits that knowledge is created through the transformation of experience, emphasizing the need for active involvement in learning processes. Similarly, Mezirow's (1991) Transformative Learning Theory focuses on how individuals change their frames of reference through critical reflection. Purpose-driven learning leverages this theory by encouraging students to reflect on their roles in society and their potential to effect positive change. Additionally, Vygotsky's (1978) Social Constructivist Theory highlights the importance of social interactions in the learning process. Purpose-driven learning environments facilitate collaboration and dialogue, enabling students to construct knowledge collectively while addressing societal challenges.

Research by Barth et al. (2007) has shown that purpose-driven learning initiatives can significantly enhance students' civic engagement and sense of social responsibility. Similarly, a study by Lozano et al. (2017) found that integrating sustainability into higher education curricula can lead to increased awareness and action on global issues among students. Klein (2020) advocates for interdisciplinary approaches in education, arguing that they foster a holistic understanding of complex issues. While Smith (2020) highlights the challenges of integrating diverse perspectives within a coherent curriculum, he notes that successful implementation can lead to more robust and adaptable learning outcomes.

The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a global framework for addressing pressing challenges such as poverty, inequality, and climate change. Purpose-driven learning aligns with these goals by equipping students with the knowledge and skills to contribute

to sustainable development. Vision 2030, a strategic framework adopted by various countries, aims to transform national economies through sustainable development and inclusive growth. Higher education institutions play a crucial role in this vision by fostering innovative and socially responsible graduates. Africa Vision 2063 outlines the continent's long-term development aspirations, emphasizing inclusive growth and sustainable development (African Union, 2015). Purpose-driven learning is integral to achieving these goals by preparing graduates to address Africa's unique challenges and opportunities.

Reports from the World Bank and United Nations emphasize the importance of higher education in driving social and economic development (United Nations, 2020; World Bank, 2020). These reports highlight the need for education systems to adapt to the evolving demands of the labor market and society, underscoring the relevance of purpose-driven learning. By preparing students to tackle real-world problems and contribute to their communities, purpose-driven learning models can significantly enhance the social and environmental impact of higher education institutions.

Purpose-driven learning represents a transformative approach in higher education, aiming to align academic programs with societal needs and global development agendas. Grounded in experiential learning, transformative learning, and social constructivism, this approach has the potential to foster critical thinking, social responsibility, and interdisciplinary collaboration. Empirical studies and global development strategies further support the integration of purpose-driven learning in higher education to achieve meaningful social impact and contribute to sustainable development goals (Rodríguez Aboytes & Barth, 2020; Probst, 2022).

The concept of social impact has gained prominence in recent years, with universities increasingly expected to contribute to societal development (Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015). Studies have explored various mechanisms through which universities can create social impact, including research, community engagement, and entrepreneurship (Nyong'o, 2020). However, measuring and evaluating social impact remains a complex task (Bryson, 2020).

While the literature on social impact is growing, there is a need for more in-depth studies on the specific pathways through which universities can translate their activities into tangible societal benefits. For instance, research initiatives that address local and global challenges, such as health crises or environmental sustainability, can have significant social implications (Rodríguez Aboytes & Barth, 2020). Universities often engage in community-based projects that foster development and provide practical solutions to pressing issues. Entrepreneurship programs within universities can also drive social innovation by supporting startups that address social needs and create employment opportunities (Miller Center for Social Entrepreneurship, 2023).

Moreover, the role of context, especially in developing countries, plays a significant part in shaping the relationship between universities and society. Universities in regions with limited resources and infrastructure encounter distinct challenges when attempting to generate social impact. For instance, the ability of higher education institutions to foster community engagement and address societal needs often depends on local conditions, such as available resources, governance, and socioeconomic factors (Probst, 2022). Understanding these contextual variables is essential for designing effective strategies that cater to local needs and capacities. Research indicates that

universities can contribute to sustainable development by adapting their educational models to the specific challenges and opportunities within their communities (Rodríguez Aboytes & Barth, 2020). Therefore, purpose-driven universities must consider these unique contexts to implement strategies that are not only sustainable but also impactful in addressing local challenges (Probst, 2022).

The complexity of measuring social impact is another critical area that demands attention. Traditional metrics such as economic output or employment rates may not fully capture the breadth of a university's social contributions. This is supported by Feor et al. (2023), who emphasize the importance of combining qualitative and quantitative methods to provide a fuller understanding of social impact. Engaging stakeholders throughout the process and using post-intervention measurement tools are key to capturing the breadth of these contributions. Innovative approaches that incorporate qualitative and participatory methods can provide a more nuanced understanding of social impact. For example, participatory action research involving community members can yield insights into the direct and indirect effects of university initiatives on local populations.

In sum, while universities are increasingly recognised as key players in societal development, there is a pressing need for more comprehensive research on how their activities translate into social impact. This includes examining the specific pathways through which universities contribute to societal well-being, the contextual factors that influence these processes, and the development of robust methodologies for evaluating social impact. By addressing these gaps, future studies can provide valuable insights into the ways universities can maximize their positive contributions to society.

Universities in Tanzania face increasing expectations to align themselves with labor market demands, community development needs, and broader societal goals. This shift necessitates a move towards purpose-driven learning models that emphasize social impact. As Tanzanian higher education institutions adapt to these evolving demands, they must focus on producing graduates equipped with the skills and knowledge to address real-world challenges, thereby fostering community development and contributing to national and global development goals (Komba, 2021; URT, 2020).

To become purpose-driven, universities must integrate experiential learning, critical thinking, and interdisciplinary approaches into their curricula. These methods equip students with practical problem-solving skills, foster innovation, and enhance adaptability. Experiential learning allows students to apply theory to real-world challenges, a necessity for addressing Tanzania’s issues like low literacy and poor management of schools. Critical thinking cultivates analytical skills essential for devising solutions in complex environments, while interdisciplinary approaches encourage collaboration across sectors, preparing graduates to tackle multifaceted problems like economic growth and community development (Africa-press, 2022; The Citizen, 2023).

Moreover, aligning curricula with local labor market needs and involving community stakeholders ensures that academic programs are relevant and impactful. By engaging students in real-world problem-solving scenarios, universities can produce graduates who are not only employable but

also capable of driving social change in Tanzania. This shift toward purpose-driven education is particularly relevant given Tanzania's need for skilled leaders who can address educational disparities, healthcare challenges, and sustainable development goals (URT, 2020).

Context

The scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL) at AKU-IED aligns with the purpose-driven university model by integrating teaching, learning, and research to address real-world societal challenges. This approach emphasizes not only academic rigor but also the practical application of knowledge to foster social impact. By encouraging faculty to engage with rigorous theoretical frameworks and best practices, the aim is to ensure that teaching contributes directly to the university's broader mission of social responsibility and community development. Purpose-driven universities focus on producing graduates who can act as change agents in their communities, and SOTL at AKU-IED supports this by fostering quality teaching that promotes critical thinking, interdisciplinary collaboration, and engaged learning (Barkley, 2020; Christensen Hughes & Mighty, 2021). This aligns with the goal of preparing students to address pressing global challenges through their academic work and community engagement, thus embodying the principles of purpose-driven education.

In alignment with the principles of a purpose-driven university, AKU-IED graduates are expected to embody a range of attributes that directly contribute to societal improvement and global development. These attributes include ethical global leadership, critical and creative thinking, and evidence-based decision-making, all of which are essential for addressing real-world challenges in communities. Graduates are not only trained to communicate effectively and act as socially and environmentally responsible citizens but are also equipped with specialist knowledge designed to drive transformative change. This holistic development ensures that graduates are prepared to solve multifaceted problems, which is a core tenet of purpose-driven education (Aga Khan University, 2023).

Method

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the implementation and impact of purpose-driven learning at the Aga Khan University Institute for Educational Development (AKU-IED). A qualitative approach was chosen to capture the depth, complexity, and richness of individual and institutional narratives, with a focus on lived experiences. Drawing on interpretivist paradigms, this design allows for a nuanced understanding of how AKU-IED's educational strategies align with broader societal needs and contribute to long-term social transformation. The primary aim of this study was to enable AKU-IED to critically reflect on its educational programs, teaching practices, and social impact initiatives. Insights derived from the research informed the development of new academic programs, refinement of learning outcomes, and articulation of graduate attributes—strengthening the university’s role in advancing community transformation.

Sample

To ensure a comprehensive representation of key perspectives, this study used purposive sampling to recruit 50 participants from across stakeholder groups. These included current students, alumni, university administration, faculty, and technical staff. The inclusion criteria include: current AKU-IED students and alumni, faculty members engaged in teaching or supervision; university administrators involved in academic and strategic decision-making; and technical staff supporting program delivery. Those excluded are individuals with no academic or operational connection to AKU-IED, and participants who declined to provide informed consent. This strategy ensured a representative cross-section of institutional voices, contributing to a holistic understanding of AKU-IED's educational ecosystem.

Data Collection

The study relied on two main qualitative methods: semi-structured interviews with administrators and technical staff and focus group discussions (FGDs) with students, alumni, and faculty. Each FGD involved 6–12 participants and was guided by a trained moderator. Sessions lasted 40–50 minutes and were structured around key thematic areas, including curriculum design, inclusion strategies, graduate attributes, and social impact. All interviews and FGDs were audio-recorded (with consent) and transcribed for thematic analysis. Participant groups included: Associate Vice Provost & Dean (Administration), Deputy Head of Programs & Program Coordinator (Technical staff), alumni and current students from multiple cohorts, and full-time and adjunct faculty members.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach: familiarization with data, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. NVivo software was used to assist in organizing and managing codes across data sets. Data were triangulated with institutional reports and program documents to enhance analytical rigor. Peer debriefing and code cross-checking were conducted to ensure inter-coder reliability. This process generated themes that reflected institutional practices, implementation barriers, and impact pathways related to purpose-driven learning.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to the highest ethical standards for educational research. Participation was voluntary and informed consent was obtained from all individuals. Participants were provided with detailed information about the study's objectives, potential risks, and data use procedures. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained, and data were securely stored and anonymized in the reporting phase. Participants retained the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. Ethical clearance was secured from the university's Institutional Review Board, and all procedures complied with international guidelines emphasizing autonomy, beneficence, and justice.

Results

The landscape of higher education is evolving to meet the complex societal challenges of the 21st century, a shift that has given rise to the concept of purpose-driven learning (Dewey, 1916). In line with this emerging paradigm, the Aga Khan University Institute for Educational Development (AKU-IED) in East Africa exemplifies how higher education can contribute to societal development by addressing real-world problems and aligning its educational mission with broader social goals (Aga Khan University, n.d.). These findings demonstrate how AKU-IED's approach to purpose-driven learning fosters social impact in East Africa while overcoming contextual challenges typical of resource-constrained environments. The findings offer broader implications for universities aiming to adopt similar models.

AKU-IED's Contribution to Social Impact

Social Impact is at the core of AKU-IED's strategic plan, and its purpose-driven learning model is the university's focus on addressing critical societal challenges, particularly in underserved regions in East Africa. This strategic focus ensures that AKU-IED's initiatives align closely with community needs. By prioritizing the enhancement of educational access and quality in these areas—for example, offering flexible programme models (full-time and part-time), financial support, and access for special needs students—AKU-IED seeks to bridge educational inequities, a goal in line with global educational frameworks such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which emphasizes inclusive and equitable quality education (United Nations, 2015; Aga Khan University, 2022; Aga Khan University, 2021).

AKU-IED's strategy for empowering educators is anchored in a comprehensive model that integrates sustained reflection, practicum-based learning, and continuous professional development, as outlined in its Teaching and Learning Framework (Aga Khan University, 2015). This multifaceted approach equips teachers and school leaders with the practical tools and reflective insights necessary to not only improve educational outcomes but also to address broader social challenges. AKU-IED graduates have emerged as key advocates in areas such as environmental conservation, gender equity, literacy initiatives, and support for individuals with special needs (Aga Khan University, 2023). These educators leverage the skills and knowledge gained through ongoing professional development and practicum experiences to drive social change at both the local and systemic levels. As one participant expressed, "We don't just train teachers—we equip them to become leaders and change agents in their communities." This approach is consistent with Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory, which underscores the transformation of experience into actionable knowledge through active engagement, ultimately fostering educators who are not just practitioners but influential agents of change within their communities.

AKU-IED's interdisciplinary approach in its programmatic offering is a carefully crafted integration of various disciplines, including education, language, pluralism, and policy and leadership, which collectively reflect and address the societal challenges specific to East Africa. This multidisciplinary strategy is not arbitrary; it is a deliberate response to the priorities outlined in key development frameworks such as the African Union's Agenda 2063, the United Nations

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the East African Community Vision 2050. This model equips students with a well-rounded perspective on societal issues. A student noted, “The program goes beyond education; it allows us to explore language, community needs, and policies that help us address real challenges back home.” Faculty also underscored the program’s impact, with one member stating, “We are not just teaching educators; we’re shaping leaders who understand the interconnections between education and social, economic, and political factors essential for meaningful community impact.” Through this integrated approach, AKU-IED ensures graduates are well-prepared to drive transformative change across diverse sectors in East Africa and to address challenges such as poverty, gender inequality, political instability, and social equity (African Union Commission, 2015; United Nations, 2015; East African Community, 2016).

By aligning its educational offerings with these global and regional priorities, AKU-IED ensures that its graduates are equipped to contribute meaningfully to sectors such as education, governance, and social services (Aga Khan University, 2021). Klein (2020) highlights that such an interdisciplinary model fosters a holistic understanding of complex issues, preparing graduates to tackle multi-dimensional problems. This approach enables AKU-IED not only to address educational challenges but also to expand its societal reach, producing graduates capable of responding to broader crises, such as environmental degradation, political instability, and public health challenges. This alignment with key developmental frameworks ensures that the university’s curriculum is not only academically rigorous but also highly relevant to the socio-political and economic needs of East Africa.

AKU-IED explicitly and consciously focuses its admissions, project interventions, and research efforts on marginalized areas as a strategic approach to empowering underserved communities. These strategies are grounded in its institutional equity commitments and curriculum design principles (Aga Khan University, 2015). By prioritizing the inclusion of students from these regions and tailoring its interventions and research to address the specific needs of marginalized groups, the university aligns itself with Tanzania’s Vision 2025, which aims to reduce regional disparities in education and economic development (United Republic of Tanzania [URT], 2020). Faculty members reinforce this commitment, noting that “AKU-IED’s admissions and project focus aims not only to educate but to cultivate leaders from within communities that most need representation.” Alumni feedback suggests that support mechanisms provided by AKU-IED have enabled many to pursue higher education who might otherwise have been unable to do so due to financial constraints. Moreover, students report that financial assistance and mentorship provided by AKU-IED are instrumental in their academic success and community involvement, with many feeling empowered to reinvest their learning back into their communities.

Moreover, as one faculty report emphasizes, the university’s programs are designed to "empower individuals who will serve as catalysts for sustainable development within their local contexts" (Aga Khan University, 2020). This approach ensures that AKU-IED's initiatives contribute meaningfully to fostering leadership, enhancing educational access, and driving socio-economic empowerment within Tanzania's most underserved regions, aligning closely with national development goals. This targeted approach enables AKU-IED to contribute directly to national development goals by ensuring that its programs foster leadership, education, and socio-economic empowerment in areas most in need.

A longitudinal graduate tracer study indicates that AKU-IED graduates continue to utilize their training to drive impactful changes within their communities long after program completion (Aga Khan University, 2023). Alumni frequently assume leadership roles in initiatives focused on literacy, public health, and environmental conservation. Findings from the tracer study suggest that many graduates have founded local NGOs and educational initiatives, showcasing a sustained commitment to addressing regional challenges; others have moved into political leadership with a focus on enhancing community welfare. Additionally, a significant number of graduates advocate for gender equity, environmental conservation, and improved literacy levels within their regions. Many alumni credit AKU-IED's comprehensive training in leadership and community engagement as the foundation that empowers them to initiate and lead community-driven projects. As one alumnus stated, "Without the reflective and critical tools we were given, I would not have imagined starting my own education initiative back home" (Aga Khan University, 2023).

Feedback from partner communities reflects a strong appreciation for AKU-IED's tailored educational interventions, with community members highlighting visible improvements in local educational standards and increased civic engagement led by AKU-IED alumni. One community leader noted, "The teachers trained by AKU-IED don't just teach; they mentor and lead community initiatives, fostering a culture of learning that extends beyond the classroom." This sentiment was echoed by a local school director, who shared that "AKU-IED alumni bring unique perspectives and leadership skills, inspiring other teachers and students to participate actively in community life."

Further evidence comes from a parent who observed that "teachers trained by AKU-IED have elevated the quality of education in our area, and they instil values that encourage students to take pride in their community and give back." Such feedback triangulates the positive impact AKU-IED has on its partner communities, demonstrating that the university's approach not only addresses educational gaps but also fosters a culture of social responsibility, empowerment, and community involvement that aligns with the needs and expectations of the communities served.

AKU-IED encounters several challenges in implementing its purpose-driven learning model, stemming from limited resources, language barriers, and logistical constraints in reaching remote areas. However, an additional significant challenge lies in the traditional conceptualization of universities, which often prioritize academic activity, such as high publication output, research grants, and large student enrolment, as primary indicators of success. This conventional assessment model overlooks AKU-IED's broader social impact, community engagement, and contributions to societal development, which do not fit neatly into these traditional metrics.

As a result, AKU-IED's efforts to empower underserved communities and address pressing local needs through experiential learning and community-driven projects are not fully recognized within the broader academic landscape. To address these challenges, AKU-IED has implemented strategies such as forming partnerships with local NGOs and leveraging alumni networks to expand its reach. Additionally, digital platforms for remote learning and continuous faculty development have helped overcome logistical constraints, ensuring the university maintains high standards despite these limitations. However, broader acknowledgment and adaptation of

university assessment models to include social impact metrics could allow purpose-driven institutions like AKU-IED to gain the recognition they deserve for their transformative work in society.

By integrating marginalized communities into the core of its educational and research activities, AKU-IED exemplifies purpose-driven learning that not only addresses educational disparities but also promotes broader community development and empowerment. This conscious focus is critical to achieving sustainable social impact, as it directly engages those most affected by regional inequalities, preparing graduates to become leaders who can drive change in their communities.

Overcoming Contextual Challenges

Operating in resource-constrained environments presents significant challenges, yet AKU-IED has developed innovative strategies to navigate these obstacles. One critical strategy is the university's commitment to long-term, tailored professional development for educators. Rather than offering short-term training sessions, AKU-IED provides continuous support that helps teachers adapt new skills and practices over time (Aga Khan University, 2020). This ongoing engagement reflects Mezirow's (1991) Transformative Learning Theory, which emphasizes the importance of critical reflection and sustained support in fostering meaningful change. A participant emphasized, "Our program does not end with the workshop; we scaffold support to ensure that the teachers can apply what they've learned in real-world settings."

Flexibility and local relevance are also key to AKU-IED's success. The university designs its programs to be adaptable to the specific needs of local communities, ensuring that its educational interventions are both relevant and sustainable (Aga Khan University, 2015). For example, the leadership course training provided to educators addresses the acute shortage of skilled teachers in Tanzania, ensuring that graduates are equipped to address pressing societal issues. This flexibility resonates with Barth et al.'s (2007) findings, which suggest that purpose-driven learning initiatives enhance students' civic engagement and sense of responsibility by fostering local relevance and adaptability.

Strategic partnerships further enable AKU-IED to overcome contextual challenges. By collaborating with governments, local schools, and international organizations, the university accesses the resources and networks necessary to amplify its initiatives (Aga Khan University, 2020). These partnerships are particularly crucial in regions where infrastructure and funding are limited. As Nyong'o (2020) notes, partnerships between universities and communities can foster social innovation, allowing institutions to create practical solutions to local challenges. For AKU-IED, these collaborations not only enhance its programs but also contribute to a broader societal impact by ensuring that its initiatives are scalable and sustainable.

Moreover, AKU-IED's focus on quality over quantity in its educational programs sets it apart. Instead of prioritizing the number of graduates, the university emphasizes the development of highly skilled individuals who can lead systemic change in their communities. This focus aligns with Astin's (1993) argument that education should prioritize both academic excellence and personal development, ensuring that graduates are equipped to make meaningful contributions to society.

Implications for Resource-Constrained Universities

The findings from AKU-IED's case offer valuable insights for universities in other resource-constrained settings. One key lesson is the importance of designing educational programs that are localized and context specific. Research suggests that universities should tailor their curricula to meet the specific needs of the communities they serve, as AKU-IED has done by aligning its programs with the labour market and societal demands in East Africa (Komba, 2021; Aga Khan University, 2021). By doing so, universities can ensure that their graduates are not only employable but also capable of driving social change. Another critical insight is the necessity of long-term engagement and continuous support for educators. AKU-IED's success in sustaining improvements in educational quality underscores the importance of providing ongoing professional development, rather than short-term interventions (Aga Khan University, 2020). This approach reflects Vygotsky's (1978) Social Constructivist Theory, which highlights the importance of collaboration and social interactions in the learning process. By fostering long-term relationships with educators and community leaders, universities can ensure that their programs have a lasting impact.

Interdisciplinary education is also essential in addressing complex societal challenges. AKU-IED's integration of education, healthcare, education, language, pluralism, and policy and leadership training prepares graduates to confront multiple issues simultaneously, from educational reform to public health (Aga Khan University, 2015). As Klein (2020) suggests, interdisciplinary approaches foster a holistic understanding of societal problems, enabling graduates to develop innovative solutions that address multiple facets of community development. Universities in other contexts can adopt this model to ensure that their graduates are prepared to tackle a broad spectrum of societal challenges. Finally, strategic partnerships are critical for universities operating in resource-constrained environments. By collaborating with governments, NGOs, and international organizations, universities can access the resources and expertise needed to scale their initiatives. Bryson (2020) emphasizes that the complexity of social impact requires innovative approaches to partnerships, which can help universities navigate resource limitations and enhance their societal contributions. AKU-IED's success in leveraging partnerships demonstrates how these collaborations can amplify the university's impact, providing a blueprint for other institutions to follow.

The case of AKU-IED illustrates the transformative potential of purpose-driven learning in higher education. By aligning its educational mission with societal needs, AKU-IED has made significant contributions to social impact in East Africa, particularly in underserved regions. Its strategies—tailored professional development, flexible program design, interdisciplinary education, and strategic partnerships—offer valuable lessons for universities in similar contexts. As universities around the world increasingly recognize their role in fostering societal development, the lessons from AKU-IED highlight the importance of aligning educational practices with real-world challenges. Purpose-driven learning, as Dewey (1916) argues, represents a shift in higher education toward a more engaged and socially responsible model. By adopting this model, universities can enhance their contributions to societal well-being, ensuring that their graduates are equipped not only with academic knowledge but also with the skills and ethical foundation necessary to drive positive change in their communities.

In conclusion, purpose-driven learning offers a pathway for universities to align their programs with global development agendas, such as the SDGs, while addressing local challenges in resource-constrained environments. As AKU-IED demonstrates, the integration of experiential learning, critical thinking, and interdisciplinary approaches can transform universities into powerful agents of social change, capable of addressing the pressing challenges facing their communities and contributing to sustainable development at a global scale.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide a comprehensive examination of how the Aga Khan University Institute for Educational Development (AKU-IED) implements a purpose-driven learning model in East Africa, contributing to social impact through the empowerment of educators, interdisciplinary collaboration, and community engagement. These findings align with, extend, and, in some cases, introduce new perspectives to the existing literature on purpose-driven learning and the role of higher education in fostering societal development. The findings affirm much of the current literature on purpose-driven learning, particularly regarding its emphasis on aligning education with societal needs. For example, the core elements of AKU-IED's model—mission and vision alignment, curriculum design, and community engagement—are well-established in the literature as critical components of purpose-driven universities (Astin, 1993; Dewey, 1916). Astin's (1993) emphasis on aligning academic learning with broader social goals is reflected in AKU-IED's focus on addressing real-world challenges in marginalized regions of East Africa, as documented in its teaching framework and institutional strategy (Aga Khan University, 2015; 2022).

The university's interdisciplinary approach is also consistent with the literature. Klein (2020) advocates for interdisciplinary approaches as essential in fostering a holistic understanding of complex societal challenges. AKU-IED's integration of education, policy, language, pluralism, and leadership training prepares graduates to tackle a range of issues—from improving educational outcomes to addressing public health concerns. This interdisciplinary model is aligned with the broader educational goal of producing graduates who can contribute to various sectors of society, a concept widely supported in the literature on transformative education (Barth et al., 2007). AKU-IED's use of experiential learning as a core component of its teacher development programs further aligns with Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory. The university's approach of providing continuous, long-term professional development for educators reflects Kolb's assertion that knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. By scaffolding support for teachers beyond initial training workshops—through mechanisms detailed in its professional development policy (Aga Khan University, 2020)—AKU-IED ensures that educators are able to reflect on their practices, adapt to new challenges, and foster critical thinking and leadership in their classrooms. This aligns with Mezirow's (1991) Transformative Learning Theory, which underscores the importance of critical reflection in the learning process.

While the findings align with much of the existing literature, they also extend the conversation on purpose-driven learning by providing a case study of its application in a resource-constrained environment. The context in which AKU-IED operates—East Africa—poses unique challenges that are not always addressed in the broader discourse on purpose-driven learning, which tends to focus on well-resourced institutions in developed countries (Altbach & de Wit, 2021). The strategies that AKU-IED has employed to overcome these challenges, including its emphasis on flexibility, local relevance, and strategic partnerships, provide new insights into how purpose-

driven learning can be adapted to meet the needs of universities in low-resource settings. The integration of long-term professional development for educators as a strategy for sustaining educational quality in marginalized regions also extends the literature on purpose-driven learning. Most studies on professional development in higher education emphasize short-term interventions or workshops (Bryson, 2020). In contrast, AKU-IED's model of sustained support, which provides continuous mentorship and scaffolding, demonstrates that long-term engagement is critical for fostering lasting social impact in under-resourced areas. This approach aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) Social Constructivist Theory, which highlights the role of social interaction and collaboration in learning but extends it by showing how sustained mentorship can be institutionalized in purpose-driven learning models (Aga Khan University, 2020).

Moreover, AKU-IED's ability to leverage strategic partnerships with local governments, NGOs, and international organizations contributes to the literature on the role of collaboration in higher education. Nyong'o (2020) has argued that partnerships are essential for driving social innovation, particularly in developing regions. AKU-IED's success in utilizing these partnerships to extend its reach and amplify its impact—through both funded projects and alumni networks—provides a practical example of how universities can operationalize these collaborations. This insight is particularly relevant for institutions in resource-constrained settings, which often face significant barriers to accessing funding and other resources. One of the more novel aspects of AKU-IED's approach is its focus on producing highly skilled graduates who are positioned as leaders and change agents in their communities, rather than merely increasing the number of graduates produced. While much of the literature on higher education, particularly in developing countries, emphasizes the need to scale up access and enrolment (Altbach & de Wit, 2021), AKU-IED prioritizes quality over quantity. This strategic decision diverges from traditional metrics of success in higher education, which often prioritize enrolment numbers or graduation rates. Instead, AKU-IED's focus on producing graduates who are equipped to lead systemic change in their communities—evidenced by tracer study outcomes (Aga Khan University, 2023)—provides a new perspective on how higher education can contribute to societal development, particularly in regions with limited resources.

Furthermore, the study introduces the concept of sustained, context-specific mentorship as a critical factor in fostering leadership and social impact in resource-constrained settings. While the importance of mentorship is well-documented in literature, few studies have explored how this can be systematically integrated into purpose-driven learning models over the long term, particularly in developing regions. AKU-IED's approach demonstrates that continuous, contextually relevant support—reflected in the lived experiences of its graduates—is essential for ensuring that educators can apply the skills they have learned and lead meaningful change in their communities. This finding adds to the growing body of research that calls for more innovative and context-sensitive approaches to professional development in higher education (Bryson, 2020). Another novel contribution of this study is the examination of how purpose-driven learning models can be adapted to address national and regional development goals, such as Tanzania's Vision 2025 (United Republic of Tanzania, 2020). While much of the literature on purpose-driven learning focuses on global frameworks like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), this study provides a concrete example of how a university can align its educational mission with specific national priorities. AKU-IED's alignment with Tanzania's Vision 2025 demonstrates that

purpose-driven learning models must be flexible enough to adapt to both global and local contexts, offering a valuable extension to the literature on higher education and development.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the evolving discourse on purpose-driven learning (PDL) by offering empirical insights into its implementation within a resource-constrained higher education context. Drawing on the case of the Aga Khan University Institute for Educational Development (AKU-IED), the findings demonstrate that PDL can be effectively enacted to yield meaningful and sustainable social impacts, even in environments facing systemic limitations. Key contributions of the study include the identification of three interrelated strategies central to AKU-IED's success: sustained professional development, contextually grounded mentorship, and flexible, interdisciplinary programming. These strategies collectively support a model of higher education that is not only academically rigorous but also responsive to local and global development priorities. By aligning its institutional mission with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and national visions such as Tanzania's Vision 2025, AKU-IED exemplifies how universities can serve as catalysts for educational equity and community transformation.

Importantly, the findings offer practical implications for similarly positioned institutions seeking to implement PDL approaches. Strategic partnerships, a deliberate emphasis on quality over scale, and continuous engagement with local educators and communities emerged as essential enablers of impact. AKU-IED's model suggests that graduates can be cultivated as socially responsive change agents through intentional and sustained pedagogical commitments. While the study yields significant insights, it is not without limitations. The focus on a single institutional case within a specific regional context may constrain the broader applicability of its conclusions, particularly given the researcher was an actor inside that university. Furthermore, the study's reliance on qualitative methods, though rich in narrative depth, limits the ability to systematically track long-term societal outcomes associated with PDL. These limitations point to valuable avenues for future research.

Subsequent studies might pursue comparative case analyses across institutions operating in diverse resource-constrained settings to better understand how PDL models can be adapted, scaled, and sustained globally. Longitudinal and mixed-methods designs could also enhance understanding of the extended impacts of PDL on communities and educational systems. In sum, this study advances both theoretical and practical understandings of how higher education institutions can address complex societal challenges through purpose-driven learning. It underscores the need for contextually grounded, innovative, and partnership-oriented approaches to higher education reform, particularly in the Global South, where such transformations are most urgently needed.

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were developed independently by the authors through manual analysis and interpretation. The study complied with rigorous ethical standards, having received approval from the Aga Khan University Ethical Review Board. Participation was entirely voluntary, with informed consent obtained from all participants, and confidentiality maintained in accordance with both institutional and international ethical guidelines. Participants were fully informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. We extend our sincere gratitude to all participants for their invaluable contributions to this study.

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