Makerere University's Research-Led Agenda through the Lens of the Service Marketing Triangle

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Abstract

Using the Service Marketing Triangle framework, this study analysed Makerere University's external, internal, and interactive marketing of its research-led agenda to identify key misalignments. A narrative literature review design was employed to synthesize theoretical and empirical studies, policy documents, institutional repositories, and reports accessed through major online databases. The findings show that externally, Makerere University deploys its strategic plan, research policy, branding initiatives, and communication strategies to articulate a research-led value proposition. Internally, the university invests in staff training, motivation, and a research-enabling environment. Interactively, academic staff provide graduate supervision and mentorship, generate research outputs, and engage in knowledge creation and collaboration. However, significant misalignments persist, including overloaded, under-resourced, and demoralized staff operating within research-inefficient systems as they supervise graduate students, manage research grants, and collaborate with partners. These gaps weaken the university's impact on students, government, policymakers, donors, and communities. The study recommends that Makerere University improves recalibration of its external, internal, and interactive marketing efforts to align the research-led agenda with stakeholder expectations.

Introduction

The increasing marketization of higher education, alongside advances in services marketing, positions higher education institutions at the centre of global scrutiny (Mamdani, 2007). Higher education is a complex service that is simultaneously produced and consumed, relies heavily on human capital, is co-created by staff and students, and delivers largely intangible benefits (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2011). These traits drive universities to adopt service-industry marketing models to enhance the quality, relevance, and competitiveness of their offerings (Grönroos, 2017; Vargo & Lusch, 2016). In Africa, rising demand for higher education compels universities to strategically market their services to remain competitive and sustainable (Cloete et al., 2015).

Makerere University has a long-standing reputation for excellence and positions itself as a knowledge creator, innovator, international collaborator, and producer of employable graduates (Makerere University, 2020). In its ongoing transformation, the university seeks to become a research and innovation hub that aligns with the expectations of internal and external stakeholders (Mak-RIF, 2024). At the same time,

persistent systemic challenges within the research ecosystem such as; heavy workloads, limited institutional support, administrative inefficiencies, and low research impact, signal misalignment in how the university sets, enables, and delivers its research-led agenda (Nakimuli & Lubaale, 2023; Muhangi, 2022; Wamala & Oonyu, 2021; Nakayiwa, 2021). Applying the Service Marketing Triangle (SMT) framework therefore, offers a structured way to analyse Makerere University's external, internal, and interactive marketing of its research mission and to uncover the misalignments that undermine its research-led aspirations.

Statement of the Problem

Externally, Makerere University presents itself as a research powerhouse aligned with the National Development Plan III and the Sustainable Development Goals (Makerere University, 2024; National Planning Authority, 2020; United Nations, 2015). This positioning portrays the institution as a trusted knowledge partner for students, government, industry, donors, and communities (Makerere University, 2024; Mak-RIF, 2024). However, there are growing concerns that the internal structures and practices essential to sustain this research-led identity are not adequately aligned with the projected image. Persistent challenges, such as heavy workloads, limited institutional support, prolonged graduate student timelines, administrative inefficiencies, inadequate research infrastructure, and relatively low research impact continue to constrain the university's research performance (JEPA Africa, 2025; Teferra, 2025; Nakimuli & Lubaale, 2023; Wamala & Oonyu, 2021; Cloete et al., 2015). These systemic constraints suggest breaks in the university's promise–enablement–delivery chain. This underscores the need for a SMT-based analysis to identify misalignments and inform targeted interventions (Zeithaml et al., 2018).

Study Objectives

This study was guided by the following objectives:

1. To examine how Makerere University externally markets its research-led agenda.
2. To assess how Makerere University internally markets its research-led agenda.
3. To analyse how Makerere University interactively markets its research-led agenda.
4. To determine the misalignments in Makerere University's research-led SMT.

Methodology

Guided by the SMT, this study employed a narrative literature review design to critically examine the alignment between Makerere University's research-led agenda and its stakeholder engagement strategies (Torraco, 2005). Relevant literature was systematically sourced from Makerere University's institutional repository, Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, and African Journals Online, as well as key institutional documents such as strategic plans, the Research Agenda, and policy briefs. Boolean operators were used to combine keywords including "Service Marketing Triangle," "higher education," "research-led agenda," "stakeholder engagement," and "Makerere University," thereby ensuring a focused yet comprehensive search.

Inclusion criteria were developed to guide the selection, organization, synthesis, and critical appraisal of sources within the SMT conceptual framework (Green

et al., 2006). A matrix-based mapping approach was then used to organize citation details and themes corresponding to external, internal, and interactive marketing functions and to document identified misalignments. Thematic synthesis facilitated the identification of recurring patterns, gaps, and inconsistencies across the three SMT domains (Torraco, 2005). Although narrative reviews inherently lack the procedural standardization of systematic reviews (Ferrari, 2015), this design supported a rigorous analytical and interpretive examination of how Makerere University's strategic research initiatives align with stakeholder engagement practices. Ethical rigor was maintained by appropriately acknowledging all sources, including publicly accessible institutional documents (Green et al., 2006).

Theoretical Underpinning

The SMT framework explains how service organizations fulfil their promises by aligning external, internal, and interactive marketing functions to ensure high-quality service delivery (Zeithaml et al., 2010). The framework involves three key stakeholders: management, employees, and customers (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2011). External marketing focuses on communicating organizational promises to customers; internal marketing centres on preparing and supporting employees to deliver these promises; and interactive marketing is the actual service delivery interactions between employees and customers (Zeithaml et al., 2018). When the three elements align effectively, they enhance customer experience, loyalty, and organizational performance (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Conversely, misalignment in the three marketing functions undermines institutional credibility and service quality (Grönroos, 2007). This study used the SMT as a diagnostic tool to identify gaps in Makerere University's promise-enablement-delivery chain, analyse alignment between rhetorical promises and operational factors, and highlight critical moments when promises translate into actual service delivery.

Literature Review

The SMT views service delivery as an interdependent relationship among the organization, employees, and customers (Zeithaml et al., 2018). External marketing entails communicating the institution's value proposition to stakeholders. For instance, Makerere University positions itself as a premier research institution to build legitimacy, attract funding, and boost global visibility. Literature confirms a strong positive correlation between external marketing and internationalization, resource mobilization, and partnerships in higher education (Altbach & de Wit, 2018; Kehm & Teichler, 2007). The university's Strategic Plan (2020-2030) underscores the importance of external engagement for strengthening its research profile (Makerere University, 2020).

Internal marketing involves motivating, empowering, and training employees while fostering a supportive work environment (Brown et al., 2025). This includes providing resources, mentorship, incentives, and enabling policies (Kotler & Fox, 1995). Studies on African higher education institutions reveal challenges such as underfunding, limited mentorship, and heavy teaching loads that restrict research productivity (Atibuni et al., 2017; Muriisa, 2015). Without robust internal marketing, Makerere University's research-led agenda risks remaining aspirational rather than impactful.

Interactive marketing covers staff-customer interactions such as student supervision, knowledge transfer, policy engagement, and collaboration with industry and communities (Kurniatun & Heriyati, 2012). Effective interactive marketing depends on

staff competence, credibility, empathy, and responsiveness (Asyiah et al., 2024). Positive staff-student engagement enhances research outcomes, graduate employability, and innovation (Scott, 2009; Young & Sax, 2009). It also ensures alignment with national development priorities, securing research relevance (National Planning Authority, 2020).

The SMT emphasizes the need for alignment across its three elements (Grönroos, 2015). Misalignment, such as projecting a strong research identity without internal support, creates service delivery gaps and threatens organizational reputation (Alsayah, 2022; Lafuente-Ruiz-de-Sabando et al., 2018). Alignment ensures that strategic goals, staff capacity, motivation, and stakeholder engagement mutually reinforce one another (Savga et al., 2018). Nevertheless, formal promises may mask real-time service failures, particularly in African universities, where systemic constraints limit staff capacity to meet research output pledges (Teferra, 2025; Muriisa, 2015; Mamdani, 2007).

Therefore, the success of Makerere University's research-led agenda depends on strategic branding, partnerships, and international visibility; robust capacity-building, motivation, and supportive internal policies; and active supervision, community engagement, and collaborative knowledge creation (Makerere University, 2020). Rising societal demand for African universities underscores the need for coherent service positioning (Cloete et al., 2015). Makerere University's transition into a research-led institution requires integrated service delivery aligned with stakeholder expectations (Mbati & Simba, 2018; Ng & Forbes, 2009). Thus, addressing the university's SMT misalignments is central to its research-led agenda pursuit.

Empirical studies have applied the SMT across education contexts to examine promising ethics and competitive advantage in educational services (Prihartono, 2021), university staff as part-time marketers (Marques & Estima, 2022), the effects of service quality on student satisfaction in higher learning institutions (Kobero & Swallehe, 2022), ethics in educational promises (Kurniatun & Heriyati, 2012), relational marketing in education services (Asyiah et al., 2024), and the effect of internal marketing strategy on employee performance in public universities (Muriuki, 2018). These studies analyse different elements of the SMT, which is insightful. However, they fall short of applying the SMT to the university's research-led agenda for the purpose of diagnosing systemic misalignments across external, internal, and interactive research functions.

In Uganda, obtained research on higher education marketing addressed market orientation (Lamaro et al., 2025), higher education branding (Arinaitwe & Abaho, 2025), digital marketing tools (Ndagire et al., 2024), internal marketing (Injikuru, 2024), effect of marketing on enrolment (Murungi, 2024), and marketing strategies and higher education performance (Musiimenta, 2017). Whereas this rich and emerging scholarly work on Uganda's higher education marketing addresses discrete marketing functions, they do not integrate all three SMT marketing functions within the country's higher education context. Secondly, no study comprehensively applied the framework to a university's research agenda. So, on top of addressing these gaps, this study responds to calls for applied higher education frameworks (Moullin et al., 2020; Soicher et al., 2020).

Results

This section presents the findings of the narrative literature review, organized according to the four study objectives.

External Marketing: Setting the Research-led Promise

Makerere University articulates its research-led identity primarily through its Strategic Plan (2020-2030) and its Research Agenda (2025/26-2029/30). The two documents emphasize high-impact research, strengthened graduate training, and robust industry and community partnerships (Makerere University, 2020, 2024). These strategic documents serve as core external marketing tools that communicate the university's research value proposition to students, funders, policymakers, and the wider public. The promise is further amplified through slogans that emphasize innovative, Africa-led, and globally relevant solutions; such as "An institution that offers innovative, Africa-led, globally relevant solutions" and "Research and innovation leadership in priority areas such as public health, climate change, agriculture, social sciences, and indigenous knowledge systems" (Makerere University, 2020, 2023). In a period of four months; July, August, September, and October 2025, Makerere University signed seven MoUs with a mix of academic institutions, NGO partners, private sector firms, and international organisations (Makerere University News, 2025). This signals readiness for collaborative research with a diverse range of partners (Makerere University News, 2025).

From 2019, the Government of Uganda (GoU) has offered an annual research and innovation fund to the university through the Makerere University Research and Innovation Fund (Mak-RIF). Since then, Mak-RIF has supported over 1,300 projects, promoted commercialization efforts, and strengthened collaborations with government agencies and communities (Mak-RIF, 2023). These achievements are frequently showcased in institutional and college annual reports, press releases, exhibitions, and other public platforms (Mak-RIF, 2025). At college level, research milestones are actively publicized, including College of Education & External Studies (CEES) dissemination of work on curricula, soft skills, and science education; College of Humanities & Social Sciences (CHUSS) engagement with cultural institutions and NGOs; College of Computing & Information Science's (CoCIS) highlights of ICT innovations; and Collage of Agriculture & Environmental Studies (CAES) presentation of climate-smart agriculture and food security research involving farmers and development partners (CEES, 2022; CHUSS, 2024; CoCIS, 2022; CAES, 2023).

In addition, Mak-RIF has also institutionalized standardized communication tools such as policy briefs, press releases, media engagements, and branding guidelines to enhance the visibility and consistency of research dissemination (Mak-RIF, 2022). The institutional repository (MakIR) provides open access to publications and research data, while search engine optimization strategies boost the university's global visibility (MakIR, n.d.; Mak-RIF, 2023). Strategic collaborations with organizations such as UNICEF, the International Rescue Committee, and Oregon State University, alongside engagement in journals, conferences, and co-creation labs, further consolidate Makerere University's external research profile (Makerere University, 2023–2025; University of Oregon, n.d.; Mak-RIF, 2025; CoCIS, 2024).

Internal Marketing: Enabling the Research-Led Promise

Internally, Makerere university communicates its research agenda through strategic documents that orient staff toward eight thematic research areas aligned with national development priorities (Makerere University, 2024). Mak-Rif has played a central role in demystifying research and motivating staff participation by offering

competitive grants and training on grant writing and management (Mak-RIF, 2024, 2025). Colleges routinely celebrate research achievements in their annual reports and organize capacity-building initiatives such as grant-writing workshops, research symposia, and collaborative ICT and education projects (CHUSS, 2022, 2024; CoCIS, 2022, 2023; Namyalo, 2022; University of Bergen, 2021).

Graduate supervision capacity is strengthened through training offered by the Directorate of Graduate Training and partners such as the Centre for Teaching and Learning Support, CARTA, and EAST-SPARK, focusing on expectation management, supervision approaches, ethics, and diversity (CoNS, 2024; DGT, 2024; Makerere University News, 2025a). A policy under development aims to make supervision training mandatory, which signals institutional commitment to quality postgraduate mentoring. The university further invests in administrative and research management capacity through staff training in grants management, budgeting, and compliance. It does this by leveraging external initiatives such as ARUA Early-Career Research Fellowships and Mak-MSU collaborations (Makerere University, 2025; Mak-RIF, 2024; CHUSS, 2024).

Recognition programmes, including the Vice-Chancellor's Research Excellence Awards, highlight initiatives to motivate exemplary researchers thereby contributing to a culture that values research excellence (Makerere University, 2025; SoftPower News, 2023). In addition, digital systems such as the Grants Management System, Grants Management Committee structures, the Financial Management System, and the Digital Academic Records and Processes platform, offer support to the staff in grants call identification, proposal preparation, compliance, funds tracking, requisitions, budgeting, and supervisory processes (Makerere University, n.d., 2024). Collectively, these initiatives constitute key internal marketing mechanisms intended to enable the research-led promise.

Interactive Marketing: Delivering the Research-Led Promise

Makerere University aims to increase graduate enrolment from 12% to 30% by 2030, and recent trends show notable progress toward this target (Makerere University News, 2023). Graduate enrolment grew by nearly 18% in the 2023/24 academic year and by 28.8% between 2020 and 2025, following a pandemic-related dip, with numbers rising from 3,766 in 2021 to 5,914 in 2024 (MFPED, 2024; Makerere University News, 2024; Mak-RIF, 2024). Similarly, graduation statistics indicate steady increases in master's and PhD completions between 2022 and 2025. This suggests improved delivery of the research-led promise at the level of student outcomes (DGT, 2025; Makerere University Graduation Statistics, 2022-2025).

Staff increasingly integrate research into teaching and supervision, which encourages student involvement in research projects, grant writing, and field-based learning (Makerere University, 2024). Knowledge-based supervision approaches allow supervisors to tailor their guidance to individual student needs, while reforms such as cohort-based PhD models, structured mentorship, and digital tracking mechanisms are reported to enhance student progress (Makerere University, 2025b; DGT, 2025). Supervisors also support students through academic writing and conference presentation training, complemented by digital platforms such as RIMS and e-supervision systems that streamline proposal reviews, meetings, and feedback (DGT, 2025; MakSPH, 2025; CoNAS, 2024; Makerere University, 2025). Graduate seminar series

across CEES, CHUSS, and MakSPH provide additional interactive spaces for students to present and refine work in progress (CHUSS, 2025; MakSPH, 2024; Makerere University, 2025a).

Mak-RIF has directly supported 117 PhD students through research grants, while the CABUTE programme at CEES has enhanced research training and supervision quality, particularly in open and distance learning contexts (Makerere University News, 2023; CEES, n.d.). International collaborations, including Sida-Mak Phase V, NORHED networks, UNICEF partnerships, joint supervision initiatives, NORAD-funded consortia, and two World Bank-funded African Centres of Excellence; further demonstrate the interactive marketing function by exposing staff and students to global standards and expanding interdisciplinary research and industry linkages (Makerere University, 2023; Sida, 2023; NORAD, 2022; UNICEF & Makerere University, 2023; University of Bergen, 2022a, 2022b; World Bank, 2023).

Finally, community-based initiatives such as COBERS, youth entrepreneurship training, and Social Innovation in Health fellowships demonstrate how research is translated into tangible societal impact. CEES trained more than 500 youths in action-oriented entrepreneurship (CEES, 2023). MakSPH's Social Innovation in Health (SIHI) supports community innovators (SIHI Uganda, n.d.). CHUSS, CoCIS, and CAES undertake diverse community engaged initiatives including ICT innovation, cultural transformation, and climate-smart agriculture (CAES, 2023; Makerere University, 2025; Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, 2022). Such initiatives demonstrate delivery of the university's research-led promise. Figure 1 illustrates Makerere University's research-led SMT.
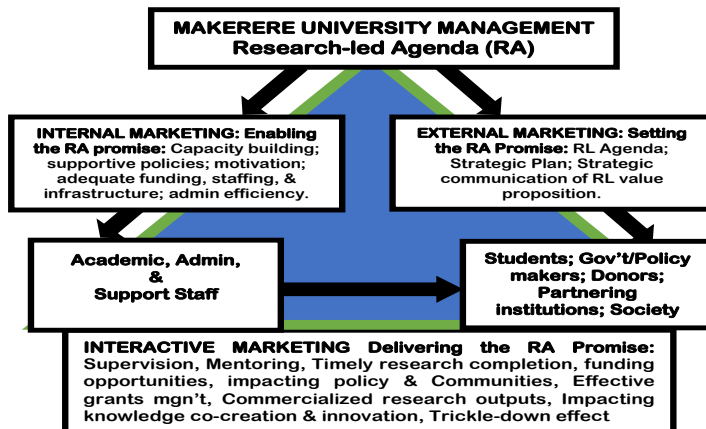

Fig. 1: Mak's Research-Led Service Marketing Triangle

Misalignment in the Research-Led Promise-Enablement-Delivery Chain

Despite the notable progress highlighted above, several misalignments continue to beleaguer Makerere University's capacity to fully deliver its research-led mandate. A central challenge is insufficient supervision and mentoring capacity, with departments across colleges reporting limited numbers of qualified supervisors relative to the rapidly growing graduate enrolment (DRGT, 2023). Academic staff are overworked, and many still lack adequate supervision training, mentorship opportunities, and access

to essential research infrastructure (Makerere University, 2022, 2023, 2024; Nakayiwa, 2021; Muhangi, 2022; Muwanga et al., 2020; Mamdani, 2007). Restricted access to laboratories, ICT facilities, scholarly journals, and research funding compels many graduate students to rely heavily on personal resources. This contributes to extended candidature cases, delayed feedback, weak supervisory relationships, and diminished research quality (Makerere University News, 2025).

The Office of the Auditor General (2025) reported that more than 400 graduate students exceeded their study timelines, largely due to supervision delays. Completion rates remain low, with only 63% of master's and 31.5% of PhD cohorts graduating in the period 2013/14–2020/21 (Nile Post, 2025), and only 41% of PhD students completing on time (Makerere University News, 2025). These delays erode student confidence in the university's research promise, which signal misalignment between rhetoric and delivery.

Administrative inefficiencies compound the problem further. These include procurement bottlenecks, slow absorption of allocated funds, and delays in accessing essential research supplies, which all combined, frustrate both students and supervisors (MFPED, 2024; Office of the Auditor General, 2023). Research timelines are frequently disrupted by slow ethics approvals, and delays in proposal vetting, dissertation examination, and viva scheduling (DRGT, 2023). This undermines students' and donor confidence, which strains institutional relationships (World Bank, 2023).

Further misalignment is evident in the dissemination and utilization of research outputs. Although Mak-RIF and ARUA-supported projects generate valuable research, dissemination remains fragmented and inconsistent (Makerere University, 2024). Weak communication strategies and inadequate packaging of research findings limit societal uptake and policy influence (NPA, 2023; Makerere University, 2021; Nandudu, 2025). For example, despite Mak-RIF's support to 15 commercialization projects, only 1.2% progressed beyond prototype stage, indicating gaps in translating research ideas into market-ready innovations. Many researchers have limited skills in business development, intellectual property and regulation, which constrains commercialization and partnership opportunities (Mak-RIF, 2025).

Heavy dependence on donor funding causes misalignments between research priorities and national needs. Recent shocks such as the freezing of U.S. aid have stalled major projects, revealing fragility in the current funding model (Foreign Policy, 2025; Makerere University, 2024; HEJNU, 2025). Persistent staffing crisis pose additional threat to the university's research-led ambitions. Makerere University operates at 40-52% of its approved staff establishment, with acute shortages at senior academic ranks (Campus Bee, 2024; Parliament Watch, 2024; UBC, 2025).

Staff attrition, mandatory retirement at 60 years, promotion delays, and slow recruitment exacerbate these gaps. Promotion bottlenecks generate staff frustration and, in some cases, litigation (URN, 2018, 2023, 2024; Daily Monitor, 2019, 2023; ULII, 2019). Besides, the mandatory retirement age at 60 contributes to the loss of experienced supervisors and mentors. Replacement is often slow or unfeasible because of a limited pool of qualified candidates (The Observer, 2025; Nantambi, 2012). For instance, in laboratory-based programmes, staffing shortages have been severe enough to trigger suspension of some accreditations (Campus Bee, 2024).

Given funders' expectations for institutional stability and research leadership, such staffing constraints negatively affect supervision capacity, grant performance,

publication output, research collaborations, and overall research-led reputation (Hlatshwayo, 2024; EduRank, 2025; Azikuru et al., 2022; Mushemeza, 2016). Collectively, these issues suggest significant misalignment within Makerere University's SMT, particularly between the externally projected research-led promise and the internal and interactive capacities required to sustain the promise. Figure 2 shows the university's misaligned research-led SMT.
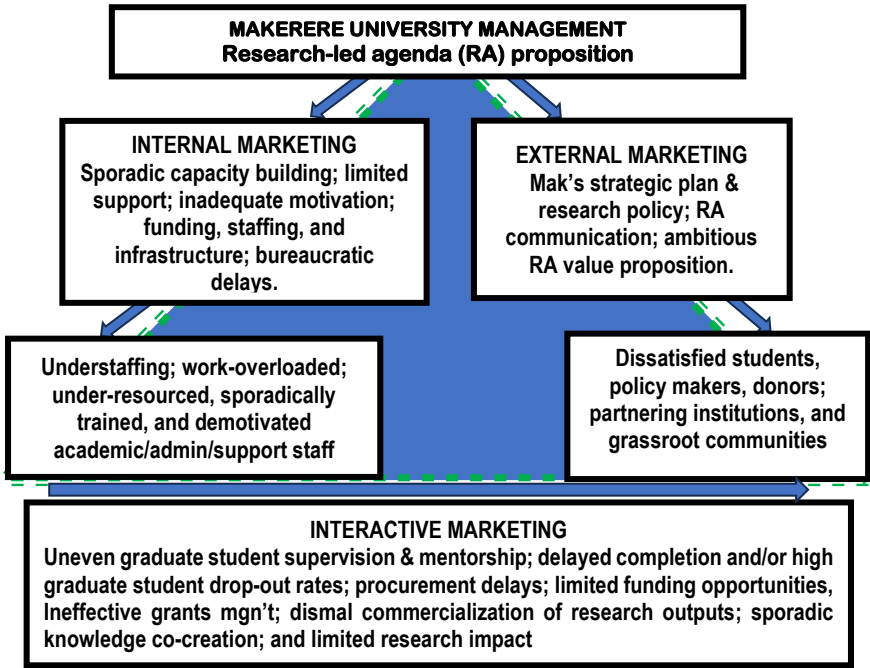

MAKERERE UNIVERSITY MANAGEMENT
Research-led agenda (RA) proposition

INTERNAL MARKETING
Sporadic capacity building; limited support; inadequate motivation; funding, staffing, and infrastructure; bureaucratic delays.

EXTERNAL MARKETING
Mak's strategic plan & research policy; RA communication; ambitious RA value proposition.

Understaffing; work-overloaded; under-resourced, sporadically trained, and demotivated academic/admin/support staff

Dissatisfied students, policy makers, donors; partnering institutions, and grassroot communities

INTERACTIVE MARKETING
Uneven graduate student supervision & mentorship; delayed completion and/or high graduate student drop-out rates; procurement delays; limited funding opportunities, Ineffective grants mgn't; dismal commercialization of research outputs; sporadic knowledge co-creation; and limited research impact

Fig. 2: Mak's Misaligned Research-led Service Marketing Triangle

Conclusion

This study highlights the critical interplay among institutional strategy, staff capability, and stakeholder engagement in sustaining a viable research-led university model. Using the Service Marketing Triangle as a diagnostic lens, the analysis shows how Makerere University sets its research-led promise through strategic plans and branding, seeks to enable that promise through internal capacity-building and digital systems, and delivers it through graduate training, research collaborations, and community engagement (Zeithaml et al., 2018; Makerere University, 2020, 2024; Mak-RIF, 2023, 2025). However, persistent challenges, such as supervision overload, bureaucratic delays, unstable and donor-dependent funding, staffing shortages, and limited commercialization of research outputs, undermine alignment across the promise-enablement-delivery chain. This threatens the sustainability of the research-led agenda (DRGT, 2023; Office of the Auditor General, 2023, 2025; HEJNU, 2025; Mak-RIF, 2025). Addressing these misalignments is thus essential if Makerere University is to consolidate

its position as a research-led institution that effectively responds to national and global development priorities.

Recommendations

In light of the identified misalignments, the study recommends that Makerere University:

- Strengthens graduate supervision capacity by expanding supervisor training, improving supervisor-to-student ratios, and scaling up digital supervision and research management systems such as RIMS and e-supervision platforms.
- Streamlines its administrative processes to reduce bureaucratic delays in procurement, ethics review, proposal vetting, dissertation examination, and viva scheduling. This can safeguard research timelines and donor confidence (DRGT, 2023; MFPED, 2024; Office of the Auditor General, 2023).
- Enhances community and stakeholder engagement through structured feedback mechanisms, coordinated dissemination strategies, and improved packaging of research findings for policy, industry, and community audiences (Makerere University, 2021, 2024; NPA, 2023; Nandudu, 2025).
- Diversifies and stabilizes funding sources to reduce overreliance on external donors, aligns research priorities more closely with national development needs, and mitigates the impact of abrupt funding disruptions (Foreign Policy, 2025; HEJNU, 2025).
- Addresses staffing gaps by accelerating recruitment and promotions, revisiting the mandatory retirement age at 60, improving remuneration and working conditions, and strengthening academic career pathways, especially at senior ranks (Campus Bee, 2024; Parliament Watch, 2024; The Observer, 2025).
- Invests in graduate training pipelines and mentorship schemes that build long-term research and supervision capacity, including targeted support for early-career researchers and structured succession planning (Azikuru et al., 2022; Hlatshwayo, 2024).
- Commissions an institution-wide mixed-methods study to systematically examine the research-led promise-enablement-delivery chain through a robust baseline for monitoring SMT alignment and informing future reforms (Moullin et al., 2020; Soicher et al., 2020).

These measures, if executed in an integrated manner, would help recalibrate Makerere University's external, internal, and interactive marketing functions to close critical SMT gaps and strengthen the university's research-led trajectory.

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