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Community-Based Experiential Learning as a Missing Pillar of Competence-Based Higher Education in Uganda: Lessons from Northern Uganda

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Research Article

Keywords: competence-based education, work-integrated learning, community-based experiential learning, graduate employability, Northern Uganda, higher education financing, service learning

Posted Date: July 13th, 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-10314220/v1

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Additional Declarations: The authors declare no competing interests.

Abstract

Uganda's National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) requires all programmes admitting first-year students from 2027/2028 to be fully competence-based. Yet, institutional practice has concentrated on curriculum restructuring and short workplace placements, leaving community-based experiential learning (CBEL) underdeveloped. This paper distinguishes CBEL conceptually from corporate work-integrated learning (WIL), arguing that the two differ in power dynamics, supervision, economic incentives and reciprocity. Using a narrative synthesis and narrative policy analysis (Popay et al., 2006) of literature and policy documents (2020–2026), including NCHE's 2026 standards, Uganda's Third National Development Plan and UNESCO's CFIT III reports, the paper develops a conceptual framework linking community engagement, experiential learning, competency acquisition, graduate employability and national transformation. Drawing on illustrative cases at Gulu University, Makerere University and the University of Kisubi, it identifies institutional, community and policy factors shaping CBEL, provides a costed analysis of scale-up requirements, and proposes financing mechanisms, including a 5–10% practical-fee reallocation, differentiated for public universities' centralised fee regulation and private universities' tuition-dependent autonomy. It further specifies authentic assessment tools, including e-portfolios, structured reflective journals, 360-degree community-partner rubrics and field presentation vlogs, needed to evaluate CBEL's practical, social and ethical competencies under NCHE's formative assessment standards. Policy implications are developed for NCHE, universities, government, development partners, employers and communities, aligned with Vision 2040, Agenda 2063 and the Sustainable Development Goals. The paper concludes that without CBEL, distinct from workplace WIL, Uganda risks an operationalization of CBET that remains classroom-bound, and proposes a Northern Uganda-centered research agenda.

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Policy Context: Competence-Based Education and Training in Uganda

Competence-Based Education and Training (CBET) is now the central policy direction for higher education in Uganda. Following ministerial directives, the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) has approved minimum standards that require student-centred pedagogy, formative assessment constituting at least half of overall assessment, and demonstrable industry and community linkages, privileging observable competencies over content coverage (NCHE, 2026). All higher education institutions must align programmes that admit first-year students from the 2027/2028 academic year with this framework, and national workshops are already preparing university leaders, curriculum developers and academic staff for the transition (NCHE, 2026). Globally, competency-based approaches are promoted by UNESCO, the African Union and development partners as a response to youth unemployment, skills mismatch and the demand for Labour-market-oriented higher education (African Union, 2015; UNESCO, 2026; United Nations, 2015).

Despite this momentum, graduate tracer studies and employer surveys across Uganda and East Africa continue to document persistent gaps in work readiness, problem-solving, teamwork, communication and ethical conduct among university graduates. Bagonza et al. (2021), surveying employers, lecturers and administrators in three Ugandan public universities, found that expansion of the university sector is significantly associated with employers' perceptions of skills adequacy, yet the duration graduates take to secure employment remains a persistent concern. Similarly, a multiple-case study of Makerere University's curricula found that programmes emphasize career development and disciplinary knowledge and incorporate workplace-relevant skills such as critical thinking, collaboration and communication, but continue to neglect emotional intelligence and authentic work experience (Sophia & Onen, 2024). In Northern Uganda specifically, Gulu University has piloted community-engaged curriculum redesign through Joint Advisory Groups (JAGs) that link academic programmes to agricultural, health and business challenges facing surrounding communities, demonstrating transformative potential that nonetheless remains peripheral to mainstream CBET reform (Lamaro et al., 2025).

1.2 Problem Statement and Rationale

Experiential learning, especially when embedded in community settings, offers a mechanism for integrating theoretical knowledge with real-world problem-solving, thereby advancing both professional competencies and civic responsibility (Kolb, 1984). Yet most CBET discussion in Uganda emphasises internships, practicum and laboratory-based skills, with comparatively little attention to structured, credit-bearing community-based experiential learning (CBEL) that is co-designed with local stakeholders. Part of this neglect is conceptual: policy documents and institutional practice frequently treat "community linkage" as a subset of workplace-based work-integrated learning (WIL), rather than as a distinct pedagogical modality governed by different relationships of power, accountability and reciprocity. NCHE's minimum standards reference industry and community linkages but offer limited operational guidance on how community-based, as distinct from workplace-based, experience should be designed, resourced, supervised and assessed (NCHE, 2026). This constitutes a critical knowledge and practice gap, and it is compounded by the absence, within Ugandan CBET discourse, of a costed and institutionally feasible model for scaling CBEL beyond isolated, often donor-dependent, pilot initiatives.

1.3 Aim, Objectives and Contribution

This paper responds to these gaps by advancing a conceptual and policy-oriented argument that CBEL is a missing, yet indispensable, pillar of competence-based higher education in Uganda. Drawing on Ugandan, African and global evidence, it pursues four objectives: (1) to differentiate CBEL conceptually from corporate and industry work-integrated learning, clarifying the distinct power dynamics, supervision structures and reciprocity obligations that each modality entails; (2) to examine how CBEL contributes to the development of professional and transferable competencies among university students, with particular reference to Northern Uganda; (3) to identify institutional, community and policy factors shaping CBEL implementation, including the realistic costs and financing mechanisms required to scale it; and (4) to generate recommendations for integrating CBEL into competence-based curricula in ways that improve graduate employability and support national transformation. The paper's contribution is

fivefold: it clarifies a conceptual conflation that has constrained CBEL's policy visibility; it synthesises fragmented evidence on CBEL in Uganda and Africa into a single argument; it develops an original conceptual framework linking community engagement to national transformation through experiential learning and competency acquisition; it offers the first costed institutional-economics analysis of CBEL scale-up for the Ugandan context; and it translates this framework into concrete, stakeholder-specific policy recommendations for NCHE's ongoing CBET reform.

2.0 Methodology: Narrative Synthesis Approach

2.1 Review Design and Rationale

This paper is a conceptual and policy-oriented article built on a narrative synthesis of literature, rather than a systematic review or meta-analysis. Narrative synthesis is appropriate where the evidence base is heterogeneous in design, discipline and geography, and where the purpose is to construct an explanatory argument and conceptual framework rather than to estimate a pooled effect size (Popay et al., 2006; Snyder, 2019). Given that CBEL scholarship spans education, development studies, public health and engineering education, and includes conceptual papers, institutional reports, longitudinal cohort studies and qualitative case studies, a textual, interpretive synthesis was judged more suitable than statistical aggregation (Popay et al., 2006).

2.2 Search Strategy, Databases and Timeframe

The search covered literature published between January 2020 and June 2026, a period chosen to capture recent evidence on work-integrated learning, service learning and competence-based curricula, while remaining sensitive to Uganda's accelerated CBET reform trajectory since 2024. Four databases and platforms were searched: Google Scholar, ERIC (Education Resources Information Center), Scopus, and African Journals Online (AJOL), supplemented by targeted searches of institutional repositories (Gulu University, Makerere University, University of Kisubi) and policy websites (NCHE, UNESCO, African Union, National Planning Authority) for grey literature such as minimum-standards documents, workshop reports and programme reports that do not appear in academic databases. Primary search terms, combined using Boolean operators, included: "competence-based education" OR "competency-based education", "work-integrated learning" OR "WIL", "service learning", "community-based learning" OR "community-engaged learning", "experiential learning", "graduate employability", combined with "Uganda" OR "East Africa" OR "Africa" OR "Northern Uganda". Reference lists of retrieved articles were hand-searched for additional sources (snowballing), and citation-tracking was used to identify literature citing key Ugandan and African studies.

2.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Sources were included if they: (a) were published between 2020 and 2026 (with foundational theoretical texts pre-dating this window retained where they establish the theoretical framework, namely Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 1984; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Furco, 1996; Wenger, 1998; Vygotsky, 1978); (b) addressed

experiential learning, work-integrated learning, service learning, community-based learning, or competence-based higher education; (c) were peer-reviewed journal articles, doctoral dissertations, or credible institutional and policy reports from universities, NCHE, UNESCO, the African Union, or national planning bodies; and (d) were available in English. Sources were excluded if they: (a) addressed experiential learning exclusively at the primary or secondary level; (b) focused solely on clinical or vocational apprenticeship models without theoretical or policy relevance to competence-based higher education reform; or (c) were opinion pieces, blog posts, or non-attributable web content without institutional provenance. Applying these criteria across the four databases yielded a corpus of 46 sources judged directly relevant to the paper's argument, of which 14 are drawn on extensively in this manuscript; the remainder informed the framing of Sections 4 and 7 without direct citation.

2.4 Synthesis Procedure and Limitations

Following Popay et al. (2006), the synthesis proceeded through four stages: developing a preliminary theoretical model of the CBEL-CBET relationship from the introduction and existing conceptual literature; organizing extracted findings into thematic groups (employability outcomes, institutional factors, community factors, policy factors, and theoretical mechanisms); exploring relationships within and between studies, including tensions between WIL findings (e.g., Garwe, 2020; Namutuwa, 2020; Jackson & Dean, 2023) and CBEL-specific evidence (e.g., Lamaro et al., 2025; University of Kisubi, 2026); and assessing the robustness of the resulting synthesis by triangulating Ugandan institutional reports against peer-reviewed African and global studies. As a narrative synthesis rather than a systematic review, the approach does not report a PRISMA-style study-selection flow diagram or formal quality-appraisal scores, and the corpus is not exhaustive; the review is best read as a purposive, theoretically informed synthesis intended to support conceptual and policy argumentation rather than to estimate the magnitude of CBEL's effect on employability outcomes. Given the sparse empirical literature specifically on CBEL (as opposed to WIL) in Uganda, several claims in Sections 4 and 7 necessarily draw on adjacent literatures (engineering education reciprocity research, cost-sharing literature in African higher education finance) applied by analogy, a limitation made explicit at each point of use.

3.0 Conceptual Clarification: Differentiating Work-Integrated Learning from Community-Based Experiential Learning

A recurring weakness in Ugandan CBET discourse is the conflation of "community linkage," "industry linkage" and "work placement" into a single undifferentiated category of experiential or practical learning (NCHE, 2026). This section argues that corporate and industry work-integrated learning (WIL) and non-profit or community-based experiential learning (CBEL) are analytically distinct modalities that share a family resemblance, in that both place students in authentic, non-classroom settings, but diverge sharply in their governing power relations, supervisory architecture, economic incentive structures and reciprocity norms. Treating them as interchangeable, as current NCHE guidance implicitly does, obscures the specific institutional supports that CBEL requires and understates the risks of poorly designed community placements.

3.1 Corporate and Industry WIL: Power, Supervision and Economic Incentives

Corporate and industry WIL, including internships, cooperative education and workplace practicums, situates students within an employer's existing organizational hierarchy (Cooper et al., 2010, as cited in Delaine et al., 2024). Supervision is typically vested in a workplace manager or professional whose primary institutional accountability is to the firm's productivity or service objectives, and whose evaluation of the student functions partly as an assessment of employability for future hiring. Power in this relationship runs predominantly from employer to student: the firm sets tasks, standards and working hours, and the student's role, however educational, is embedded within the employer's production or service function. Economic incentives are correspondingly firm-centered: employers may gain low-cost or unpaid Labour, a recruitment pipeline, or corporate social responsibility credit, while universities gain placement capacity without bearing the ongoing costs of the work environment itself. Reciprocity, where it exists, is transactional and bounded by the placement period; the employer's obligations to the student typically end when the internship or attachment concludes, and there is rarely an expectation that the firm's own practices should change as a result of hosting students (Jackson & Dean, 2023; Garwe, 2020).

3.2 Community-Based Experiential Learning: Reciprocity and Shared Governance

CBEL, by contrast, situates students within community structures, such as local governments, farmer groups, health committees, schools and civil society organizations, that are not organized around production for profit and that typically possess far less institutional capacity to supervise, discipline or formally evaluate university students. Supervision in CBEL is necessarily shared and often informal: a lecturer retains academic responsibility for learning outcomes and assessment, while community members act as co-educators who contribute contextual knowledge, identify priorities and provide feedback, but rarely hold formal authority to grade or sanction students (Lamaro et al., 2025; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Power dynamics are more genuinely negotiated, and more ethically fraught, than in corporate WIL: communities, particularly in post-conflict Northern Uganda, often have less institutional leverage than a corporate host, which increases the risk that university programmes could unintentionally reproduce extractive relationships in which students "practice" on community members without benefit flowing back to them (Delaine et al., 2024; Weerts & Sandmann, 2008, as cited in community-based service-learning scholarship). Economic incentives in CBEL are consequently reciprocal rather than transactional: community partners typically do not gain a productive workforce, and where they contribute time, facilities or expertise, service-learning scholarship argues they should receive tangible reciprocal benefit, whether through co-designed project outputs, capacity-building, small stipends, or influence over the research and learning agenda itself (Furco, 1996; Delaine et al., 2024). Because CBEL lacks the built-in supervisory and financial infrastructure of a firm, it also carries higher

marginal costs for the university in transport, staff time, safeguarding, ethics clearance and community compensation, a point developed with a costed analysis in Section 7.2.

3.3 Why the Distinction Matters for Uganda's CBET Reform

Making this distinction explicit matters for at least three policy reasons. First, if NCHE's minimum standards continue to reference "industry and community linkages" as a single undifferentiated requirement, institutions have a strong incentive to satisfy the requirement through the administratively simpler and better-resourced route of corporate internships, leaving CBEL, which is harder to supervise, harder to cost and harder to evaluate, systematically under-provided (NCHE, 2026). Second, quality-assurance instruments calibrated to workplace WIL, such as employer-signed logbooks or supervisor performance ratings, are poorly suited to CBEL, where the "supervisor" may be a subsistence farmer or a community health volunteer with no formal assessment role; applying WIL-style instruments to CBEL risks either excluding legitimate community placements from accreditation or imposing inappropriate documentation burdens on community partners. Third, and most importantly for the argument developed in this paper, the ethical and financial obligations that CBEL creates toward community partners, obligations that are much weaker or absent in corporate WIL, mean that scaling CBEL responsibly requires dedicated institutional and financial architecture rather than simply extending existing internship-office capacity. The conceptual framework in Section 6 and the institutional-economics analysis in Section 7.2 are built on this distinction.

4.0 Literature Review

4.1 Competence-Based Higher Education and Graduate Employability

Competence-based reforms in Africa are driven by concerns about youth unemployment, informal-sector vulnerability and skills mismatch, concerns reflected in the African Union's Agenda 2063 aspiration for people-driven development and in the Sustainable Development Goals' targets on quality education and decent work (African Union, 2015; United Nations, 2015). UNESCO's China Funds-in-Trust Phase III programme (CFIT III), implemented in twelve higher education institutions across Côte d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Gabon, Senegal, Tanzania and Uganda between 2021 and 2025, has documented how curriculum review, industry partnership and work-based training can improve Labour-market alignment when combined with tracer studies and dedicated career and employability hubs (UNESCO, 2026). In Uganda, Makerere University and Mbarara University of Science and Technology were the CFIT III partner institutions, and national workshops have since promoted competence-based assessment and hands-on, field-based instruction as a replacement for lecture-centered delivery (UNESCO, 2026).

Within this broader momentum, Ugandan evidence on employability remains sobering. Bagonza et al. (2021) found that while expansion of the university sector has increased perceived employment options, the time graduates require to secure work remains a source of concern for both employers and lecturers,

implying that qualification expansion alone does not resolve the competency gap. Sophia and Onen's (2024) multiple-case analysis of four Makerere University undergraduate programmes similarly found that curricula are aligned with several twenty-first-century employability skills, including critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, communication and digital literacy, yet emotional intelligence and structured work experience remain comparatively neglected, and science-based disciplines are more likely than others to embed experiential components. Read together, these studies support the broader African argument that competence-based reforms risk being curriculum-deep but practice-shallow unless accompanied by robust experiential and community-linked pedagogies.

4.2 Experiential Learning, Work-Integrated Learning and Community-Based Learning in the Global and African Evidence

Experiential learning is broadly defined as learning through structured experience, reflection, conceptualization and action in authentic contexts (Kolb, 1984). WIL and internships are the most extensively studied form of experiential education; they are consistently associated with enhanced employability, particularly foundational, adaptive and collaborative skills, although effects vary by design, timing and discipline. Using national graduate survey data from Australia (n = 76,261), Jackson and Dean (2023) found that work-based WIL was most effective in improving graduates' perceived preparedness for employment, while non-workplace and global forms of WIL produced stronger gains in collaborative and adaptive skills, suggesting that diverse forms of experiential exposure serve complementary developmental functions.

African evidence introduces important nuance. Garwe's (2020) three-year longitudinal study of Zimbabwean graduates found that, regardless of when WIL occurred within a programme, it played a critical role in building work-related competencies; however, the timing of WIL interacted with the type of employment graduates subsequently obtained, underscoring a need for diversified, scaffolded WIL models rather than a single standard placement. In contrast, Namutuwa's (2020) doctoral study of undergraduates in Namibia found no significant difference in employability outcomes between students who undertook WIL placements and those who did not, concluding that short-term placements alone may be insufficient unless embedded within broader curriculum reform, career guidance and sustained experiential exposure. Considered together, Garwe (2020) and Namutuwa (2020) caution against treating brief workplace placements as a sufficient proxy for experiential learning, and they strengthen the case for community-based, longitudinal alternatives that extend beyond a single work placement.

Community-based learning and service learning extend experiential education beyond workplace settings into community sites where students co-create solutions with local stakeholders. This tradition, most developed in South African and Jesuit higher education networks in Africa, situates students within community problem-solving rather than employer-supervised production, and it foregrounds reciprocity, reflection and civic outcomes alongside professional skill development (Furco, 1996). A recent systematic review of reciprocity in engineering service-learning and community engagement, though

drawn from a different disciplinary and geographic context, corroborates the theoretical distinction developed in Section 3: reciprocity in community-based programmes is achieved through deliberate relational design (co-defined goals, mutual accountability structures, sustained partnership) rather than assumed to follow automatically from placing students in a community setting (Delaine et al., 2024).

4.3 Community-Based Experiential Learning and University-Community Partnerships in Uganda

In Uganda, emergent models of CBEL are visible at Gulu University, Makerere University and the University of Kisubi. Gulu University's Joint Advisory Groups bring together academic staff, students and community stakeholders, including farmers, health workers and local leaders, to co-design curricula around regional challenges such as food insecurity and health-system constraints; Lamaro et al. (2025) argue that this co-design model strengthens the relevance of academic programmes to Northern Uganda's development priorities while cultivating student leadership, communication and problem-solving capacity through direct engagement with non-academic stakeholders. Because Joint Advisory Groups position community members as co-educators within a shared community of practice, they operationalize several of the theoretical propositions discussed in Section 5, most notably Lave and Wenger's (1991) emphasis on learning through legitimate participation in authentic social practice.

Makerere University's pedagogical reforms under CFIT III have similarly promoted experiential, field-based instruction over lecture-centered delivery, reflecting a growing institutional recognition that authentic contextual engagement is necessary for competencies to be internalized rather than merely described (UNESCO, 2026). At the same time, Sophia and Onen's (2024) curriculum analysis suggests that this recognition has not yet been matched by systematic integration of community-based, credit-bearing experiential modules across the university's academic programmes.

Faith-based institutions have gone further in some respects. The University of Kisubi has embedded service learning directly within professional curricula: its "Serving to Learn" initiative places first-year nursing and midwifery students into community primary-health-care engagements as a required component of foundational course units, framing service learning as a mechanism for translating classroom knowledge into practical, community-responsive competence while building empathy, professionalism and civic values (University of Kisubi, 2026). Such initiatives illustrate that CBEL is not merely a theoretical aspiration in Uganda but an emerging institutional practice; however, they remain concentrated in a small number of disciplines and institutions and are not yet systematically referenced within NCHE's programme accreditation templates or quality assurance instruments beyond general language on "community linkages" (NCHE, 2026).

4.4 Competency Development Through CBEL and Graduate Employability

The literature on CBEL and service learning in African and global contexts converges on an integrated competency profile associated with sustained community engagement: leadership, communication,

critical thinking, project management, problem-solving, ethics, digital skills, research skills, adaptability, innovation, teamwork and civic responsibility. Gulu University's Joint Advisory Group model, for instance, is associated with students developing collaboration, empathy and systems thinking as they work with communities on food-security and health agendas (Lamaro et al., 2025). At the same time, the broader WIL literature warns that experiential and community-based learning can reproduce inequities or trivialise community concerns when poorly designed: short, unstructured placements can burden local partners without reciprocal benefit and may fail to produce durable competency gains (Namutuwa, 2020; Delaine et al., 2024). Quality design features, including co-design with communities, structured reflection, authentic assessment and institutional support, are therefore essential to realising CBEL's potential contribution to employability and transformation (Jackson & Dean, 2023).

Overall, the literature indicates a strong, though conditional, relationship between well-designed CBEL and competency development, while revealing significant gaps in (a) empirical studies focused specifically on Northern Uganda; (b) policy analyses of how NCHE's CBET standards might systematically embed CBEL as a recognised modality, conceptually distinguished from internships and laboratory work; and (c) conceptual and costed models that explicitly link community engagement, experiential learning, competency acquisition and national transformation within Uganda's higher education system. This paper addresses those three gaps.

Table 1
Selected literature on CBEL, work-integrated learning and competence-based higher education

Focus area	Source	Key contribution	Relevance to CBEL-CBET in Uganda
Timing of WIL and employability	Garwe (2020), Zimbabwe	Confirms WIL's contribution to work-related competencies; shows timing interacts with type of employment obtained	Supports diversified, scaffolded experiential learning across a programme rather than a single placement
Impact of WIL on employability	Namutuwa (2020), Namibia	Finds no significant employability difference between WIL and non-WIL undergraduates; questions sufficiency of short placements	Warns against assuming internships alone will close employability gaps; supports broader, sustained CBEL
Types of WIL and skill outcomes	Jackson & Dean (2023), Australia (n = 76,261)	Shows work-based WIL improves perceived preparedness; non-workplace and global WIL enhance collaborative and adaptive skills	Supports embedding multiple experiential modalities, including community-based projects, alongside conventional placements
University expansion and graduate employability	Bagonza et al. (2021), Uganda	Finds expansion of the university sector associated with perceived skills adequacy, but persistent delays in securing employment	Signals that qualification expansion alone will not resolve Uganda's competency and employability gap
Curriculum alignment and employability	Sophia & Onen (2024), Makerere University	Finds alignment with several employability skills but neglect of emotional intelligence and authentic work experience	Suggests CBEL can address gaps in socio-emotional competencies and authentic experiential exposure
Community-engaged curriculum co-design	Lamaro et al. (2025), Gulu University	Documents Joint Advisory Groups co-designing curricula with communities, strengthening relevance and student competency	Provides a concrete Northern Ugandan model for embedding CBEL into programme design
Service-learning pedagogy	University of Kisubi (2026)	Documents credit-embedded service learning in nursing and midwifery curricula, framed as CBET-aligned practice	Demonstrates Ugandan institutional precedent for CBEL that can be scaled within CBET frameworks
Reciprocity in service-learning/community engagement	Delaine et al. (2024)	Systematic review shows reciprocity must be deliberately structured, not assumed, in community-based programmes	Grounds the WIL-CBEL distinction (Section 3) and the reciprocity safeguards proposed in Sections 6–7

Focus area	Source	Key contribution	Relevance to CBEL-CBET in Uganda
Competence-based higher technical education	UNESCO (2026), CFIT III	Documents labour-market-oriented teaching, work-based learning and competence-based assessment across six African countries, including Uganda	Provides international guidance and Ugandan institutional experience (Makerere, Mbarara) for integrating experiential learning within competence-based systems
CBET policy standards	NCHE (2026)	Establishes minimum standards for competence-based programmes, effective for 2027/2028 first-year intake	Anchors the argument that CBEL must be explicitly written into national CBET standards, not left to institutional discretion

5.0 Theoretical Framework

Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory conceptualises learning as a cyclical process comprising concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation, through which knowledge is created by transforming experience rather than merely receiving it. In the context of CBEL, community engagement supplies concrete experience; structured reflection and debriefing support reflective observation; disciplinary and interdisciplinary synthesis enables abstract conceptualisation; and iterative project implementation corresponds to active experimentation as students revise their interventions in light of community feedback.

Situated learning theory, developed by Lave and Wenger (1991) and extended through the concept of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), emphasises learning through legitimate peripheral participation in authentic social practice, whereby newcomers move gradually toward fuller participation in communities defined by shared activity and meaning. CBEL situates learners within community and professional practices, such as health promotion, agricultural extension and local governance, where they learn by participating alongside experienced practitioners and community members, thereby constructing identities as competent professionals and engaged citizens rather than merely acquiring detached technical knowledge. Gulu University's Joint Advisory Groups exemplify this mechanism, positioning farmers, health workers and local leaders as co-educators within a shared community of practice (Lamaro et al., 2025).

Constructivist perspectives, associated with Dewey (1938) and Vygotsky (1978), treat learning as an active, social process through which learners construct knowledge by interacting with their environment and with others, mediated by cultural tools and language. CBEL environments provide rich socio-cultural contexts in which learners co-construct an understanding of complex problems, such as food insecurity and public health challenges, in dialogue with community partners, integrating experiential, social, and cognitive dimensions of learning within a single activity.

Service-learning theory foregrounds the deliberate integration of community service with academic content, structured reflection and civic outcomes, arguing that well-designed service-learning fosters academic learning and social responsibility simultaneously rather than treating them as competing goals (Furco, 1996). When aligned with CBET, service learning becomes a vehicle for demonstrating competencies in authentic contexts, including ethical reasoning, teamwork, communication and problem-solving, as illustrated by the University of Kisubi's service-learning curriculum (University of Kisubi, 2026). Recent reciprocity scholarship extends Furco's framework by empirically demonstrating that reciprocity is not a default outcome of community placement but must be structured through explicit relationship-building mechanisms, formal partnership agreements, and mutual goal-setting (Delaine et al., 2024), thereby reinforcing the distinction drawn in Section 3 between CBEL and corporate WIL.

Collectively, these theories converge on four core propositions: (a) experience in authentic contexts is foundational to deep learning; (b) learning is inherently social and relational; (c) reflection and conceptualization transform experience into durable knowledge and competence; and (d) identity formation as a competent practitioner and engaged citizen is integral to the learning process. The conceptual framework developed in Section 6 integrates these propositions, together with the WIL-CBEL distinction developed in Section 3, to explain how CBEL can function as a strategic mechanism for competence development and employability within Uganda's CBET agenda.

6.0 Conceptual Framework

6.1 Methodological Note: Narrative Policy Analysis and Case Boundary Conditions

The conceptual framework developed in this section, and the policy arguments built on it in Section 7, rest methodologically on a narrative policy analysis that extends the narrative synthesis procedure described in Section 2 (Popay et al., 2006) from academic literature to policy and institutional documents. Three categories of policy document were purposively selected for close reading rather than database searching, because they constitute the binding or near-binding instruments currently shaping CBET implementation in Uganda: NCHE's 2026 minimum standards and workshop reports, which set the formal compliance requirements that universities must meet from the 2027/2028 intake (NCHE, 2026, 2026); Uganda's Third National Development Plan (NDPIII) and Vision 2040, which establish the national development targets against which higher education's contribution is measured (National Planning Authority, 2007, 2020); and UNESCO's CFIT III programme reports, which document the only large-scale, externally evaluated competence-based reform initiative currently operating across Ugandan public universities (UNESCO, 2026). These documents were triangulated against one another and against the peer-reviewed and institutional-report evidence identified in Section 2 to construct the explanatory account offered below.

The primary illustrative case, Gulu University's Joint Advisory Groups, is used throughout this paper as a worked example of CBEL-in-practice rather than as a representative sample of Ugandan CBEL, and its boundary conditions should be read accordingly. It is a public-university case, situated in a specific post-conflict regional economy (Acholi sub-region), operating within disciplines (agriculture, health) where community-facing practicums have a longer institutional history than in, for example, business or law programmes, and documented primarily through a single published account (Lamaro et al., 2025) rather than independent evaluation. The University of Kisubi's "Serving to Learn" initiative is used as a complementary illustrative case precisely because it differs from Gulu on each of these dimensions, being a private, faith-founded institution with a health-sciences focus and a different governance and financing model, as discussed further in Section 7.2. Conclusions drawn from these two cases are therefore treated as illustrative of plausible mechanisms and institutional pathways, not as statistically generalizable findings about CBEL's prevalence or effectiveness across Uganda's 55 or more universities and other tertiary institutions.

6.2 The Five-Layer Cascade Model

The proposed conceptual framework models a pathway from community engagement to national transformation, mediated by experiential learning, competency acquisition and graduate employability, and structured throughout by the reciprocity and shared-governance principles that Section 3 identifies as distinctive to CBEL.

Community engagement. At the foundation, universities establish sustained, reciprocal partnerships with communities, employers and local government, particularly in Northern Uganda, co-identifying priority issues such as maternal health, youth unemployment and climate resilience, and co-designing learning activities. Community partners act as co-educators and co-researchers, contributing contextual knowledge and feedback and forming the communities of practice that anchor CBEL (Lamaro et al., 2025; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Experiential learning. Student participation in community-based projects generates concrete experience, including participatory needs assessments, health-education campaigns and livelihood pilots, structured around Kolb's (1984) learning cycle. Lecturers facilitate reflective observation through debriefs, journals and portfolios; abstract conceptualization occurs as students apply disciplinary theory to interpret community dynamics; and active experimentation is realized as students iteratively adapt interventions based on community feedback.

Competency acquisition. Through repeated cycles, students acquire and demonstrate professional and transferable competencies, including leadership, communication, critical thinking, project management, problem-solving, ethical reasoning, digital literacy, research skills, adaptability, innovation, teamwork and civic responsibility. Competencies are assessed through performance-based tasks, authentic rubrics, reflective evidence and co-assessment involving community partners, consistent with NCHE's emphasis on formative, competency-based assessment (NCHE, 2026).

Graduate employability. Competency-rich graduates are more likely to secure meaningful employment, pursue entrepreneurship and contribute to community-based initiatives. Evidence from WIL programmes indicates that graduates with sustained, well-designed experiential exposure demonstrate greater adaptability and Labour-market readiness than those exposed only to brief or poorly structured placements (Jackson & Dean, 2023; Garwe, 2020).

National transformation. At the macro level, scaling CBEL within CBET contributes to national development goals by strengthening human capital, reducing youth unemployment and enhancing community resilience, in alignment with Uganda's Vision 2040, national development planning, African Union Agenda 2063 and the Sustainable Development Goals on education and decent work (African Union, 2015; National Planning Authority, 2007, 2020; United Nations, 2015). Universities become engines of regional transformation, not only by producing employable graduates but by co-generating context-responsive innovations with the communities they serve.

Figure 1. **Five-layer CBEL-to-national-transformation cascade model with feedback loops**

Figure 1 **description**

The framework cascades left to right through five layers: community engagement, experiential learning, competency acquisition, graduate employability and national transformation. Three feedback loops complete the model: community feedback loops back from experiential learning into community engagement, refining priority-setting and partnership terms; graduate-trajectory feedback loops back from graduate employability into competency acquisition, indicating where curricula and assessment require adjustment; and national policy-context feedback loops back from national transformation into community engagement, indicating how funding, quality-assurance and planning priorities reshape institutional CBEL strategy over time. The diagram below (Fig. 1) renders this structure as a text-based flow diagram.

7.0 Discussion

7.1 Objective One: Competencies Developed Through Community Engagement

Evidence and emerging practice in Northern Uganda suggest that structured CBEL cultivates an integrated competency profile that is difficult to achieve through classroom-based instruction alone. Gulu University's community-engaged curricula demonstrate that students working with Joint Advisory Groups on agricultural and health challenges develop leadership by coordinating multi-stakeholder meetings, communication skills through dialogue with non-academic audiences, and project-management skills through planning and monitoring community interventions (Lamaro et al., 2025).

Critical thinking and problem-solving are strengthened as students confront complex, ill-structured problems, such as food insecurity and health-system bottlenecks, that require synthesising diverse

information, balancing competing perspectives and iteratively refining solutions. Ethics and civic responsibility emerge as central competencies as students navigate power dynamics, confidentiality, cultural sensitivity and sustainability considerations in community engagements, echoing service-learning scholarship on positionality and structural awareness (Furco, 1996; Delaine et al., 2024). Teamwork and adaptability develop through multi-disciplinary projects in which students negotiate roles, manage conflict and adjust to unpredictable field realities, as illustrated by the University of Kisubi's cross-disciplinary "Serving to Learn" initiative (University of Kisubi, 2026).

However, the durability of these competencies depends on the depth, duration and pedagogical structuring of CBEL experiences, and on the reciprocity safeguards discussed in Section 3.2. Short, episodic community visits with limited reflection or responsibility may yield superficial learning and fail to build robust competencies, echoing Namutuwa's (2020) finding that brief WIL placements had negligible employability impact. This underscores the need for CBEL to be embedded as a longitudinal, credit-bearing curriculum component, governed by its own quality-assurance criteria distinct from those applied to workplace WIL, rather than as an ad hoc extracurricular activity.

Realising this potential also depends on how these competencies are assessed, since NCHE's CBET standards require that at least half of overall assessment be formative and demonstrably competency-based rather than reliant on written examinations (NCHE, 2026), a requirement that conventional end-of-placement reports cannot satisfy for CBEL's practical, social and ethical dimensions. Four authentic assessment tools are particularly well suited to CBEL and merit explicit recognition in programme assessment regulations. Structured reflective journals, completed at defined intervals throughout a community engagement, provide evidence of the reflective-observation and abstract-conceptualisation stages of Kolb's (1984) learning cycle and allow lecturers to assess ethical reasoning and critical thinking as they develop rather than only at the end of a placement. E-portfolios, compiling reflective entries, artefacts from community projects, and evidence of iterative revision, allow assessors to track growth across a longitudinal CBEL sequence and are increasingly used in service-learning and WIL assessment internationally (Jackson & Dean, 2023). Three-hundred-and-sixty-degree community-partner rubrics, in which community co-educators, such as farmers, health workers or local leaders, provide structured feedback on a student's reliability, communication and cultural sensitivity alongside academic assessors, operationalise the shared-governance and co-assessment principle developed in Section 3.2 and give community partners a formal, though bounded, voice in grading. Field presentation vlogs or short recorded presentations, in which students narrate and visually document a completed community project for peers, lecturers and, where appropriate, community audiences, provide an authentic performance-based assessment of communication and digital literacy that mirrors the CBET emphasis on demonstrable, observable competence (NCHE, 2026). Used together and weighted appropriately within a programme's assessment scheme, these tools allow CBEL to generate the kind of practical, social and ethical assessment evidence that NCHE's competence-based standards require but that classroom examinations cannot produce.

7.2 Objective Two: Institutional, Community and Policy Factors, Including the Economics of Scale-Up

At the institutional level, CBEL is shaped by curriculum design, workload allocation, funding, staff capacity and quality assurance. NCHE's CBET minimum standards explicitly reference industry and community linkages but offer limited operational guidance on CBEL design, assessment and resourcing, leaving institutions to interpret community engagement variably (NCHE, 2026). Funding constraints represent a major limiting factor: NCHE leadership has publicly acknowledged that CBET is more resource-intensive than traditional lecture-based approaches because of its practical, facilities-dependent nature (NCHE, 2026). Community-based projects carry transport, materials, facilitation and coordination costs; without dedicated budget lines, institutions risk relying on short-lived, donor-funded projects that lapse once external grants end.

Because CBEL, as distinguished in Section 3, lacks the built-in supervisory and financial infrastructure that a corporate host provides in WIL, its realistic cost structure must be made explicit if NCHE and universities are to plan responsibly for scale-up. Drawing on comparable community-engagement, service-learning and field-research costing experience in Sub-Saharan Africa, four recurrent cost categories can be identified. First, student and staff transport to community sites, which in Northern Uganda's dispersed rural settlements can be substantial given poor road infrastructure and fuel costs, and which scales with the number of community sites and the frequency of visits rather than with student numbers alone. Second, field supervision, comprising the additional teaching load of lecturers who must travel to, or maintain remote oversight of, multiple community sites, a cost usually invisible in workload models calibrated to classroom contact hours. Third, research and safeguarding ethics, since CBEL frequently involves engagement with vulnerable groups, including children, survivors of conflict, and person living with disabilities, which in Northern Uganda's post-conflict context requires institutional ethics review, safeguarding training and, in some cases, national research clearance, each carrying direct administrative and training costs. Fourth, community-partner recognition, encompassing modest stipends, transport reimbursement, or in-kind support for community co-educators, such as farmers, health workers and local leaders, whose time is a genuine opportunity cost and whose uncompensated participation risks the extractive dynamic that Section 3.2 warns against (Delaine et al., 2024).

Table 3 sets out these four cost categories with indicative, order-of-magnitude cost drivers for a Ugandan public university seeking to scale CBEL across a faculty, drawing on the structure of comparable community-engagement and field-research budgeting practice rather than on a single audited costing exercise, since no such published costing yet exists for Uganda specifically; the table is therefore offered as an illustrative planning tool for institutional finance officers rather than a definitive costed budget.

Financing CBEL sustainably requires moving beyond the donor-project model that currently characterises most Ugandan community-engagement initiatives. Uganda's higher education financing already relies substantially on cost-sharing between government and students, following the broader

Sub-Saharan African pattern in which tuition and other charges supplement constrained public budgets (Johnstone, 2004; Amutuhaire, 2022). Three financing mechanisms, consistent with this cost-sharing logic but distinct from simply raising tuition, merit consideration. First, universities could reallocate a defined proportion of existing practical or laboratory fee income, already paid by students in most CBET-relevant programmes, toward a ring-fenced CBEL fund, on the basis that CBEL is pedagogically equivalent to laboratory-based practical learning and should be resourced on a comparable basis rather than treated as an unfunded add-on. Second, a public-private-community cost-sharing model could see local governments and district production or health offices, which stand to gain directly from student-supported service delivery, contribute in-kind resources, such as transport, meeting space or extension staff time, in exchange for formal recognition as CBEL partners within programme accreditation documents, converting an unfunded community obligation into a documented institutional partnership with reciprocal accountability. Third, integration with local government development planning, through which sub-county and district development plans already budget for community mobilisation and extension activities, could allow CBEL projects to be co-financed as a line item within existing local government work plans rather than requiring universities to raise entirely new funds, provided that memoranda of understanding formalise the arrangement and specify the community-benefit obligations discussed in Section 3.2. Together, these mechanisms shift CBEL's financial basis from donor dependency toward a blend of internal fee reallocation, local government co-financing and formalised community reciprocity, a combination more consistent with the fiscal realities of Uganda's public university sector than reliance on time-limited development-partner grants (Johnstone, 2004; UNESCO, 2026).

To move the first mechanism from principle to practice, universities would need to designate a specific, published proportion, in the order of 5 to 10 percent, of existing practical, laboratory or field-attachment fee income within CBET-relevant programmes as a ring-fenced CBEL levy, administered through a dedicated community-engagement office account rather than absorbed into general institutional revenue. A 5 to 10 percent band is proposed, rather than a single figure, because the appropriate share will vary with a programme's existing practical-fee base and the intensity of community engagement its curriculum requires; health and agriculture-related programmes with dispersed rural placements, for instance, are likely to need a share toward the upper end of this range, while programmes with more localised or campus-adjacent community partnerships may require less. Operationalising this levy requires three further steps: an internal costing exercise, informed by the cost categories in Table 3, to translate the percentage into a per-student and per-cohort budget line; a transparent reporting mechanism, ideally audited alongside other student-fee income, so that students and community partners can see how the levy is spent; and a multi-year phase-in schedule, since immediate full-scale reallocation could strain programmes with thin practical-fee margins.

7.2.1 Public-Private Divergence in Financing and Governance

Public and private universities, however, face materially different constraints in executing this mechanism, and the CBET reform is unlikely to succeed if it assumes a single implementation pathway. Public universities such as Gulu University and Makerere University operate within a centralised government fee-regulation environment: tuition and functional fee structures for government-sponsored students are set through Ministry of Education and Sports guidance and cabinet-level decisions, and fee changes affecting privately sponsored students typically require approval through university councils and, in practice, are politically sensitive given periodic public contestation over fee increases (Kasozi, 2006; Amutuhaire, 2022). This means that a public university seeking to introduce or resize a CBEL levy cannot simply adjust its fees structure administratively; it must build the case through existing budget-approval channels, potentially bundling the levy with broader NCHE-mandated CBET cost adjustments rather than introducing it as a stand-alone charge, and it may be better placed to draw on the local-government co-financing and NDPIII-aligned funding routes described above, since public universities sit more naturally within government planning and reporting structures (National Planning Authority, 2020). Private universities, including faith-founded institutions such as the University of Kisubi, generally have greater institutional autonomy to set and restructure fees without external ministerial approval, which can allow faster internal mainstreaming of mandatory CBEL modules of the kind already reflected in the "Serving to Learn" initiative (University of Kisubi, 2026); this autonomy, however, is offset by near-total reliance on tuition revenue, since private institutions do not receive the government subvention that partially cushions public universities, making any new mandatory cost, including CBEL transport, supervision and community-partner stipends, a more direct and immediate pressure on fee levels, affordability and competitive positioning relative to other private providers (Amutuhaire, 2022). In practice, this suggests that public universities should pursue CBEL financing primarily through the sequenced, government-linked mechanisms set out above, treating fee reallocation as one component embedded within broader public-finance processes, while private universities may be able to move faster on internal fee-based ring-fencing but will need to work harder to secure the local-government and community in-kind contributions that offset direct cost pressure on students, and may find closer, formally documented partnerships with local government and civil society organisations, rather than fee increases alone, to be the more sustainable route.

Community factors also matter. CBEL depends on communities' willingness to host students, share knowledge and co-own projects; trust deficits, prior experiences of extractive research, and misaligned expectations can hinder genuine partnership. Ensuring reciprocity, so that communities see tangible benefit, influence project agendas and participate in co-assessment, is essential to sustaining engagement and avoiding "community fatigue" (Delaine et al., 2024). In Northern Uganda, histories of conflict and humanitarian intervention create complex landscapes in which communities may be wary of externally driven programmes that do not deliver lasting change, making the co-design model developed at Gulu University especially instructive for other institutions in the sub-region (Lamaro et al., 2025).

Policy and regulatory environments are simultaneously enabling and constraining. On the enabling side, Uganda's CBET reforms legitimise student-centred, experiential and community-linked approaches, and national training workshops have begun preparing university leadership for the transition (NCHE, 2026).

Regional and continental frameworks, including Agenda 2063 and UNESCO's CFIT III programme, reinforce the imperative to connect higher education with community and Labour-market realities (African Union, 2015; UNESCO, 2026). On the constraining side, limited clarity in policy instruments regarding CBEL specifically, as opposed to internships and workplace WIL, can lead institutions toward risk-averse interpretations that privilege conventional, easily measured placements over more innovative community-based models. Accreditation norms that favor easily quantifiable outcomes may further discourage the incorporation of complex, relational competencies such as civic responsibility and community leadership unless NCHE's quality assurance framework explicitly recognizes and assesses them, using instruments designed for CBEL's shared-governance structure rather than adapted from corporate WIL logbooks.

Table 2
Illustrative cost categories for scaling community-based experiential learning in a Ugandan public university

Cost category	Primary cost drivers	Scales with	Illustrative funding mechanism
Transport	Fuel, vehicle hire or maintenance, road conditions in dispersed rural sites	Number of community sites and visit frequency, not student numbers alone	Practical-fee reallocation; local government in-kind transport support
Field supervision	Additional lecturer time for travel to, or remote oversight of, multiple sites; overload allowances	Number of supervising staff and geographic spread of sites	Workload-model revision; dedicated CBEL coordination budget line
Ethics and safeguarding	Institutional ethics review, national research clearance, child-safeguarding and conflict-sensitivity training	Number of new community partnerships and vulnerability of groups engaged	University research-ethics committee budget; development-partner capacity-building grants
Community-partner recognition	Modest stipends, transport reimbursement, or in-kind support for farmers, health workers and local leaders acting as co-educators	Number and duration of community co-educator engagements	Formal partnership agreements with local government and community organisations; ring-fenced reciprocity fund

7.3 Objective Three: Recommendations for Integrating CBEL into Competence-Based Curricula

First, at the level of national policy, NCHE should explicitly articulate CBEL within CBET minimum standards and programme templates as a recognized modality of competence-based learning, conceptually and operationally distinguished from internships, laboratory work and research projects, along the lines developed in Section 3. Detailed guidelines on CBEL design, covering co-designed community partnerships, structured reflection, performance-based assessment and community co-

evaluation, would reduce interpretive ambiguity and support institutions to mainstream CBEL rather than treating it as an optional extra; these guidelines should explicitly name authentic assessment tools, including e-portfolios, structured reflective journals, 360-degree community-partner rubrics and field presentation vlogs, as acceptable and encouraged evidence for the formative, competency-based component of CBET assessment (NCHE, 2026).

Second, universities, particularly in Northern Uganda, should institutionalize CBEL through curriculum-review processes that embed community-based modules, capstone projects and longitudinal service-learning sequences aligned with regional development priorities, adopting e-portfolios, reflective journals, community-partner rubrics and field presentation vlogs as standard assessment instruments rather than leaving assessment design to individual lecturers. This requires joint curriculum committees involving lecturers, community representatives, employers and students, together with clear learning outcomes linked to competencies and recognition of community-engaged teaching in workload norms and promotion criteria, building on the precedent set by Gulu University's Joint Advisory Groups (Lamaro et al., 2025), while recognizing that public universities may need to route curriculum and assessment changes through more centralized approval processes than private institutions such as the University of Kisubi (Section 7.2.1).

Third, government and development partners should allocate dedicated funding streams for CBEL infrastructure, including community engagement offices, transport, small grants for student projects and capacity-building for staff and community co-educators, financed where possible through the fee-reallocation, local government co-financing and community reciprocity mechanisms set out in Section 7.2 rather than through open-ended donor grants alone. Leveraging platforms such as UNESCO's CFIT programme, Uganda can integrate CBEL into broader skills and youth-employment strategies, ensuring that CBEL contributes to tracer studies, Labour-market analysis and national skills planning (UNESCO, 2026).

Fourth, employers and professional bodies should be engaged to co-design CBEL activities that bridge community and industry contexts, such as social-entrepreneurship projects, community-health innovations and agricultural value-chain initiatives, thereby aligning competencies with Labour-market demand and social impact, while being careful to preserve CBEL's reciprocity-based governance rather than converting it into a disguised form of corporate WIL. Employers can contribute mentors, project briefs and assessment input, strengthening the relevance and legitimacy of CBEL within competence-based programmes.

Fifth, lecturers and curriculum developers need targeted professional development in experiential pedagogy, service-learning design, facilitation of reflection, community-partnership management and authentic assessment. Universities can establish communities of practice among staff engaged in CBEL, facilitating peer learning, shared rubrics and co-authored scholarship on CBEL in Ugandan higher education (Wenger, 1998).

Sixth, students should be prepared and supported to engage responsibly in CBEL through orientation, ethics training and reflective-practice workshops, ensuring they approach communities as partners rather than as "beneficiaries." Student-led service-learning clubs, of the kind already operating at the University of Kisubi, can extend CBEL beyond credit-bearing modules and foster sustained civic engagement (University of Kisubi, 2026).

Finally, community organizations, including civil society organizations, local governments, cooperatives and faith-based groups, should be recognized as co-educators and co-researchers in CBEL, with formal agreements outlining mutual expectations, benefits and mechanisms for resolving tensions. Participatory evaluation of CBEL projects can surface community perspectives on impact, inform iterative improvement and build the trust that Northern Uganda's post-conflict context requires (Lamaro et al., 2025; Delaine et al., 2024).

8.0 Policy Implications

The argument that CBEL is a missing pillar of CBET in Uganda, and that it requires governance and financing distinct from corporate WIL, has implications across multiple policy levels. Aligning CBEL with Uganda's Vision 2040 and national development planning requires recognising community-based experiential learning as a strategic tool for human-capital development and regional transformation, especially in Northern Uganda, where socio-economic vulnerability and post-conflict reconstruction priorities remain acute (National Planning Authority, 2007, 2020). Integrating CBEL into national skills and youth-employment strategies can contribute to reducing rates of youth not in employment, education or training, and to advancing Agenda 2063 targets on youth empowerment and decent work (African Union, 2015).

Within the education sector, CBEL should be articulated in sector planning as a priority for higher education, linked to indicators on graduate employability, community engagement and innovation, thereby justifying the dedicated budget lines and cost-sharing mechanisms set out in Section 7.2. NCHE's Quality Assurance Framework can be revised to include specific criteria and indicators for CBEL, distinct from WIL indicators, such as the proportion of programmes with embedded community-based components, the quality and reciprocity of community partnerships, evidence of community-partner compensation or benefit, and evidence of both competency gains and community impact (NCHE, 2026).

At continental and global levels, Uganda's CBEL-CBET integration can align with African Union Agenda 2063's aspiration for "an Africa whose development is people-driven" and with Sustainable Development Goal 4 on inclusive, equitable quality education and Goal 8 on decent work and economic growth (African Union, 2015; United Nations, 2015). UNESCO's CFIT programme already supports labour-market-oriented, competence-based teaching in Uganda through Makerere University and Mbarara University of Science and Technology; Uganda can leverage this platform to showcase and learn from CBEL innovations, contributing to regional knowledge exchange (UNESCO, 2026).

Table 2
Policy-oriented recommendations for mainstreaming CBEL within competence-based higher education in Uganda

Stakeholder	Recommended actions	Expected outcomes	Indicative timeline
NCHE	Explicitly incorporate CBEL into CBET minimum standards, programme templates and quality assurance criteria, distinct from WIL; name e-portfolios, structured reflective journals, 360-degree community-partner rubrics and field presentation vlogs as approved formative-assessment evidence (NCHE, 2026)	Increased number of accredited programmes with embedded CBEL; clearer institutional expectations; assessment guidance that matches CBET's formative, competency-based requirements	Short-medium term (1–3 years), aligned with the 2027/2028 CBET roll-out
Universities, especially in Northern Uganda	Integrate CBEL modules and longitudinal service-learning sequences into curricula; adopt e-portfolios, reflective journals, community-partner rubrics and field presentation vlogs as standard assessment instruments; establish community engagement offices; recognise CBEL in promotion and workload (Lamaro et al., 2025; Sophia & Onen, 2024)	Enhanced student competencies; stronger university-community partnerships; improved employability outcomes in tracer studies	Medium term (3–5 years), integrated into ongoing programme review cycles, with public and private institutions following different approval routes (Section 7.2.1)
Government (Ministry of Education and Sports, National Planning Authority, local government)	Allocate dedicated funding for CBEL infrastructure via fee reallocation and local-government co-financing; embed CBEL in Vision 2040 and national development planning; incentivize regional CBEL hubs in Northern Uganda (National Planning Authority, 2007, 2020; Johnstone, 2004)	Sustainable resourcing for CBEL; contributions to youth-employment and regional-development targets; reduced youth idleness	Medium-long term (5–10 years), synchronized with national planning cycles
Development partners	Support CBEL capacity-building, seed funding for student projects and regional CBEL networks; incorporate CBEL indicators in programme logframes (UNESCO, 2026)	Scaled CBEL innovations; stronger evidence base on CBEL impact; enhanced South-South collaboration	Short-medium term (1–5 years)
Employers and professional bodies	Co-design CBEL projects in community and industry settings; provide mentors; participate in competency-based assessment and feedback, while preserving	Better alignment between competencies and Labour-market needs; more internships, apprenticeships and	Short term (1–3 years), tied to sectoral partnerships

Stakeholder	Recommended actions	Expected outcomes	Indicative timeline
	CBEL's reciprocity-based governance	social-enterprise opportunities	
Lecturers and curriculum developers	Engage in professional development on experiential and service-learning pedagogy; form communities of practice; document and publish CBEL scholarship (Wenger, 1998)	Improved CBEL quality; increased research output; shared practice across institutions	Short-medium term (1–5 years)
Students	Participate in CBEL orientation; lead service-learning clubs; co-evaluate CBEL projects; pursue social innovation and entrepreneurship (University of Kisubi, 2026)	Enhanced civic responsibility, leadership and innovation; stronger student engagement and graduate networks	Short term (1–3 years), ongoing per cohort
Community organizations	Formalize partnerships with universities; co-identify priorities; contribute to CBEL assessment and evaluation; negotiate reciprocity terms (Lamaro et al., 2025; Delaine et al., 2024)	More relevant and impactful CBEL projects; strengthened community capacity; durable university-community alliances	Short-long term (1–10 years), contingent on trust-building

9.0 Conclusion

This paper has argued that community-based experiential learning is a missing yet essential pillar of competence-based higher education in Uganda, distinct in its power dynamics, supervisory architecture, economic incentives and reciprocity obligations from corporate and industry work-integrated learning, and requiring its own institutional economics and financing model rather than an extension of existing internship infrastructure. Drawing on experiential, situated, constructivist and service-learning theory, and on a narrative synthesis of literature published between 2020 and 2026 across Google Scholar, ERIC, Scopus and AJOL, it has developed a conceptual framework linking community engagement, experiential learning, competency acquisition, graduate employability and national transformation, and it has synthesized recent empirical evidence from Uganda, Africa and global scholarship.

The review reveals that while internships and work-integrated learning are widely recognized as important for employability, short and weakly structured placements may have limited impact (Namutuwa, 2020), whereas sustained, co-designed CBEL initiatives, as seen at Gulu University and the University of Kisubi, demonstrate meaningful gains in professional and transferable competencies, civic responsibility and community impact (Lamaro et al., 2025; University of Kisubi, 2026). These initiatives nonetheless remain largely peripheral to formal CBET standards and quality assurance instruments, underscoring a policy and implementation gap that NCHE is well positioned to close as it operationalizes

its 2026 minimum standards, provided it recognizes CBEL as conceptually and financially distinct from workplace WIL.

Future research should undertake mixed-method tracer studies of CBEL-equipped graduates in Northern Uganda, comparative analyses of CBEL models across disciplines and institutions, formal costing studies of CBEL scale-up to validate or revise the illustrative estimates offered in Table 3, and evaluative studies of NCHE's CBET implementation with specific attention to the community-engagement dimension. There is also scope for design-based research on CBEL curricula that iteratively refines conceptual frameworks and practice. Without such deliberate effort, Uganda risks operationalizing CBET in ways that are structurally competence-based but experientially thin, producing graduates who can describe competencies without being able to enact them in complex, community-grounded realities.

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Figures

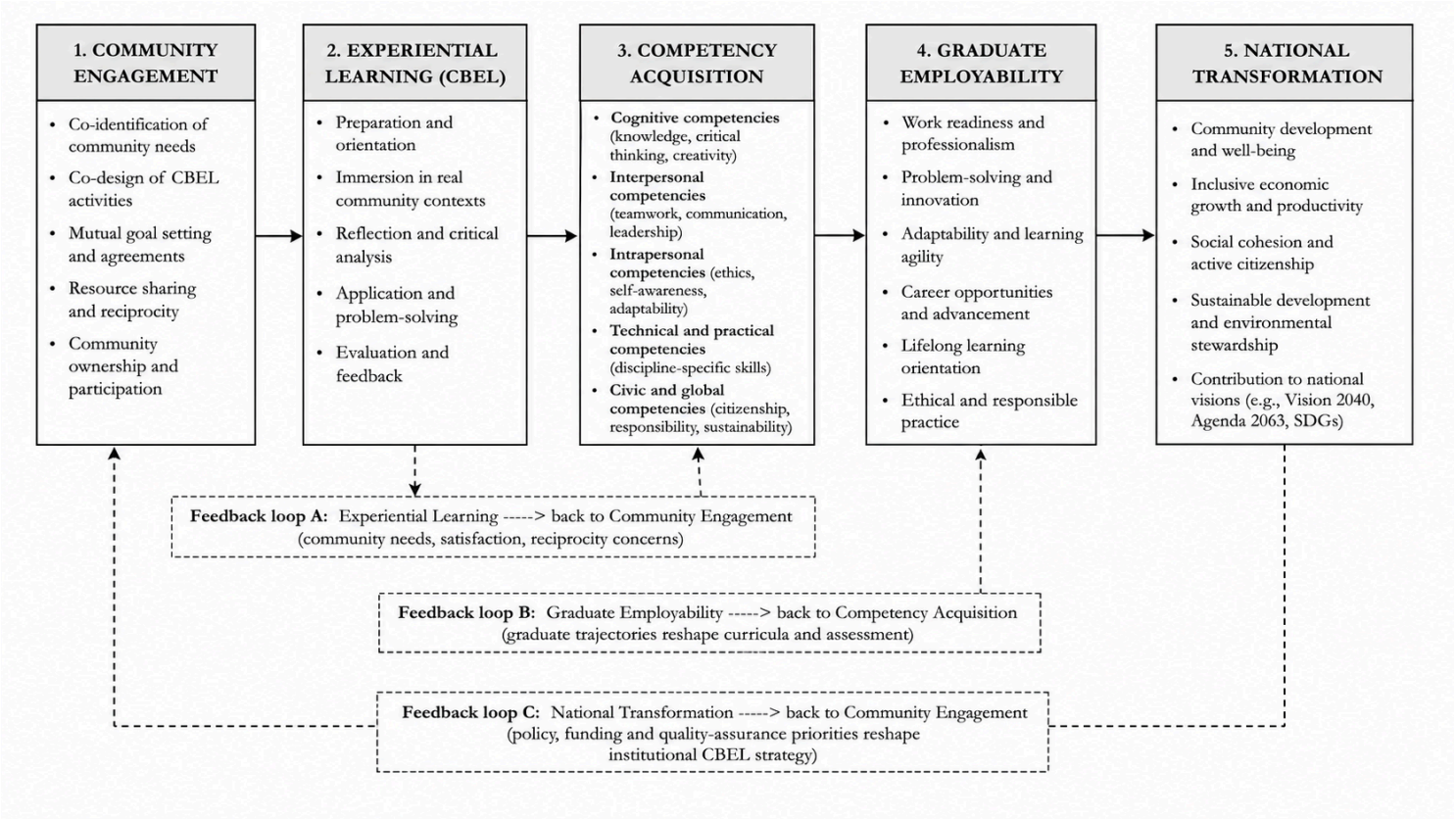


Figure 1

Conceptual framework illustrating the five-layer cascade from community engagement to national transformation through community-based experiential learning (CBEL), competency acquisition, and graduate employability, including reciprocal feedback loops.