



University-community engagements in africa: nature, scope and outcomes at the university of Ghana learning centres

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

community needs
employment opportunities
educational enhancement
sustainable development
UCEs
UGLCs

ABSTRACT

University-community engagements (UCEs) play a critical role in fostering sustainable development, promoting lifelong learning, and addressing local and national challenges. This qualitative study examines the nature, scope, and outcomes of UCE at the University of Ghana Learning Centres (UGLC), focusing on how these initiatives contribute to both institutional goals and community needs. Using an exploratory case study approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, including the head and coordinators of the UGLC as well as community members/students. Grounded in the theory of community of practice and through a thematic analysis, the study highlighted UCE's diverse nature and scope including distance education (DE) and academic counselling, partnerships and research collaborations, economic development and civic engagement, public events and workshop, and school outreach programmes. In addition, the outcomes of the UCEs include enhanced reputation and public image, student recruitment and retention, employment opportunities, educational enhancement, and well-being. The study recommended seeking more partnerships with organizations, industries, and NGOs to maximize UCE benefits.

1. Introduction

Universities are increasingly redefining their core missions of teaching, research and community service to respond to contemporary and emerging challenges and opportunities (Olo et al., 2021). The third pillar of university mission include a robust focus on societal engagement, often referred to as the "third mission." This emphasizes the role of universities in contributing to societal and economic development beyond their traditional roles of education and research. The current trends in this area include fostering entrepreneurial mindsets among students and staff and encouraging the creation of startups and spin-off companies. This trend is driven by the need to translate academic research into practical, marketable solutions that can address societal challenges (Compagnucci and Spigarelli, 2020). Another trend is that HEIs are increasingly offering programs that cater to lifelong learners, including professional development courses, online learning modules, and community education initiatives to help individuals to continuously update their skills in a rapidly changing job market. In addition, universities are increasingly collaborating with industry, government, and non-profit organizations to conduct research that addresses real-world problems. These partnerships enhance the relevance and impact of

academic research and facilitate the transfer of knowledge and technology to society (Ruano-Borbalan, 2024).

For Bidandi et al. (2021) HEIs aim to contribute to innovation, economic growth, democratization, social cohesion, human rights, and environmental sustainability. However, the scholarship on Higher Education Societal Relevance (HESR) remains inconclusive. According to Mugimu (2021), this shift has brought about a new conceptualization of universities, which are no longer stand-alone elite institutions but part of a broader framework of higher education that encompasses diverse providers and collaborative approaches.

University-Community Engagements (UCEs) is one of such medium with collaborative approach and have become critical for addressing societal challenges and fostering sustainable development (Teslenko, 2019). UCE refers to the collaboration between HEIs and their surrounding communities to address mutual needs and foster positive societal influence. It involves institutions moving beyond traditional academic boundaries to integrate with their communities. This engagement can take various forms, including service-learning, community-based research, and public service initiatives. The goal is to create a reciprocal relationship where both the university and the community benefit from shared knowledge, resources, and expertise.

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2025.103354>

Received 6 January 2025; Received in revised form 5 March 2025; Accepted 2 July 2025

Available online 5 July 2025

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This approach helps address broader societal issues and fosters a more engaged and responsive educational environment (Ward, 2020). UCE is considered as one of the university's mechanisms in discharging its social responsibility to its nearby community. Universities are highly recommended to embed community engagement responsibility into their policies as part of their commitment to improve the well-being of societies surrounding the campus (Bakar et al., 2019).

The problematisation of UCE involves critically examining the complexities, challenges, and contradictions inherent in the relationship between universities and their surrounding communities. UCE lacks a universally accepted definition, leading to varied interpretations and implementations across institutions. This ambiguity can result in inconsistent practices and outcomes (Mwanguzi et al., 2023). Another challenge is that the relationship between universities and communities often reflects existing power imbalances, where universities may dominate the agenda-setting and decision-making processes. This can undermine the principles of reciprocity and mutual benefit that are central to effective engagement (Kagan and Diamond, 2019). Additionally, both universities and communities may face resource limitations that hinder their ability to engage effectively. Financial, human, and infrastructural resources are critical for sustaining meaningful engagement activities (Mwanguzi et al., 2023). It is well known that the extent to which universities prioritize UCE varies, with some institutions viewing it as peripheral to their core missions of teaching and research. This can affect the level of institutional support and the integration of engagement activities into the broader academic agenda (Kagan and Diamond, 2019).

Though there are problems linked to complexities and contradictions, studies have shown that UCEs are beneficial in a lot of ways under certain circumstances, contributing to both the university and the community. UCE enriches the educational experience by providing students with opportunities for experiential learning. This hands-on approach helps students apply theoretical knowledge to real-world problems, fostering critical thinking and problem-solving skills leading to more engaged and motivated students. In addition, specific needs, such as public health issues, educational disparities, or economic development, are addressed in these engagements. Another advantage is that effective UCE is characterized by mutually beneficial partnerships where both the university and the community gain. This results in building trust and creating networks that support ongoing collaboration (Mwanguzi et al., 2023).

In addition to the benefits outlined above, it is worth noting that UCEs in Ghanaian universities though unique in context share similar benefits. The notable one is that UCE initiatives helped to address pressing socio-economic issues such as poverty, unemployment, and health disparities. UG collaborated with local communities to develop and implement solutions that are tailored to the specific needs of these communities. For example, UG health programmes significantly improved healthcare access and outcomes in underserved areas (Agyeman et al., 2021). Secondly, UCE provided opportunities for lifelong learning and professional development as noted by Boadi et al. (n.d.). In their study, a community learning centre (in Tema), offered educational programs that cater to the needs of non-traditional students, including working adults and those in remote areas helping bridge the educational gap and promoting social mobility.

UGLCs play a vital role in extending educational opportunities beyond the main campus. It dates back from the Accra Workers College (being the oldest UGLC) established in 1963. These centres have a significant influence and are strategically located across the former ten regions of Ghana. The primary mission of the UGLC is to broaden the reach of the University of Ghana's (UG) educational programs and services, particularly through distance and continuing education (University of Ghana, 2024).

In Africa, which is the second largest yet least-studied continent in this regard, UCE has emerged as a vital strategy for advancing partnerships between universities and communities. According to Kisambira

et al. (2024), UCE takes various forms, including Community Service Learning (CSL), which integrates community service into academic coursework. There is also Participatory Action Research (PAR) and Community-Based Research (CBR). These forms of UCEs emphasize reciprocal interactions between university stakeholders and communities (Nelson and Stroink, 2020, as cited in Kisambira et al., 2024). Such collaborative models have increasingly become integral to higher education globally, with students actively participating in academic activities involving community partners (Arya-Pizarro and Verelst, 2023; Gregorutti, 2022; Mann and Bowen, 2021, as cited in Kisambira et al., 2024). Despite these advancements, the African context poses unique features and influence in the practice of UCE which has not been unearthed. Various studies have failed to provide a firsthand account of how UCE contributes to sustainable development, enhances educational outcomes, and promotes social cohesion while addressing the underlying challenges of implementing such initiatives in Africa (Bidandi et al., 2021; Kisambira et al., 2024). Secondly, at the UG, although there have been studies on UCEs (Agyeman et al., 2021; Tagoe, 2014; Manuh et al., 2006), they did not focus on the UGLCs entirely. Therefore, this empirical research is both pioneering and timely. Hence, the goals of the study are to analyze the nature and scope of UCEs at the UGLCs, and to assess the outcomes of these engagements on both the UGLCs and its surrounding communities. To achieve these goals, the study sought to find answers to these research questions: What is the nature and scope of UCEs at the UGLC? What are the outcomes of UCEs on both the UGLCs and its surrounding communities? What is the influence of these outcomes on both parties?

The significance of this research lies in its potential to fill critical gaps in the scholarship on HESR. Thus, through the examination of theoretical, methodological, and pragmatic dimensions of UCE within an African HEI context. It provides insights into how HEIs can better align their missions with societal needs. Also, it offers evidence-based recommendations to improve the effectiveness of UCE initiatives, thereby maximising partnership benefits that foster innovation, equity, and sustainability in higher education. As such, this study aspires to leave a lasting influence on higher education studies and practice, particularly in a continent that urgently requires contextually relevant and transformative educational strategies.

2. Literature review

This literature provides a strong foundation for the study by providing a comprehensive overview of existing research and identifying gaps in knowledge. Based on this, the following concepts were reviewed and deemed appropriate for this study because of their relevance to the study's objectives.

2.1. Meaning of UCE and its implications

As discussed early on, the collaborative nature of UCE leads to several outcomes, hence the need to review its multifaceted importance. A comparative analysis of various studies reveals a shared emphasis on the transformative potential of UCE for students, communities, and universities. However, significant gaps persist, including the absence of standardized frameworks for measuring UCE effectiveness, insufficient focus on long-term influence, and limited examination of UCE within African contexts beyond South Africa and Uganda. Gaps in these African countries' case studies emphasize the need for further research that systematically explores UCE's multidimensional influence. For instance, in South Africa's HEIs van Hoepen and Coetzee (2020) explore the role of community engagement in accounting education, emphasizing its practical benefits for students and its capacity to yield research outputs and community value. Their work highlights how UCE can enhance students' application of theoretical knowledge to real-world scenarios while simultaneously benefiting the communities involved. However, their study remains limited in geographical scope and theoretical

exploration, as it does not examine how these benefits can be systematically measured or sustained in diverse contexts, particularly in Africa.

Further, Farnell's (2020) analytical report adopts a broader perspective, defining community engagement in higher education as a multidimensional interaction between universities (European countries, including Croatia, the Netherlands, and Belgium) and external communities, encompassing teaching, research, and collaborative projects. Farnell argues that UCE addresses societal needs at political, economic, social, and environmental levels and posits that the COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the importance of such engagements. While this work provides a comprehensive conceptual framework, it lacks empirical depth, as it does not analyse specific regional or institutional practices, particularly within African contexts where UCE dynamics may differ significantly.

Bidandi et al. (2021) contribute a focused case study on the University of the Western Cape (UWC), revealing the integral role of UCE in South Africa's higher education landscape. Through semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, they identify both the institutional benefits and challenges of UCE, such as its role in policy development and academic promotion versus logistical hurdles like delays in Memoranda of Understanding. Their findings emphasize the variability in UCE practices across departments and individuals, suggesting a lack of standardized procedures. Their study offers valuable insights but is limited in its exploration of UCE's long-term influence on community transformation and its replication across diverse African contexts.

Also, Kisambira et al. (2024) provide a comparative perspective by examining UCE in a Ugandan public and private university. These authors showed UCE's ability to co-create knowledge, enhance student learning outcomes, and foster sustainable community development. Their findings reveal both short-term and transformative influence on communities and institutions, as well as the challenges of high costs and logistical complexity. While their study advances understanding of UCE's dual influence on higher education and societal outcomes, it calls for better documentation of academic progress and an expanded awareness of non-academic outcomes.

2.2. Nature and scope of UCE

UCEs serve as vital channels for bridging academic pursuits with societal development needs. Across the globe, UCEs often grapple with a tension between academic institutions' commitment to research and their societal responsibilities. For instance, Tshishonga (2022) critiques prestigious universities for prioritizing research over community engagement, perpetuating what is termed as an "ivory tower" attitude that disconnects academia from the communities it is meant to serve. Tshishonga (2022) contends that elevating community engagement to the same level of importance as teaching and research could lead to transformational societal influence, enhancing knowledge generation and dissemination. This view points out the need for a paradigm shift within academic institutions to reorient their priorities toward more inclusive and practical outcomes.

UCEs take a more direct and pragmatic approach. For example, the University of Cape Coast (UCC), Ghana, fosters social capital creation through collaborations with local communities such as Yamoransa (a small town in the central region of Ghana, located along the coastline near Cape Coast and the University of Cape Coast). As Wabike (2021) highlights, these engagements strengthen community capabilities by promoting access to resources, enhancing knowledge sharing, and encouraging collective action. Similarly, the University for Development Studies (UDS), Ghana implements the Third Trimester Field Practical Programme (TTFPP), where students immerse themselves in rural communities to address development issues.

In addition, universities may engage through the concept of quadruple helix. The quadruple helix is a reciprocal relationship that creates a mutual beneficial collaboration with the industry, government, and community. As prescribed in the Guidelines for Assessing

Community Engagement in Higher Education Institution there are four main elements in community engagement framework namely, research, teaching and learning; community advocacy and service and volunteerism. These elements need to be considered in managing a good UCE program (Bakar et al., 2019).

UCE initiatives are designed to be mutually beneficial, providing value to both universities and communities. Universities gain opportunities for applied research, student learning, and community service, while communities benefit from the expertise and resources of the university (Benneworth et al., 2009). In addition, UCE involves the exchange of knowledge and skills between universities and communities. This exchange can take the form of workshops, seminars, and joint projects, enhancing the capacity of both institutions (Israel et al., 1998).

Collaborative research projects are also worth mentioning since they are a cornerstone of UCE. These projects address community-identified issues and involve community members in the research process. This approach ensures that the research is relevant and beneficial to the community (Strand et al., 2003). Also, UCE ensures service-learning, integrating community service with academic instruction, emphasizing reflective thinking and personal growth. This type of engagement allows students to apply classroom knowledge to real-world problems, enhancing their educational experience (Bringle and Hatcher, 2002).

Conversely, universities encourage students and faculty to engage in civic activities, promoting a sense of social responsibility and community involvement. This engagement helps to build stronger, more cohesive communities (Eyler and Giles, 1999) addressing critical social, economic, and environmental issues. By working together, universities and communities can develop innovative solutions to these challenges (Maurrasse, 2010).

2.3. Influence of UCEs on universities and its surrounding communities

UCE represents a dynamic intersection between higher education institutions and their surrounding communities, fostering collaboration to address societal challenges while enhancing educational outcomes. UCEs play a crucial role in promoting sustainable development. These partnerships leverage the resources, knowledge, and innovation capabilities of universities to address local and global sustainability challenges. Teslenko's (2019) study shows how sustainable development can be met through UCEs. He addresses curriculum enhancement, advocating for the integration of real-world experiences and community perspectives into teaching. This approach, grounded in constructivist learning theories, prepares students to address complex societal issues while promoting a culture of sustainability.

In addition, universities provide expertise and research capabilities that can help communities develop sustainable practices. This includes training, workshops, and collaborative research projects that address specific local issues (Clifford and Petrescu, 2012). A study by Kisambira et al. (2024) provide a comparative perspective by analysing UCE in Ugandan public and private universities. Their findings demonstrate UCE's ability to co-create knowledge, enhance student learning, and foster sustainable community development. However, they highlight challenges such as high costs and logistical complexities, suggesting the need for better documentation of academic and non-academic outcomes. These limitations call for further exploration of UCE's multidimensional influence, particularly its sustainability and replicability.

Engagements with communities provided practical learning opportunities for students, enhancing their academic experience and preparing them for real-world challenges. This experiential learning fosters critical thinking, problem-solving, and civic responsibility. For Kisambira et al. (2024) UCE has emerged as an essential component of modern higher education, fostering collaboration between universities and local communities to address societal challenges, enhance educational experiences, and contribute to the public good. Thus, Astin et al., (2000) study indicates the transformative potential of service learning as a pedagogical approach that integrates community service with academic

instruction. The framework used by these authors, rooted in experiential and reflective learning theories, focuses on how service learning enhances students' academic performance, critical thinking skills, and social awareness. Bringle and Hatcher (2002) also extended this argument by demonstrating that service learning bridges the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, resulting in deeper understanding and improved educational outcomes.

In addition, UCE is pivotal in fostering social cohesion by bridging the gap between higher education institutions and local communities. This approach emphasized collaboration to address societal challenges while promoting inclusivity, trust, and mutual understanding. Moiseyenko (2005) identified the creation of social networks as a fundamental outcome of UCE initiatives. By fostering relationships among individuals from diverse backgrounds, UCE strengthens the social fabric of communities through trust and reciprocity. Further, the role of civic participation in UCE is extensively explored by Eyler and Giles Jr. (1999), who argued that engaging students and faculty in community service promotes civic responsibility and a sense of belonging. Their research, grounded in experiential learning theory, demonstrates how active participation cultivates social awareness and a commitment to community well-being.

Also, collaborative projects between universities and communities can drive innovation and research. The National Centre for Universities and Business (2021) primarily focuses on how collaborative research between universities and communities contributes to addressing localized challenges. It emphasized partnerships as a conduit for fostering innovative solutions and advancing academic knowledge. Goddard et al. (2016) expanded this perspective by emphasizing the dynamic exchange of knowledge and expertise between universities and communities. Their analysis highlights the bidirectional flow of resources, leading to the co-creation of technologies, business models, and practices. Bringle and Hatcher (2002), on the other hand, delved into the practical applications of UCE initiatives, arguing that research relevance and societal benefit are critical to community-driven innovation. Also, Durose et al. (2012) stressed the importance of public engagement in fostering societal support for research and cultivating a collaborative culture that enhances innovation.

Furthermore, UCE represents a powerful mechanism for influencing public policy by fostering evidence-based research and creating channels of communication between academic institutions, policymakers, and community members. A review of Benneworth et al. (2009) article indicates the pivotal role of evidence-based research in shaping public policy. These authors argue that when universities partner with communities to conduct rigorous studies, the findings are more relevant and impactful, directly addressing societal needs. Hart and Wolff (2006) then extend this argument by emphasizing UCE's capacity to foster advocacy and amplify marginalized voices, pushing for systemic social change. Israel et al. (1998) focussed on the capacity-building aspect of UCE, where community members gain skills to participate actively in policymaking. Maurrasse (2010) broadened the discussion by introducing the idea of collaborative problem-solving, which ensures that policies are not only evidence-based but also culturally appropriate and community-driven. In a more focused study, Bidandi et al. (2021) examined UCE at the University of the Western Cape, emphasizing its dual role in policy development and academic promotion.

2.4. The university of Ghana learning centres (UGLCs)

The UGLCs play a pivotal role in extending the university's reach and influence across the country. These centres are strategically located across the regions of Ghana, including Accra, Bolgatanga, Cape Coast, Koforidua, Kumasi, Sekondi/Takoradi, Sunyani, Tamale, Tsito/Ho, Tema, and Wa, ensuring accessibility to diverse populations (University of Ghana, 2022). Their multifaceted functions are tailored to address the educational and developmental needs of students and communities alike, making them central to the university's mission of inclusivity and

societal engagement. One of their primary functions is supporting DE students by providing tutorials and academic assistance. These services cater to both diploma and degree students, ensuring that individuals pursuing education remotely receive the guidance needed to succeed. This role is crucial for broadening access to higher education, particularly for those unable to attend traditional on-campus programs due to geographical or personal constraints.

In addition to DE, the centres facilitate continuing professional development programs aimed at equipping youth and adults with skills and knowledge relevant to various fields. These programs support life-long learning and enable individuals to remain competitive in evolving professional landscapes. Alongside formal education, the centres also address community needs through non-formal education initiatives. These initiatives are tailored to local contexts, promoting lifelong learning and addressing specific challenges faced by community members. Community engagement is another cornerstone of the centres' activities. Through organized service projects and other initiatives, they actively collaborate with local populations to address societal challenges and foster mutual growth. This engagement reflects the university's commitment to societal impact, creating opportunities for meaningful partnerships between academia and local communities (University of Ghana, 2022).

The centres are also at the forefront of integrating Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) into teaching and learning. UGLC supports the development and delivery of online and hybrid courses, ensuring that technological advancements are leveraged to enhance educational access and quality. Furthermore, these centres facilitate research and foster collaborations with professional bodies and organizations. Their goals are to enhance educational and professional opportunities for students and contribute to the broader knowledge economy. In essence, the UGLCs serve as hubs of educational excellence and community empowerment (University of Ghana, 2022). Their diverse functions not only extend the university's reach but also reinforce its commitment to inclusive education, professional development, and community engagement across Ghana.

3. Theoretical review

This study adopts the Community of Practice (CoP) theory, developed by Etienne Wenger and Jean Lave. The theory posits that learning is not merely an individual cognitive process, but a social endeavour embedded within a community (Lave and Wenger, 1991). The theory was adopted due to its relevance in understanding the collaborative and learning dynamics between universities and communities. It also emphasizes the importance of social learning and the development of shared practices within a community, making it particularly suitable for analyzing UCEs.

Another posit is that learning is a social process that occurs through participation in a community. This aligns with the objectives of UCEs, where both parties benefit from shared knowledge and experiences (Wenger, 1998). The theory also highlights the role of mutual engagement in building a community. Universities and communities engage in joint activities, fostering relationships that enhance learning and development (Lave and Wenger, 1991). CoP theory also focuses on the development of a shared repertoire of resources, such as tools, experiences, and stories, which are crucial for effective collaboration and problem-solving in university-community partnerships (Wenger, 1998).

Additionally, the theory emphasizes three critical elements: the domain, which provides a shared purpose and identity; the community, which enables sustained relationships and collaboration; and the practice, which involves the development of shared resources, tools, and experiences through joint activities (Wenger et al., 2002). Hence Wenger's CoP shows how these three elements can lead to collective learning, generating knowledge and fostering mutual growth among the UGLCs and communities.

Further, CoP theory complements and addresses theoretical gaps by

shifting the focus from the individual learner to the collective, emphasizing the role of social interaction and shared practices in the learning process. The theory fills this theoretical gap by framing these engagements between the UGLCs and communities as a dynamic interplay where both parties learn from and contribute to shared goals. Hart and Wolff (2006) argue that successful UCEs require iterative, flexible approaches that acknowledge the evolving nature of collaboration. CoP theory supports this perspective by emphasizing that learning is non-linear and arises organically through participation, problem-solving, and shared reflection within a community.

Moreover, CoP theory provides a mechanism to integrate power dynamics and cultural diversity into the understanding of UCEs. The theory underscores the importance of these factors by focusing on how communities collectively negotiate meaning and develop shared practices (Wenger et al., 2002). In the African context, where traditional hierarchies, resource disparities, and cultural variations influence engagement, the theory offers a more nuanced framework for understanding and fostering equitable partnerships. Erickson et al. (2022) extend Wenger’s contributions by demonstrating how CoPs enable diverse stakeholders to collaborate, exchange knowledge, and co-create solutions in ways that are inclusive and responsive to local contexts. Their work highlights how CoPs transcend individual learning models, by prioritizing collective growth and sustained interaction. This is particularly relevant for the UGLC, where academic knowledge intersects with community-based expertise to address local development challenges.

Through CoP theory, this study provides a robust framework for analysing how universities and communities can engage in meaningful, context-sensitive collaborations. By framing UCEs as CoPs, the study highlights the potential for mutual learning, sustainable knowledge creation, and equitable partnerships that respond to the unique needs and dynamics of African contexts. Ultimately, this integration of theoretical perspectives enriches the understanding of UCEs, offering a model for fostering transformative learning experiences at both individual and collective levels.

4. Methodology

This qualitative research used an explorative case study design to investigate the nature, scope, and outcomes of UCEs at the UGLCs. The exploratory nature provides a holistic view of UCEs within its real-life context, focusing on the experiences and insights of key stakeholders in the centres including the Head and Coordinators of UGLCs, community members and students. Thus, a case study approach was deemed appropriate as it helps examine relationships between the university and its surrounding communities. Case studies allow researchers to conduct a detailed examination of a specific subject within its real-life context, in this case, the different environments in which the UGLCs are located. This depth of analysis helps uncover complex phenomena that might be missed with other methods (Creswell and Poth, 2017; Yin, 2018). This research design facilitated the collection of different forms of data that captured the firsthand account of participants directly involved in UCE activities. The research employed purposive sampling to select participants who were directly involved in managing and coordinating activities at the UGLCs. The purposive sampling technique was chosen to ensure that the study engaged participants with relevant knowledge, experience and current insights into UCE. The target group comprised 1 head of the UGLCs, 8 UGLC coordinators and 3 community members/students (table 1.1). The number was deemed right as data saturation set in at that point due to recurring themes. Also, the data collected was sufficiently detailed and comprehensive to support the research findings with multiple examples (Saunders et al., 2018). These study participants were considered key informants due to their strategic roles in facilitating and overseeing UCEs.

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, which provided the flexibility to explore participants’ perspectives while adhering

to a structured framework of questions (Magaldi and Berler, 2020). The semi-structured interview schedule included open-ended questions that allowed participants to elaborate on their experiences, perspectives, and observations related to UCE. Given logistical constraints and the geographical distribution of the learning centres, the interviews were conducted over the phone within the period of 2nd –13th December 2024. With the consent of participants, the interviews were all recorded. Each interview lasted for about 10–20 min, allowing for in-depth discussions while respecting participants’ time. Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data, focusing on identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns (themes) within the data. Thematic analysis is a widely used method in qualitative research for systematically examining qualitative data to uncover recurring themes and subthemes. To be accepted as trustworthy, qualitative researchers must demonstrate that data analysis has been conducted in a precise, consistent, and exhaustive manner through recording, systematizing, and disclosing the methods of analysis with enough detail to enable the reader to determine whether the process is credible (Nowell et al., 2017). The process of thematic analysis involved several steps. First, all interview data was transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy. The transcripts were then reviewed multiple times to achieve familiarity with the content. Initial codes were generated by identifying key phrases and ideas relevant to the research questions. These codes were subsequently organized into broader themes and subthemes, capturing the essence of the data. The themes were refined and defined to ensure clarity and consistency, and they were then used to construct a comprehensive narrative about UCE at the centres. Hence, this methodology allowed for an in-depth exploration of UCE, providing insights into the interactions between the UGLCs and their surrounding communities. For this thematic analysis, three main themes came up: nature and scope of UCEs, outcomes of UCEs on UGLCs and outcomes of UCEs on surrounding communities. Subsequently sub-themes emerged from the various themes and have been discussed in the findings.

5. Findings

The findings from this study had three main themes: nature and scope of UCEs, outcomes UCE on UGLCs and outcomes of UCE on surrounding communities.

5.1. The nature and scope of UCE

The corresponding sub-themes under this theme include DE and academic counselling, partnerships and research collaboration, public events and workshops, economic development and civic engagement, and lastly school outreach programmes. The findings are presented below:

5.1.1. Distance education (DE) and academic counselling

DE has become increasingly important due to its ability to provide flexible learning opportunities to a diverse population. All the centres

Table 1
1 Data on interviewees.

Personal Information	Number
Gender	
Male	10
Female	3
Total	13
Marital status	
Single	1
Married	12
Relationship with UGLC	
Head	1
Centre coordinator	8
Community member/student	3
Total	13

provided avenues for doing DE as it's the sole provider for DE in the UG. Secondly, the centres also provided academic counselling for students. A participant stated:

'The centres provide various diploma and undergraduate programs nationwide through DE. As a result, UG's enrolment have increased significantly.'

5.1.2. Partnerships and research collaboration

All the centres had diverse partnerships and research collaborations going on. These collaborations involved multiple stakeholders, including industry partners, government agencies, and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), working together to achieve common research goals.

'The Centre partnered with the Legon Lions Club and the Tamale Teaching Hospital to have a program on health education and eyes screening exercise for two communities in the Sanaregu district. Reproductive health education and family planning programme were also held with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA-formerly, the United Nations Fund for Population Activities).'

Also, in terms of research collaboration, a participant stated:

'I had a research collaboration with the students in the community on their experiences with teaching and learning at the Tsito Learning Centre and also their experiences with the use of Sakai Learning Management System. A paper is being published in this regard'.

5.1.3. Public events and workshops

All the centres hosted a variety of public events and workshops, including the Annual New Year School (ANYs), Easter School, and various skill development sessions. Training programmes held include snail farming, mushroom cultivation, bead making, soap making, smock weaving, oil extraction, aqua culture, computer training, financial literacy and English literacy among others.

A participant commented:

'I facilitated a workshop for Cadbury in the Tema Metropolitan Assembly to help build the capacity of middle-level management staff. The centre also organized training activities for capacity building and skill development of the youth which include English literacy programs, leadership training, customer relations, communication skills and farming education'.

5.1.4. Economic development and civic engagement

All the centres contributed to the development of human capital by offering education and training programs that equip community members with the skills needed for the modern workforce. This led to higher employment rates and better job opportunities promoting economic development in the communities.

A participant narrated:

'The centre organized income generation training for rural community women in the Upper East Region sponsored by the then Institute of Adult Education (IAE) and DVV, a German adult education organization on the cultivation of mushrooms.'

Civic engagement involves universities partnering with local communities to address societal challenges, promote social justice, and enhance the overall quality of life of the community. Another participant said:

'Our centre organized a political talk for the youth in the community. This was done for participants to be aware of their civic right and responsibilities, and to promote active participation in the 2024 December elections'.

5.1.5. School outreach programmes

School outreach programmes were held where the centres engage with Senior High Schools (SHS) and the community to provide educational information on admission requirements of the UG. These programmes are a vital component of UCEs, fostering strong connections between universities and their surrounding communities. A participant echoed:

'The centre organized an education fair for final year students of second cycle institutions in collaboration with the Regional Coordinating Council to create awareness of the UG's DE and Access Course for Mature Students entry into the DE programme and to increase access of tertiary education to under-served or remote parts of the region. Also, we opened our computer labs for applicants who do not know how to do the online application, and our IT person is there to provide guidance and assistance to them.'

5.2. Outcomes of UCEs on UGLCs

UCEs have a significant outcome on universities in various ways. Three sub-themes that emerged under this theme were reputation and public image, student recruitment and retention as well as economic benefits.

5.2.1. Reputation and public image

Centres that actively engage with their communities often enhance their reputation and strengthen relationships with local stakeholders. This led to increased support from the community and collaborative opportunities. A participant revealed:

'It has increased the university's visibility. There are some people who do not know about the UG and do not know the programmes we offer at the centre, so, through our UCEs, they are able to get to know about the programmes and get to know more about the UG.'

5.2.2. Student recruitment and retention

UCEs play a crucial role in both student recruitment and retention, affecting the overall enrollment and success of the centre. Centres that actively engage with their communities such as the school outreach programs often attract more prospective students. A participant stated:

'UCEs have boosted our enrollment; the application and admission of students have increased tremendously'.

5.2.3. Economic benefits

The centres were all actively involved in their communities thus, this attracted more funding and investments from both public and private sectors through community projects, partnerships with local businesses, and donations from alumni and philanthropists. In addition, the centres also hired some of their facilities, such as conference rooms and hostels, to earn more income. A participant said:

'The centre gained some revenue from the hiring of our facilities and selling nursery seedlings to our community'.

5.3. Outcomes of UCE in surrounding communities

UCEs have a profound outcome on surrounding communities, fostering social, economic, and educational benefits among others. This theme had three sub-themes emerging from it. These were employment opportunities, educational enhancement and well-being.

5.3.1. Employment opportunities

All the centres offered employment opportunities through training programmes, which enhanced the knowledge and skills of the local workforce. This development of human capital is crucial for long-term

economic growth and competitiveness (Valero and Van Reenen, 2016). A participant related:

‘So, with foreign people, the influence that we have made on them is huge. We have instances whereby Ivorians come and then we expose them to basic reading and writing of English language and then, through that, some of them are able to secure jobs in the country. Some too once they gained the qualification, they travelled back to their country to work.’

5.3.2. Educational enhancement

UCEs benefit the surrounding communities by enriching the educational experiences of students. Apart from the diploma and degree programmes, the centres offered community education programs, workshops, and seminars that promoted lifelong learning. These programs helped community members acquire new skills and knowledge, contributing to personal and professional growth as a participant narrated:

‘Those who were taught ICT, learnt something practical including designing wedding cards, funeral brochure etc. which has enhanced their economic livelihoods. They were given certificates which are stepping stone for education career development in the near future.’

In addition, by partnering with community organizations, the centres offered students practical, hands-on learning opportunities. These experiences helped students apply theoretical knowledge in real-world settings, thereby enhancing their learning and professional development. Thus, a student participant recalled:

‘After I had gone through the DE programme, my method of teaching changed drastically and that helped my students mostly because I was always making sure that they set the tone for the training, which is one of the most reliable forms of training. Even though the military is based on instructor centered, I made it both learner and instructor centered so that they’ll be able to learn more based on their experiences.’

5.3.3. Well-being

The centres partnered with local health organizations to provide medical services, health education, and preventive care to their surrounding communities. These partnerships led to better health outcomes and increased access to healthcare services. A participant echoed:

‘We engage them on the issues related to health. We organized health screening in some communities where we partnered with our nursing students, and we were able to get some of their equipment to aid in our health screening. We have also done health education in these communities, and it proved to be very beneficial. On one occasion we had someone whose blood sugar level was very high and had it not been for our activity on that day, we never know what could have happened to him. So, after the detection, we gave him referral to go to the hospital. We also have an affiliation with some of the hospitals within our catchment area, so we normally refer these people to those hospitals to seek medical attention.’

6. Discussion of findings

The research aims to analyze the nature and scope of UCEs at the UGLCs. The UGLCs provide DE for UG which allows individuals who may not have access to traditional education due to geographical, financial, or personal constraints to pursue their academic goals (Abramson, 2021). In addition, academic counselling is also provided which plays a crucial role in supporting students’ academic and personal development. DE students need a lot of support due to the different responsibilities they have (family and job related). Thus, academic counselling helps them navigate their educational journey effectively as supported by Mishra and Mishra (2014).

A lot of partnerships and research collaborations are enhanced in the UGLCs. The projects addressed community-identified issues and involved community members in the research process thus ensuring that

the research is relevant and beneficial to the community (Strand et al., 2003). The importance of such partnerships lies in their ability to pool resources, expertise, and perspectives, thereby enhancing the quality of research outcomes. Examples of such collaborations are seen in health education and screening exercises done by the Tamale UGLC and a research collaboration with the community members at the Tsito UGLC.

Public events and workshops involved various activities that serve as platforms for knowledge exchange, cultural enrichment, and collaborative problem-solving, thereby strengthening the bond between the UGLCs and the communities they served as supported by Bouillion and Gomez, (2001). The notable ones in the centres include workshops on communication skills, leadership skills and customer relations. In addition, a lot of training programs were done to provide skills that led into self-employment for community members. Some of which include snail farming, basket weaving and bead making leading to meaningful self-employment opportunities and promoting entrepreneurship. This is in alignment with Mitchell et al., (2023). In these engagements the expertise of faculty members or a resource person were used and the community members benefitted by the skills acquired.

Having a meaningful employment from the skills acquired led to economic development. Economic development improves well-being and quality of life as a result of creating and retaining jobs and supporting or growing incomes (World Bank, 2023). From this study most of the participants that were trained could now live a comfortable life as their quality of lives improved. For civic engagement, education was provided by some centres for the community members on their rights to vote and the importance of exercising their civic rights for the December 2024 elections. This is supported by Schröder and Neumayr (2023) who confirmed in their study that individuals and groups who actively participate in the political and community life of their society helps to improve conditions for all. Civic engagement activities help students and community members develop essential civic skills, such as leadership, communication, and collaboration. These experiences also promote values such as empathy, equity, and justice (Chittum et al., 2022).

All the centres provide school outreach programmes where they engage with SHS to provide educational support in the surrounding communities. Communities in remote areas were targeted, likewise the matured individuals who may not have plans of schooling. The goal was to advertise the centre’s programmes to the hard-to-reach communities. The outreach programmes were done in the SHS or through the media such as the radio or social media. Flyers are also not left out. These programmes provided prospective students with access to information on admissions, university resources, such as computer laboratories, libraries, and expert faculty for firsthand information. For example, the technicians in the information technology (IT) lab assisted students with their online application for admission to UG. This exposure inspired them to pursue higher education paving a better road to the future for prospective students, sponsors and their communities as confirmed by NTC Corporate (2022).

The next objective sought to assess the outcomes of UCEs on UGLCs. The first outcome was reputation and public image which means a lot to universities. UCE is a powerful strategy for universities to enhance their reputation and public image as stakeholders patronise a university’s services if it has a good image. UCEs allowed the UGLCs to demonstrate their commitment to societal development, which boosted their reputation. This aligns with the study by Gutiérrez-Villar et al. (2022), that a positive reputation is a critical factor in differentiating a university from its competitors and improving relationships with stakeholders. These engagements take various forms, such as public lectures, and partnerships with local organizations.

Student recruitment and retention came up as another outcome from UCEs on the UGLCs. Once students are enrolled, a strong sense of community and engagement can help retain them. This sense of belonging and support is crucial for student satisfaction and persistence as seen in Chittum et al.’s study (2022). The community engagement initiatives highlighted in this study improved student retention rates by

fostering a supportive and inclusive campus environment.

In addition, UCEs led to substantial economic benefits to the UGLCs. According to Bowen (2012), universities play a crucial role in community economic development through employment, purchasing, and resource sharing. The UGLCs generated revenue by hiring out their facilities and selling products. For example, conference rooms and hostels were rented out for events, while products like nursery seedlings were sold to the community. This approach is supported by Adams and Farrell (2024), who suggested that leveraging campus facilities for revenue generation is a practical strategy for financial stability.

The last objective which was to assess the outcomes of UCEs in its surrounding communities had employment opportunities, educational enhancement and well-being as the main sub-themes. The development of human capital provided employment opportunities through education and training programmes in all the centres. By aligning workforce training and education with industry demands and entrepreneurship endeavours, these communities created a robust talent pool that increased job opportunities as confirmed by Economic Impact Catalyst (2024) and Compagnucci and Spigarelli, (2020) in meeting the third mission of universities. Furthermore, educational attainment by the participants improved their employability, making them stronger and more resilient, which is vital for sustaining job retention and growth. This is in alignment with a study by Forward Wayne County (2024).

For educational enhancement, most of the community members benefitted from practical lessons taught. The integration of practical learning opportunities (such as bead making and aqua culture) is very necessary for preparing students for the workforce as it emphasized creativity, critical thinking, and real-world applications (Shikshavartha, 2023). Also, studies have shown that students participating in the learning process, that is skills acquisition produce better educational outcomes and play vital role in their personal and professional lives compared to traditional lecture-based methods Ruano-Borbalan (2024) and Harvard Gazette (2019).

For wellbeing initiatives, the UGLCs partnered with the local health organizations to do medical screening, health education, and preventive care. Others are public health campaigns and research projects aimed at addressing local health issues. These collaborations are essential for promoting community well-being and addressing health disparities. These efforts also helped reduce the prevalence of diseases, promoted healthy lifestyles, and improved overall community health as supported by Smith et al. (2017). For example, a community member was advised to go to the hospital after he was screened, and it was detected that he had high blood sugar.

7. Conclusion and recommendations

The study has examined the nature and scope as well as the extensive and multifaceted outcome of UCE on both the UGLCs and their surrounding communities. It has highlighted UCE's diverse nature and scope, encompassing DE and academic counselling, partnerships and research collaborations, economic development and civic engagement, public events and workshops as well as school outreach programmes. These activities significantly contributed to educational, economic, and health improvements. The outcomes on the UGLCs include enhanced reputation and public image, student recruitment and retention, and economic benefits. These are crucial for the sustainability of the UGLCs and contributes to their institutional goals. For the surrounding communities, UCEs fostered employment opportunities, educational enhancement and well-being, creating a symbiotic relationship that ensured mutual growth. It should be noted however that generalizability in qualitative research is often limited due to the small, non-random samples typically used. This means that while these findings provide deep insights in UCEs in this context which is the UGLCs, they may not be broadly applicable to other contexts (Lewis et al., 2014).

The study recommended that the management of the UGLCs seek more partnerships with organizations, industries, and NGOs to

maximize UCE benefits. In addition, community members and students should also avail themselves to be active participants in the programmes that are organised for them since without these collaborations UCEs fail. The study also observed a decline in UCE activities due to reduced funding post-2000, affecting programmes such as the UNFPA Mass Adult Population Education Project and the Ghana Aids Commission Project. The cancellation of the Northern Easter School has also diminished community engagement, particularly in Northern Ghana. Despite these challenges, UCE programs have positively influenced access to continuing education, health information, and income generation skills.

Author statement

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