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Original Article

Reconstructing the Moral University: Critical Idealism as a Framework for Moral Formation in African Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Universities face an institutional crisis in which moral formation remains rhetorically central but is practically displaced by performance metrics, ranking regimes, and market-oriented governance, while rapid digital transformation reshapes teaching, assessment, and institutional life. In postcolonial African contexts, this crisis is intensified by inherited colonial institutional forms, plural moral and epistemic traditions, and uneven digital infrastructure. This paper pursues three objectives: first, to diagnose the governance-level problem in which the imperative for moral formation persists but coherent institutional frameworks are missing; second, to reconstruct classical Idealism into Critical Idealism, a postcolonial, plural, and digitally attentive framework that retains moral seriousness while addressing epistemic hierarchy, atomistic agency, and digital governance through Ubuntu-informed relationality; and third, to translate this reconstruction into a policy-relevant model with five institutional design dimensions and twelve evaluable propositions suitable for quality assurance integration. Using reconstructive conceptual analysis, the paper subjects classical Idealism to four contemporary tensions: universal truth versus epistemic pluralism, autonomy versus relational selfhood, embodied formation versus digital mediation, and moral ideals versus political-economic constraints. The resulting framework operationalises moral formation through curricular integration, dialogical pedagogy, integrity governance, epistemic pluralism, and ethical digital governance. Rather than claiming demonstrated feasibility, the paper proposes phased implementation pathways and a future empirical validation agenda anchored in Uganda's higher education context, with the framework intended for careful adaptation across comparable African and postcolonial settings. In doing so, it offers a reconstructive institutional logic for restoring moral purpose to university governance under conditions of constraint, contestation, and digital change. The framework's principal practical contributions are: a five-dimensional institutional audit tool applicable to university governance and quality assurance cycles; twelve propositions with measurable thresholds that accreditation agencies and institutional leaders can integrate into programme review instruments; scenario-differentiated implementation pathways calibrated to resource-rich, mid-capacity, and low-capacity institutions; and an Ubuntu-informed moral-reasoning instrument designed for culturally grounded empirical validation in Ugandan and comparable African university contexts.

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INTRODUCTION

When several African university students report witnessing academic misconduct (Bayaa Martin Saana et al., 2016; Mwamwenda, 2012; Starovoytova & Arimi, 2017), when generative artificial intelligence can produce credible essays at scale (Herbold et al., 2023), and when learning analytics can track and profile student behaviour without transparent accountability (Selwyn, 2019), the question of how universities cultivate ethical agency becomes urgent. These are not only enforcement challenges. They point to a deeper problem where contemporary higher education often lacks an institution-level account of how moral purpose is translated into governance, pedagogy, assessment, and digital infrastructure.

Universities have long been understood as more than credentialing systems or research enterprises. They are formative institutions, expected to cultivate ethical judgment, civic responsibility, and commitment to the public good alongside professional competence (Soria et al., 2016). Yet these purposes are increasingly strained by ranking regimes, audit cultures, performance metrics, and market-oriented financing (Sangwa et al., 2025). Digital transformation can expand access and flexibility, but it can also narrow the conditions for sustained moral dialogue and belonging, particularly where connectivity is uneven, and platforms are adopted primarily for throughput rather than pedagogy (Bao, 2020; Czerniewicz et al., 2020).

In postcolonial African contexts, moral purpose is particularly contested and institutionally fragile. Universities must negotiate plural moral and epistemic traditions within institutional architectures shaped by colonial legacies, while simultaneously serving national development agendas under conditions of rapid massification, resource constraint, and market-oriented financing. Across the continent, the 'ethical crisis' is visible not only in misconduct reports (Bayaa Martin Saana et al., 2016; Mwamwenda, 2012; Starovoytova & Arimi, 2017), but also in structurally produced vulnerabilities like rising student–faculty ratios, assessment overload, and the rapid adoption of digitally mediated teaching and monitoring tools without robust participatory governance (Czerniewicz et al., 2020; Selwyn, 2019). In Uganda, a National Council for Higher Education review suggested that ethics coursework is unevenly embedded across undergraduate programmes and often limited to discipline-specific professional codes (NCHE, 2020). Makerere University's strategic plan frames institutional mission in terms of ethical leadership and social responsibility, while operational pressures also encourage heavier teaching loads and increased reliance on digital

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assessment and monitoring (Makerere University, 2020).

Existing responses to the moral crisis of the university tend to fragment into three inadequate approaches: (i) critique that diagnoses neoliberalization and digitalisation without offering reconstructive institutional design; (ii) applied ethics initiatives disconnected from governance instruments, assessment systems, and quality assurance; and (iii) localised pedagogical interventions that do not scale to university-wide reform. Technical fixes alone honour codes, plagiarism software, and standalone ethics modules fail because they treat symptoms rather than the institutional logic that marginalises moral formation. What is needed is not another policy add-on but a reconstructive framework that re-embeds moral purpose within governance, pedagogy, and digital infrastructure. The critical gap, therefore, is the absence of a coherent normative-institutional framework that can simultaneously diagnose the governance-level erosion of moral formation, draw on non-Eurocentric philosophical resources including Ubuntu, and translate moral purpose into auditable institutional design dimensions that quality assurance agencies and institutional leaders can evaluate and act upon.

Philosophical Idealism, once central to moral education theory, is often dismissed as culturally narrow or impractical, rather than reconstructed for plural, postcolonial, and digitally mediated contexts (Glanzer & Ream, 2008). This dismissal is premature. Idealism's core insight, that education is inherently morally formative, remains essential. What requires reconstruction is not the telos, but assumptions about moral universality, atomistic agency, embodied formation, and institutional neutrality. This paper pursues three interconnected objectives: first, diagnosing the governance-level problem; second, reconstructing classical Idealism into Critical Idealism; and third, translating this into a policy-relevant model with five institutional design dimensions and twelve empirically testable propositions. Rather than asserting demonstrated feasibility, the paper concludes by setting out context-sensitive implementation pathways and a future agenda for empirical validation, grounded in Uganda and designed to guide adaptation across comparable postcolonial settings. Three research questions orient the inquiry: (RQ1) How do neoliberal, colonial, and digital governance pressures undermine the institutional conditions for moral formation in African universities? (RQ2) Which assumptions of classical Idealism require reconstruction to remain defensible under conditions of epistemic pluralism, relational selfhood, digital mediation, and resource constraint? (RQ3) How can a reconstructed Critical Idealism framework be operationalised into evaluable institutional design dimensions and quality-assurance-ready propositions?

CONCEPTUAL APPROACH AND METHOD

This article employs reconstructive conceptual analysis, a critical-reconstructive approach to normative theory-building (Bhaskar, 2008; Habermas, 1985). Reconstruction proceeds through three movements: retrieval (identifying enduring normative commitments), immanent critique (testing commitments against contemporary contradictions), and reconstruction (articulating principles adequate to current conditions). This approach provides criteria for judging institutional adequacy, principles for guiding reform, and evaluative standards for assessment.

Source engagement was purposive and problem-driven: (1) classical Idealist educational theory by Plato, Kant, and Hegel to retrieve a moral-formation kernel; (2) pluralism, communitarian ethics, Ubuntu, and feminist traditions to address Eurocentric assumptions and centre African philosophical resources; (3) digital education ethics and critical data studies to analyse algorithmic governance; and (4) higher education policy literature, with particular attention to Ugandan and African contexts, to clarify political-economic constraints. Sources were selected for inclusion based on three criteria: (i) direct theoretical relevance to the moral-formation

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kernel or one of the four reconstructive tensions; (ii) representativeness of a scholarly tradition African, postcolonial, feminist, digital ethics, or classical Idealist rather than exhaustive coverage; and (iii) availability in English or French academic databases including Google Scholar, JSTOR, and African Journals Online, searched between 2023 and 2025 using terms such as "moral formation higher education," "Ubuntu philosophy university,""epistemic decolonization Africa," and "algorithmic governance education." Sources were excluded where they addressed individual moral psychology without institutional or governance implications, or where contextual grounding was exclusively Global North without postcolonial applicability.

The procedural sequence followed four steps. First, classical Idealist texts were read to identify the enduring moral-formation kernel (retrieval). Second, that kernel was tested against four contemporary tensions identified through the postcolonial, feminist, and digital education literatures (immanent critique). Third, reconstructive principles adequate to each tension were articulated, drawing on Ubuntu and indigenous philosophy as co-equal resources (reconstruction). Fourth, the principles were translated into a five-dimensional institutional design framework with twelve evaluable propositions, each assigned measurable thresholds, expected outcomes, and links to quality assurance instruments (operationalisation). The empirical validation strategy was developed by mapping the twelve propositions onto measurement approaches drawn from mixed-methods education research, including ethnographic case study (Yin, 2018), realistic evaluation (Pawson & Tilley, 2017), and the development of an Ubuntu-informed moral-reasoning instrument capable of capturing relational, restorative, and communitarian dimen sions of ethical judgment not assessed by existing Western tools such as the Defining Issues Test.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Retrieving Idealism's Moral-Education Kernel

Philosophical Idealism occupies a central place in educational thought because it understands education as a morally formative enterprise rather than a merely instrumental one. Idealism holds that human reality is shaped not only by material conditions but also by ideas, reason, and moral purpose (Banerjee, 2025; Rusdi, 2013). In educational terms, this orientation frames learning as the cultivation of persons, developing capacities for ethical judgment, reflective discernment, and responsible agency (Matusov et al., 2016; Nera, 2015).

In Plato's vision, education is not the accumulation of information, but a reorientation toward truth and virtue. The allegory of the cave presents learning as a turning away from illusion toward the Good as the source of moral and epistemic order. Teaching, therefore, involves disciplined reflection and dialogical inquiry that reshapes what the learner can recognise as worthy of assent (Grubor, 2023; Losin, 1996).

Kant grounds moral formation in rational autonomy. Moral agency arises from the capacity to legislate moral law for oneself, acting from duty rather than inclination (Kant, 1785/2002; Kain, 2004; Korsgaard, 2009). Moral education thus aims to cultivate practical reason and a commitment to universalisable principles, thereby habituating learners to justify action by reasons that can be shared beyond private preference (Assunção et al., 2024; Sticker, 2015).

Hegel extends this account by locating moral development within history, social practice, and institutions. He notes that ethical life (Sittlichkeit) is not realised only through private deliberation, but through participation in shared norms and laws, and that education mediates between individual subjectivity and collective moral life by inducting persons into practices through which agency becomes socially intelligible and sustained (Hegel, 1977; Pinkard, 2000; Taylor, 1975).

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Importantly, this moral-community orientation resonates beyond Idealism's European origins. African traditions articulated through Ubuntu emphasise moral formation through relational belonging, shared responsibility, and communal flourishing. Ubuntu's claim that personhood is realised through relationships (umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu) aligns with Idealism's formative emphasis while challenging overly individualistic accounts of moral agency and underscoring the ethical significance of mutual recognition (Gyekye, 1995; Menkiti, 1984; Metz, 2011; Ramose, 1999). For African higher education, Ubuntu is not a cultural supplement, but an epistemic resource that must be treated as a constitutive partner in reconstructing moral formation.

Across these strands, the retrieved kernel is that universities are moral communities obligated to cultivate citizens capable of ethical reasoning and civic participation. Yet the historical conditions that shaped classical Idealism differ from today's pluralistic, postcolonial, and digitally mediated university, with conditions acutely visible across African higher education. The next section, therefore, subjects this kernel to immanent critique, clarifying four tensions that indicate where reconstruction is necessary.

IMMANENT CRITIQUE: FOUR TENSIONS REQUIRING RECONSTRUCTION

Classical Idealism was shaped in settings that assumed a relatively shared moral language and stable institutional authority. Contemporary universities work under different conditions, including deep value disagreement, postcolonial knowledge politics, digital mediation, and tight political-economic constraints (Barnett, 2017; Readings, 1996). In African contexts, these tensions are particularly acute, where universities must navigate epistemic hierarchies inherited from colonialism, resource constraints intensified by massification, and digital infrastructures adopted under conditions of unequal global power (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Sarr, 2020). The task is not to discard Idealism's moral-formation kernel, but to show where it becomes vulnerable in practice, and how reconstruction can make it defensible and usable today.

Universal Moral Truth and Epistemic Pluralism

Idealism is compelling because it refuses to treat ethics as mere preference. It assumes that reason can orient persons toward a shared moral horizon, giving moral education substance, where students learn to justify claims, weigh reasons, and act responsibly in public life (Korsgaard, 2009; Nagel, 1997). Without this orientation, ethics teaching collapses into cultural comparison or procedural tolerance without evaluative depth, and universities lose their capacity to make normative claims about integrity, discrimination, or legitimate expertise.

Yet universities increasingly face moral disagreement that is not simply a misunderstanding waiting to be corrected. Value pluralism holds that some goods are genuine but competing. For example, freedom, equality, mercy, justice, solidarity, and tradition can each command allegiance without fitting into a single reconciled moral order (Berlin, 1969). Sunstein (1986) adds that projects of rational synthesis can understate the depth of disagreement, and quietly present one tradition's resolution as "reason itself." In postcolonial African contexts, the tension sharpens because disagreement is entangled with epistemic hierarchy. Wiredu (1996) and Hountondji (1996) show how Western frameworks have often functioned as default standards, relegating indigenous moral epistemologies such as Ubuntu to "culture" rather than knowledge. Under these conditions, when universities declare "universal ethical principles" while teaching only Kantian or utilitarian frameworks, they do not escape relativism — instead, they enact epistemic violence while claiming neutrality (Mignolo, 2011; Santos, 2015).

But pluralism cannot be an excuse for moral thinness. Universities must make normative

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decisions about curricula, assessment, discrimination, misconduct, and legitimate expertise. If the institution retreats into relativism, moral education becomes procedural tolerance without evaluative depth, and governance collapses into bargaining among interests (MacIntyre, 2013; Williams, 2011). Students learn that all positions are "equally valid" in principle while discovering that some positions of Western liberal individualism are more valid in practice, in assessment criteria, institutional reward structures, and what counts as rigorous argumentation.

Reconstruction, therefore, requires neither monism nor relativism, but principled pluralism. The university can retain normative seriousness, reason-giving, mutual justification, and accountability (Rawls, 2005; Forst, 2014) while refusing epistemic ranking. For African universities, this means institutionalising dialogical spaces governed by mutual recognition, non-domination, and contestability, where Ubuntu and Western moral traditions meet as co-equal sources of moral insight, rather than as ranked vocabularies (Gyekye, 1995; Menkiti, 1984). This is not multiculturalism as aesthetic diversity, but epistemic decolonisation, where Ubuntu's relational personhood and Western liberal autonomy are both tested, refined, and limited through sustained engagement, and neither is permitted to set the terms of dialogue unilaterally (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Mbembe, 2020).

Consequently, universities require principled pluralism that constitutes inclusive epistemic recognition, combined with shared standards of public justification for decisions about harm, rights, and integrity. For African higher education, this means Ubuntu and other indigenous traditions must be treated as epistemic partners, not cultural add-ons.

Autonomy and Relational Selfhood

Kantian Idealism centres autonomy, arguing that persons are morally accountable because they can govern themselves by reason rather than impulse (Kant, 1998; O'Neill, 2013). In university life, this remains essential, where autonomy grounds responsibility, academic integrity, and ethical critique. Without a robust account of autonomous judgment, moral formation reduces to socialisation, and students become conformists rather than critical citizens.

However, moral agency is formed inside relationships and institutions, not outside them. Communitarian and feminist traditions show that moral judgment is shaped by histories and social practices (MacIntyre, 2013; Sandel, 2005), and that vulnerability, dependency, and care are not marginal but morally decisive features of human life (Held, 2005; Noddings, 2013). These insights matter because campuses can cultivate moral harms through silencing, exclusion, fear, and stigma, even while celebrating "autonomous" learners (Ahmed, 2020; Lynch, 2021). When universities increase student-to-staff ratios, casualise teaching positions, and reduce opportunities for sustained mentoring, they produce structural conditions where students cannot develop the relationships through which moral discernment is learned (Berg & Seeber, 2016; Lynch, 2021).

Ubuntu intensifies the institutional point further, explaining that personhood is realised through reciprocal responsibility and communal flourishing (Metz, 2011; Molefe, 2019). In African philosophical traditions, moral agency is not pre-social, but emerges through relationships of mutual recognition and obligation (Gade, 2012). Moral formation, therefore, depends on whether universities build durable structures of recognition, care, and accountability through mentoring, fair procedures, inclusive pedagogy, and ethical leadership.

Yet relationality can be weaponised. Appeals to "community" can enforce conformity and protect hierarchies, especially where power is unequal (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2012; Oyěwùmí, 2017). Autonomy cannot be abandoned; it is also a safeguard against coercion and moral silencing.

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Reconstruction is thus best framed as autonomy-in-relation: universities should form persons capable of critical reflection and accountability, while recognising that these capacities are cultivated through care, recognition, and just institutional arrangements (Anderson, 1995; Benhabib, 2013). This means designing institutions where relationships are neither optional (the liberal fallacy) nor totalizing (the communitarian risk), but structured through practices that simultaneously enable critique and sustain belonging.

Accordingly, Critical Idealism treats agency as relational and embodied, while preserving autonomy as the capacity to critique and resist unjust norms achieved not by balancing two competing values, but by recognising that autonomous judgment is itself a relational achievement, cultivated through institutions that provide recognition, care, and the structural conditions for dissent.

Embodied Formation and Digital Mediation

Idealist moral education often assumes sustained embodied interaction, including dialogue, shared institutional life, and everyday encounters through which learners develop empathy, responsibility, and civic habits (Garrison, 2010; Kristjánsson, 2015). Face-to-face seminars, office hours, shared meals, and campus life create the conditions for students to witness ethical modelling, practice moral conversation, and experience themselves as recognised members of a moral community.

Digital mediation reshapes these conditions and cannot be treated as morally neutral. Critics warn that mediated interaction can thin moral attention. Turkle (2015) argues that digital spaces encourage curated self-presentation and weaken empathic engagement, while Bayne (2015) questions whether digitally mediated presence can sustain the relationships on which moral formation depends. Research on emergency remote teaching during COVID-19 documented challenges in sustaining dialogical engagement, with educators reporting difficulties in maintaining the relational presence required for moral deliberation (Hodges et al., 2020; Williamson, Eynon, & Potter, 2020). In African contexts, where digital infrastructure is uneven, and platforms are often adopted rapidly with limited participatory governance, these risks are compounded (Zeleza & Okanda, 2021).

Still, digital mediation is not inherently morally impoverished, and nostalgia for embodied presence can exclude. Online environments can widen access, support reflective participation, and enable meaningful dialogue across distance. For students with disabilities, caregiving responsibilities, or those who face discrimination in physical spaces, digital mediation can enable participation that embodied settings foreclose (Dolmage, 2017; Seale, 2020). The decisive issue is how platforms are designed and governed, and which educational goods they silently privilege (Feenberg, 2017; Winner, 2020).

Feenberg (2017) and Selwyn (2019) show that technologies embed values and power relations, meaning that platforms are not neutral tools. Learning analytics and algorithmic governance can normalise surveillance, reframe education around what is measurable, and undermine the trust and autonomy on which genuine moral formation depends (Prinsloo & Slade, 2017; Selwyn, 2019). To make the digital dimension explicitly Ubuntu-informed, Critical Idealism treats data and algorithmic governance as relational, rather than purely individual (Birhane, 2021; Couldry & Mejias, 2019). This shifts digital ethics from a narrow focus on individual consent toward relational accountability. Institutions should evaluate whether data practices strengthen or erode trust, and whether affected persons and communities can obtain reasons, review, and remedy.

Reconstruction, therefore, shifts the question from "Can we teach ethics online?" to "Do our digital systems cultivate agency, privacy, trust, and contestability?" Critical Idealism extends moral education to digital governance, requiring transparency, proportionality, privacy protection, student participation, and real avenues for appeal

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and contestation, not as a supplement to pedagogy but as a constitutive dimension of moral infrastructure.

Moral Ideals and Political-Economic Constraints

Idealism maintains that universities should be governed by their highest purposes rather than by external pressures or instrumental calculations. Without normative ideals, universities become passive receptors of market logics and state demands, unable to resist pressures that undermine their formative, critical, and civic missions (Brown, 2015; Collini, 2012; Readings, 1996).

Yet Idealism is often criticised as morally abstract and an aspiration detached from feasibility (Buchanan, 2018; Geuss, 2008). Performativity regimes reward what is countable and auditable, and penalise what is formative but resistant to metric capture (Ball, 2016; Shore & Wright, 2015). As Ball (2003) and Lynch (2015) show, metrics do not merely measure academic work; they reshape it. The result is an institutional contradiction in which mission statements and resource-allocation decisions pull in opposite directions.

In African postcolonial contexts, the pressures can be sharper and more uneven. Mamdani (2007) shows how neoliberal reforms at Makerere displaced civic and moral missions. Uganda's expansion of private universities alongside declining public investment intensifies incentives toward revenue generation and throughput (Kasozi, 2003; Makerere University, 2020), narrowing institutional space for relational and civic formation. Yet constraint realism can become capitulation: if feasibility is treated as the final standard, universities lose their critical and civic role and simply mirror market logics (Giroux, 2014; Harvey, 2020).

Reconstruction, therefore, places moral formation inside the "hard" machinery of institutional governance, assessment, workload models, incentives, and resource allocation (Callahan & Bok, 2012; Brennan & Naidoo, 2022). For African universities operating under severe resource constraints, an incremental, low-cost-first approach is not a compromise but a strategic necessity that preserves normative ambition while respecting institutional realities.

Synthesis

Taken together, the four tensions yield four reconstructive imperatives that directly shape the Critical Idealism framework. First, principled pluralism: universities must justify their normative standards without collapsing into relativism or reproducing epistemic hierarchy, centring Ubuntu and indigenous traditions as co-equal epistemic partners. Second, autonomy-in-relation: moral agency requires both critical independence and the relational structures through which such independence is learned and sustained, synthesising Kantian and Ubuntu insights rather than choosing between them. Third, digital mediation as moral infrastructure: platform governance, data practices, and algorithmic decisions shape trust, agency, and fairness as directly as any curriculum. Fourth, feasibility-sequenced operationalisation: moral purposes cannot survive as rhetoric; they must be translated into governance, incentives, assessment, and workload built incrementally within existing institutional structures.

THE CRITICAL IDEALISM FRAMEWORK

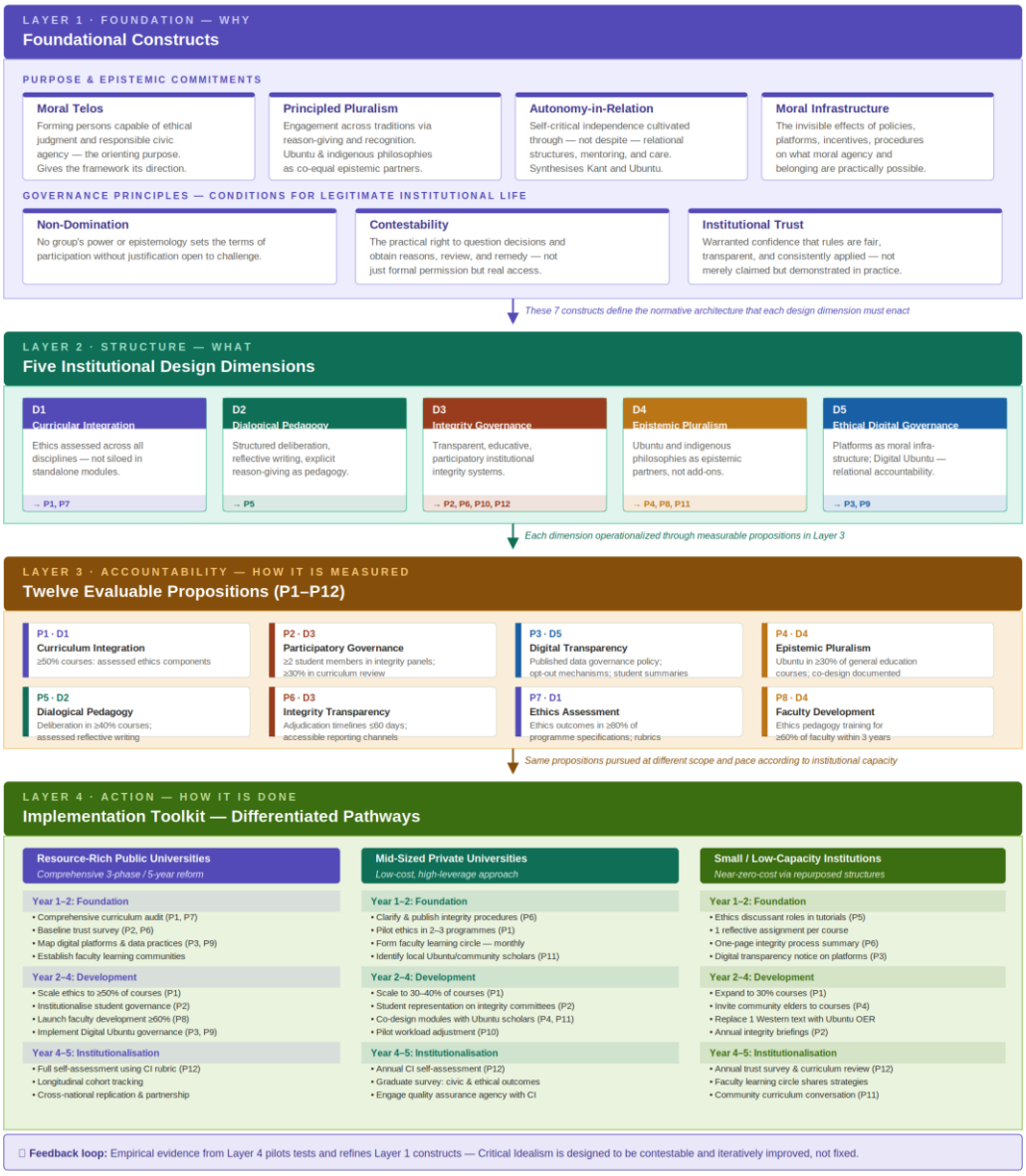
Critical Idealism is presented as an institutional design framework that translates the moral-formation telos into governable domains of practice assessable by university leaders and quality assurance agencies. The framework has four analytical layers: foundational constructs defining the normative orientation; five institutional design dimensions; twelve evaluable propositions making the framework empirically testable; and an implementation toolkit calibrated to resource-constrained settings, anchored in Ugandan contexts but designed for adaptation across African higher education.

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At its core is the moral telos: forming persons capable of ethical judgment and responsible civic agency. This telos is pursued through principled pluralism, understood as sustained engagement across moral traditions through reason-giving, mutual recognition, and non-domination; within it, Ubuntu and other indigenous traditions function as co-equal epistemic partners rather than cultural supplements. On this basis, the framework targets autonomy-in-relation, where self-critical independence is learned and sustained through relationships rather than imagined as the absence of dependence. Because such formation is shaped by institutional conditions, moral infrastructure names the often-invisible effects of policies, platforms, incentives, and procedures on what moral agency and belonging are practically possible. To ensure this infrastructure serves formation rather than coercion, non-domination requires that no group's power or epistemology set the terms of participation without justification, while contestability secures the practical right to question decisions and obtain reasons, review, and remedy. When these conditions hold, institutional trust becomes warranted confidence that rules are fair, transparent, and consistently applied.

Figure 1: Critical Idealism Framework Architecture: Four Analytical Layers from Foundational Constructs to Implementation Toolkit.



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Five Institutional Design Dimensions

Curricular Integration

Ethics and moral reasoning must be assessed across disciplines rather than confined to standalone modules (Colby et al., 2003; Nussbaum, 2010). Students encounter ethical dilemmas in laboratories, clinics, engineering projects, data systems, and policy work. If disciplinary spaces treat ethics as external, the institution produces technical competence without ethical reflexivity. Curricular integration requires discipline-sensitive design: not ethics as policing, but ethics as embedded professional intelligence.

Dialogical Pedagogy

Learners develop ethical judgment through structured deliberation, reflective writing, peer engagement, and feedback that makes reasons explicit (Biesta, 2015; Garrison, 2016; Habermas, 1987). The educator functions not as a moral authority but as a participant in ethical inquiry. For African universities with large classes and limited faculty, structured small-group protocols, rotating 'ethics discussant' roles, peer facilitation models, and asynchronous discussion designs can sustain dialogical engagement at scale.

Integrity Governance

Universities teach through how they govern (Brennan & Naidoo, 2022; Marginson, 2016). Transparency, consistency, and procedural fairness communicate institutional values as powerfully as curricula do. Integrity governance should be educative and trustworthy rather than merely punitive. In African contexts where distrust of institutional processes can be high due to perceived arbitrariness or historical experience of procedural injustice (Jansen, 2019; Mamdani, 2018), transparent and consistently applied integrity systems are foundational to the institutional trust on which moral formation depends.

Epistemic Pluralism

Colonial curricula positioned Western philosophical traditions at the centre while treating indigenous traditions as cultural folklore rather than rigorous ethical knowledge (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Santos, 2015; Mignolo, 2011). Ubuntu and African moral philosophies provide sophisticated accounts of personhood, responsibility, and the good life, accounts that must function as epistemic partners in moral education rather than cultural decoration (Metz, 2018). Institutional translation requires integrating African philosophy within general education requirements, embedding Ubuntu in research ethics and methodological training, and designing assessments that reward collaborative problem-solving and relational reasoning.

Ethical Digital Governance

Higher education increasingly unfolds within global digital infrastructures that shape participation, visibility, and moral perception. Critical Idealism rejects the view that technology is a neutral delivery mechanism (Feenberg, 2017; Winner, 2020). Platforms are a moral infrastructure that can support or undermine dignity, autonomy, and belonging, particularly for African universities adopting platforms designed in and for Global North contexts. Digital Ubuntu extends this by emphasising plain-language data practices, data minimisation as a dignity-preserving norm, meaningful contestability including appeal pathways for algorithmic decisions, participatory oversight with student representation, and relational accountability.

Twelve Evaluable Propositions

The framework is operationalised through twelve propositions with associated indicators, data sources, scope conditions, and expected outcomes. Numerical thresholds function as quality assurance heuristics signalling institution alisation and critical mass, not universal constants. Where institutions begin from very low

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baselines, targets may be staged while preserving measurement logic.

Table 1: Twelve Evaluable Propositions of the Critical Idealism Framework

P#	Dim.	Proposition	Threshold / Indicator	Expected Outcome
P1	**D1**	**Curriculum Integration**	≥50% of courses include assessed ethics components	Student transfer of ethical reasoning to professional contexts within 2–3 years
P2	**D3**	**Participatory Governance**	≥2 student members in integrity adjudication; ≥30% in curriculum review	Increased institutional trust; reduced integrity breach rates within 3–5 years
P3	**D5**	**Digital Transparency**	Published data governance policy; plain-language student summaries; opt-out mechanisms.	Enhanced student agency; improved fairness perceptions within 1–2 years
P4	**D4**	**Epistemic Pluralism**	Ubuntu in ≥30% of general education courses; co-design documented	Productive moral dialogue without epistemic hierarchy within 3–5 years
P5	**D2**	**Dialogical Pedagogy**	Structured deliberation in ≥40% of courses; assessed reflective writing; peer protocols	Improved moral reasoning capacity and ethical judgment within 2–4 years
P6	**D3**	**Integrity Transparency**	Published adjudication timelines (≤60 days); accessible reporting channels	Perceived procedural fairness and consistent application within 1–3 years
P7	**D1**	**Ethics Assessment**	Ethics outcomes in ≥80% of programme specifications; rubrics for ethical reasoning	Ethics is recognised as a core graduate competency in quality assurance within 2–4 years.
P8	**D4**	**Faculty Development**	Ethics pedagogy training for ≥60% of faculty within 3 years, with ongoing support	Improved instructor confidence and teaching practices within 2–3 years
P9	**D5**	**Platform Rights**	Students access their data; opt-out for non-essential data; contestation for algorithmic decisions.	Student perception of control over digital identity; system trust within 1–2 years
P10	**D3**	**Workload Alignment**	Teaching loads reduced 10–20% where ethics pedagogy is added	Faculty report adequate time for relational pedagogy; reduced burnout within 2–4 years
P11	**D4**	**Community Engagement**	Ubuntu scholars co-design curriculum (≥2 per programme); processes documented	Authentic epistemic partnership; community validation of curriculum within 2–5 years
P12	**D3**	**Institutional Self-Assessment**	Annual Critical Idealism audit using framework rubric; published results and improvement plans	Embedded reflexive governance and improvement culture within 3–5 years

Note. P1–P12 = evaluable propositions cross-referenced to design dimensions D1–D5. Thresholds are indicative heuristics; institutions beginning from low baselines may stage them while preserving measurement logic.

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EMPIRICAL VALIDATION STRATEGY

Critical Idealism, as a normative-institutional framework, calls for empirical assessment at the level of institutional culture, governance, and moral formation. Because these domains are diffuse, temporally extended, and shaped by context, validation cannot be reduced to a single bounded intervention or short-term outcome measure. A suitable strategy would therefore combine mixed methods, multi-site comparison, and longitudinal design in order to examine processes, outcomes, mechanisms, and institutional variation over time (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Moore et al., 2015; Pawson & Tilley, 2017; Yin, 2018).

Multi-Site Pilot Design

An initial validation programme could be organised through coordinated pilot studies across contrasting university types in Uganda, with later extension to comparable East African settings. Bishop Stuart University (BSU), a mid-capacity private university of approximately 5,000 students, would offer a useful starting point because it reflects a common institutional profile within African private higher education: tuition-dependent, moderately resource-constrained, but potentially more agile in governance and mission alignment than many large public institutions (Bishop Stuart University, 2022). A contrasting pilot at Makerere University would make it possible to examine the framework under conditions of scale, institutional complexity, and regulatory pressure typical of large public universities in Africa (Makerere University, 2021). Taken together, the contrast between BSU and Makerere would provide an analytically useful basis for understanding how institutional capacity, governance structure, and organisational culture mediate the operation of the framework.

Measurement and Cultural Grounding

Any empirical assessment of Critical Idealism would require culturally grounded measurement rather than the simple transfer of instruments developed elsewhere. Existing tools for assessing ethical reasoning, including the Defining Issues Test, have been influential, but they may privilege moral assumptions rooted in Western intellectual traditions and may not adequately capture relational, restorative, and communitarian dimensions of moral judgment salient in many African settings (Rest et al., 1999). An Ubuntu-informed instrument could therefore be developed to assess not only individual reasoning about moral dilemmas, but also recognition of effects on communal relationships, obligations to peers, elders, and future generations, orientations toward restoration rather than punishment, and the role of consensus-building in moral deliberation (Metz, 2021; Molefe, 2020).

Cross-National Validation Partnerships

A longer-term validation strategy could be strengthened through cross-national partnerships designed to examine how the framework travels across related but distinct postcolonial settings. Replication or adaptation partnerships might be developed with universities such as the University of Nairobi, the University of Dar es Salaam, the University of Rwanda, and the University of the Western Cape, each of which represents a different historical, regulatory, and moral-political context. Engagement with bodies such as the African Quality Assurance Network could further support the development of contextually relevant indicators and provide a basis for regional dialogue on moral formation, institutional legitimacy, and ethical digital governance. Cross-national validation would therefore contribute not only to empirical refinement of the framework, but also to the broader task of developing an African and postcolonial conversation about what morally serious university governance may require under contemporary conditions (Yin, 2018).

Implementation Pathways

Implementation of Critical Idealism would need to be calibrated to institutional capacity, governance structure, and resource conditions.

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Three stylised scenarios, therefore, indicate how sequencing, scope, and resource intensity might vary across institutional types. As summarised in Table 2, resource-rich public universities may be able to pursue broader multi-phase reform over five years; mid-sized private universities may prioritise lower-cost, high-leverage actions with selective scaling; and small or low-capacity institutions may begin with near-zero-cost routines embedded in existing structures.

Table 2: Implementation Pathways by Institutional Capacity

Phase	Resource-Rich Public Universities	Mid-Sized Private Universities	Small / Low-Capacity Institutions
Year 1–2 Foundation	• Comprehensive curriculum audit (P1, P7) • Baseline institutional trust survey (P2, P6) • Map digital platforms and data practices (P3, P9) • Establish faculty learning communities	• Clarify and publish integrity procedures (P6) • Pilot ethics integration in 2–3 programmes (P1) • Form faculty learning circle — monthly meetings • Identify local Ubuntu/community scholars (P11)	• Ethics discussant roles in existing tutorials (P5) • Convert 1 assignment per course to reflective justification • Publish one-page plain-language integrity summary (P6) • Digital transparency notice on course platforms (P3)
Year 2–4 Development	• Scale ethics integration to ≥50% of courses (P1) • Institutionalize student governance representation (P2) • Launch faculty development programme for ≥60% staff (P8) • Implement Digital Ubuntu platform governance (P3, P9)	• Scale to 30–40% of courses with ethics components (P1) • Student representation on integrity committees (P2) • Co-design modules with Ubuntu scholars (P4, P11) • Pilot workload adjustment in 2 departments (P10)	• Expand to 30% of courses with ethics reflection (P1) • Invite community elders to general education courses (P4) • Replace 1 Western text/course with Ubuntu OER reading • Student assemblies for annual integrity briefings (P2)
Year 4–5 Institutionalisation	• Full self-assessment using CI rubric (P12) • Longitudinal cohort tracking — graduate outcomes • Publish annual CI audit with improvement plans • Cross-national replication and partnership dissemination	• Annual self-assessment against CI rubric (P12) • Graduate survey tracking civic and ethical outcomes • Publish anonymised integrity case resolutions • Engage quality assurance agency with CI propositions	• Annual trust survey and curriculum mapping review (P12) • Faculty learning circle shares peer strategies • Community curriculum conversation with advisors (P11) • Develop Year 3 improvement plan from findings

Note. P1–P12 refer to the evaluable propositions outlined in Section 5.2. OER = Open Educational Resources; CI = Critical Idealism. The actions listed in each scenario are indicative rather than exhaustive and are cross-referenced to the propositions they are intended to operationalise. Timelines are approximate and would need to be aligned with accreditation cycles, institutional planning periods, and available resources. The three scenarios are stylised types designed to guide adaptation, not fixed models for uniform adoption.

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For institutions with minimal financial resources, the framework would need to be translated into concrete routines that repurpose existing structures rather than create new offices or courses. Existing tutorial sessions could be used to implement rotating ethics-discussant roles; one assignment per course could be adapted to include a reflective justification component; a one-page plain-language summary of integrity procedures could be published; community elders could be invited to contribute to general education courses; and one Western text per course could be replaced with an open-access Ubuntu or indigenous philosophy reading.

Implementation would likely face political resistance, including faculty workload concerns, administrative inertia, and commercial platform lock-in (Ball, 2016; Brennan & Naidoo, 2022; Giroux, 2014). Strategic coalition-building would therefore need to engage student organisations, progressive institutional leaders, quality assurance reformers, and civil society partners. Because the propositions are auditable, they could be embedded in accreditation criteria and programme review instruments, allowing quality assurance agencies to evaluate integrity governance, ethics integration, and digital transparency as components of institutional quality.

LIMITATIONS AND BOUNDARY CONDITIONS

Critical Idealism is a normative-institutional framework; it cannot eliminate deep moral disagreement, but it can structure legitimate public justification and protect deliberation from being displaced by purely instrumental logics. It cannot substitute for adequate resourcing, but it specifies minimum moral conditions and sequencing principles that guide reform under constraint. The framework assumes some institutional commitment to transparency and accountability, without which evaluation and trust-building are practically impossible.

While anchored in Ugandan contexts and drawing substantially on Ubuntu as a philosophical resource, the implementation logic is designed to travel to comparable postcolonial settings. Transferability requires careful attention to local epistemic traditions, regulatory environments, and institutional histories. Institutions in different contexts must engage their own indigenous philosophical resources, not transplant Ubuntu as a pan-African template. Ubuntu in Rwanda is not identical to Ubuntu in Uganda, and ubupfura in Rwanda carries its own post-genocide institutional meanings. National quality assurance frameworks differ across countries; the twelve propositions function as adaptable heuristics whose thresholds must be calibrated to local regulatory expectations.

These boundary conditions do not diminish the framework's relevance beyond Uganda. They affirm that Critical Idealism is not a one-size-fits-all prescription but a reconstructive logic that must be translated faithfully but flexibly into diverse institutional contexts.

CONCLUSION

The moral purposes of universities remain central to higher education's legitimacy, yet are systematically displaced by instrumental logics prioritising efficiency and market responsiveness (Collini, 2012; Marginson, 2016; Readings, 1996). Responding to this erosion requires more than critique; it requires reconstructive frameworks that connect moral purpose to institutional design. By retrieving Idealism's moral-formation kernel and subjecting it to immanent critique under conditions of epistemic pluralism, relational personhood, digital mediation, and political-economic constraint, this paper has argued for reconstruction rather than abandonment, and for African higher education as the site where that reconstruction is both most urgently needed and most philosophically generative.

Critical Idealism offers that reconstruction by reframing moral formation as institutional

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responsibility enacted through curriculum, pedagogy, governance, epistemic inclusion, and ethical digital infrastructure. The framework is operational, providing five design dimensions, twelve evaluable propositions, and implementation pathways for quality assurance integration, and it is contestable. That is, propositions invite empirical testing, and principles require local adaptation rather than uniform transplantation. This dual character of normative seriousness combined with empirical accountability distinguishes it from both abstract idealism and technocratic policy. Three critical limitations warrant acknowledgement. First, as a conceptual-normative framework, Critical Idealism cannot substitute for empirical evidence; the twelve propositions remain hypotheses until piloted and validated in real institutional settings. Second, the framework assumes a minimum institutional commitment to transparency and accountability that may not obtain in all settings where it is applied, limiting immediate applicability where governance itself is contested or opaque. Third, while Ubuntu is treated as a co-equal epistemic partner rather than a cultural supplement, the framework does not claim that Ubuntu is uniform across African contexts; institutions must engage their own indigenous traditions and resist transplanting Ugandan Ubuntu as a pan-continental template.

For postcolonial African universities, reclaiming moral formation refuses the false choice between uncritical Westernisation and defensive nativism. It invites institutions where Ubuntu and Idealism, indigenous wisdom and modern science, communal responsibility and individual accountability coexist in productive tension, not as syncretic compromise but as the condition for genuine epistemic justice and moral seriousness (Mbembe, 2020; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Santos, 2015). Under conditions of resource constraint and digital disruption, that project is difficult. But it is also the condition for restoring the trust, integrity, and civic purpose without which contemporary universities cannot justify their own existence.

The systematic validation strategy developed here demonstrates that the framework's claims are empirically testable rather than merely aspirational. By specifying measurable propositions, culturally grounded assessment instruments, and multi-site longitudinal designs, Critical Idealism invites exactly the scrutiny that any credible normative framework must withstand. The proposed Uganda-anchored pilots will generate evidence about what works, what fails, and what adapts knowledge essential for refinement and for informed transfer across the diverse landscapes of African higher education. On the basis of this analysis, four recommendations are offered in order of priority. First, and most urgently, quality assurance agencies in Uganda and comparable African systems should incorporate the twelve evaluable propositions into institutional accreditation and programme review cycles. Second, university senates and governing councils should commission governance audits against the five design dimensions, beginning with the two lowest-cost, highest-leverage actions: publishing plain-language integrity procedures (P6) and establishing ethics-discussant roles in existing tutorial sessions (P5). Third, national research councils and development partners should fund multi-site longitudinal pilots at contrasting institutions to generate the empirical evidence base that the framework currently lacks. Fourth, African philosophy scholars and Ubuntu community elders should be engaged as co-designers of curriculum and assessment instruments, ensuring that epistemic partnership is institutionalised as a process rather than claimed only as a principle.

The question before institutions, accreditors, and policymakers is ultimately not whether universities can afford systematic moral formation. It is whether they can afford to continue without it.

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Alex Tumusiime: Conceptualisation, theoretical framework development, original draft preparation, manuscript revision, and corresponding author responsibilities.

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Informed Consent

Not applicable. This study did not involve human participants, clinical trials, or the collection of personal data.

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No new data were created or analysed in this study. This is a conceptual paper employing reconstructive conceptual analysis of existing scholarly literature. Data sharing is therefore not applicable.

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