

Kuverengegwa as an Organizing Principle of Higher Education Systems

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Abstract

Kuverengegwa, “to be counted”, is an African concept of imputation that I introduce in this paper to capture the notion of being recognized, valued, and credited in the higher education domain. The discourse on credit systems has been pervasive in higher education literature for the past three decades. Focus has been on operational, functional, and structural issues such as the fairness of credit systems, their equity, the “exchange rate” between universities, and the ethical considerations that lie behind. However, no research has been done to explore the paradigmatic antecedents of credits, credit policies, and credit systems. *Kuverengegwa*, an African traditional concept, is invoked to understand how the higher education system emerges, how it attracts willing participants, as well as why it creates new knowledge that did not exist before (moves from the known to the unknown in systems parlance). This paper explores national higher education systems from a *Kuverengegwa* theory point of view. Utilizing a pragmatic approach, I juxtapose the financial system and the higher education credit system to find similarities and differences. This process sheds light on hitherto unknown possibilities that exist in the operational modalities of national higher education systems as well as universities. The core of this model is explored, and applications are drawn with conclusions aimed at addressing fundamental imbalances and inequities in higher education systems, closing out the paper.

Keywords: credit, credit systems, social capital, inclusive education, Global North, Global South, internationalization

Introduction

Higher education crediting practices and policies constitute visible and hidden structures within which national and international higher education systems operate. Such crediting can be found in different systems of rankings among universities, the funding they attract, how their qualifications are regarded, how the knowledge they produce is regarded, the number of publications produced, and where knowledge is published, to name but a few. Crediting practices and policies are typically linked with the national higher education authority, the system of universities, and standard academic work against which credits are earned as the basic unit of contributing to the system. The term “credit” as used in this paper should not be reduced to academic credits attained by

a student in a program, but refers to anything that is regarded as a deliverable or contribution in the system. Credit is thus a social currency used to reward expectations and responsibilities fulfilled at a societal level (Bourdieu, 1983). Credits in the academe thus become a domain-specific indicator of this exchange of social currency.

At face value, the credits awarded are not equal. Academic progress from the so-called Global North is often more esteemed than that in the Global South, resulting in funding concentrating there as opposed to the South (Marginson, 2022). Even within the same country, these imbalances are also persistent within national education systems (Reinders et al., 2020).

Various approaches have been implemented to investigate the nature of the imbalances that exist between universities with the desire to close them (Wimpenny et al., 2021; Heleta & Chasi, 2023; Heleta, 2016). I believe these efforts are lacking as they mostly approach universities and national higher education systems as linear and straightforward systems, while overlooking numerous underlying mechanisms in place that contribute to the existence of national education systems in general and university institutions in particular. I view imputation of credit as the organizing principle around which national higher education systems and universities evolve. I juxtapose national higher education systems with the national financial systems to identify similarities and differences between the two, since both are based on a credit mechanism. I use this framework to understand how inequities in higher education can be resolved by observing them through the lens of *Kuverengegwa* towards challenging the dominant paradigm in higher education management.

Methodology

The framework of Kuverengegwa

I posit *Kuverengegwa*'s theory as an African/Global South social constructivist theory of imputation, which identifies a variety of credit mechanisms inherent in society responsible for the creation and transfer of social currency. *Kuverengegwa*, to be credited, is a Shona (Karanga dialect) translation of a temple and judicial process *Kuverengerwa* (Shona Team, n.d., Romans, 4, 22) of imputation or crediting. It is a temple process captured in Shona translations of temple social and legal functions. Its focus is on the imputation of credit to restore, reconcile, and redeem people back to good social status within a society.

Kuverengegwa is thus an inherently social construct of imputation of credit. This credit is awarded to people within groups who have fulfilled socially determined obligations based on socially developed norms of a group and hence increase their social status therein through *Kuverengegwa*, to be counted, or being credited with more social value by society. I apply the lens of *Kuverengegwa* to two key social systems driven by social capital (academic and financial systems) to illustrate the ubiquity of *Kuverengegwa* and make hitherto unknown applications in creating fairer, more just, and equal academic systems.

Social capital accumulation through gaining social currency

Bourdieu (1983) defines social capital as the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of institutionalized

relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition. Bourdieu goes on to mention education as a form of social capital and describes how it works to improve social capital, however, the rudimentary processes through which social capital is created and, by extension, transferred, are not described.

To resolve this gap, I introduce Graeber (2012, p. 414), who identifies social currencies as the transactional medium through which exchanges between social actors lead to the accumulation of social capital in general and the basis for creating and fashioning human beings about cultural capital in particular. The mechanisms that impute social currency are embedded in society's need to create people and maintain social relations (Graeber, 2011, p. 67), with reciprocity and mutual obligation at their foundation.

Initially, social currencies worked between individuals, but as society progressed and societal institutions developed, social currencies began to serve both social and economic purposes. Temples and palaces formalized social currency by changing the basic reciprocity of social currency from person to person to person-to-institution, setting these obligations through laws and quantifying the means to satisfy them. They institutionalized social currency while retaining some social elements, such as the expectation of reciprocity and mutual dependence between rulers and subjects (Graeber, 2011, p. 412).

The basic functions they institutionalized social currency for were measuring out and implementing penalties for wrongs done in the community, creating a basis for denominating fines and penalties commensurate with the wrongs done (Hudson, 2018, p. 163). Obligations set by the temple and palace were then resolved through partaking in socially acceptable behavior such as restitution for wrongs done or paying fines, these obligations were then absolved by crediting the wrongdoer or supplicant with the cancellation of wrongs or obligations imposed on that member of society, hence the concept of counting credit towards imputation.

The creation of social currencies and the accumulation of social capital as regulated by a societal institution positions the accordance of social currency (to count towards) or *Kuverengegwa* as an inherently social process. So, *Kuverengegwa*, to credit, to be counted, is the culturally ubiquitous social mechanism that creates social currencies, enabling the setting and resolution of obligations through acknowledging by imputing credit at (counting towards the compliant party) the presentation of social currencies (resources or tokens thereof) for the settlement of preset obligations. It is present in all societies as the mechanism for delivering and maintaining justice, social cohesion, and an institutional order.

From the lens of *Kuverengegwa*, reciprocity is set as the foundation of the working of social currencies between members of a society, as well as society and its institutions. The emergence of a socially organized system with a setter and enforcer of obligations as well as standards and measures of social currencies to pay for/settle those obligations, is recognized. I find that resources, especially labor, can be mobilized by imposing tax obligations and then granting tax forgiveness or tax credits in exchange for participating in socially beneficial projects and behaviors. I also see the emergence of the extension of credit against existing collateral as the subsequent accumulation of social capital through credit mechanisms.

Social currency and capital as the basis for credit in financial and higher education systems

Two key tenets developed from accumulation of social capital through earning social currency are the innovation of temples/palaces/courts to determine credit worthiness on socially desirable actions or collateral already obtained as well as palaces to extend tax forgiveness (Graeber, 2011, p. 413) or tax credits in exchange for doing socially desirable or necessary work (Hudson, 2018, p. 63). These two concepts then undergird Harris's (2002) allusion to the work of Charles Elliot of Harvard for the introduction of the credit hour in exchange for work done or previously accumulated learning in the 19th century, for use in the American secondary and post-secondary education system.

Kuverengegwa asserts that Elliot refined a concept that is nested in a bigger social currency mechanism. In short, *Kuverengegwa* concludes that higher education institutions are issuers of social currency in a state-mediated and set national higher education system. As such, the credit hour and the credit exist as part of credit mechanisms, a larger system that valorizes certain desirable societal attributes and translates them into currency that can be used in other parts of society.

Observing that credits are an indispensable facet of higher education, it serves best to focus on the dynamics of the issuance of credit and its impact on why universities form and how they conduct themselves in fulfilling their functions. *Kuverengegwa's* theory emerges to undergird the dynamic processes in the packaging and delivery of higher education within and across borders. It is an attempt in a value-free way to assess the motives behind the logics of the university and internationalization, adding a further facet to the debates on higher education internationalization dynamics in a global context.

The crediting thinking using *Kuverengegwa* in the higher education system follows a specific order:

1. It starts with a society (through the state) that wants to supply itself with an educated labor force and wants to contribute to knowledge.
2. The state imposes skills obligations on the population, payable in credits issued by universities that it has given a charter.
3. Faced with governments' skills obligations, students offer their effort and intellect in exchange for university credits.
4. The government, upon satisfaction of its chartered agent (university), issues these credits in exchange for effort and competency demonstrated by students and researchers mobilizing for itself an educated workforce in the process, and to contribute to solving the challenges of the time.
5. Society accepts these accumulated credits as a means to assign responsibilities in the running of society and improving society.

The table on the next page summarizes key similarities between the monetary credit and academic credit in the higher education system to summarize differences and similarities, and identify opportunities for solving problems, especially in higher education.

Table 1: Juxtaposing financial systems and academic recognition systems

	Monetary Credits	Academic Credits
Similarities		
Goal	Meet the financial resources needs of the government	Meet human resources/knowledge needs of the economy and society (eventually government)
Compelling Mechanism	The government imposes tax liabilities on people, forcing them to work	The government needs specialized labor to set a minimum standard of labor and knowledge needed to run the economy
Issuer Authority	Government Charter	Government Charter
Issuing Institution	Banks	Universities
Conditions for Issuance	Collateral/Creditworthiness (Income)	Prior Learning/Effort to learn/ Effort to create new knowledge
Finiteness at Issue	Collateral/Income	Prior Learning/effort
Purpose of issue	To mobilize resources from the informal sector to the formal sector	To mobilize resources from the unlearned sector and what is unknown to the learned sector, and to knowledge
Accumulation	Returns on Investment/Interest	Qualifications/Work/ Publications
Transfer	Financial Systems	Academic Credit Transfer Systems (e.g., ECTS)
Differences		
Retirement	Loan paid back	Never gets depleted
Transferability/Convertibility	Subject to exchange rates	Subject to the adjudication panels creating an exchange rate

Author’s own compilation.

Three key insights that develop from the juxtaposition of the financial and academic credit systems are that:

1. Society (its state and its problems), through charters awarded to universities, ultimately sets the (goals) basis for the issuing of academic credits.
2. Credit systems are neutral and exist to mobilize human resources from the unskilled sector to the skilled sector to meet societal needs.
3. The returns on academic credits are determined by their absorption back into society or by creating more knowledge (research, knowledge production) in academic settings.

These three key insights are going to drive the discussion on the similarities and differences in credits issued in the Global North and Global South, as well as the implications for internationalization between the Global North and South.

Discussion

Implications

Key principles that flow from these key tenets are the following:

- The education system's goals should be set by society. Both the role and the content of the education should be linked to societal needs and demands.
- The shaping and definition of academic credit defines the nature of the university, its operations, structure, and function, and even the behavior of the industry.
- The decision of who should access education is determined by societal needs. Access is a function of societal goals.
- The goal of this system is to research and teach the broadest range of knowledge as well as the depth of existing pieces of knowledge. It seeks to know new things as well as deepen existing bits of knowledge.
- The optimal education system should have a definition of a credit system that fits well with the societal needs of where the higher education system is situated.
- How narrowly defined credit is, shapes the type of university system that you will get. Narrow definitions qualitatively will create exclusive systems, while more inclusive definitions will create more balanced, inclusive, and sustainable systems.

So, in a nutshell, if you define university credits, you own the higher education system of a country. *Kuverengegwa's* theory is pragmatic and neutral and works best to detect what lenses are being imposed on the definition of the university credit, with undesirable situations developing from the classroom, the curriculum, all the way up to the global higher education system.

Organizing principle for national education systems

The emergence, management, and maintenance of higher education systems are thus drawn from Bourdieu (1983, in Dressman, 2008), who argues that values and capitals are necessary to create cultural spaces where higher education takes place. *Kuverengegwa's* theory extends the operational qualifications Bourdieu (1983) presents by providing an undergirding mechanism (social currencies) that translates values into capital. *Kuverengegwa* suggests that creating cultures or environments that are crucial to higher education requires a crediting mechanism that valorizes appropriate values, infusing them as credited skills, attitudes, and capabilities that accumulate into various capitals that set a standard for pedagogical development.

When *Kuverengegwa* mechanisms are functional, pedagogy, research, and engagement are inevitable. Once this happens across borders, internationalization is inevitable. The added value *Kuverengegwa* brings to the higher education policy discourse is its orientation as a value-free description of the undergirding mechanism that enables education. It can provide a way to objectively examine the dynamics in higher education with everything on an equal footing. It contributes to higher education by advocating for shaping the student into a socially responsive individual, as well as advocating for inclusive educational initiatives at the national and institutional levels. It also gives credence to credit mechanisms existing at various levels in the higher

education sector, providing valorization for previously invisible efforts that are crucial to the progress of the education project.

Internationalization

While there is no clear definition for internationalization (Stein, 2021), Knight's (2012) definition has spawned an entire literature on its own. Heleta and Chasi (2023, para 14), following a decolonial approach, propose a new definition:

Internationalisation of higher education is a critical and comparative process of the study of the world and its complexities, past and present inequalities and injustices, and possibilities for a more equitable and just future for all. Through teaching, learning, research and engagement, internationalisation fosters epistemic plurality and integrates critical, anti-racist and anti-hegemonic learning about the world from diverse global perspectives to enhance the quality and relevance of education.

Under *Kuverengegwa*, I loosely define internationalization as the conduct and recognition of teaching, learning, research, and engagement across jurisdictional borders. I add to the decoloniality debate by observing that Global South institutions have the institutional makeup to develop original higher education systems, and the introduction and perpetuation of Global North institutions is an imposition. This definition adopts both Knight's (2012) and Heleta and Chasi's (2023) definitions, undergirding them by linking them to a societal credit mechanism that provides basic organizing principles that drive momentum and dynamism in higher education internationalization. *Kuverengegwa*, then, is crucial to understand as the policy lever that drives dynamics in higher education does not lie at the institutional level, but rather at national and soon-to-be-observed global policy levels. Thus, the direction of internationalization research should encapsulate university-level structures and processes that embody higher education internationalization as well as the deep underlying forces that give rise to their existence and perpetuation.

Conclusion

This paper identifies the *Kuverengegwa* lens of credit systems in problematizing epistemic exclusion in knowledge production, concerning dynamics in the Global North and South. At a systemic level, the paper concurs with Mason et al. (2001), who state that credit systems are being defined narrowly to produce a student for the new market at the expense of global pursuit of knowledge. At the same level, the paper draws from Stein and Andreotti (2016) and Stein et al. (2019) in identifying what could be a theoretical justification for knowledge production for the societal good (as a counterpart to internationalization for societal good).

Since credit systems have been subjugated to a narrower focus than is societally beneficial, Global South systems could focus on knowledge production for societal good, creating academics and scholars who focus on becoming global authorities on local issues. Global South universities can do well to focus more on developing their epistemes, creating global experts in local phenomena "by engaging with local communities in ways unrelated to gains in personal capital (literal or cultural)" (Wimpenny et al., 2024).

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