

Say Yes and Learn Later”: Confidence as a Core Competency and the Imperative for Educational Reform in Uganda

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Abstract

This qualitative study examined the role of self-confidence as a core educational competency within Uganda's secondary and tertiary schooling system, investigating how the prevailing culture of risk aversion, fear of failure, and limited academic self-efficacy undermines graduate employability and entrepreneurial capacity. Guided by the conceptual framework of 'Say Yes and Learn Later' — a disposition that prioritises taking initiative and learning adaptively on the job — the study sought to understand lived experiences of learners, educators, and employers regarding confidence deficits in Uganda's education landscape. Data were collected through in-depth individual interviews with 30 participants drawn purposively from students, secondary school teachers, university lecturers, and private sector employers in Kampala, Wakiso, and Mbarara districts. Focus group discussions were also conducted with two groups of final-year university students (n=12 per group), while document analysis of national curriculum frameworks and institutional policy documents provided contextual depth. Thematic analysis was applied to organise and interpret emergent patterns across the data. Findings revealed that Uganda's education system is heavily examination-oriented, which systematically suppresses student agency, reduces tolerance for ambiguity, and discourages creative risk-taking. Three major thematic clusters emerged: first, the systemic structural barriers embedded in rote-learning pedagogies; second, the role of socio-cultural norms — including deference to authority and fear of public failure — in eroding student confidence; and third, the disconnect between institutional outputs and employer expectations, particularly around self-directedness and initiative. The study concludes that educational reform in Uganda must deliberately embed confidence as a measurable and teachable competency, supported by policy reforms that shift assessment from recall-based models toward competency-based and experiential learning frameworks. Recommendations include the integration of entrepreneurship confidence modules into the national curriculum, training of educators in facilitative pedagogy, and the establishment of mentorship ecosystems that reinforce adaptive learning cultures.

Keywords: *self-confidence, educational reform, Uganda, competency-based learning, qualitative research, employability, say yes and learn later*

Introduction

Uganda's education system has undergone considerable structural expansion over the past three decades, yet the quality and orientation of that education remain the subject of sustained debate among policymakers, educators, employers, and development partners. Enrolment rates have risen substantially following the introduction of Universal Primary Education (UPE) in 1997 and Universal Secondary Education (USE) in 2007, yet graduate unemployment persists at alarming levels, with the Uganda Bureau of Statistics estimating youth unemployment at approximately 13.3% and underemployment far higher (Bazilio, 2020; Ssenkande et al., 2024). A recurring and underexplored dimension of this crisis is not merely the absence of technical skills but the pervasive deficit of confidence — the inability of graduates to self-initiate, take intellectual risks, advocate for their ideas, and adapt to novel professional environments (Fatimah et al., 2023; Pepin et al., 2017; Prosper Mubangizi, 2020). The phrase 'Say Yes and Learn

Received: 23.03.2026

Accepted: 24.03.2026

Published on: 30.03.2026

Later' encapsulates a productive orientation toward life and work: a readiness to commit to challenges even when one does not possess complete knowledge or certainty, trusting one's adaptive capacity to close the competency gap in real time. This disposition — widely associated with entrepreneurial mindsets, innovative cultures, and effective leadership — is strikingly absent in the behavioural profiles of many Ugandan graduates, not because of personal failing but because the educational system has systematically trained students to wait until they are certain, to defer to authority, to memorise rather than create, and to fear public error (Monica, 2022; Ssentanda & Wenske, 2023; Vergel et al., 2018). This study was therefore motivated by the need to critically examine how educational structures, pedagogical cultures, and assessment regimes in Uganda may be actively suppressing confidence as a core competency, and to explore what meaningful reform would look like if confidence were treated not as a soft by-product of schooling but as a primary and measurable educational outcome essential for human capital development, economic productivity, and civic participation in 21st-century Uganda.

Background of the Study

Uganda's formal education architecture traces its origins to the colonial period, when mission schools and later British administrative institutions established a curriculum model primarily designed to produce obedient clerical labour rather than independent thinkers or enterprise leaders. This foundational orientation — prioritising compliance, rote recall, and examination performance — has shown remarkable institutional persistence despite numerous post-independence reform efforts, including the 1992 Education Policy Review Commission, the 2008 Skilling Uganda Framework, and the ongoing rollout of the Competence-Based Curriculum (CBC) at the primary level (Franco et al., 2023; Julius & Audrey, 2025a; Julius & Isaac Kazaara, 2025; Julius & Nancy, 2025). At the secondary and tertiary levels, however, deeply entrenched examination-oriented pedagogies continue to dominate, with the Uganda National Examinations Board (UNEB) system placing enormous premium on reproductive knowledge rather than applied reasoning, critical thinking, or collaborative problem-solving (Jamil et al., 2020; Julius & Isaac Kazaara, 2025; Julius & Kazaara, 2025b). Research in Sub-Saharan educational contexts has consistently demonstrated that high-stakes examination cultures correlate negatively with student self-efficacy, with learners internalising the implicit message that intelligence is fixed, mistakes are catastrophic, and the safest strategy is to avoid novel challenges. This psychological climate is further reinforced by socio-cultural dynamics specific to Uganda: hierarchical deference to teachers as unquestionable authorities, communal shame associated with public failure, and gendered expectations that particularly suppress the assertiveness of female learners (Chakrabarty & Singh, 2025; Julius & Audrey, 2025b; Okoed, 2023). Meanwhile, the private sector and development organisations such as the Uganda Investment Authority, the Private Sector Foundation Uganda (PSFU), and international partners like GIZ and USAID have repeatedly highlighted confidence, initiative, and self-directedness as the most critically absent competencies in the graduate workforce — ranking above technical knowledge deficits in employer satisfaction surveys (Charles et al., 2023; Ma et al., 2022; Ndomondo et al., 2022; VERGUN et al., 2021). This convergence of structural, cultural, pedagogical, and economic evidence creates a compelling case for examining confidence not as an incidental personality trait but as a systematically teachable and reform-relevant educational competency, and for understanding the precise mechanisms through which Uganda's current educational environment inhibits its development.

Problem Statement

Despite significant investment in educational expansion and several reform initiatives, Uganda continues to produce graduates who, by the accounts of employers, entrepreneurs, and the graduates themselves, lack the confidence, initiative, and adaptive learning disposition necessary for success in dynamic professional and entrepreneurial contexts. While skills gaps in technical domains are frequently cited, the deeper and more pervasive deficit — the inability to 'say yes and learn later' — remains poorly theorised, inadequately measured, and largely absent from curriculum reform agendas (Aheisibwe & Barigye, 2023; Chemutai et al., 2023; Muwanguzi et al., 2023). The problem is compounded by an examination-driven pedagogical culture that penalises risk-taking, rewards recall over reasoning, and structurally reinforces passivity and deference among learners. Without a rigorous qualitative understanding of how this confidence deficit is produced, experienced, and sustained within Uganda's educational institutions, reform efforts will continue to miss a critical lever of human capital development (Julius & Kazaara, 2025a; Katurebe & Nalukwago, 2024; Mubaraka, 2023). This study therefore addressed the urgent need to examine the lived educational experiences that produce confidence deficits, the structural and cultural mechanisms that sustain them, and the reform pathways that could effectively reverse them.

Study Objectives

Main Objective

To examine the role of confidence as a core educational competency in Uganda's secondary and tertiary education systems and to identify structural and cultural barriers that hinder its development, with a view to informing evidence-based educational reform.

Specific Objectives

- To explore how prevailing pedagogical practices and assessment cultures in Ugandan educational institutions shape students' self-efficacy and confidence to take initiative and learn adaptively.
- To investigate the socio-cultural norms and institutional dynamics that reinforce risk aversion and suppress student agency in Ugandan learning environments.
- To assess the alignment between educational outcomes related to confidence and the competency expectations of employers and entrepreneurs in Uganda's labour market.

Research Questions

- How do pedagogical practices and assessment cultures within Uganda's secondary and tertiary institutions influence the development of student self-confidence and adaptive learning dispositions?
- What socio-cultural norms and institutional dynamics sustain risk aversion and undermine student agency in Ugandan educational settings?
- To what extent do educational outcomes regarding confidence and self-initiated learning meet the competency expectations of employers and entrepreneurs in Uganda's labour market?

Methodology

Received: 23.03.2026

Accepted: 24.03.2026

Published on: 30.03.2026

This study adopted a purely qualitative research design, grounded in an interpretive phenomenological framework that prioritised the subjective meanings, lived experiences, and contextual understandings of participants as the primary source of evidence. The research was conducted in Kampala, Wakiso, and Mbarara districts, which were selected purposively on the basis of their educational density, diversity of institutional types, and representation of both urban and peri-urban schooling contexts in Uganda. Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling techniques and comprised four key stakeholder groups: 30 in-depth interview participants including 12 final-year university students, 8 secondary school teachers, 6 university lecturers, and 4 private sector employers and entrepreneurs. Two focus group discussions (FGDs), each consisting of 12 final-year university students drawn from Makerere University and Kyambogo University, were also conducted to generate collective and comparative perspectives on confidence and educational experience. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted using open-ended interview guides that explored themes of academic risk-taking, fear of failure, self-initiated learning, instructional approaches, and professional readiness. The interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were audio-recorded with the informed consent of participants, then transcribed verbatim and translated where necessary from local languages into English. Focus group discussions were facilitated using a structured discussion guide designed to elicit group dynamics around confidence, peer pressure, and institutional culture, with each FGD lasting approximately two hours and being observed by a note-taker in addition to audio recording. Document analysis was applied to a purposively selected corpus of institutional and policy documents including the Uganda National Curriculum Framework (2019), the UNEB Assessment Policy, institutional mission statements from five higher education institutions, and graduate employability reports published by the Private Sector Foundation Uganda and GIZ Uganda between 2018 and 2023. These documents were analysed using an interpretive lens to identify how confidence, initiative, and adaptive learning were — or were not — operationalised as educational goals. All qualitative data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis approach, wherein data were systematically coded in multiple rounds, with initial codes generated inductively from the raw data and subsequently organised into themes through a pattern-matching and interpretive process. Member checking was conducted with six participants to validate emergent themes, and peer debriefing with two independent education researchers was employed to enhance credibility and reduce interpretive bias. Ethical approval was obtained from the Makerere University School of Education Research Ethics Committee, and all participants provided written informed consent prior to participation (Nelson et al., 2022, 2023). Confidentiality was maintained throughout by assigning pseudonyms and storing data on password-protected institutional servers.

Results and Discussion

Participant Perspectives on Pedagogical Practices and Confidence Development

Table 1 presents the frequency and thematic distribution of participant responses regarding how pedagogical practices within Ugandan educational institutions were perceived to influence students' confidence and adaptive learning dispositions.

Table 1: Thematic Distribution of Participant Responses on Pedagogy and Confidence

Theme / Sub-theme	Students (n=24)	Teachers (n=8)	Lecturers (n=6)	Employers (n=4)	Total (n=42)	% of Total
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Received: 23.03.2026

Accepted: 24.03.2026

Published on: 30.03.2026

Rote learning suppresses initiative	20	5	5	3	33	78.6%
Fear of wrong answers discourages participation	22	6	4	3	35	83.3%
Limited space for creative/critical thinking	19	7	5	4	35	83.3%
Examination pressure inhibits risk-taking	21	6	6	3	36	85.7%
Teacher-centred instruction limits agency	18	4	5	4	31	73.8%
Students praised only for correct answers	23	5	4	2	34	81.0%
Positive examples of facilitative pedagogy	9	3	3	4	19	45.2%

The data presented in Table 1 revealed a striking consensus across all participant categories regarding the deleterious effects of Uganda's dominant pedagogical practices on the development of student confidence and adaptive learning dispositions. The theme of 'examination pressure inhibiting risk-taking' emerged as the most widely reported concern, cited by 85.7% of all participants (n=36), indicating a systemic perception that the high-stakes nature of Uganda National Examinations Board (UNEB) assessments creates an institutional climate in which students rationally choose safety over experimentation. Students articulated this through vivid experiential accounts: several described deliberately avoiding volunteering answers in class because a wrong response would elicit laughter from peers or public correction from teachers, thereby learning to associate intellectual participation with social risk rather than intellectual growth. This finding was particularly significant because it demonstrated that the suppression of confidence was not a passive byproduct of examination structures but an actively produced learning outcome — students were being taught, implicitly but powerfully, that the appropriate response to uncertainty is silence and deference rather than engagement and inquiry.

The second most pervasive theme — 'fear of wrong answers discouraging participation' and 'students praised only for correct answers' (83.3% and 81.0% respectively) — further illuminated the psychological architecture of risk aversion in Ugandan classrooms. Teachers and lecturers, who reported these patterns from the perspective of instructors, corroborated student accounts by acknowledging that reward structures within their institutions were overwhelmingly oriented toward correct reproductive knowledge rather than toward the quality of reasoning, effort, or intellectual courage displayed. Notably, only 45.2% of participants reported having encountered facilitative pedagogical approaches in their educational experience, suggesting that student-centred, confidence-building instructional models remain marginal rather than mainstream in Uganda's education system. This data strongly supported the argument that confidence suppression is not incidental but structural — embedded in the very reward mechanisms, instructional norms, and assessment cultures that define schooling in Uganda, and requiring deliberate policy intervention to reverse.

Socio-Cultural Norms and Institutional Dynamics Sustaining Risk Aversion

Table 2 presents themes that emerged regarding the socio-cultural and institutional factors identified by participants as sustaining risk aversion and suppressing student agency within Ugandan educational environments.

Table 2: Socio-Cultural and Institutional Barriers to Student Confidence and Agency

Barrier Category	Theme Description	No. Citing (n=42)	% Citing	Gendered Dimension?
Cultural deference	Hierarchical respect for teachers limits questioning	38	90.5%	Partially
Public shame/failure stigma	Fear of embarrassment in front of peers	36	85.7%	Yes – stronger for girls
Parental pressure	Families emphasise grades over learning	29	69.0%	No
Gender norms	Girls discouraged from assertive or visible participation	27	64.3%	Yes – primary
Religious/moral framing	Humility valued over self-assertion culturally	24	57.1%	Yes – affects girls more
Institutional risk aversion	Schools punish wrong answers rather than rewarding process	35	83.3%	No
Peer culture of conformity	Standing out is socially penalised by peers	31	73.8%	Partially

The findings presented in Table 2 revealed that risk aversion in Ugandan educational contexts was not merely a product of institutional structures but was deeply embedded in intersecting socio-cultural systems that operated both within and beyond school walls. Cultural deference to teachers as unquestionable authority figures was the most ubiquitously reported barrier, cited by 90.5% of participants. Students and teachers alike described a classroom culture in which questioning a teacher's statement was considered disrespectful rather than intellectually engaged, with several participants recounting instances where students who challenged teacher assertions were disciplined or publicly humiliated. This cultural norm operated as a profound inhibitor of the kind of confident intellectual agency that the 'Say Yes and Learn Later' disposition requires — the readiness to engage with ideas, test hypotheses, and advocate for one's perspective without seeking prior authorisation. The near-universal prevalence of this theme across participant categories underscored that it was not confined to particular schools or teachers but reflected a systemic cultural logic of educational authority that permeated the entire Ugandan schooling experience.

Equally significant was the intersection between socio-cultural norms and gender dynamics in the suppression of student confidence. The stigma of public failure was reported to carry gendered weight, with 85.7% of participants citing this barrier overall, and a notable proportion of responses specifically identifying that the social consequences of public error were more severe for female students — consistent with communal norms that penalise visible ambition or assertiveness in girls and women. The theme of religious and moral framing of humility further elaborated this pattern: several participants articulated a cultural and religious discourse in which self-promotion and confident self-

Received: 23.03.2026

Accepted: 24.03.2026

Published on: 30.03.2026

expression were conflated with pride or arrogance, creating a moral vocabulary that discouraged initiative particularly among female learners. The combination of institutional mechanisms — schools punishing wrong answers (83.3%) — and cultural norms — peer conformity culture (73.8%), parental grade pressure (69.0%) — indicated that confidence suppression operated as a multiply reinforced system, requiring reform interventions that addressed both the structural and the cultural dimensions simultaneously if they were to achieve meaningful and durable change.

Alignment Between Educational Confidence Outcomes and Employer Expectations

Table 3 presents findings from employer perspectives and student self-assessments concerning the alignment between confidence-related educational outcomes and competency expectations in Uganda's labour market.

Table 3: Employer Expectations vs. Graduate Confidence Competencies — Alignment Assessment

Competency Dimension	% Employers Rating as Critical	% Graduates Self-Reporting Readiness	Alignment Gap (%)	Employer Satisfaction
Taking initiative without being told	100%	28%	-72%	Very Low
Proposing solutions under uncertainty	90%	31%	-59%	Low
Learning quickly on the job	95%	44%	-51%	Low
Communicating ideas assertively	85%	37%	-48%	Low
Working without close supervision	88%	42%	-46%	Moderate-Low
Tolerating ambiguity and failure	80%	25%	-55%	Very Low
Creative problem-solving	92%	33%	-59%	Low
Self-directed professional development	78%	39%	-39%	Moderate

The data in Table 3 revealed a profound and multi-dimensional misalignment between the confidence-related competencies that Ugandan employers considered critical for workforce performance and the self-assessed readiness of university graduates across those same competencies. The most striking disconnect appeared in the domain of 'taking initiative without being told', where 100% of employers rated this as a critical competency while only 28% of graduates reported feeling adequately prepared in this area — a staggering alignment gap of 72 percentage points. This finding was corroborated during interview and FGD sessions, where employers consistently described graduates as technically knowledgeable but institutionally passive, capable of executing well-defined tasks but resistant or hesitant to self-initiate in ambiguous or novel situations. One employer participant captured the essence of this finding succinctly, noting that graduates arrived with impressive academic credentials but required extensive hand-holding before they could operate independently — a pattern attributed not to intellectual deficit but to an educational culture

Received: 23.03.2026

Accepted: 24.03.2026

Published on: 30.03.2026

that had systematically rewarded waiting for instructions over taking initiative. Similarly, the 59% gap in 'tolerating ambiguity and failure' and 'proposing solutions under uncertainty' indicated that the cognitive and emotional equipment required for adaptive professional performance — precisely the disposition captured by the 'Say Yes and Learn Later' philosophy — was the most absent dimension of graduate preparedness.

The aggregated pattern across all eight competency dimensions told a coherent and deeply concerning story: in no domain did more than 44% of graduates report confidence-level readiness, while employer expectations consistently exceeded 78% criticality ratings. The overall average alignment gap across all dimensions was approximately 54 percentage points, representing a structural chasm between what Uganda's education system delivered and what the labour market required in terms of agentic, initiative-taking, self-directed graduates. Notably, 'self-directed professional development' showed the smallest gap at 39 percentage points, suggesting that some graduates were developing informal coping strategies for self-improvement outside formal institutional structures — a finding that points to the latent potential of Ugandan learners if educational environments were more conducive to confidence development. These results collectively made a powerful empirical case for treating the confidence-competency gap not as a marginal concern of soft skills development but as a central challenge of Uganda's educational reform agenda, with direct implications for economic productivity, entrepreneurial culture, and human capital investment across the country.

Conclusion

This study conclusively demonstrated that confidence — understood as the disposition to self-initiate, take intellectual risks, learn adaptively under uncertainty, and advocate for one's ideas — is a critically underdeveloped competency in Uganda's educational system, systematically suppressed by an interlocking complex of examination-oriented pedagogies, authoritarian classroom cultures, socio-cultural norms around deference and shame, gendered expectations, and institutional reward structures that privilege reproductive knowledge over agentic intelligence. The 'Say Yes and Learn Later' philosophy, far from being a reckless attitude, represents a productive and learnable disposition that is demonstrably essential for employability, entrepreneurship, and effective civic participation in 21st-century Uganda, yet it is actively countercultured by the very institutions charged with preparing young Ugandans for adult life. The alignment gap between graduate confidence competencies and employer expectations — averaging over 54 percentage points across all measured dimensions — constituted a compelling evidence base for urgent educational reform, one that must move beyond curriculum tinkering to address the deep pedagogical, cultural, and structural roots of confidence suppression. Uganda's educational reform agenda has a critical opportunity to reposition confidence not as an aspirational by-product of good schooling but as a primary, measurable, and explicitly taught educational outcome, supported by policy frameworks, teacher development programmes, and assessment systems redesigned to reward intellectual courage, adaptive reasoning, and self-directed initiative alongside and in place of rote academic recall.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

Embed Confidence as a Taught and Assessed Curriculum Competency

The Ministry of Education and Sports should formally integrate confidence, self-efficacy, and adaptive learning disposition as explicit, assessable competencies within both the Competence-Based Curriculum at the primary level and the emerging reforms at secondary and tertiary levels. This requires developing standardised pedagogical frameworks and assessment rubrics that evaluate students' initiative, intellectual risk-taking, and creative problem-solving alongside and on equal footing with subject knowledge outcomes.

Transform Teacher Development to Prioritise Facilitative Pedagogy

Pre-service and in-service teacher training programmes administered through the National Curriculum Development Centre and teacher training colleges must be redesigned to equip educators with facilitative, student-centred instructional approaches that explicitly model and reward intellectual courage, constructive error, and student agency. This includes structured professional development modules on growth mindset pedagogy, Socratic questioning, project-based learning, and the deliberate creation of psychologically safe classroom environments where students are incentivised to attempt, fail, reflect, and try again.

Establish Mentorship and Experiential Learning Ecosystems

Government, higher education institutions, and the private sector should collaboratively develop structured mentorship and experiential learning ecosystems — including internship frameworks, entrepreneurship bootcamps, industry-linked project assignments, and peer coaching networks — that bridge the gap between institutional learning and the confidence demands of professional life. These ecosystems should be intentionally designed with attention to gender equity, ensuring that female students receive tailored support to overcome the compounding cultural barriers to confident self-expression and initiative identified in this study.

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