Selecting a Theory for Understanding Knowledge Sharing in Resource-Constrained Higher Education Settings: Evidence from a Systematic Literature Review

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Accepted: 13th April 2026; Published: 1st May 2026

https://doi.org/10.58653/nche.v13i2.1

Abstract

In recent decades, numerous scholars have advanced various theories to explain how academics and practitioners share knowledge in higher education. However, little attention has been given to whether these theories are applicable in resource-constrained institutions, a context common in the Global South. This systematic literature review examines dominant theories of academic-practitioner knowledge sharing and evaluates their relevance in such settings. The review analysed evidence from 76 peer-reviewed articles indexed in Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, identifying 10 prominent theories, including knowledge transfer theory, the SECI model, communities of practice, diffusion of innovations, social exchange theory, and absorptive capacity theory. The findings indicate that most frameworks assume the presence of developed infrastructure, formal coordination mechanisms, and substantial organisational capacity, which limits their explanatory power in institutions where these conditions are weak or absent, such as in Uganda.

Among the reviewed theories, communities of practice emerged as particularly relevant, emphasising informal collaboration, peer-based learning, and practice-oriented knowledge sharing, aligning closely with how resource-constrained institutions operate. The study, therefore, concludes that knowledge-sharing theories are context-dependent, and their uncritical application across institutions may obscure important local dynamics. By highlighting the limitations of existing frameworks, this review identifies theoretical lenses better suited to guide research and practice in resource-constrained higher education contexts.

Keywords: *Academic-practitioner; Knowledge sharing; Resource-constrained; Higher education; Systematic literature review*

Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are increasingly expected to demonstrate the relevance and impact of the knowledge they produce. Knowledge sharing between academics and practitioners is central to this, as universities are tasked not only with generating knowledge but also with contributing to and disseminating it beyond the campus. In this study, we define academic-practitioner knowledge sharing as the formal and informal exchange of knowledge supporting teaching, research, and societal impact. Evidence shows that such sharing enhances teaching, research effectiveness, innovation, and organisational learning (Fullwood et al., 2013). Concurrently, HEIs are encouraged to engage external partners and support social and economic development. These trends have heightened scholarly interest in how knowledge is generated, shared, and applied across academic and practice contexts (Al-Kurdi et al., 2018). Yet, conceptualisations of these processes vary across institutions and disciplines, particularly in settings with differing resource capacities.

In recent years, extensive research has examined knowledge-sharing processes, with an emphasis on organisational, technological, and personal factors (Fullwood et al., 2013). Although the results of these studies have offered important insights, they tend to focus on single factors of knowledge sharing and often do not critically examine the

theoretical assumptions underlying them. In particular, little attention has been paid to the impact of knowledge-sharing theories on higher education settings with scarce resources. This scenario raises the fundamental question of the applicability of existing knowledge-sharing theories across various settings. However, without such scrutiny, policy and practice are prone to promote theoretical approaches that are theoretically sound but difficult to implement (Foss & Pedersen, 2019).

Several theoretical frameworks have been proposed to explain academic-practitioner knowledge sharing, each offering distinct views on how knowledge is created, exchanged, and applied. Prominent examples include knowledge transfer theory, the SECI (socialisation, externalisation, combination, and internalisation) model, diffusion of innovations, social exchange theory, and absorptive capacity. Knowledge transfer theory frames sharing as a linear transfer from academia to practice (Perkmann et al., 2020), whereas SECI emphasises iterative, integrated exchanges (Nonaka et al., 2020). Diffusion of innovations highlights the influence of social systems on the adoption and dissemination of ideas (Rogers, 2003), while social exchange theory emphasises reciprocity and perceived benefits as drivers of knowledge sharing (Cropanzano et al., 2017). While these frameworks explain academic knowledge-sharing practices, most were developed and tested in resource-rich contexts, limiting their applicability in low-resource settings.

These limitations are particularly acute in resource-constrained HEIs, where limited funding, infrastructure, and staff shortages hinder both the practice and theoretical application of knowledge-sharing models (Goh & Sandhu, 2013). In countries such as Uganda, underdeveloped research funding and weak institutional support further restrict knowledge exchange (National Council for Higher Education [NCHE], 2022). Consequently, strategies derived from resource-rich environments may not transfer effectively, highlighting the need for context-sensitive evaluation of knowledge-sharing theories. Yet, there has hardly been any systematic review to assess the suitability of these frameworks under such constraints.

Against this backdrop and in response to these gaps, this study reviews existing academic-practitioner knowledge-sharing theories and

assesses their relevance to resource-constrained HEIs such as those in Uganda. Specifically, this study addresses three research questions:

1. What theoretical frameworks explain academic-practitioner knowledge sharing in higher education?
2. To what extent do these frameworks explain academic-practitioner knowledge sharing in resource-constrained HEIs?
3. Which theoretical perspective is most suitable for explaining academic-practitioner knowledge sharing in resource-constrained higher education contexts, and why?

Literature Review

Major theories of academic-practitioner knowledge sharing in higher education

In this section, we provide a critical reflection on the major theoretical orientations in academic-practitioner knowledge sharing, emphasising their underlying assumptions and explanatory shortcomings in higher education institutions. The review takes the form of five analytic domains: behavioural, relational and structural, practice-based, organisational and innovation, and process- and capability-based. The discussion starts from behavioural theories.

Behavioural theories of knowledge sharing

Two key behavioural theories underpin knowledge sharing: the theory of planned behaviour (TPB) and social cognitive theory (SCT). TPB, developed by Icek Ajzen, conceptualises knowledge sharing as an intention-driven behaviour grounded in individual cognition, in which action is shaped by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control (Ajzen, 1991). Attitudes reflect the perceived value of knowledge sharing for professional and academic outcomes; subjective norms capture perceived institutional and peer expectations; and perceived behavioural control reflects individuals' perceived capacity to act under existing constraints. Empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that these constructs are strong predictors of knowledge-sharing intentions across organisational contexts, in which favourable

attitudes, supportive norms, and greater perceived control increase the willingness to share knowledge (Lin, 2007; Wang & Noe, 2010). However, TPB is limited by its weak incorporation of structural constraints, which assume relatively stable conditions for action. This scenario generates an intention-behaviour gap in which workload pressures, resource scarcity, and weak incentive systems undermine perceived control and hinder the translation of intention into actual knowledge-sharing behaviour.

The social cognitive theory (SCT), developed by Albert Bandura, extends this cognitive account by conceptualising knowledge sharing as a socially learned behaviour shaped through reciprocal interactions among personal factors, environmental conditions, and behaviour (Bandura, 1986). Within this framework, self-efficacy determines individuals' confidence in their ability to engage in knowledge-sharing activities, while environmental factors such as leadership support, organisational culture, and peer modelling reinforce behaviour through observation and imitation. Empirical studies confirm that both self-efficacy and supportive environments significantly enhance knowledge-sharing behaviour in organisational settings (Al-Kurdi et al., 2018). Nevertheless, SCT remains contingent on enabling environmental conditions; where these are weak or fragmented, processes of observational learning and behavioural reinforcement are constrained, thereby limiting its explanatory adequacy in structurally deprived contexts.

Relational and structural theories of knowledge sharing

Relational and structural theories shift the analysis of knowledge sharing beyond individual cognition by situating it within social relationships and network configurations that determine access to, and control over, knowledge. Although not originally developed to explain knowledge sharing, these perspectives provide a robust analytical lens for examining how power asymmetries, trust, and structural positioning shape knowledge flows. A central assumption across these perspectives is that knowledge sharing is neither neutral nor evenly distributed, but is structurally embedded within systems of relational inequality and differential access.

From a social capital perspective, Pierre Bourdieu conceptualises social capital as a form of power embedded in durable networks, where

access to knowledge is conditioned by institutional position, status, and accumulated relational resources (Bourdieu, 1986). This framing highlights that knowledge sharing is inherently stratified, privileging actors with greater symbolic and network capital (Bourdieu, 1986). In contrast, James Coleman emphasises relational quality, arguing that trust, norms, and obligations facilitate coordinated action and reduce uncertainty in exchanges, thereby enabling knowledge flows (Coleman, 1988). Empirical evidence supports both perspectives, showing that institutional prestige, network position, and trust significantly influence collaboration and knowledge transfer (Borgatti et al., 2009). However, Bourdieu's framework remains largely diagnostic of inequality, whereas Coleman's mechanism depends on stable relational infrastructures, limiting its explanatory power in fragmented, resource-constrained institutional contexts.

Extending this structural-relational lens, network-based perspectives, proposed by scholars such as Nan Lin and Mark Granovetter, further explain how network configuration and positional advantage shape knowledge exchange. Lin (2001), in particular, argues that access to resources depends on actors' positions within a network, where centrally located actors benefit from greater exposure to diverse knowledge. Mark Granovetter, on the other hand, demonstrates that weak, non-redundant ties enable access to novel information across otherwise disconnected groups (Granovetter,1973), while Ronald Burt highlights the strategic advantage of brokerage positions that bridge structural gaps and control information flows (Burt, 1992). While these theories are not explicitly formulated as knowledge-sharing frameworks, their core propositions have been widely applied in empirical research, which consistently shows that network centrality, weak ties, and brokerage positions are positively associated with knowledge sharing, innovation, and collaborative outcomes (Borgatti et al., 2009). However, these structural advantages depend on the availability of well-developed network infrastructures and opportunities for interaction; in resource-constrained HEIs, weak connectivity, limited external linkages, and restricted mobility constrain the formation of such ties and positions, thereby reinforcing inequalities in knowledge access, circulation, and participation.

Practice-based theories of knowledge sharing

Practice-based theories conceptualise knowledge sharing as a socially situated process emerging through interaction, reciprocity, and participation in shared activities. Rather than locating knowledge solely in an individual cognition or network position, these perspectives emphasise that knowledge is produced, reproduced, and transferred through ongoing social practices and collective engagement within organisational contexts, including HEIs.

Social Exchange Theory, postulated by Peter Blau and George Homans, conceptualises knowledge sharing as a reciprocal process in which individuals evaluate the costs and benefits of exchange before engaging in collaborative behaviour (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1961). The theory assumes that expectations of reciprocity guide interaction and that individuals share knowledge when perceived rewards outweigh associated costs. Empirical studies show that trust and reciprocity are essential for sustaining knowledge-sharing behaviours in organisational contexts, thereby enhancing both the willingness and the continuity of exchange (Wang & Noe, 2010). In HEIs, academics are more likely to share knowledge when they anticipate professional recognition, reputational gains, or future collaboration opportunities. In under-resourced environments where formal incentive systems are weak, knowledge sharing increasingly depends on informal, trust-based exchanges that are uneven and context-dependent, thereby limiting systematic knowledge circulation.

Communities of Practice (CoP), developed by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, extend this relational logic by conceptualising knowledge sharing as participation in socially situated practices in which learning occurs through mutual engagement, shared repertoires, and collaborative problem-solving (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Knowledge is, therefore, not transmitted linearly but co-produced through continuous interaction and participation in collective practice. Supporting evidence suggests that communities of practice promote the exchange of tacit knowledge and professional learning (Amin & Roberts, 2008). In HEIs, they act as spaces for mentoring, peer learning, and collaborative inquiry between academics and practitioners. Yet their success relies on persistent engagement, which is often stymied at more resource-

constrained institutions by workload demands and weak organisational support structures that limit the continuity and depth of engagement.

Organisational and innovation theories of knowledge sharing

Organisational and innovation theories view knowledge sharing as a process at the system level, rooted in the arrangements of institutions, communication infrastructures, and inter-organisational linkages that systems have established within organisational frameworks. In contrast to behavioural or relational views' stress on individual cognition or dyadic exchange, these theories assume that formal systems, coordination mechanisms, and external ties structure the possibilities for knowledge distribution. This scenario means that knowledge sharing is the end product of the organisation design and integrated ecosystem within HEIs.

According to the knowledge transfer theory, advanced by scholars such as Ikujiro Nonaka and Hirotaka Takeuchi, knowledge sharing is the transfer of knowledge through formal organisational routines, codified structures, and systematic processes that support transfer, retention, and reuse across organisational units (Nonaka et al., 2020). The underlying assumption in theory is that successful transmission requires coordination capacity, standardisation mechanisms, and absorptive structures that reduce loss of knowledge as it is transmitted. It has an empirical basis for the claim that transfer effectiveness is highly associated with absorptive capacity and coordination routines (Szulanski, 1996). In HEIs, this manifests itself through formal collaborations, institutional partnerships, and exchange programmes. Such mechanisms, however, depend on stable organisational infrastructure, which in resource-constrained contexts is often underdeveloped and does not provide the basis for sustained use of transferred knowledge.

Diffusion of innovations theory, developed by Everett Rogers, conceptualises knowledge sharing as the spread of innovations via communication channels embedded in social systems over time (Rogers, 2003). Perceived characteristics of innovations – relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability and observability – rather than exposure alone, shape adoption. Observations of communication

networks support the findings of studies. In the context of HEIs, this framework accounts for the adoption of new pedagogical methods, research tools, and cooperative structures. However, diffusion relies on working communication; in fragmented institutional environments, weak connectivity and limited external exposure hinder diffusion, revealing the structural barriers to adoption.

The Open Innovation (IO) theory, postulated by Henry Chesbrough, extends the organisational view, characterising knowledge sharing as a boundary-spanning process in which organisations purposefully leverage both internal and external flows of knowledge to improve innovation outcomes (Chesbrough, 2003). The model assumes that absorptive capacity, external partnerships, and policy climates influence the success of innovation. Research has shown that robust networks of collaboration and internal integration capabilities are crucial for the success of open innovation (West & Bogers, 2014). This situation is manifested in HEIs with the university-industry relationship and by practitioner-engaged research. In resource-constrained settings, limited funding, poor external linkages, and fragmented innovation ecosystems, open innovation practices are unlikely to be viable and sustainable.

Process- and capability-based theories of knowledge sharing

Theories based on process and capability are characterised by knowledge development, which, according to process, is an iterative system in which knowledge is established, transformed, and applied rather than a linear process of information transfer. These perspectives underscore that knowledge value can only be achieved when organisations, HEIs included, transform knowledge into real and purposeful outcomes that are relevant to the local context, as they will through a learning process.

The SECI model, developed by Ikujiro Nonaka and Hirotaka Takeuchi, views knowledge construction as a dynamic process of conversion between tacit and explicit knowledge through socialisation, externalisation, combination, and internalisation (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Its fundamental assumption is that knowledge is constructed socially through interaction and embedding within organisations rather than being passed along. Evidence supports the impact of collaborative

cultures, supportive leadership, and open learning environments on knowledge conversion (Secundo et al., 2021). For HEIs, knowledge sharing thus takes place through mentoring sessions, joint research, and practitioner outreach, and tacit understanding is gradually built into formal outputs, such as publications and teaching work. Yet this process is highly contingent on context; the SECI cycle is derailed by institutional fragility, resource limitations, and low organisational support, resulting in insufficient continuous knowledge creation and sharing.

Cohen and Levinthal (1990) complement this view with an alternative perspective, the absorptive capacity theory, which focuses on an organisation's capacity to identify, assimilate, transform, and exploit external knowledge. This theory posits that one relies on prior knowledge, knowledge of learning routines, and organisational resources to make effective use of knowledge. Indeed, empirical evidence demonstrates that absorptive capacity is one of the most important determinants associated with innovation performance and knowledge application (Volberda et al., 2021). In HEIs, absorptive capacity assesses the extent to which joint academic and practitioner knowledge can be successfully transferred to improved teaching, research, and innovation outcomes. However, its positive effect is limited in resource-limited environments, where weak infrastructure, insufficient training, and funding shortages restrict the development of absorptive capacity that enables shared knowledge to be translated into worthwhile institutional change.

Applications of knowledge sharing theories in resource-constrained higher education institutions

Research on knowledge sharing in higher education has grown in the last decade, focusing on individual behaviour, organisational climate, and institutional support structures (Goh & Sandhu, 2013; Al-Kurdi et al., 2018; 2020). Our literature has discussed the motivational and institutional factors that impact knowledge sharing. But much of it comes from well-resourced environments and thus provides little insight into what knowledge sharing looks like in resource-constrained settings. As such, there is a knowledge-sharing gap in settings with limited institutional capacity, high workloads, and scarce technological infrastructure.

A major limitation of the dominant theoretical models is that they were largely developed and empirically tested in resource-rich settings where assumptions such as stable infrastructure, formal incentive systems, and strong digital capacity are implicit (Al-Kurdi et al., 2020). These assumptions often fail in resource-constrained HEIs, particularly in the Global South, such as in Uganda, where financial constraints, high teaching loads, and weak digital infrastructure are common (Goh & Sandhu, 2013). In these settings, these constraints are not accidental but fundamental.

There is increasing evidence that structural constraints significantly impact the predictive power of traditional knowledge-sharing frameworks. Behavioural models, for example, can accurately predict intention, yet structural and institutional obstacles often prevent these intentions from translating into action (Al-Kurdi et al., 2018). Academics have limited time, poor coordination, and little institutional backing, which hinder long-term collaboration, collective learning, and the practical implementation of knowledge-sharing strategies (Al-Kurdi et al., 2020). This scenario demonstrates a gap between theoretical predictions and practice in resource-constrained HEIs.

In these constrained contexts, knowledge sharing is often more informal, relational and practice-based than formal. Personal networks, peer engagement, and everyday collaborative practices are important for knowledge sharing (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Tacit knowledge, transferred through mentoring, observation and shared experience, is especially valuable in the absence of codified processes (Goh & Sandhu, 2013). These informal mechanisms are not a shortcoming but a form of adaptation that allows for knowledge sharing to persist in the face of structural limitations.

Overall, the current literature tends to focus on formal systems, technological platforms, and policy-focused interventions, making it less applicable to fragile institutions (Goh & Sandhu, 2013). As such, existing theories explain only a portion of the picture of knowledge sharing and fail to account for relational, situated, and practice-based dynamics that dominate in contexts of limited circumstances. These empirical studies demonstrate that traditional frameworks offer useful insights but are context-dependent and must be combined with frameworks that

account for structural limitations, social circumstances, and strategies for knowledge sharing.

Suitable knowledge-sharing theoretical framework for resource-constrained contexts

The existing literature increasingly shows that knowledge-sharing models that focus on formal structures and technology-based processes are not appropriate for resource-constrained HEIs (Al-Kurdi et al., 2020; Goh & Sandhu, 2013; Perkmann et al., 2020). While well-designed to work with established institutions, these models miss relational and practice-based dynamics in the absence of stable infrastructure, incentive systems, and digital systems (Croucher & Locke, 2020). In such settings, knowledge sharing is less about formal processes and more about everyday interactions, personal relationships and adaptive behaviour.

The Communities of Practice (CoPs) developed by Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998) provide a useful framework for understanding knowledge sharing in constrained settings. CoPs envision learning as socially rooted and integrated into communities of shared practices and joint enterprise, as well as common engagement. Knowledge is co-generated, maintained, and transferred through participation, mentoring, observation, and cooperation, rather than through formal systems (Lave & Wenger, 1991). CoPs thus shift our attention away from a person's own intention or organisational processes to relational and participatory processes.

CoPs are specifically relevant in resource-constrained HEIs, where formal knowledge management systems, digital infrastructure, and institutional incentives are limited (Goh & Sandhu, 2013; Croucher & Locke, 2020). In these settings, informal coordination, trust-based interactions, and peer-to-peer relationships are fundamental and not secondary to knowledge sharing (Goh & Sandhu, 2013). CoPs, therefore, capture relational and practice-based dynamics that other frameworks often gloss over, explaining how knowledge can persist and flow even in low-resource settings.

CoPs, however, do have limitations. They require sustained engagement and interaction, which can be difficult in high-pressure, resource-strapped institutions (Al-Kurdi et al., 2018). Furthermore,

they do not consider structural and power factors, such as institutional hierarchies, uneven access to resources, and organisational priorities, which affect participation and are relevant to knowledge-sharing outcomes (Croucher & Locke, 2020; Goh & Sandhu, 2013). Thus, though CoPs offer a context-sensitive, relational perspective, frameworks that account for structural constraints in knowledge sharing in resource-poor HEIs should be part of the picture.

Finally, CoPs provide a holistic, adaptive framework for sharing academic-practitioner knowledge in resource-constrained higher education contexts. They focus on social, relational, and practice-based mechanisms and are thus particularly well suited to explaining knowledge co-construction and exchange when formal systems are weak. CoPs are not a panacea for all structural challenges, but they offer an adaptive approach to knowledge sharing and understanding in highly resource-constrained environments with fragmented networks and institutional fragility (Goh & Sandhu, 2013; Al-Kurdi et al., 2020)

Methodology

Research design

In this study, we conducted a systematic literature review (SLR) to examine how knowledge-sharing theories explain interactions between academics and practitioners in higher education, with a focus on resource-constrained institutions. Following Kitchenham and Charters (2007), the SLR was employed as a rigorous, transparent method to identify, evaluate, and synthesise research addressing established questions. This approach is particularly suited to higher education knowledge-sharing literature, which is theoretically diverse and dispersed across organisational learning, innovation, and higher education studies. The review identified the dominant theoretical frameworks, their assumptions, and their applicability in resource-constrained contexts. By comparing studies using different frameworks, the SLR enables critical analysis rather than mere description, reduces bias compared to narrative reviews, and provides a strong foundation for theory-based synthesis in under-resourced HEIs.

The SLR also foregrounds contextual factors, recognising that resource-limited institutions often face low institutional capacity, heavy teaching workloads, fragmented infrastructure, and weak incentive systems. This perspective avoids uniform assumptions about higher education systems and clarifies how specific theoretical models (Croucher & Locke, 2020) function across diverse settings. By integrating these environmental considerations, the review supports the development of contextually relevant theoretical frameworks to understand knowledge-sharing dynamics in resource-constrained HEIs.

Data sources and search strategy

We searched major peer-reviewed databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, Taylor & Francis Online, and Emerald Insight. The term search was structured in three categories: (i) knowledge sharing and knowledge exchange; (ii) higher education, universities and academic staff; and (iii) practitioner engagement and contextual descriptors (e.g., Communities of Practice, resource-constrained settings, developing countries). Boolean operators and truncation were used to retrieve all studies.

The search was restricted to articles published over the last three decades to examine the evolution of research on knowledge sharing in higher education. Backwards and forward citation chaining were used to identify seminal works that may have been missed in the first search (Webster & Watson, 2002). This dual approach ensured that foundational and contemporary papers were included to provide a comprehensive synthesis of theoretical perspectives. All search processes, including those that included and excluded studies, were documented to ensure the transparency and replicability of the results. Studies in resource-constrained settings were explicitly identified by the authors or inferred from institutional or national characteristics, reflecting the research focus.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Following systematic review protocols, articles were selected based on clearly defined criteria. Studies were included if they: (i) were published in peer-reviewed journals; (ii) were concerned with knowledge sharing/knowledge exchange processes in higher education; (iii) applied,

critiqued, or discussed a knowledge sharing theory or conceptual framework; and (iv) addressed the relationship between academics and practitioners (whether in a collaborative or institutional framework).

Studies were excluded if they: (i) focused solely on student-to-student knowledge sharing; (ii) were conference papers, theses, reports or other non-peer-reviewed materials; (iii) examined knowledge management outside higher education; or (iv) lacked sufficient methodological or theoretical detail for assessment. Exclusion criteria also prevented prioritisation of studies conducted exclusively in high-resource settings. These criteria ensured strong alignment between study selection and research objectives, allowing the review to focus specifically on theoretical explanations of academic-practitioner knowledge sharing in contexts with limited institutional capacity.

Selection of studies and dataset

The initial database search returned 142 articles. After duplicate removal, titles and abstracts were screened, yielding 96 articles for full-text review. The inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied to identify 76 articles, including both empirical and conceptual studies. This combination enabled the review to examine how theoretical frameworks are operationalised in practice and how they are conceptually critiqued or extended. The sample size is consistent with other systematic reviews of higher education and is adequate for highlighting dominant theoretical patterns while providing a detailed theory-based synthesis (Kitchenham & Charters, 2007).

The dataset also enabled comparisons across studies from different resource contexts, facilitating a critical assessment of the effectiveness of theoretical models in under-resourced settings. By considering both conceptual and empirical work, the review could test assumptions, assess the practical application of findings in the real world, and be both analytically rigorous and applicable to practice.

Data analysis

The data were analysed using thematic content analysis and deductive and inductive coding, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach: familiarisation, initial coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition, and reporting. The research questions guide

deductive coding: (i) Which theoretical frameworks explain academic-practitioner knowledge sharing? (ii) To what extent do these frameworks capture practices in resource-constrained higher education institutions (HEIs)? and (iii) Which theoretical perspective is most suitable to explain knowledge sharing in such contexts?

Inductive coding enabled the identification of new patterns not anticipated in the initial framework, including tacit knowledge-sharing practices, informal learning routines, relational mechanisms (trust, legitimacy, identity, etc.), and structural constraints (workload pressures, limited infrastructure, poor coordination). This way, the review captures context-specific phenomena that are not generally captured in conventional theoretical models (Goh & Sandhu, 2013). The combination of deductive and inductive analysis provides a rigorous, context-sensitive synthesis of both conceptual and empirical literature, making the review replicable, transparent, and analytically rigorous. It also enables the review to evaluate not only the explanatory power of theories but also their use in under-resourced higher education contexts.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents the results of the systematic literature review and addresses the study's three research questions. It outlines the main theoretical frameworks explaining academic-practitioner knowledge sharing, examines their application across institutional contexts, and argues that Communities of Practice (CoP) provide the most robust lens for understanding knowledge sharing in resource-constrained higher education. Evidence from the reviewed studies is combined with theoretical analysis to highlight consensus and identify gaps in the literature.

RQ1: What theoretical frameworks explain academic-practitioner knowledge sharing in higher education?

The review identified 10 dominant theories that explain academic-practitioner knowledge sharing in higher education. Analysis of 76 studies showed these frameworks draw on diverse traditions, including knowledge management, organisational learning, behavioural science, and innovation studies. Theories differ in assumptions about how

knowledge is created, shared, and applied, spanning formal codified mechanisms, relational and practice-based learning, individual cognitive and behavioural drivers, and external knowledge ecosystems. This diversity highlights the multi-level nature of knowledge exchange, covering individual motivation, interpersonal relationships, organisational processes, and broader institutional networks. Table 1 summarises the originators, core propositions, assumptions, and applications of each theory in higher education research.

Table 1: *Thematic integration of theories explaining academic-practitioner knowledge sharing in higher education*

Theme	Theory	Originator(s)	Core Proposition	Basic Assumptions	Key Citations
Formal and codified knowledge-sharing mechanisms	Knowledge Transfer Theory	General KM literature	Knowledge flows from source to recipient through formal channels	Actors can codify, store, and deliberately transfer knowledge	Foss & Pedersen (2019); Ankrah & Al-Tabbaa (2015)
	SECI Model	Ikujiro Nonaka & Hirotaka Takeuchi	Actors create knowledge through socialisation, externalisation, combination, and internalisation.	Organisational contexts enable a structured knowledge spiral.	Secundo et al. (2021); Nonaka et al. (2020)
	Absorptive Capacity Theory	Wesley Cohen & Daniel Levinthal	Ability to recognise, assimilate, and exploit new knowledge	Organisations have varying capacities for knowledge integration	Al-Kurdi et al. (2020); Volberda et al. (2021)
	Diffusion of Innovations	Everett Rogers	Innovations spread over time through social systems	Perceived attributes and social systems influence adoption	Ramayah et al. (2019); Rogers (2003)

Theme	Theory	Originator(s)	Core Proposition	Basic Assumptions	Key Citations
Relational and practice-based knowledge-sharing	Social Exchange Theory	Peter Blau; George Homans	Knowledge sharing as reciprocal social behaviour	Individuals exchange benefits based on trust and reciprocity	Cropanzano et al. (2017); Al-Kurdi et al. (2020); Fullwood et al. (2013)
	Communities of Practice (CoP)	Jean Lave & Etienne Wenger	Knowledge shared through participatory practices	Knowledge is socially constructed and relational	Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Fullwood et al. (2013); Al-Kurdi et al. (2018)
	Network of Practice (NoP)	John Seeley Brown & Paul Duguid	Informal networks facilitate knowledge exchange	Interaction fosters learning across organisational boundaries	Brown & Duguid (2001); Al-Kurdi et al. (2018)
Individual cognitive and behavioural drivers	Social Cognitive Theory	Albert Bandura	Behaviour shaped by personal, environmental, and cognitive factors	Learning is socially mediated	Nonaka & Takeuchi (1995); Bandura (2001)
	Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB)	Icek Ajzen	Behaviour driven by intention shaped by attitudes, norms, and control	Individual perceptions predict behaviour	Ramayah et al. (2019); Ajzen (1991)

Theme	Theory	Originator(s)	Core Proposition	Basic Assumptions	Key Citations
External and open knowledge-sharing	Open Innovation Paradigm	Henry Chesbrough	Organisations use internal and external ideas	Knowledge flows organisational beyond borders	Secundo et al. (2021); Chesbrough (2003); Perkmann et al. (2020)

Table 1 shows that research on academic-practitioner knowledge sharing draws on multiple theoretical traditions, reflecting the complexity of knowledge exchange in higher education. Thematic analysis highlights a key distinction between structural or system-based theories, which emphasise formal organisational processes, and relational or practice-based perspectives, which focus on social interaction, collaborative learning, and professional engagement. Widely used frameworks such as knowledge transfer theory, absorptive capacity, and the diffusion of innovations originate in organisational and innovation research traditions, which assume relatively structured institutional environments.

In contrast, frameworks like CoP and social exchange theory emphasise relational and practice-based dynamics, capturing how collaboration emerges through social interaction and shared professional activities. This diversity shows that no single framework fully explains academic-practitioner knowledge exchange. Instead, the literature presents a multi-layered conceptual landscape, offering analytic lenses at individual, relational, organisational, and ecosystem levels. Figure 1 synthesises these relationships, mapping how the four thematic clusters interact as complementary, rather than isolated, explanatory layers.

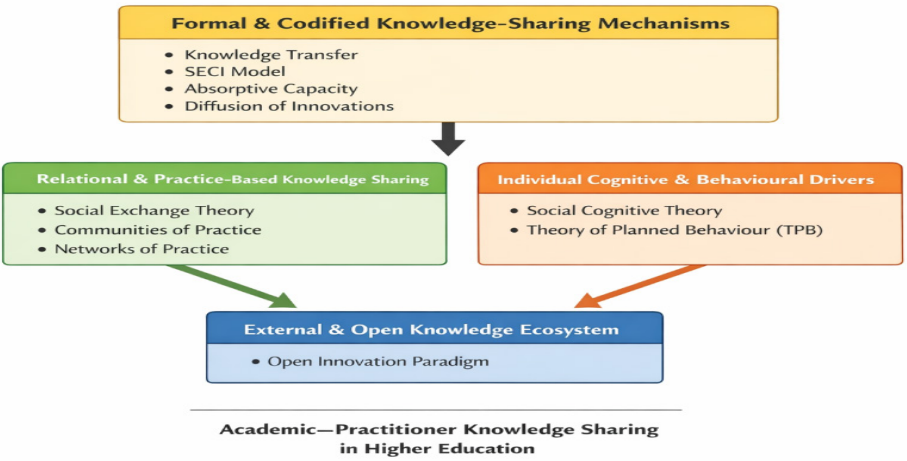

Figure 1: *Conceptual map of theories explaining academic-practitioner knowledge sharing in higher education*

Figure 1 groups knowledge-sharing theories into four categories: formal and codified mechanisms; relational and practice-based mechanisms; individual cognitive and behavioural drivers; and external/open knowledge ecosystems. These clusters illustrate the multiple, overlapping channels through which academics and practitioners exchange knowledge, while also highlighting the limitations of each perspective in isolation.

Formal and codified knowledge sharing mechanisms. A great deal of research has focused on structured and formalised models such as knowledge transfer theory, the SECI framework, absorptive capacity, and the diffusion of innovations (Foss & Pedersen, 2019; Secundo et al., 2021; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). These models also assume that knowledge can be formalised and communicated through organisations and are, therefore, well-suited to planning, such as workshops, curriculum development, and faculty development programmes.

However, empirical evidence suggests that this model often underestimates the roles of tacit knowledge, informal learning, and relational dynamics in a resource-limited higher education setting (Al-Kurdi et al., 2020; Goh & Sandhu, 2013). As a result, while these frameworks

are theoretically sound, their explanatory power is often contingent on context, and they can overlook how knowledge is exchanged in everyday institutions.

Relational and practice-based knowledge sharing. Communities of Practice (CoP), Networks of Practice (NOP), and social exchange theory, among others, promote participation, common identity, and ongoing connections in knowledge generation (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Al-Kurdi et al., 2018). Informal structures such as peer networks, mentoring, and cooperative problem-solving are particularly relevant in areas where formal structures are weak, enabling experiential learning and adaptive problem-solving.

However, they can be problematic: informal networks can reproduce inequalities, reinforce silos, or fail to scale without organisational support (Al-Kurdi et al., 2020; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). This finding highlights the need for relational approaches combined with institutional support to sustain equitable knowledge flows.

Individual cognitive and behavioural pathways. Theories such as social cognitive theory and the theory of planned behaviour explain academic engagement in terms of self-efficacy, attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control (Ramayah et al., 2019; Bandura, 2001). These perspectives provide insight into motivation and behaviour at the micro-level.

However, they tend to discount structural, relational, and contextual constraints, and, in this respect, are insufficient to explain knowledge sharing in isolation, especially within under-resourced higher education environments (Al-Kurdi et al., 2020). They really work best together with organisational and relational frameworks that take into account environmental and social conditions.

External and open knowledge ecosystems. Open innovation models, in particular, focus on inter-institutional collaboration and information flows from industry and professional organisations (Secundo et al., 2021). While these models may be useful for encouraging external engagement, they are also linked to stable organisational capacity and consistent partnerships, as well as to enabling policies, which are rarely available in resource-poor organisations (Goh & Sandhu, 2013). If not

integrated with internal relational and behavioural systems, external collaboration models may become aspirational, rather than practical.

Overall, this thematic analysis suggests that integrative approaches, combining formal structures, relational practices, individual motivations, and external ecosystems, provide the most powerful explanation for academic-practitioner knowledge sharing. CoPs are especially sensitive to participation, identity, and context that bridge the gap between codified structures, interpersonal relations, and individual agency (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Al-Kurdi et al., 2018). The integration of CoP with organisational and behavioural frameworks enables a more nuanced, context-sensitive perspective on knowledge sharing in resource-limited areas of higher education, where it is relational and context-based.

RQ2: To what extent do these frameworks explain academic-practitioner knowledge sharing in resource-constrained HEIs?

This section assesses how well-known theories of knowledge sharing explain the practices of resource-constrained HEIs in Uganda. It does not assume that these theories are universally applicable to all HEIs; rather, it examines the extent to which each theory fits within the context of resource-constrained HEIs in practice, particularly those affected by budget limitations, weak digital infrastructure, and underdeveloped knowledge management systems. Fit is the extent to which a theory can explain knowledge-sharing practices in empirical studies and is reported in the literature. Table 2 compares the theories' similarities and differences, their strengths and weaknesses, and suggests avenues for further exploration.

Table 2: *Thematic assessment of knowledge-sharing theories in resource-constrained higher education institutions*

Theme	Theory	Core Assumptions	Analytical Fit for Resource-Constrained HEIs	Key Limitations in Low-Resource Contexts	Key Citation
Formal and codified knowledge-sharing mechanisms	Knowledge Transfer Theory	Knowledge moves linearly from sender to receiver via formal channels	Low	Overemphasises codified knowledge and formal systems.	Foss & Pedersen (2019); Ankrah & Al-Tabbaa (2015)
	SECI Model (Nonaka)	Knowledge created through tacit–explicit conversion cycles	Low–Moderate	Assumes stable infrastructure and time for codification	Secundo et al. (2021); Nonaka et al. (2020)
	Absorptive Capacity	Organisations must recognise, assimilate, and apply external knowledge	Moderate	Depends on prior knowledge base and organisational maturity	Al-Kurdi et al. (2020); Volberda et al. (2021)
	Diffusion of Innovations	Innovations spread through adopter categories and communication channels	Low–Moderate	Assumes communication infrastructure and resource readiness	Ramayah et al. (2019); Rogers (2003)

Theme	Theory	Core Assumptions	Analytical Fit for Resource-Constrained HEIs	Key Limitations in Low-Resource Contexts	Key Citation
Individual cognitive and behavioural drivers	Theory of Planned Behaviour	Behaviour driven by attitudes, norms, and perceived control	Moderate	Downplays structural and material constraints	Cropanzano et al. (2017); Al-Kurdi et al. (2020); Fullwood et al. (2013)
	Social Cognitive Theory	Self-efficacy, observation, and social modelling shape learning.	Moderate	Focuses on individuals more than systems	Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Fullwood et al. (2013); Al-Kurdi et al. (2018)
Relational and practice-based knowledge-sharing	Social Exchange Theory	Knowledge shared based on reciprocity and trust	High	Does not explain institutional sustainability	Brown & Duguid (2001); Al-Kurdi et al. (2020)
	Networks of Practice	Knowledge flows through professional ties across organisations	High	Weakly supported by institutional structures	Nonaka & Takeuchi (1995); Bandura (2001)
	Communities of Practice	Learning occurs through participation in shared practice	Very High	Difficult to scale without formal recognition	Ramayah et al. (2019); Ajzen (1991)
External and open knowledge ecosystems	Open Innovation Paradigm	Value created through external knowledge inflows and partnerships	Low	Requires stable policy and partnership capacity	Secundo et al. (2021); Perkmann et al. (2020)

Table 2 shows that knowledge-sharing theories are grouped into different thematic areas and appear to explain differently across resource-constrained HEIs. Relational and practice-based models are generally

more similar to one another than formal and codified models, consistent with previous research on knowledge exchange under structural constraints (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). We discuss the differences below by examining each thematic category in terms of institutional conditions that impact academic-practitioner interactions.

Formal and codified mechanisms. Codification-based theories – such as knowledge transfer theory, the SECI model, absorptive capacity, and the diffusion of innovations – assume stable routines, reliable infrastructure, and consistent managerial oversight (Fullwood et al., 2013; Al-Kurdi et al., 2020). Such mechanisms are useful for planning interventions like workshops, structured training, or curriculum redesign. But as Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) and Foss and Pedersen (2019) point out, formal models often overlook tacit knowledge exchange and informal, adaptive learning. In resource-limited HEIs, where access to digital infrastructure and managerial support is uneven, such codified mechanisms may be partial or ineffective.

Relational and practice-based mechanisms. Frameworks such as CoP, NoP, and social exchange theory emphasise trust, reciprocity, and long-term interaction as the basis for knowledge sharing (Al-Kurdi et al., 2018; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). These mechanisms align with the informal peer networks, mentoring, and cooperative problem-solving that academic life relies on. Previous research indicates that these relational mechanisms underpin learning and innovation, especially when formal structures fail (Lave & Wenger, 1991). However, the sustainability and inclusivity of these mechanisms also require institutional recognition or support to avoid that same social injustice or siloed knowledge.

Cognitive and behavioural pathways. Individual-level theories such as social cognitive theory and the theory of planned behaviour explain variation in engagement in terms of self-efficacy, motivation, or behavioural intention (Ajzen, 1991; Bandura, 2001). While providing insights into micro-level drivers, these frameworks largely ignore structural constraints (e.g., high teaching load, limited access to ICT, and weak coordination) that often prevent intentions from being translated into action (Al-Kurdi et al., 2018). Their explanatory power is enhanced

by combining relational and organisational perspectives that account for environmental contingencies.

External and open knowledge ecosystems. Open innovation approaches emphasise inter-institutional collaboration and knowledge flow (Secundo et al., 2021). The point of them is to make the case for industry partnerships and cross-institutional learning. However, evidence suggests that their application in resource-constrained HEIs is constrained by unstable policy settings, uncertain institutional capacity, and the absence of long-term partnerships (Goh & Sandhu, 2013). In practice, these models may be largely aspirational without alignment with internal relational practices.

Overall, knowledge sharing in low-resource HEIs is more dependent on structural enablers and relational mechanisms than on geographical or sectoral factors. Relational and practice-based frameworks, especially CoP, are best at explaining how knowledge exchange has a social and adaptive nature (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

RQ3: Which theoretical perspective is most suitable for explaining academic-practitioner knowledge sharing in resource-constrained higher education contexts, and why?

Our analysis of the 10 commonly used knowledge-sharing theories in resource-constrained higher education contexts highlights a key limitation. While these frameworks offer important insights, they often overlook the fact that academics share knowledge through everyday practice rather than through formalised systems, focusing instead on structured institutional mechanisms. In contrast, CoP better reflect how knowledge is exchanged in such settings, viewing knowledge as emerging through interaction, collaboration, and collective problem-solving within groups. This perspective is especially relevant in contexts like Ugandan higher education, where limited funding, weak digital infrastructure, and scarce formal knowledge management systems make informal, practice-based knowledge exchange essential. CoP explains how academic knowledge flows by emphasising participation, tacit knowledge, and informal networks, helping sustain knowledge

sharing. Table 3 summarises the key elements of the CoP model and their relevance to resource-constrained institutions.

Table 3: *Thematic components of communities of practice in resource-constrained higher education institutions*

Theme	CoP Element	Relevance in Resource-Constrained HEIs	Supporting Evidence
Relational participation	Mutual Engagement	Encourages active participation despite limited formal structures	Faculty collaborate through departmental groups, mentorship, and informal networks, sustaining relationships and shared practice even in low-resource settings (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998)
Contextual alignment	Joint Enterprise	Aligns shared goals with actual institutional needs	Members negotiate and commit to common goals that reflect local priorities, ensuring knowledge-sharing activities are relevant and sustainable (Perkmann et al., 2020).
Tacit knowledge circulation	Shared Repertoire	Enables transmission of practical know-how without reliance on formal codification or digital infrastructure	Communities co-create and maintain routines, tools, shared language, and other resources that support the transfer of tacit knowledge without relying heavily on formal systems (Lave & Wenger, 1991).
Collective learning processes	Social Learning	Strengthens relational networks for knowledge exchange	Knowledge is co-constructed through participation in social networks, enabling peer learning, collective meaning-making, and cross-departmental collaboration (Secundo et al.,2021).

The results in Table 3 suggest CoP are especially well-suited for resource-constrained HEIs compared with formal, codification-based knowledge-sharing models. Unlike process-based knowledge transfer theory or open innovation, CoP do not depend on static organisational routines, documentation, or specialised systems. Instead, they are based on co-member engagement, common goals, common repertoires, and social learning (which are very adaptable to low-resource environments).

In contrast, formal knowledge management models are highly dependent on organisational coordination, managerial oversight and technological support (Foss & Pedersen, 2019). These presuppositions are often absent in under-resourced systems, limiting their explanatory and practical value. Open innovation frameworks, for instance, rely on absorptive capacity, stable partnerships and enabling policy conditions, and policy conditions are often weak or fragmented in these settings (Secundo et al., 2021), making their implementation largely symbolic and transformational rather than tangible.

The SECI model and absorptive capacity theory are both at an intermediate position, both theoretically and practically. Both frameworks require facilitation mechanisms, documentation platforms, and organisational learning practices (Nonaka et al., 2020). The main stages of SECI in resource-limited HEIs are skipped (externalisation and combination), and knowledge creation is disrupted (Secundo et al., 2021). Likewise, in absorptive capacity models, the lack of funding, staff, and digital infrastructure makes it difficult to move from knowledge acquisition to exploitation (Al-Kurdi et al., 2020). Thus, these models have a moderate explanatory power but need to be adapted to the context.

On the other hand, relational and practice-based models are particularly well-suited to knowledge sharing in organisationally constrained HEIs. Social exchange theory emphasises trust, reciprocity, and fairness as key drivers, even in the absence of formal incentives (Cropanzano et al., 2017), while networks of practice demonstrate how professional ties enable knowledge flows when organisational coordination is weak (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Evidence suggests that disciplinary and inter-institutional connections can partially offset organisational limitations (Al-Kurdi et al., 2020). Local CoPs are especially effective at fostering the circulation of tacit knowledge, social

learning, mentoring, and collaboration despite limited formal structures (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Al-Kurdi et al., 2018).

Individual-level frameworks also provide valuable insights. Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2001) and the theory of planned behaviour clarify the motivation and intentions behind knowledge sharing. However, in practice, heavy workloads and scarce resources often constrain engagement. Similarly, diffusion of innovations theory describes adoption pathways but does not fully account for infrastructural and incentive barriers in low-resource settings. Together, these frameworks complement relational models, highlighting how both social and individual factors shape knowledge-sharing practices in resource-constrained HEIs.

Conclusion

In this study, we investigated the dominant theoretical models of knowledge sharing between academics and practitioners and their relevance in resource-constrained higher education settings. The key findings indicate that formal, system-oriented approaches such as knowledge transfer theory, the SECI model, absorptive capacity, the diffusion of innovations, and open innovation provide only partial explanations. Although these frameworks focus on structured activities (e.g., training, workshops, and funded collaborations) and formal activities, they fail to account for informal, sometimes socially embedded practices that are inherent to everyday academic knowledge exchange in resource-constrained contexts.

In contrast, socially grounded perspectives, such as CoP, NoP, and social exchange theory, explain the observed patterns of knowledge sharing, trust, reciprocity, and long-term interaction much more effectively. Behavioural theories provide insights into individual motivation, but they can be very limited without links to relational and organisational contexts.

These findings have clear implications for policy and practice. They suggest that knowledge-sharing strategies in resource-constrained higher education systems should move beyond the use of formal

knowledge management models in resource-rich settings and build informal academic networks and communities that sustain knowledge as a habit of living. Practical interventions may include providing protection for work on the project and recognising community-based knowledge work. Low-cost facilitative approaches are more likely to improve relationships rather than replace them.

This study has limitations. It is based on secondary literature and thematic synthesis and is biased towards the English language, which may lead to publication bias and limitations. Also, assessing theoretical "fit" in resource-constrained settings can be challenging because the study is interpretive and may not fully capture the complexity of institutions.:

Future research should be focused on empirical validation across institutional and geographical contexts. Longitudinal and comparative designs, in particular, would help us better understand how formal, relational, and individual mechanisms interact across different resource settings. This approach would be beneficial for developing context-sensitive and theoretically robust approaches to academic-practitioner knowledge sharing.

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