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# Accountability and Public Interest in Government Institutions

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## ABSTRACT

The study attempts to explain public interest in government institutions using stewardship theory. This study builds upon previous studies which have largely used agency theory to examine public interest. Data relating to the constructs of responsibility, answerability, and openness were found to be significant predictors of public interest. Data were collected from public primary schools' teachers and parents in these schools. This paper urges public officers in government institutions to offer accountabilities for the public funds as they execute their tasks and duties. These findings have both policy and managerial implications which we discuss.

## KEYWORDS

Uganda; accountability; responsibility; answerability; public interest

## Introduction

Serving the public is the fundamental mission of government institutions (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2014). This duty transforms a civic ideal into a responsibility for government managers (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2007). Public officers occupy prominent and even prestigious positions in their communities and in society at large (Freedman, 2003). However, individualism outweighs collectivistic interests and dominates in public life at the expense of common preferences (Mbago, Ntayi, & Muhwezi, 2016). Public officers try to meet the interests of citizens though their behaviours are not aligned with the interests of citizens (Leif, 1991). Some studies have been conducted on Public interest in sub-Saharan Africa. These studies have concentrated on the sociological, organizational behaviour, anthropological, political, legal factors and have largely used Agency theory (Donaldson & Davis, 1991) ignoring the stewardship theory thereby creating a knowledge gap which needs to be filled. Therefore, this study adopts the construct of accountability from stewardship theoretic lenses to predict public interest. The study specifically use the three dimensions of accountability; responsibility, answerability and openness in explaining the predictive power of accountability on public interest in Uganda.

Citizens are not contented with the services of government officers and they question whether their interests are put first. For example, the public health sector has been neglected; every year government spends about \$

2.2 million (about Shs. 5.86 billion) on treatment of mostly top government officials who seek medical assistance abroad while Ugandan hospitals lack medicine and staff (Ministry of Health Ministerial Statement, 2016). Beds in public hospitals are always full, while many other patients wait in line. Patients and their family members bring mats and sleep on hospital ward floors, in the corridors and courtyards. The budget allocated to the Ministry of Health for the last 5 years has been ranging between 6% and 8% of the national budget. This budget allocation cannot provide affordable medical care which forces citizens to access medical services from the private sector where costs are high (Ministry of Health Report, 2016).

Uganda's health sector, ranked 186<sup>th</sup> out of 191 nations (WHO, 2015), is one of the worst in the world. The health and life expectancy of Ugandans is among the lowest across the globe: one in every 200 births ends the mother's life; around a million people are HIV positive; malaria accounts for 14% of all deaths and less than 10% of children under five sleep under insecticide-treated nets. Trained medical officers are always leaving the country for greener pastures. At the same time, quality facilities like ambulances that would transport patients in case of accidents are lacking and well-equipped and functioning diagnostic equipment are no more in these hospitals (Ministry of Health Report, 2016). The budget of Mulago National Referral Hospital, the biggest hospital in Uganda, is approximately US \$ 10 million. The hospital needs three times its current budget to run effectively (Uganda Ministry

of Health Report, 2017). The same report shows that with a 1,790 – bed capacity, the hospital accommodates over 3,000 inpatients and handles between 6,000 and 7,000 outpatients daily. As in all other public hospitals across the country, the patient load in this hospital continues to be too heavy. Despite the public need for increased and improved health facilities, as shown by the increased population from 12,500,000 to 37,500,000 between 1960 and 2010, the current government has neither constructed anymore public hospitals nor equipped the old ones.

In the education sector, it is estimated that 68% of children who enroll in primary school drop out before completing primary education (UNESCO, 2014). The same report also shows that at least 80% of the pupils in primary two cannot work out a two – digit subtraction and 61% cannot read a single word of a short sentence. Uganda is trailing in the East African region in terms of literacy and comprehension. Pupils in Universal Primary Education (UPE) schools cannot compete with those in private schools. Many pupils in UPE schools study under trees when they are hungry, and, in most cases, are taught by equally hungry teachers (World Bank Development Report, 2017a). The Ministry of Education and Sports received 8% of the total national budget which cannot provide quality education to propel Uganda out of poverty and into national development (Ministry of Education, 2016). Following the introduction of UPE in 1997, enrolment increased from 3.1 million pupils in 1996 to 8.4 million in 2013. The dropout rate is estimated to be at 68% amongst primary school children and poor-quality schooling for some of those who complete primary school in Uganda (UNESCO, 2015). Contrary to the general perception that parents are not supposed to pay for anything, UPE is not entirely free; the cost of pens, exercise books and clothing is beyond the reach of poor parents (Millennium Development Goal Report, 2015).

Public managers are expected to serve the interests of their citizens (Lewis, 2006). As public servants execute their tasks and duties, the way they discharge their obligations becomes an issue. Economic individualism and self-based values dominate today's public management at the expense of the common good (Bozeman, 2007). In the interest of common people, legislators, regulators and courts exercise their tasks and duties (Bozeman & Sarewitz, 2005). As they exercise their obligations, what remains important is whether public servants are responsive to the demands of their citizens (Soroka & Wleziem, 2005). The very involvement of public officers in policy-making may create a risk of decision – making getting captured by powerful and special interested individuals (Rasmussen, Brendan, &

Lowery, 2014;; Schattscheider, 1960). As a result, policy-making venues may be overly crowded with interest groups that are less than representatives of public opinion, and particularistic policies may be adopted benefiting a few interests (Baumgartner, 2011).

## Theoretical underpinning

### Stewardship theory

This theory states that stewards act in the best interests of their principals. Therefore, the stewardship theory is based on the concept of ensuring that the behaviors of the managers are aligned with the interests of the principals. Stewardship theory is mainly concerned with identifying the situations in which the interests of the principal and the steward are aligned (Donaldson & Davis, 1991, 1993). The theory holds that there is no conflict of interest between managers and owners hence the interests of the principal and the steward is aligned. Therefore, the theory argues that people are intrinsically motivated to work for others or for organizations to accomplish tasks and responsibilities with which they have been entrusted which give them a higher level of satisfaction. The theory places greater value on goal union among the parties involved in governance than on the agent's self-interest (Van Slyke, 2006). Block (1996) suggested a stewardship role of service over self-interest believing that both organizational and individual needs will be best achieved by honouring relationships and treating followers like owners and partners. However, the theory ignores the fact that individualistic interests can outweigh collectivistic interests (Mbago et al., 2016). If public officers worked in line with the stewardship theory, they would act in public interest. Most Ugandan public officers are largely driven by self-interests (Ntayi, 2012).

## Literature review and hypotheses development

### Public interest

Public interest has multiple meanings and appears not to be specific. Authors explain it in terms of common interest, public significance or common good or anything of interest to the public (Moyers, 2007). It involves the outcomes best serving the long-run survival and well-being of a social collective construed as a public (Bozeman, 2007). It is what happens when citizens discharge their obligations and successfully claim their rights (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2007). It is achieved when citizens get the sense that public institutions provide with them quality services (Bozeman, 2007). In order to achieve the common good, civil leaders and individuals alike must seek what is good for the whole of a society rather than what promotes individual or minority interests. Public interest is about the superior ideas

and concerns for the good of society, rather than self-interests that motivate political action (Reich, 1988). It also brings with it a basic concern with social ends and goals (Herman, 2007). It is a society where the values of the whole would not differ from those of any specific individuals (Downs, 1962).

### **Accountability**

Accountability concerns the possibility of holding the actors governing a political action responsible for their actions (Hansson & Longva, 2014). It is the leader's willingness to accept the responsibilities inherent in the leadership position to serve the wellbeing of the citizens; the implicit or explicit expectation that he or she will be publicly linked to his or her actions, words or reactions. It entails the expectation that the leader may be called on to explain his or her beliefs, decisions, commitments or actions to the citizens (Wood & Winston, 2005). Holding public officers answerable for their decisions and actions captures the essence of the stewardship theory (Donaldson & Davis, 1991). Accountability means being able to provide an explanation or justification, and accept responsibility for events or transactions and for one's own actions in relation to the events or transactions.

### **Accountability and public interest**

According to Stewart (in Hondeghorn, 1998) accountability rests both on giving an account and being able to account. All government departments have to be efficient because they have to ensure value for tax-payers' money where by efficiency encompasses the qualitative and value-laden expectations of the society which is in the public interest (Lamont, 2005). Merriam-Webster's Dictionary defines accountability as "the quality or state of being accountable; especially: an obligation or willingness to accept responsibility or to account for one's actions." The concept carries with it an idea that individuals, organizations, and community are not only responsible for their actions, but must also answer for their performance to an outside authority that, in turn, may impose a penalty for failure. Schools and students are responsible for teaching and meeting learning goals – no excuses, no blame game, no victimhood, and under no-child-left behind, there are serious sanctions for districts, schools and teachers failing to meet these goals. In the simplest sense, students come to school to learn, and schools and the educators within them exist to teach and to promote student learning. Since tests show which students and what schools are meeting or exceeding standards and those that are not, students and teachers who are falling short should be held accountable for their failure (and less frequently, those who succeed

beyond expectations should be rewarded for their success) (Herman, 2007).

Leaders willingly accept the responsibility to lead the community in one way or another, make decisions, and act on the organization's behalf (Chaffe, 1997). The unique role of leaders and managers in an organization makes them accountable from two perspectives – the one from above, as employees responsible to the organization itself, and the perspective from below, for meeting commitments arising from the nature of their relationships with subordinates (Kraines, 2001). Accountable leaders accept responsibility, not just for activities, circumstances, or past results, but for future direction, potential effectiveness, possibility thinking, an inspiring shared vision, and maximum contribution (Kouzes & Posner, 2002). Accountability involves the leader's response to the implicit or expectation that he/she will be publicly linked to his/her actions, words, or reactions (Wood & Winston, 2005). Markman and Teklock (2000) posit that when people believe that their decisions will be public, expectations of accountability put implicit or explicit constraints on what they do. Knowing that they will be held accountable for their actions and decisions, people seek approval and respect, either as ends in themselves, or to protect and enhance their own self-image (Petrick & Quinn, 2001).

A democratic government combines two content ideas: that those who rule should do so in the public interest; and that they will be more likely to do so when they are in some way representative of, and -/or answerable to those they rule (Mark, 2012). Linking the demand that those who rule do so in the interest of the people with attempts to make them representative of, and -/or accountable to the people, shows the relationship between accountability and public interest (World Bank, 2017b). Okoh and Ohwoyibo (2009) argued that public accountability reflect the need for government and its agencies to serve the public interest in accordance with the law of the land. Government is held accountable by the public for the way it uses its discretion and spends government money or taxpayers' money. Accountability is the price government has to pay for exercising its authority which must be in the interest of the citizens (Igbo, Onu, & Obiyo, 2015).

Wood and Winston (2005) maintain that accountable leadership involves the expectation that the leader may be called on to explain his or her beliefs, decisions, commitments, or actions to constituents in an open way. As a steward of the institution, the leader serves the institution's goals and values more effectively by informing constituents more completely. Proactively, this includes providing detailed descriptions of past events (Giorgio, 2002) providing the reasons for what the leader says or does (Lerner & Tetlock, 1999); informing constituents of the process by which actions were taken or decision made

(Siege-Jacobs & Yates, 1996); explaining why suggested action was not taken (Manwaring, 1997); answering for prior public commitments (Conners, Smith, & Hickman, 1994; Tetlock, 1999); explaining results, progress toward results or the lack there of (Conners et al., 1994); revealing personal motives, beliefs and feelings (Giorgio, 2002); or simply answering questions (Morley, 1989). By taking the initiative to explain decisions or beliefs rather than waiting until a problem or complaint arises, accountable leaders and the further benefit of engaging the commitment, support and resources of constituents in defining team relationships and solving organizational problems (Kouzes & Posner, 1993).

A key purpose of accountability is to hold managers of institutions accountable for social, environmental and economic outcomes (or impacts) arising from the actions (policies, practices and activities) of their institutions (Unerman & Brendan, 2005). Accountability is a cornerstone of public management because it constitutes the principle that informs the processes whereby those who hold and exercise public authority are held to account (Awal, 2010). Generally, it means answerability for the discharge of duties or conduct (Aucoin & Heintzanan, 2000). It requires satisfactory reasons for one's conduct and an acknowledgement of responsibility for one's actions. Thus, accountability is not only the foundation of any governing process but also a check on power and authority, exercised by both politician and administrators (Jabbar & Dwivedi, 1988). It requires openness and the provision of information and the acceptance of responsibility for one's actions. Therefore, the following hypotheses were proposed:

*H<sub>1</sub>: There is a significant positive relationship between accountability and public interest*

*H<sub>1(a)</sub>: There is a significant positive relationship between responsibility and public interest*

*H<sub>1(b)</sub>: There is a significant positive relationship between answerability and public interest*

*H<sub>1(c)</sub>: There is a significant positive relationship between openness and public interest*

## Methodology

### Research design, population and sample

In this study, the researchers adopted a cross-sectional design approach and quantitative methodology (Saunders, 2011). The researchers adopted this approach as the most appropriate method of data

collection because cross-sectional studies are perceived to be relatively inexpensive, faster and easier to conduct, useful for generating and clarifying hypotheses and can lay the groundwork for decisions about follow-up studies (Sekarana, 2000). Previous research supports the reliability and validity of the self-report measures (Lechner, Bolman, & Van Dijke, 2006). The lead researcher was permitted in writing by the Ministry of Education to collect data. The study population was 483 urban public primary schools categorised in 24 clusters based on Districts found in Central Uganda. The sample size was 214 schools and was determined based on Krejcie and Morgan (1970). The study selected two respondents (head teacher and a parent/beneficiary) per school and 348 respondents were responsive from 174 schools giving a response rate of 81.3%. Data from each school were aggregated using the name of school as a break variable since the school was the unit of analysis.

### Measurement of variables

The dimensions of accountability in this study included: Responsibility, Openness, and Answerability. In developing the questionnaire, items to measure all the three dimensions were captured. The measurement items for accountability's dimensions were adopted from James, Wood, and Bruce (2007) and localized to suit our study. Public interest was conceptualized to include: Common preferences, Citizens' will, and Egalitarianism. The items to measure this construct were adopted from Schwartz (2013), Dutzik, Imus, & Baxandall, (2009) Morrison and Svennevig (2002). For both constructs, the questions were anchored on a six – point Likert scale, ranging from 1-Strongly Disagree to 6-Strongly Agree. Respondents tend to tick or answer the not sure/middle point which is avoided here with the six-point Likert scale (Chomeya, 2010).

### Data entry, editing and reliability analysis

The researchers entered the raw data from the field into SPSS and checked for entry errors, out of range values, missing values, presence of outliers and normality of data. Outliers and missing values were not a threat in the data. Missing values analysis was used to statistically test whether missing values were random or non-random. Missing values were found to be at 2.4%. Since missing values were less than 5%, they were replaced using linear interpolation (Field, 2009; Little & Rubin, 2002). The researchers tested data for normality assumption and it

was found to exhibit a normal distribution pattern; all missing values were filled using linear interpolation. Additionally, tests included stem and leaf, the PP and QQ plots which confirmed normality of the data. The measurement items were subjected to both validity and reliability tests. The Cronbach alpha coefficients results for the constructs were: responsibility = .782, openness = .707, answerability = .777 and public interest was 0.909, respectively, and exceeded the minimum acceptance value of 0.70 as recommended by Nunally (1978). Content validity was determined by giving the instruments to nine respondents who were experts and practitioners in the field of accountability and public interest.

### Common method bias

Common Method Biases (CBMs) are a problem in cross-sectional data because they are one of the main sources of measurement errors (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986). CBMs threaten the validity of the conclusions about the relationships between measures (Bagozzi & Yi, 1999). The researchers addressed this phenomenon by using methodological separation of measurement variables and protecting respondents' anonymity (Podsakoff et al., 2003). The researchers distributed the questionnaires for public interest first; then, 3 weeks later, the items for accountability were given out. The scales for measurements of predictor and criterion variables were improved. As a procedural remedy, careful construction of the items was carried out. This was done by defining ambiguous/unfamiliar terms. Vague concepts were removed, keeping questions simple, specific, and concise, avoiding double-barrelled questions, decomposing questions into simpler more focused questions (Tourangea, Rips, & Rasinski, 2000).

## Results and discussion

### Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA)

EFA was performed by running principal component analysis as the extraction method using Varimax with Kaiser Normalization to explore factor structure of the study constructs. This helped to summarize variables from the constructs with multiple questions into more meaningful and interpretable factors. Besides, EFA also enabled to test for validity of the study items.

### Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA)

After performing EFA on our data, CFA was carried out following guidelines by Anderson and Gerbing

### EFA for accountability.

	Responsibility	Openness	Answerability
ACCR1	.639		
ACCR2	.688		
ACCR3	.591		
ACCR10	.522		
ACCR11	.597		
ACCR12	.589		
ACCO1		.736	
ACCO2		.706	
ACCO3		.538	
ACCO5		.567	
ACCO6		.574	
ACCO7		.545	
ACCA1			.686
ACCA2			.567
ACCA3			.715
ACCA4			.735
ACCA5			.776
ACCA6			.566
Eigen Value	<b>5.130</b>	<b>1.778</b>	<b>1.261</b>
Variance %	<b>46.635</b>	<b>16.161</b>	<b>11.464</b>
Cumulative %	<b>46.635</b>	<b>62.796</b>	<b>74.260</b>
<b>KMO of Sampling Adequacy</b>	.948		
<b>Bartlett's Test of Sphericity</b>			
<b>Approx. Chi-Square</b>	8285.340		
<b>Df</b>	406.000		
<b>Sig.</b>	.000		

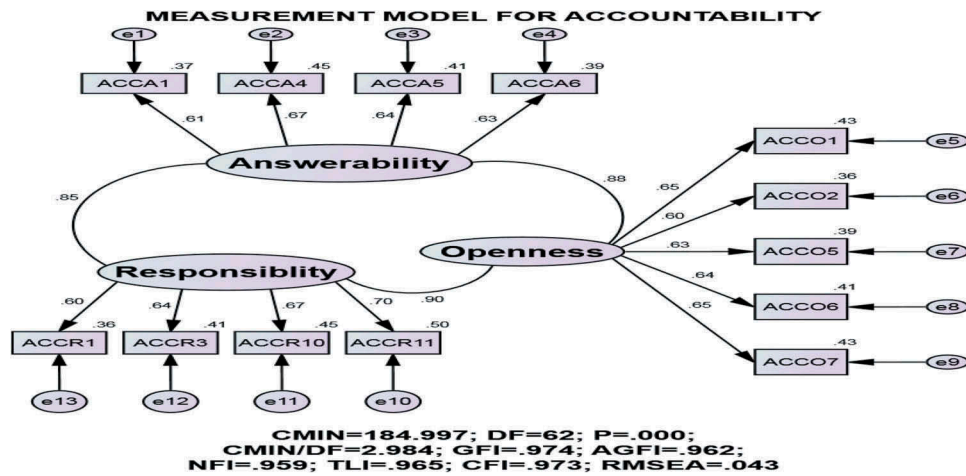
Source: Primary data

### EFA for Public interest.

	Citizen's Will	Egalitarianism	Common preferences
PNTW1	.700		
PNTW2	.711		
PNTW3	.660		
PNTW4	.716		
PNTW5	.736		
PNTW6	.650		
PNTG1		.607	
PNTG2		.678	
PNTG3		.667	
PNTG4		.590	
PNTG5		.635	
PNTP4			0.607
PNTP6			0.533
PNTP7			0.547
Eigen Value	9.301	7.301	3.803
Variance %	31.002	24.338	12.676
Cumulative %	31.002	55.340	68.017
<b>Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy</b>	.904		
<b>Bartlett's Test of Sphericity</b>			
<b>Approx. Chi-Square</b>	6635.774		
<b>Df</b>	435.000		
<b>Sig.</b>	.000		

Source: Primary data

(1988) to construct the CFA and SEM models. Only those dimensions and respective items that were



retained at EFA for each variable (accountability and public interest) were used to carry out a CFA using Analysis of Moment Structures (AMOS). For the construct of accountability: out of the six items, responsibility retained four; of the six items openness retained five; while answerability retained four out of six items. The measurement model yielded acceptable fit indices as seen below (Hu & Bentler, 2009).

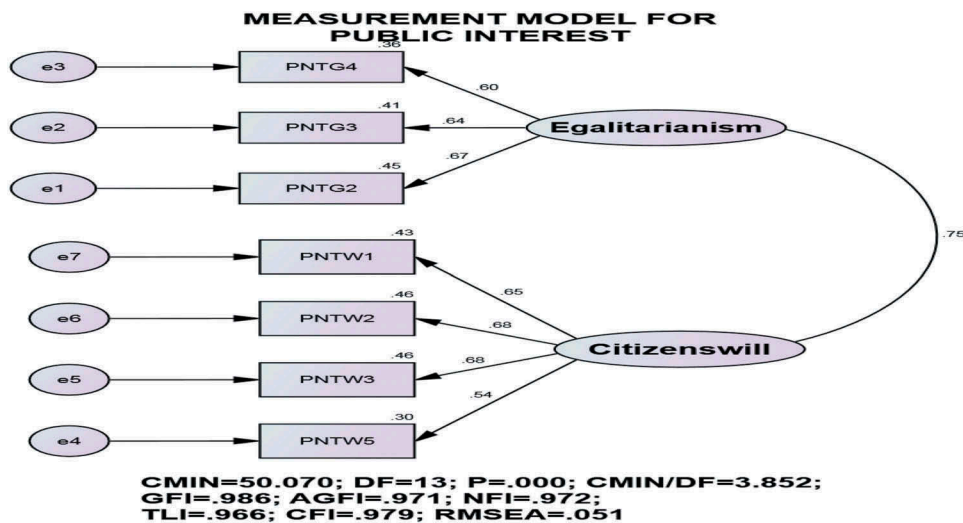
**Public interest**

For public interest: none of the three items for common preferences survived after conducting CFA, for citizens will, out of six items from EFA, four were retained after CFA while three items from five were for egalitarianism were retained after conducting CFA. The measurement

model yielded acceptable fit indices (Hu & Bentler, 2009), suggesting a good representation of public interest.

**Demographic characteristics**

The results indicated that 52.3% were males while females constituted 47.7%. Most of the respondents (64.9%) were born between 1981 and 2000; 19% between 1965 and 1980; Over 9.8% between 2001 to date; and the least respondents 6.3% were born between 1946 and 1964. In terms of education levels, the majority of the respondents (52.0%) had certificates. Over 23.6% were diploma holders; 17.2% held the Bachelor’s degree; 6.0% held the Master’s degree; and the least respondents (1.1) had PhDs. In terms of



marital status, the majority of the respondents' (52.3) were single; followed by 40.8% who were married, 4.0% were widowed and the least category of respondents (.9) were widowers. Most respondents were self-employed as evidenced by 60.3%; the government employed 31.6% and the corporate sector 8.0%.

## Results

### Hypotheses testing

			Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P	Label
PUBLICINTEREST	←	RESPONSIBILITY	.351	.060	5.216	***	Supported
PUBLICINTEREST	←	ANSWERABILITY	.140	.049	2.386	.017	Supported
PUBLICINTEREST	←	OPENNESS	.365	.049	6.112	***	Supported

The research results above show a significant positive relationship between responsibility and public interest. ( $\beta = .351$ ,  $t$ -value = 5.216,  $p < .05$ ). Furthermore, results confirm that there is a significant positive association between answerability and public interest. ( $\beta = .140$ ,  $t$ -value = 2.386,  $p < .05$ ). Again, the findings established a positive significant association between openness and public interest. ( $\beta = .365$ ,  $t$ -value = 6.112,  $p < .05$ ). These findings are discussed below.

### Discussion and implication

H<sub>1</sub>: The results tested and confirmed that “there is a significant positive relationship between accountability and public interest”. This implies that a positive change in accountability in form of responsibility, answerability and openness promotes public interest. This is through UPE schools benefiting parents by showing pleasure in attending to pupils' welfare and taking care of all pupils equally. In the context of public primary schools, accountable government teachers justify or explain the reasons for doing an act or providing an account for avoiding that action. In keeping with the aim of this study, whenever learning does not take place and pupils perform poorly, teachers explain as to why learners failed. It is evident that when teachers and administrators accept responsibilities allotted to them especially delivering lessons and completing the syllabi on time, good grades are attained. As stewards of these schools, when school administrators accept to undertake tasks and responsibilities in their respective schools, public interest is achieved by having a literate

Ugandan society through quality education given to pupils. To achieve the aim of this research, we discuss the research findings based on three view points below;

H<sub>1(a)</sub>: Started that there is a significant positive relationship between responsibility and public interest, which was tested and confirmed. This indicates that responsibility as a factor of accountability promotes public interest in terms of teachers in UPE being concerned with teaching pupils what is required, protecting the interests of all parents and also staff showing pleasure

in attending to pupils. Responsibility is demonstrated by UPE staff being able to do what they are expected to do ranging from; teaching, guiding as well as counselling pupils in accordance with the requirements of the Ministry of Education and Sports. Teachers interface and consult community members on how to improve the wellbeing of the pupils especially on the best ways to deliver quality education. It is hoped that when staff of government schools devise alternative better approaches to learning ranging from the quality of instruction, balancing teacher to pupil ration and engaging pupils in other school activities, dropout rate of learners in UPE schools will reduce. Again, when teachers are held responsible for their actions or inactions, it in effect works towards improvement in pupils' performance and promoting the wellbeing of the society by producing disciplined and hardworking citizens.

School administrators take charge of strategic issues including working with other schools for activities like co-curricular, nurturing and grooming learners to turn them into respectable citizens of society. Again, they are in charge of erasing unpleasant and disgusting behaviors that may deter learners from taking up professional careers in future. UPE staff get in touch with other service providers in the community for the good of their pupils by partnering with opinion leaders and district officials for the pupils' safety and welfare. In effect, the society's wellbeing especially having an educated citizenry is created.

In support of the above research findings, Halqachmi (2012) researched on “Charter schools in the USA: A strategy to increase responsiveness, service quality and stretch resources”. In his study, he

established that public–private partnership (PPP) charter schools are conducive for the development of local government productivity because charter schools stretch resources utilization, leverage its ability to license as a mean for mobilizing new resources, improve service quality without expanding cost, reduce future financial obligations (i.e., pensions), diffuse accountability issues that have to do with elementary and secondary education. When public primary schools are responsive to government funds and pay teachers on time; these teachers will clearly spell out their responsibilities. Then teaching, setting exams, marking and providing results on time will be attained as required by the Ministry of Education.

However, Robinson (2012) argues that there are several factors that lead to a denial of taking responsibility. There are situations in which a person or institution may avoid to take responsibility for an action or response to another, because they do not care about the other. They are simply more concerned about their own good. It is often argued that this focus on self-care to the exclusion of others is based in vices such as greed. Contrary to our UPE schools where results depend on frequency of meetings and sharing amongst teachers. Best performing schools have evidence of minutes documented and filed to the effect of professional documents, schemes of work, endorsed by Director of Studies, these are indicators of collectivism and sharing which is against selfishness.

The findings are also inconsistent with some Greek philosophers who argue that selfishness is not a toxic thing. From De Mandeville's (1732) *The Fable of the Bees* to Gordon Gecko's famous speech in the film *Wall Street* there is the attempt to argue that selfishness is good or more particularly, that private interests lead to public goods especially increased wealth and well-being. This usually happens in UPE schools when teachers and school administrators first execute their individual tasks and duties before coming to school to execute the school responsibilities. For example, in rainy seasons, a number of teachers in rural public schools first cultivate and plant their plants and they end up coming to school late and very tired to ably teach learners. Another level of denial involves groups or persons who may genuinely believe that they are responsible for a greater good, and in pursuit of the interests of other people are overridden (Robinson, 2012).

H<sub>1(b)</sub>: Started that there is a significant positive relationship between answerability and public interest. In this study, answerability as a theme under accountability promotes public interest in Uganda. It involves the obligation of the Ministry of Education, the social

services committees at the districts, School Management Committees, Parent and Teachers' Associations (PTA), school administrators and teachers to provide appropriate justification for their decisions and actions. In UPE schools, teachers are expected to explain their decisions and commitments to society so as to foster the wellbeing of Ugandans. This in essence ensures that society is assured of quality services provided by the competent staff in UPE schools.

Related to the study findings, the basic notion of accountability points to a condition of having to answer to an individual or body for one's actions (Flinders, 2001; Romzek & Dubnick, 1987). Public schools are held accountable by parents for the way they use public funds. Teachers who irresponsibly use taxpayers' money provided by the government are tasked to explain on how that public money was spent. Some UPE administrators leave the core functions of the learning process unfunded. This results in poor students' grades which is against the will of the citizens. Also, answerability ensures actions and decisions taken by public teachers are subject to oversight so as to guarantee that UPE schools' initiatives meet their stated objectives and respond to the needs of the community they are meant to be benefiting, thereby contributing to societal benefit.

Our research findings relate well with Rosenblatt (2016) who researched on Personal accountability in education. Again, Rubin (2015) conducted research on holding employees accountable for the accomplishment of organizational goals: the case of the U.S. Federal Government. They established that explicitly holding employees accountable for contributing to the accomplishment of organizational goals is consistent with the interests of citizens.

H<sub>1(c)</sub>: Started that openness has a significant positive relationship with public interest. This implies that when teachers disclose their actions and inactions in UPE schools, the public will be happy. The findings upheld the hypothesis and confirm that openness positively relates with public interest. The results are supported by Herman (2007) who observed that accountability systems are most apt to serve the public interest when they are designed to maximize benefits and minimize negative effects. In line with the study findings, Van Puyvelde (2013) conducted research on intelligence accountability and the role of public interest groups in the United States. He established that when circulating information, public interest groups, try to generate public interest in their cause and public debate about national matters.

Our research results lead support to the stewardship theory (Donaldson & Davis, 1993) as a relevant framework for understanding public interest. The concept of stewardship is traditionally grounded in a principal-agent dichotomy (Hernandez, 2007). Hernandez (2012) advancement of the stewardship theory as an alternative theory to align the interests of the principal and those of the agent is also substantiated. Therefore, in Ugandan public primary schools, government teachers play the stewardship role for the government. Teachers in UPE schools demonstrate that they are dedicated to the interests of citizens especially parents and pupils, they foster the interests of the learners as opposed to their individual interests which enhances quality education in Ugandan public education sector.

### Implications

The study was based on Stewardship theoretical review that provides the conceptualization of the construct of accountability as a predictor of public interest. The first notable theoretical implication of this study is that it contributes to the ongoing public interest debate. The Stewardship Theory that provides the conceptualization of accountability supports public interest. One of the key gaps in the stewardship theory is that the theory ignores the fact that individualistic interests at times outweigh the collectivistic interests and most Ugandan public officers are largely driven by self-interest. Therefore, future studies should examine other theories that influence public interest.

The quantitative approach was adopted, neglecting qualitative methodology. The views of respondents, which would have informed us of the reasons why respondents held certain views about accountability and public interest, were neglected. In addition, the study adopted a cross-sectional approach. This implies that the views of individuals that change over time were not considered. The same study should be conducted using the longitudinal approach.

There should be recruitment of people who have passed ethical and moral tests. Once recruited, they should again be trained on how to follow rules, regulations, and codes of conduct in enhancing public interest. Strict adherence to rules, regulations, and codes of conduct should be advocated for and those who do not abide by them be punished.

### Conclusion

UPE schools should take full responsibility for ensuring that ethical teachers are recruited, trained and retained.

These staff that behave in an ethical manner manage UPE schools based on equitable practices and principles that strengthens accountability for public funds which is vital in enhancing public interest in Uganda.

The study echoes the importance of guardianship: “*Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?*” (Juvenal circa 55–127) Juvenal’s celebrated phrase, “But who will guard the guardians?” is often used today to question the efficacy of guardianship of head teachers and teachers (Hurwicz, 2007). Whilst UPE staff are first-tier guardians of public primary schools, sometimes, they are wrongdoers.

The current study provides a novel research conclusion by opining public teachers to be responsible on their analytical, legal, consensual and socially responsible. Staff in UPE have responsibilities and considerable authority which should be used-albeit wisely. Analytically, head teachers need to regularly and methodically appraise and analyse the various aspects in schools inclusive of the teachers and learners. School administrators have legal responsibilities and obligations apropos the stewardship theory (steward role). Public officers in government schools as the servants of citizens need to be mindful of the interests of Ugandans. Socially responsible by caring about ethical/social interests of citizens which is quality education to learners. Additionally, teachers need to be attentive to the past, present and prospective future apropos the school: for instance, to take account (where appropriate) of the school’s roots, founder’s wishes and long-term obligations for parents and learners of the future.

### Limitations

The study focused on public schools only. The researchers cross-examined only teachers and members of school boards and neglected other public servants and citizens. This limited the study’s scope. Other areas/public institutions could be investigated. Furthermore, the study employed the cross-sectional approach. A longitudinal method should be employed to study the trends for at least 4 years. The study was limited to twenty 24 in Central Uganda, yet Uganda has other regions that could be investigated in future. One predictor (accountability) may not be enough to study public interest. Hence, there are other factors that may contribute to public interest in Uganda that were not part of the study. The use of SEM entails some uncertainty particularly with cross-sectional data that are not collected under controlled conditions. The study dwelt on the quantitative approach, failing to tap into salient issues from the respondents. It is necessary to use methodological approaches (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000); particularly

blend both qualitative and quantitative approaches for more enriching results.

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