Governance, researcher signaling, and institutional voice in open scholarly communication, Kenya

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https://doi.org/10.51867/ajernet.7.4.119

ABSTRACT

Open Access (OA) infrastructure does not function autonomously; it depends on governance structures, institutional coordination, and sustainable stewardship to operate effectively as a communication system. This study examines how governance arrangements, institutional policy alignment, coordination mechanisms, and sustainability frameworks influence the communicative performance of OA systems in Kenyan universities. The research was guided by Scholarly Communication Systems Theory and Knowledge Sharing Theory. Drawing on qualitative multi-site data from six universities, the study analyzes the institutional conditions that enable or constrain the transformation of information sources and digital libraries from passive platforms into active scholarly communication channels. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews, purposive sampling led to the selection of thirty (30) people: six librarians, six Information Communication and Technology (ICT) officers or repository managers, six research administrators, and twelve (12) research-active faculty members; qualitative document analysis of policies and workflow instruments; and structured non-participant observation of governance and support arrangements. Thematic analysis continued up to saturation. Findings indicate that OA platforms are formally established, governance responsibilities are often fragmented across units, resulting in diffuse ownership and inconsistent communication routines. Policy frameworks often support open access but lack operational clarity on deposit triggers, accountability, and stewardship roles. Financial and human resource constraints further weaken sustainability, with repository management often treated as an auxiliary rather than strategic function. Cross-unit coordination between libraries, ICT departments, and research offices is uneven, directly affecting interoperability maintenance, metadata quality control, and author support. Institutions demonstrating clearer governance alignment and predictable maintenance cycles show stronger communication activation and faculty engagement. The study concludes that OA systems should be understood as institutional communication infrastructures requiring deliberate governance design, stable resource allocation, and coordinated stewardship. This paper recommends a governance-centred communication framework to bolster the sustainability and effectiveness of OA systems in African higher education contexts.

Keywords: Governance, Institutional Policy, Open Scholarly Communication, Researcher Signaling

I. INTRODUCTION

The transformation of scholarly communication in the digital era has placed increasing emphasis not only on access to research outputs but also on the institutional architectures that sustain knowledge circulation. Open Access (OA) has evolved from a publishing reform movement into a broader infrastructural project concerned with how universities organize, govern, and sustain communication systems. Global frameworks such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Recommendation on Open Science (UNESCO, 2021) emphasize that open access must be embedded in institutional policy, governance coherence, and sustainable resourcing to function effectively. In this view, repositories and digital libraries are not merely technological tools; they are organizational communication infrastructures whose effectiveness depends on structured stewardship.

Institutional repositories are often evaluated by technical features or content volume. However, repositories operate within governance ecosystems that determine how deposit is triggered, who maintains metadata quality, how interoperability is monitored, and how author support is delivered. Borgman (2015) argues that digital scholarship relies on infrastructural alignment between policy, technical systems, and institutional practices. Without such alignment, infrastructure becomes underutilized, and communication channels remain dormant.

Governance clarity plays a central role in repository sustainability. Onsinyo and Saurombe (2025) demonstrate that institutional factors including leadership commitment, staffing continuity, and policy coherence are decisive in determining repository longevity and effectiveness. Similarly, Ndegwa and Kuchma (2024) contend that repositories must be integrated into institutional research ecosystems rather than treated as isolated library services. This integration

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requires explicit role definition, cross-unit coordination, and communication routines embedded within research workflows.

Sustainability is another critical dimension of OA governance. Studies across African higher education contexts show that repositories frequently emerge through donor-supported projects but struggle with long-term financial and human resource continuity (Imoro & Saurombe, 2023). When funding cycles end, maintenance responsibilities become fragmented, updates are deferred, and communication features stagnate. Okafor et al. (2022) argue that sustainable open science infrastructure depends on predictable institutional budgeting and governance mechanisms that extend beyond project-based support. Interoperability and compliance further require governance oversight. Masinde and Sanya (2022) document uneven interoperability practices among Kenyan repositories, noting that technical standards are inconsistently implemented. Such inconsistencies are rarely purely technical failures; rather, they reflect governance gaps in assigning responsibility and routine auditing. OpenAIRE (2023) guidelines emphasize that repository compliance with metadata and harvesting standards must be institutionalized to ensure effective aggregation and discoverability.

Persistent identifier integration, including ORCID adoption, similarly depends on governance decisions. ORCID (2023) highlights that identifier integration requires coordinated configuration across repository, research management, and publishing systems. Without cross-unit alignment, identifier systems remain underutilized, weakening identity continuity within global networks. In the Kenyan context, repository growth has been substantial, supported by national coordination actors such as EIFL (2022), Kenya Libraries and Information Services Consortium [KLISC] (2022), and Kenya Education Network Trust [KENET] (2023). These organizations have strengthened policy development and infrastructural connectivity. However, national-level progress does not automatically translate into coherent institution-level governance. Where institutional communication routines are fragmented, repositories may operate technically but lack strategic integration into research practice.

Taken together, international policy frameworks and regional empirical studies suggest that OA infrastructure effectiveness depends fundamentally on governance architecture. Installing platforms is only the first step; sustaining communicative vitality requires clear ownership, coordinated stewardship, predictable maintenance cycles, and resource continuity. Without governance alignment, repositories risk functioning as static archives rather than active institutional communication channels. This study therefore examines how governance, coordination, and sustainability structures shape OA communication systems in Kenyan universities. By analyzing institutional role clarity, policy operationalization, cross-unit coordination, and resource stability, the paper advances a governance-centred framework for understanding how OA infrastructures transition from passive installations to durable communication ecosystems.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Open Access (OA) infrastructure does not function autonomously; it depends on governance structures, institutional coordination, and sustainable stewardship to operate effectively as a communication system. The situation in Kenyan universities remains considerably below this ideal. Although many institutions have introduced repositories, open-access journals, digital libraries, research portals, and academic websites, these channels do not consistently communicate scholarly knowledge effectively. Researchers may deposit or upload outputs without deliberate strategies to increase visibility, identify intended audiences, promote engagement, enable feedback, or assess communication reach. Consequently, a thesis may be stored in a repository, and an article may be made available online. Yet, the scholarly message may still fail to reach or engage its intended receivers. Studies in Kenyan universities have similarly reported a gap between researchers' interest in open access and their actual use of institutional channels, partly because of inadequate infrastructure, weak communication policies, and limited institutional support (Ndegwa et al., 2022; Weng'ua et al., 2018). Although open access has been associated with improved discoverability and citation, insufficient researcher knowledge and support continue to limit its communicative potential in Kenyan universities (Adika, 2023).

1.2 Research Question

The study sought to understand: What institutional capacities enable or constrain selected universities in Kenya to develop and sustain OA scholarly communication systems?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

This study is anchored in two key theoretical frameworks that offer complementary insights into the dynamics of scholarly communication within open access (OA) environments: Scholarly Communication Theory and Knowledge Sharing Theory. These theories provide foundational perspectives for understanding the development, use, and effectiveness of OA platforms in Kenyan universities. They explain how scholarly messages are produced, shared, received and sustained through open access communication systems. Scholarly Communication Theory focuses on the

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actors, messages, channels, receivers, and feedback loop to complete the cycle, while Knowledge Sharing Theory delves deeper into how message transmission is carried out on institutional channels and the motivation its users have to either contribute more or less.

2.1.1 Scholarly Communication Theory

Scholarly communication, sometimes referred to as scientific communication, provides a comprehensive conceptual framework for examining the processes through which academic knowledge is produced, evaluated, disseminated, accessed, and preserved within institutional and disciplinary settings. Borgman (2015) characterizes scholarly communication as the dissemination of knowledge through scholars' professional activities, including participation in academic associations and the production of journal articles, books, and conference papers.

The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL, 2003) defines scholarly communication as "the system through which research and other scholarly writings are created, evaluated for quality, disseminated to the scholarly community, and preserved for future use" (as cited in Mukherjee, 2014). Accordingly, scholarly communication should be understood as an interconnected system of knowledge creation, quality assessment, dissemination, access, use, and long-term preservation. Scholarly communication is an evolving socio-technical ecosystem shaped by the interaction of researchers, peer reviewers, publishers, libraries, research institutions, funding agencies, and knowledge users. The academic knowledge lifecycle is neither linear nor confined to publication; rather, it involves continuous interaction among the production, distribution, discovery, interpretation, reuse, and preservation of research outputs.

More broadly, Borgman (2000) argues that scholarly communication encompasses a wide range of information- and communication-related phenomena within scholarly environments. It includes the information needs, information-seeking practices, and communication behaviors of individual scholars and disciplinary communities, as well as the formal and informal networks through which knowledge is exchanged. Scholarly communication therefore provides an appropriate theoretical foundation for investigating open-access practices because it captures both the institutional structures that govern research dissemination and the individual practices through which research is created, accessed, evaluated, and reused.

This theory has been instrumental in assessing the transformation of academic publishing, particularly in response to technological innovations and global OA policies. Harley expanded the theory's application by exploring faculty attitudes across disciplines toward new modes of scholarly communication. Their findings illustrated how institutional structures, funding mandates, and disciplinary cultures influence decisions to publish in OA journals, deposit in repositories, or engage in alternative forms of knowledge sharing (Harley et al., 2010, p. 18).

Despite its relevance, Scholarly Communication Theory has been critiqued for its strong orientation toward Global North publishing norms and limited attention to informal or emergent communication methods such as blogs, academic social networks, and non-peer-reviewed platforms. Critics like Chan et al. (2011) argue that the theory does not adequately account for contextual challenges faced by scholars in the Global South, including infrastructural inequities, funding limitations, and linguistic marginalization that often ignore development needs and marginalize local scholarship. Nevertheless, the theory remains highly relevant to this study. It offers a structured lens for examining how Kenyan universities are developing OA infrastructures and how these institutions integrate digital repositories, journals, and library systems to facilitate scholarly communication. In particular, the theory aligns with Objectives 1, 3, and 4 by enabling a critical evaluation of current institutional capacities, researcher preferences, and the suitability of best practices in OA implementation within the Kenyan academic landscape.

2.1.2 Knowledge Sharing Theory

Knowledge Sharing Theory offers a behavioral and organizational lens for understanding the dynamics of academic communication and information exchange. Rooted in organizational science and knowledge management literature, the theory addresses how knowledge is transferred between individuals, groups, and institutions, emphasizing both the enabling conditions and barriers to effective sharing (Wang & Noe, 2010, p. 115). In higher education and scholarly communication, knowledge sharing extends beyond informal discussions and includes more formal mechanisms, such as publication in open access (OA) platforms, institutional repositories, and collaborative research networks.

The core assumption of Knowledge Sharing Theory is that knowledge dissemination is not automatic but depends on factors such as trust, motivation, organizational culture, reward systems, and the availability of technological tools. Unlike theories that treat knowledge as a static commodity, this framework recognizes knowledge as context-bound and socially constructed, thus requiring active engagement for it to be successfully shared and reused (Ipe, 2003, p. 342). This makes it particularly relevant to understanding how academic communities in Kenya navigate the complexities of openly disseminating research through OA systems. Fullwood et al. (2013) found that academic staff's willingness to share research outputs was influenced by perceptions of institutional support, individual attitudes toward

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openness, and access to digital platforms. These insights align with the growing interest in how African institutions can promote OA participation and collaboration among scholars.

However, the theory has faced several criticisms. One main critique is its tendency to overemphasize individual-level factors such as altruism, self-efficacy, or trust while underexploring structural constraints like lack of funding, technological infrastructure, or policy support (Chikoore & Ragsdell, 2013, p. 4). Furthermore, much of the literature is based on Western institutional settings, which may not fully reflect the socioeconomic, infrastructural, and political complexities of knowledge sharing in Sub-Saharan Africa. The study benefits from the theory's insights into organizational enablers of effective knowledge sharing, such as leadership support, policy incentives, and ICT training.

In the Kenyan context, where academic culture is still transitioning toward openness and where OA adoption remains uneven across institutions, Knowledge Sharing Theory provides a crucial behavioral perspective. It helps identify individual and institutional factors that must align to foster sustainable scholarly communication through OA platforms. Whether in designing university repositories, creating incentive structures for OA publishing, or cultivating collaborative networks, this theory equips the study with a human-centred understanding of how scholarly outputs can be shared more openly and effectively.

2.2 Empirical Review

2.2.1 Institutional capacities enable or constrain universities to develop and sustain OA scholarly communication systems

The use and sustainability of open access (OA) scholarly communication systems within universities depend heavily on institutional capacity, particularly the availability of financial resources, infrastructure, technical systems, and qualified personnel.

2.2.2 Governance Structure and Role Clarity in OA Communication Systems

Scholarly communication infrastructure involves repositories, journal hosting platforms, metadata standards, preservation mechanisms, and workflows that support the submission, curation, and dissemination of academic knowledge. In the digital era, the transformation from traditional publishing models to OA systems has significantly redefined institutional responsibilities, placing a greater onus on universities to become both producers and disseminators of research output (Willinsky, 2022, p. 121). This transition requires not only visionary policies but also tangible investments in infrastructure and human capacity. The institutionalization of OA requires a combination of three interdependent components: adequate financial resources, robust technological infrastructure, governance and well-trained staff. Institutions lacking any of these may experience fragmented or underperforming OA systems (Armstrong & Chisita, 2023, p. 34). Hence, institutional capacity is not only a matter of budgeting but of strategic prioritization and policy coherence across the academic landscape. Globally, universities' capacity to develop and sustain OA infrastructures varies widely across geographical and economic contexts.

Kenyan universities such as the University of Nairobi (UoN), Kenyatta University (KU), and Moi University (MU) offer illustrative cases of both progress and challenges in OA infrastructural capacity development. The UoN Digital Repository is among the most established in the country and hosts thousands of theses, dissertations, and institutional publications. However, repository updates, content curation, and system maintenance are performed inconsistently because of limited technical staffing and server downtime (Makori et al., 2015). Kenyatta University has invested in OA journals and open publishing platforms. Still, it faces challenges in editorial management and peer-review automation because it has limited staff with XML tagging or Open Journal Systems (OJS) skills. Moi University, while having a repository, still struggles with metadata quality and duplication, largely due to manual processes and undertrained staff (Rotich & Ngeno, 2023, p. 61). Consequently, investment in server infrastructure, digital preservation tools, and staff training programs remains limited. While some institutions have successfully secured grants from international organizations such as EIFL (Electronic Information for Libraries), these efforts are not always institutionalized or scaled up for long-term use (Mwanzu, 2021).

2.2.3 Policy Operationalization in Workflow Integration

Operationalizing an institutional open access (OA) policy translates high-level mandates into routine scholarly workflows, making compliance the path of least resistance for researchers. Effective implementation hinges on embedding OA requirements within existing research lifecycle processes—submission, approval, deposit, and reporting—rather than treating them as separate administrative burdens (European Commission, 2026). Policy governance and ownership are clear designations of policy owners (often the library or research office), approval authorities, review cycles, and version control ensure accountability and keep the policy aligned with funder and national requirements (Sanbein, 2026). Workflow integration of OA checkpoints is inserted at natural decision points—grant application, manuscript submission, and annual reporting. For example, manuscript submission systems can prompt authors to confirm OA compliance and route accepted manuscripts to the institutional repository (IR). The IR provides the technical backbone for green OA, with mediated deposit services, embargo management, metadata standards, and

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integration with discovery layers to maximize visibility (Sanbein, 2026). Monitoring and incentives use compliance dashboards, audit logs, and linkage to research assessment or promotion criteria to drive behavioural change more effectively than policies without enforcement mechanisms (Matthias et al., 2026). Institutions that combine national legislation, funder mandates, and repository-mediated workflows report higher compliance than those relying on policy statements alone (Rothfritz et al., 2026).

2.2.4 Financial Sustainability and Resource Allocation

In high-income countries, universities have largely succeeded in building sophisticated OA systems due to stable funding, digital maturity, and personnel capacity. Many institutions in Europe and North America have developed institutional repositories (IRs) supported by integrated library systems, digital preservation protocols, and dedicated teams of repository managers, metadata specialists, and software developers. This vision aims to transform repositories into central, open, and interconnected infrastructures for Open Science through interoperability, innovative functionalities, and global integration (Rothfritz et al., 2025). In countries like the Netherlands, Germany, and the United Kingdom, national-level coordination through consortia and state-sponsored mandates such as Plan S have bolstered institutional capacity. These countries benefit from centralized repositories, research assessment alignment with OA principles, and government support for digital scholarly infrastructure.

Universities in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) face multiple constraints. Limited ICT infrastructure, high costs of digital platform development, unreliable internet connectivity, and a shortage of trained librarians and IT personnel severely limit their ability to sustain OA systems. According to Munoz and Patel (2024), as well as Céspedes et al. (2026) and Saloojee & Pettifor (2023), only 22% of surveyed LMIC institutions had dedicated funding for OA initiatives, and even fewer had ongoing technical support for repository maintenance (p. 58). These findings underscore the resource asymmetry that underpins the global OA landscape. Badenhorst and Raju (2023) argue that most African universities operate under restricted budgets, with library allocations frequently insufficient for both print acquisitions and digital infrastructure development. Consequently, OA becomes a policy aspiration rather than a practical institutional reality. The African Open Science Platform (AOSP) (2018), for example, is working with selected African universities to build infrastructure, establish data repositories, and train personnel. These efforts are complemented by the activities of the UbuntuNet Alliance, which promotes digital connectivity and repository interlinking across higher education institutions in Eastern and Southern Africa. However, implementation remains contingent on institutional readiness, which often requires modern data centres, software licensing, and consistent power supply resources that are often lacking.

Personnel challenges are also significant. Many African universities face shortages of IT specialists with repository management skills, metadata curation expertise, and preservation knowledge. Librarians are frequently overburdened or untrained in digital systems, and repository management is often assigned as an auxiliary duty rather than a specialized role (Chilimo & Mcharazo, 2023, p. 22). Capacity-building programs remain donor-dependent, raising questions about sustainability and institutional ownership. According to Masinde and Sanya (2022), more than 30 Kenyan universities have some form of digital repository. However, these systems are not uniformly robust or interoperable. Most Kenyan universities rely on open-source platforms such as DSpace and EPrints, which offer cost-effective solutions but require technical support and regular updates, often hindered by a lack of in-house expertise (Baro & Nwabueze-Echedom, 2022). Librarians and ICT staff often receive minimal support or training in OA publishing standards, metadata harmonization, or digital curation. While efforts have been made to incorporate OA awareness into library and information science curricula, this has not fully translated into operational capacity across university libraries. Moreover, institutional leadership often underestimates the human capital required to implement and maintain OA systems, viewing OA as a “library function” rather than a university-wide digital strategy.

Moreover, technical dependencies on a few staff members create vulnerabilities when staff resign or are transferred without continuity plans. Additionally, institutional investment in OA tends to be reactive, often tied to donor-funded projects rather than proactive strategies linked to academic planning or digital transformation agendas. As such, sustainability remains a core issue. Without comprehensive capacity-building strategies that include budget allocations, ICT upgrades, human resources, and supportive leadership, OA systems remain fragile and underutilized. Universities' institutional capacity to build and sustain open access scholarly communication systems hinges on three interrelated pillars: financial resources, technical infrastructure, and qualified personnel. At the same time, while global exemplars show the potential of well-integrated OA systems, universities in Africa, and Kenya in particular, face structural limitations that impede progress. To realize the full benefits of OA, local universities must move beyond grant-based interventions and develop sustainable institutional strategies that foreground capacity development as a strategic imperative. This will require policy coherence, leadership commitment, and alignment of OA goals with broader academic and digital development priorities.

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III METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative multiple-case research design. The qualitative approach is selected to facilitate an in-depth understanding of how institutional governance arrangements influence the communicative vitality of OA infrastructures, rather than to quantify publication outputs or repository volume. The research is grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, which acknowledges that institutional communication systems are socially constructed and maintained through policy decisions, organizational practices, leadership priorities, and cross-unit coordination. The multiple-case structure enables cross-institutional comparison of governance models, role clarity, maintenance routines, and sustainability mechanisms. This design allows for the identification of patterns in how governance architecture influences infrastructure and activation across the six universities. It also facilitates both within-case analysis of institution-level governance practices and cross-case synthesis of sector-wide patterns of stewardship and coordination.

3.2 Study Site

The participants included the University of Nairobi, Kenyatta University, Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology, Moi University, United States International University–Africa, and Mount Kenya University. These institutions were purposively selected based on three criteria: the existence of operational institutional repositories, the presence of digital library systems, and formal articulation of open access policies or related research governance frameworks.

3.3 Study Population

The study population consists of institutional actors directly involved in the governance, management, and operational stewardship of OA communication systems. Purposive sampling was utilized, which led to the selection of thirty (30) participants: six librarians, six ICT officers/or repository managers, six research administrators, and twelve (12) research-active faculty members. This balanced sampling ensures representation of governance, technical, and user perspectives, and allows for triangulation between institutional policy intent and operational reality. The selection criteria included demonstrated involvement in repository administration, policy formulation, ICT maintenance, or research coordination.

3.4 Data Collection Instruments

Data collection employed three complementary methods to capture governance architecture, coordination mechanisms, and sustainability practices. We conducted semi-structured interviews with all thirty participants. The interview guide focused specifically on governance and sustainability themes, including role clarity in repository management, decision-making authority for upgrades and interoperability compliance, funding allocation patterns, cross-unit coordination among library, ICT, and research offices, policy operationalization, and long-term stewardship planning.

Institutional policy document analyses to assess formal governance and articulation. Document analysis aimed to determine whether policy commitments were operationalized through clear role assignments, workflow triggers, funding provisions, and accountability mechanisms. Particular attention focused on evidence of cross-unit coordination, maintenance schedules, and explicit sustainability planning. We examined each institutional repository and related platform through structured non-participant observation using a governance-focused checklist. Observation assessed update frequency, visible signs of system maintenance, metadata consistency, ORCID integration, interoperability signals, user support documentation, and communication of ownership (e.g., named contact persons). This method enables independent verification of governance claims made during interviews. Observational data assess whether reported maintenance routines are reflected in platform behavior.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a blended deductive–inductive thematic approach. Deductive codes were derived from governance and communication systems theory, including categories such as role clarity, ownership, accountability, stewardship continuity, resource stability, interoperability governance, and coordination alignment. Conversely, an inductive process allowed nuanced sub-themes to emerge, ensuring the analytical framework remained responsive to the specific contextual realities of the participant organizations (Nipa et al., 2025). To ensure analytical accuracy and mitigate subjective bias, two independent coders cross-validated the resulting codebook, resolving discrepancies through iterative consensus-building and periodic literature benchmarking (Liu et al., 2026). This systematic reconciliation of coding schemes helped establish intercoder reliability while facilitating a deeper interpretation of the data's emergent narrative patterns (Vries et al., 2021).

Inductive themes emerged from the data, including fragmented ownership, grant-dependent infrastructure, deferred maintenance cycles, unclear deposit triggers, and inconsistent cross-unit communication. Coding was

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conducted systematically across transcripts, documents, and observational notes. Cross-case comparison identified institutional similarities and divergences in governance effectiveness. The analysis also used NVivo to synthesize these observations, elevating first-order codes into abstract second-order categories to reach theoretical saturation (Sun & Medaglia, 2018).

The analytical focus remained communication-centred: governance was interpreted not as bureaucratic structure alone but as the mechanism that enables or constrains sustained scholarly messaging and circulation. By examining the interplay between formal policy documents and internal organizational discourse, the study highlighted how boundary-spanning activities help adapt governance frameworks to evolving institutional mandates (Dolmans et al., 2022; Krystallis & Jasim, 2023). This synthesis of empirical observations and theoretical constructs enables the development of a conceptual model that illuminates how organizational practices align—or fail to align—with long-term strategic objectives (Naeem et al., 2023). This modeling process produced a thematic map illustrating how common governance challenges—including fragmented ownership, unclear accountability, and inconsistent coordination—contribute to institutional communication and shape repository sustainability.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered strictly to ethical principles governing research. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all the participants. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw anytime without prejudgment, and assurance of confidentiality. Anonymity was maintained throughout data analysis and reporting to ensure no participants could be identified by assigning codes.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Governance Structure and Role Clarity in OA Communication Systems

The findings indicate considerable variation in how the six universities structure governance responsibility for OA communication systems. While all institutions have repositories and digital libraries in operation, formal governance clarity, specifically the designation of ownership, oversight mechanisms, and accountability pathways, differs substantially.

In most institutions, the university library primarily oversees repositories. However, interviews revealed that ICT departments handle technical maintenance, while research offices often set policy direction. This fragmentation results in diffuse ownership and inconsistent stewardship routines. P5 pattern suggests articulated cross-unit governance structure may define communication pathways between library, ICT, and research administration. Participants repeatedly described OA as a “side project” with minimal governance enforcement or sponsorship. Participant TC10 linked the absence of oversight to operational stasis: “without oversight, the repository stagnates,” while RL04 emphasized the lack of a coordinator: “there’s no one responsible for OA strategy,” which leaves deposit work ad hoc and author messaging inconsistent, “we still run OA as a library side project.”

Table 1

Governance Structure and Ownership of OA Systems

University	Primary Repository Oversight	ICT Involvement	Research Office Involvement	Clearly Defined Cross-Unit Governance
P1	Library	Yes	Limited	No
P2	Library	Yes	Limited	No
P3	Library	Yes	Moderate	Partial
P4	Library	Yes	Limited	No
P5	Library + Research Office	Yes	Strong	Yes
P6	Library	Yes	Limited	No

The absence of clearly defined cross-unit governance structures may result in procedural ambiguity. Interview data consistently reflected uncertainty regarding who is responsible for interoperability checks, metadata quality audits, or update scheduling. In practice, repository stewardship frequently depends on individual initiative rather than institutional mandate. Robust cross-unit governance may demonstrate more predictable maintenance cycles and clearer communication pathways.

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4.1.2 Policy Operationalization and Workflow Integration

The majority of participants reported their existing open access or research policies referencing repository deposit. However, the operational clarity of these policies varies. In most cases, policy language affirms support for open access but lacks explicit procedural triggers, timelines, or accountability mechanisms. Participants indicated that repository deposit is often described as encouraged rather than systematically embedded in research workflows. Most institutions have not formalized deposit triggers at manuscript acceptance, grant closure, or performance review stages; however, few demonstrated structured integration between publication workflows and repository entry, including communication prompts and staff follow-up mechanisms. Participant R20 noted that the existing policy "has no enforcement mechanism."

Table 2

Policy Operationalization and Deposit Workflow Integration

University	OA Policy Exists	Deposit Trigger at Acceptance	Deposit Linked to Evaluation	Explicit Accountability Framework
P1	Yes	No	No	No
P2	Yes	No	No	No
P3	Yes	Partial	No	Partial
P4	Yes	No	No	No
P5	Yes	Yes	Partial	Yes
P6	Yes	No	No	No

The absence of structured deposit triggers contributes to inconsistent faculty participation and reinforces librarian-heavy deposit patterns. Participants described policy documents as aspirational but operationally thin. Where accountability mechanisms are undefined, compliance becomes discretionary, whereas explicit workflow integration may increase faculty engagement and more routine deposit behavior.

4.1.3 Financial Sustainability and Resource Allocation

Sustainability patterns reveal dependence on limited and sometimes irregular funding allocations. In most institutions, repository maintenance is embedded within general library or ICT budgets rather than supported by dedicated funding streams. Participants frequently described repositories as "cost-neutral but not investment-prioritized," resulting in deferred upgrades and limited feature enablement.

Predictable budget allocation for repository enhancement and routine technical upgrades leveraged on governance variations. Where updates delayed because of competing institutional priorities led to fragmented workflow. Staffing capacity was similarly constrained, with repository management typically assigned as an additional responsibility rather than a dedicated role. Participants TC15 and TC20 described very small teams and competing backlogs, noting that "we lack the staff to update regularly" and that even routine upgrades are risky during teaching peaks. RL06 and RL17 were of the same view that "minor customizations require outsourcing" and therefore are hardly done, which leaves service pages generic and author guidance thin. RA03 observed that "integration with editorial tools would make this useful for OA journals."

Table 3

Sustainability and Resource Allocation for OA Systems

University	Dedicated OA Budget Line	Predictable Upgrade Cycle	Dedicated Repository Staff	Long-Term Sustainability Plan
P1	No	Annual	No	No
P2	No	Irregular	No	No
P3	No	Biannual	Partial	No
P4	No	Irregular	No	No
P5	Yes	Quarterly	Yes	Yes
P6	No	Irregular	No	No

The results demonstrate that sustainability is strongly correlated with governance clarity and structured budgeting. Institutions without dedicated funding and staffing show irregular maintenance cycles and limited system enhancement. Interview narratives frequently linked deferred upgrades to risk avoidance and limited technical capacity. In contrast, the institution with a dedicated budget line and predictable update cadence exhibited stronger communicative activation and technical robustness.

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4.1.4 Cross-Table Governance Synthesis

Across Tables 1–3, a consistent pattern emerges: governance clarity, workflow integration, and sustainability planning directly influence communicative performance. Institutions with fragmented ownership structures, aspirational but weakly operationalized policies, and irregular funding cycles demonstrated limited communication activation. Repositories in these contexts remain technically present but institutionally peripheral.

Conversely, the institution demonstrating cross-unit governance alignment, deposit workflow integration, dedicated budgeting, and predictable maintenance cycles also reports stronger faculty engagement and clearer communication routines. The data suggest that governance architecture, not platform selection, is the primary determinant of OA communication vitality. Overall, the findings indicate that OA systems in Kenyan universities are structurally established but governance-fragile. Where ownership is diffuse and sustainability planning limited, repositories struggle to transition from passive storage systems to durable institutional communication channels.

4.2 Discussion

The findings show that the effectiveness of Open Access (OA) infrastructure in Kenyan universities depends more on platform presence than on governance architecture, workflow integration, and sustainability planning. Across Tables 1–3, a consistent institutional pattern emerges: repositories exist in all institutions, policies are formally present, and technical systems are operational. However, in most universities examined, governance responsibilities were fragmented, deposit workflows were weakly operationalized, and sustainability planning was limited. These governance characteristics directly shape the communicative vitality of OA systems.

4.2.1 Governance Clarity and Communication Activation

The results show that in most institutions, repository oversight is transversally distributed across libraries, ICT departments, and research offices without clear cross-unit coordination. This fragmentation produces what may be termed communicative diffusion: responsibility for outward-facing repository communication is implied but not formally assigned. As a result, repositories operate administratively but not strategically aligned. This pattern aligns with scholarship emphasizing that repository sustainability depends on institutional governance transparency rather than software selection (Onsinyo & Saurombe, 2025). When ownership is diffuse, routine stewardship tasks—interoperability checks, metadata audits, indexing verification, update scheduling—become reactive rather than systematic. Scholarly communication systems theory suggests that institutional message flow requires stable senders, identifiable channels, and predictable maintenance cycles. Without clearly designated communicative ownership, repositories remain infrastructural rather than relational.

Comparatively, Okafor et al. (2022) argue that open science infrastructure in African universities often suffers from governance ambiguity and leadership detachment, limiting long-term viability. The present findings extend this argument by demonstrating how governance ambiguity constrains repository activation: without defined accountability structures, platforms fail to develop routine outward communication functions. Conversely, the institution with defined cross-unit governance suggested clearer workflow alignment and stronger communicative routines, reinforcing the centrality of governance coherence. This is advanced by Willinsky (2022) that, in the digital era, the transformation from traditional publishing models to OA systems has significantly redefined institutional responsibilities, placing a greater onus on universities to become both producers and disseminators of research output.

4.2.2 Policy Operationalization and Workflow Design

All institutions studied possess formal policies on open access or research referencing repository deposit. However, these policies are operationalized unevenly. In most cases, policies articulate institutional commitment but lack explicit procedural triggers, enforcement mechanisms, or integration within research workflows. Deposit is encouraged but not embedded. This finding resonates with evidence from mandate effectiveness studies, which show that deposit rates increase significantly when policies require deposit at acceptance and link compliance to internal evaluation processes (Gargouri et al., 2010; Vincent-Lamarre et al., 2016). The absence of structured triggers in most institutions helps explain the weak faculty participation. Policy language alone does not produce communicative routine; workflow integration does. Institutions that combine national legislation, funder mandates, and repository-mediated workflows report higher compliance than those relying on policy statements alone (Rothfritz et al., 2026).

From a communication perspective, workflow triggers function as timed prompts that convert abstract commitment into situated action. When acceptance letters, grant reporting cycles, or performance evaluations include structured deposit reminders, communication becomes proceduralized. The institution with integrated deposit triggers demonstrated comparatively stronger faculty engagement, supporting the view that communicative activation is designable rather than incidental, and that, according to Matthias et al. (2026), monitoring and incentives use compliance dashboards, audit logs, and linkage to research assessment or promotion criteria to drive behavioural change more effectively than policies without enforcement mechanisms.

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Moreover, Masinde and Sanya (2022) document interoperability and technical gaps within Kenyan repositories, but the present findings reveal a complementary organizational gap: policies lack an operational script specifying who communicates deposit expectations and when. In this context, repositories remain reactive systems dependent on librarian initiative rather than embedded institutional processes.

4.2.3 Financial Sustainability and Resource Allocation

Sustainability findings further reinforce the governance–communication nexus. One institution showed a dedicated OA budget line, predictable upgrade cycles, and repository staff, while in other institutions, repositories operate within general library or ICT budgets without long-term financial planning. Updates are irregular, customization is minimal, and staffing capacity is limited; a phenomenon Céspedes et al. (2026), Munoz and Patel (2024), and Saloojee & Pettifor (2024) describe as only 22% of surveyed LMIC institutions had dedicated funding for OA initiatives, and even fewer had ongoing technical support for repository maintenance.

Sustainability is frequently conceptualized as technical continuity. However, the present findings suggest that sustainability is more accurately and more widely understood as communicative continuity—the institutional capacity to maintain outward messaging and circulation over time. Without predictable upgrade cycles and assigned stewardship, repositories cannot reliably support identity integration (e.g., ORCID), alerts, usage statistics, or interoperability compliance. These features are not merely technical add-ons; they are communication affordances that sustain author engagement. Confederation of Open Access Repositories [COAR] (2017) emphasizes that next-generation repositories must support identity integration, notifications, and usage visibility to function as active scholarly communication systems. The limited enablement of these features across most institutions in the present study indicates that sustainability gaps directly inhibit communication and expansion. Okafor et al. (2022) similarly argue that resource instability undermines open science infrastructure and growth in African institutions, and Karanja (2017) note that most Kenyan universities rely on open-source platforms such as DSpace and EPrints, which offer cost-effective solutions but require technical support and regular updates, often hindered by a lack of in-house expertise. The current findings concretize this observation by linking irregular funding cycles to deferred maintenance and communication dormancy.

The institution with predictable budgeting and dedicated staffing exhibited stronger governance coherence and communicative robustness. This contrast underscores that sustainability is not merely a fiscal matter; it signals strategic prioritization especially in institutions. African Open Science Platform (2018), describe building infrastructure, establishing data repositories, and training personnel.

4.2.4 Institutional Alignment and Strategic Stewardship

Taken together, Tables 1–3 suggest that governance clarity, workflow integration, and sustainability planning are mutually reinforcing. Institutions lacking defined cross-unit governance also lacked operational deposit triggers and dedicated budgets. Conversely, the institution demonstrating governance integration also demonstrated workflow embedding and financial planning.

This alignment reflects broader arguments in scholarly communication research that infrastructural effectiveness depends on institutional integration rather than technological sophistication (Borgman, 2015). Repositories must be situated within research ecosystems, not isolated as library subsystems. Where repository governance is peripheral to institutional strategy, communicative activation remains limited. The findings also support UNESCO's (2021) assertion that open science implementations require coordinated policies, governance, infrastructure, and capacity-building. Kenyan universities have established baseline infrastructure, but the present analysis shows that coordination across units remains fragile. Governance integration thus emerges as the principal determinant of OA communication and vitality.

4.2.5 Integrated Interpretation

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that OA systems in Kenyan universities are infrastructurally present but governance-fragile. Diffuse ownership, aspirational policies without operational triggers, and irregular sustainability planning constrain repositories' communicative potential. Importantly, the study reveals that these constraints are organizational rather than technological. Platforms such as DSpace and OJS can support identity integration, alerts, and metrics. However, without cross-unit governance structures and predictable maintenance routines, these affordances remain dormant.

The comparative evidence suggests that communicative activation is achievable through modest institutional reforms: naming a cross-unit repository governance team, embedding deposit triggers at manuscript acceptance and evaluation stages, institutionalizing predictable upgrade cycles, and allocating dedicated stewardship resources. These measures do not require wholesale platform replacement; they require governance, clarity, and coordination discipline. In conclusion, governance architecture—not software maturity—is the primary variable differentiating repositories that remain passive archives from those that function as active scholarly communication channels. Kenyan universities possess the foundational infrastructure; the task ahead is institutional alignment.

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V. CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusions

This study examined the governance, coordination, and sustainability dimensions of Open Access (OA) scholarly communication systems in Kenyan universities. The findings demonstrate that while repositories and digital library platforms are widely established across institutions, their communicative vitality is uneven and strongly conditioned by governance architecture rather than technological choice. In five of the six institutions studied, governance responsibilities for OA systems remain fragmented among libraries, and ICT units and research offices have no clearly articulated cross-unit stewardship structures. Policy frameworks affirm institutional commitment to open access but are frequently aspirational, lacking operational triggers, enforcement mechanisms, or structured integration within research workflows. Financial sustainability is similarly fragile, with repositories embedded in general budgets rather than supported through predictable, dedicated resource allocation.

Collectively, these findings indicate that Kenyan universities have successfully built the structural scaffolding for OA communication, but governance integration and sustainability planning remain underdeveloped. Where governance alignment, workflow embedding, and predictable maintenance cycles are present, repositories function not merely as storage systems but as active scholarly communication channels. Where ownership is diffuse and stewardship routines irregular, repositories remain peripheral to academic practice. The study therefore concludes that the primary constraints on OA communication performance in Kenyan universities are institutional coordination, not infrastructure absence.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings, several institutional recommendations emerge. First, universities should establish clearly defined cross-unit repository governance teams comprising representatives from the library, ICT department, and research office. This team should be formally mandated to oversee interoperability, workflow integration, and outward-facing communication. Clearly assigning ownership reduces diffusion of responsibility and strengthens communicative continuity. Second, institutions should embed repository deposit triggers within existing research workflows. Depositing at manuscript acceptance, integrating with performance evaluation systems, and including it in grant reporting procedures would operationalize policy commitments and normalize deposit behavior. These workflow integrations should be accompanied by simple, plain-language rights guidance and structured support pathways to reduce faculty uncertainty.

Third, universities should adopt predictable maintenance and upgrade cycles, supported by at least partial dedicated budgeting for repository enhancement. Sustainability planning should clarify staffing, interoperability health checks, and identity integration (e.g., ORCID linkage). Such measures transform repositories from static archives into durable communication infrastructures. Fourth, institutional leadership should recognize OA communication as a strategic component of research visibility and societal engagement, not a purely technical or library-based service. Positioning repositories within institutional research strategies enhances alignment and long-term viability. In summary, the path forward does not require new platforms but stronger governance coherence. Kenyan universities possess the foundational infrastructure; institutional alignment, structured workflow integration, and sustainability planning are now required to convert presence into performance.

Declaration of Interest

The authors declare that they do not have any known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Funding Declaration

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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