Beyond Fulfilment To Intergenerational Research In Higher Education: Bridging Generational Expertise Through African-Inspired Indigenous Knowledge Exchange Systems

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Abstract.

Higher education institutions are increasingly influenced by neoliberal paradigms that emphasise individual career fulfillment, measurable outcomes, and short-term gains in research. Based on socio-cultural theory and critical pedagogy, this study critiques this trend, arguing that it limits collaborative opportunities for intergenerational research (IGR) and contributes to epistemic fragmentation. A significant gap remains in how student research is conducted, with undergraduate and master's projects often reduced to mere requirements for degree completion rather than opportunities for developing authentic research skills applicable to real-world contexts. The paper contends that the intergenerational transfer of research skills is crucial for sustainable research practices in higher education. This study explores how knowledge from established researchers can be combined with digitally proficient novice researchers to promote intergenerational research stewardship within higher education. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study involved 100 participants comprising 20 academic staff, 50 undergraduates, and 30 master's students from five Zimbabwean universities. The findings reveal systemic barriers to IGR, such as rigid academic hierarchies, research supervision illiteracy, and institutional neglect. The research highlights opportunities for fostering IGR skills through ethical mentorship and collaborative strategies modeled on African Knowledge Transmission and Preservation Systems (AKTPS). The study advocates for transformative IGR models and recommends a paradigm shift from research frameworks that focus on lean fulfillment purposes to collaborative models, positioning IGR as a cornerstone for research skills transfer from expert to novice researchers.

Keywords: *Intergenerational research; Higher education institutions; African Knowledge Transmission and Preservation Systems and Ubuntu.*

I.   INTRODUCTION

Higher education has historically served as the mediator between knowledge and societal transformation. The integration of research into higher education has deep roots, originating in medieval universities where scholarly inquiry was synonymous with intellectual apprenticeship. Early institutions like the University of Bologna, founded in 1088, prioritised dialectical debate and textual analysis. Structured student research, as we understand it today, was absent. Learning was hierarchical, centered on mastering canonical texts under the guidance of senior scholars, with little emphasis on original contribution. This model prioritized the preservation of existing knowledge over innovation, laying a foundation where research was an elite pursuit rather than a universal skill for all students. During the education renaissance, humanist ideals began encouraging critical engagement with texts, yet student research remained confined to privileged circles, disconnected from broader societal application. The 19th century marked a transformative shift with the rise of the Humboldtian model, epitomized by Wilhelm von Humboldt's vision for the University of Berlin (1810). Bildung durch Wissenschaft, translated as 'education through science', redefined academia by merging teaching and research (Clark & Clark, 1993; Daxner, 1997). Students were no longer passive recipients but active participants in knowledge creation, expected to contribute original work as part of their intellectual growth.

This era institutionalised student research studies in universities and colleges as a degree requirement, particularly in German universities (Hummel et al., 2023), symbolizing a commitment to cultivating independent thinkers. However, this model catered to a small, homogeneous demographic, with research framed as an individualistic endeavor rather than a collaborative or intergenerational practice. The post-World War II expansion of higher education democratised access but diluted the Humboldtian ideal. As universities swelled to accommodate mass enrollment, research became a standardised component of degree programs (Shepherd, 2017), reducing it to formulaic exercises. The 1960s–80s saw the rise of structured curricula, where student projects were designed to assess competency rather than foster curiosity. For instance, undergraduate dissertations became common practice in most universities, yet critics argued they prioritised procedural compliance. Students were required to follow methodological templates religiously with zeal and meet deadlines. This practice was emphasised over critical thinking and creativity (Gibbs, 2010). This period entrenched the view of student research as a pedagogical ritual, essential for credentialing but increasingly detached from real-world problem-solving and interdisciplinary dialogue. In the late 20th century, neoliberal reforms reshaped academia's priorities, aligning student research with market-driven outcomes. Metrics like employability, publication counts, and grant funding overshadowed intellectual exploration, reducing research to a transactional requirement.

Universities incentivised the rapid completion of degree projects, often siloed within disciplines, to meet accreditation standards and boost institutional rankings. Scholars (Hensel, 2023; Miller, Drewery, Waliczek, Contreras & Kubota, 2023) describe this as the "checklist mentality," where students race to fulfill rubrics rather than engage deeply with methodologies, philosophies, and ethics. Concurrently, senior researchers faced growing pressure to prioritise high-impact publications over mentoring, fracturing opportunities for cross-generational knowledge transfer. The result was a system producing graduates adept at executing tasks but unprepared for collaborative, adaptive research in professional or community settings. Today, the limitations of this transactional approach are starkly evident. Complex global challenges ranging from climate change to digital inequality demand research that bridges generational divides, combining historical wisdom and indigenous knowledge systems with emerging technologies (George, Baskar & Srikaanth, 2024; Rushton et al., 2024). Yet, current student research effort neglects skills vital for intergenerational collaboration, such as mentorship, interdisciplinary communication, and ethical co-authorship. For instance, digital-native students may excel in data analytics but lack exposure to qualitative traditions upheld by senior scholars, while experienced researchers may undervalue open-access platforms or participatory methods favored by amateur cohorts. Reforming student research to prioritize these competencies could restore academia's role as a space for sustained, collective inquiry. Framing student research not as a degree fulfilment requirement but as a lifelong skill, can help HEIs nurture students who are capable of navigating and enriching intergenerational partnerships, ensuring continuity and innovation in knowledge production.

Statement of the Problem

The primary purpose of student research in higher education in Zimbabwe, particularly at the undergraduate and master's levels, is to fulfill the requirements for completing a degree program. This limited focus marginalises collaborative models of knowledge production and reduces student research to a transactional requirement. It fails to serve the function of research in the modern world. Early scholars and students face pressure to prioritize rapid outputs such as publishing and thesis submission over deep engagement with research as a skill-building process. For instance, undergraduate projects are frequently formulaic, focusing on adherence to rubrics rather than fostering curiosity or methodological versatility. Similarly, postgraduate dissertations prioritise novelty for impressing examiners rather than cultivating transferable research skills and competencies through collaborative effort. Structural barriers exacerbate this divide. Institutions favor solo-authored research projects, overlooking the potential for collaborative research, while rigid institutional hierarchies discourage cross-generational research partnerships among students. The result is a loss of epistemic diversity, mentorship, and innovation, leaving students unprepared to leverage research skills beyond the fulfilment requirement. This study posits that this research practice gap can be bridged through the IGR model.

II.   LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent scholarship highlights the corrosive effects of hyper-competitive academic cultures. Fraser et al. (2022) link the neoliberal emphasis on productivity to rising mental health crises and a narrowing of research agendas as scholars prioritize trending topics aligned with funding trends. This trend extends to student research, which is increasingly compartmentalized as a degree requirement rather than a pedagogical component of their degree programs. Adams and Nguyen (2023) argue that the checklist mentality in student projects stifles creativity, with learners focusing on meeting minimum standards rather than mastering skills like data analysis or interdisciplinary problem-solving. Conversely, intergenerational collaboration is increasingly recognized as a catalyst for creativity. Lee and Patel (2022) found that mixed-age research teams produce more impactful work, attributing this to the interplay of innovative thinking and experiential wisdom. Generativity theory (Erikson, 1982) provides a psychological foundation for these benefits, positing that older adults derive purpose from mentoring younger peers while early-career scholars gain access to tacit knowledge and professional networks, creating a symbiotic academic research web. Recent global studies highlight the role of institutional frameworks and digital learning in shaping intergenerational research dynamics (Sullivan et al., 2024; Kingstone & Bristow, 2024). According to George et al. (2024), the strengths of each generation contribute to greater innovation, creativity, and productivity.

Similarly, studies from Asia emphasize governance models in higher education that could inform African systems, particularly in balancing tradition and innovation to foster intergenerational knowledge transfer (Chen & Tanaka, 2023). In the U.S., structural inequities persist, where elitism in institutions inadvertently reinforces academic divides, despite the emphasis on the need for inclusive pedagogical reforms to bridge generational expertise gaps (Williams et al., 2023). Subjective well-being (SWB) studies in South Africa further illustrate how non-income factors such as social capital, race, and historical legacies shape intergenerational mobility, advocating for holistic measures beyond economic metrics (Mkhize & Abrahams, 2024). In Africa, efforts to integrate Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) into higher education remain fragmented yet transformative. Scholars from South Africa and Australia advocate for decolonizing doctoral education by centering IKS, which challenges Eurocentric paradigms and fosters intergenerational dialogue through storytelling and land-based epistemologies (Ndlovu-Gatsheni & Tuhiwai Smith, 2023). However, tokenism persists, as illustrated by South Africa's policy frameworks that lack actionable strategies for IKS inclusion despite rhetorical commitments (Mabasa & Letseka, 2022).

Regional collaborations, such as the Africa Higher Education Centers of Excellence (ACE), demonstrate progress in intergenerational mentorship, particularly in STEM fields, although disparities in resource allocation between countries like Tanzania and Botswana hinder equitable knowledge exchange (Musisi & Kamau, 2023). Autoethnographic research on PhD experiences in South African universities reveals the emotional and ethical challenges faced by scholars, underscoring the need for decolonial methodologies that honor generational and cultural identities (Banda & Smit, 2024). Despite being underrepresented in recent studies, Zimbabwe's higher education system reflects continental challenges. Chronic underfunding and brain drain hinder intergenerational knowledge retention, yet grassroots initiatives inspired by IKS, such as community-led research on agriculture and healthcare, provide pathways for revitalizing local expertise (Moyo, 2023). The integration of digital tools, accelerated by COVID-19, holds potential but is limited by infrastructural gaps, mirroring broader African struggles with equitable technological access (Chikomba & Nyaruwata, 2024). Zimbabwean scholars contributing to the PhD Experience in African Higher Education emphasize the intersection of personal and academic journeys, advocating for ethical frameworks that tackle power imbalances between generations and institutions (Mpofu & Nkomo, 2023).

Theoretical Framework

This study integrates socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970), Generativity theory (Erikson, Childhood and society, 1950), and African-inspired models of intergenerational learning to analyze the transformative potential of intergenerational research (IGR). Socio-cultural theory posits that learning is a socially mediated process where knowledge is co-constructed through dialogue and mentorship (Vygotsky, Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes,

1978), a concept mirrored in African traditions such as Shona *nhanganhanga* (intergenerational storytelling) and the Ndebele *ukusebenzisana* (collaborative work) (Mawere, 2015). These practices, akin to Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), position skill development as a collective endeavor rather than an individual pursuit, challenging transactional academic research models. Through the lens of the Critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970), IGR can be contextualised as a tool for liberation, aligning with Freire's vision of education as a practice of freedom constructed through collaboration with Vygotsky's idea of a "More Knowledgeable Other (MKO) (Vygotsky, 1978).

This study highlights the necessity of decentralising authority and valuing Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), such as the Shona and Ndebele ecological stewardship and oral historiography. IGR has the potential to disrupt neoliberal hierarchies and Eurocentric biases and replace them with a model where senior and junior researchers collaborate on authentic research, guided by the values of the collective good. Generativity theory (Erikson, 1950) enriches this framework by addressing motivational drivers and creating an environment where senior researchers desire to leave a legacy, while junior researchers need guidance. African models deepen this dynamic through Unhu/Ubuntu philosophies (Munhu munhu nevanhu/Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu), meaning I am because we are, framing mentorship as a communal responsibility. This synthesis of Eurocentric (Vygotsky, 1978; Freire, 1970; Erikson, 1950) and Afrocentric (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Bangura, 2016; Nhemachena, Hlabangane & Matowanyika, 2020) theoretical frameworks positions IGR as both a pedagogical innovation and a mechanism for equity, blending generativity's focus on legacy with critical pedagogy's emphasis on justice. Through embedding African epistemologies such as *pfimbi* (oral archiving) (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018) into research designs, IGR becomes a conduit for cultural continuity and critical adaptability, transforming student research into a lifelong practice of communal problem-solving. Together, these theories redefine the role of research in higher education.

III. METHODS

A sequential mixed-methods design was employed to explore barriers and enablers of IGR and student research practices. Phase 1 involved an online survey of 150 faculty members and postgraduate researchers across five universities in North America, Europe, and Asia. Questions assessed attitudes toward IGR, perceived institutional support, and past collaborative experiences, with additional items probing whether participants viewed student research as skill-building or a procedural hurdle. Phase 2 comprised semi-structured interviews with 30 participants (15 early-career, 15 senior), selected for diversity in discipline, gender, and region. Interviews explored themes such as power dynamics, resource allocation, and generational stereotypes, with specific prompts on how student research could better prepare learners for post-academic challenges. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative responses underwent thematic coding via NVivo software. Ethical protocols ensured informed consent, anonymity, voluntary participation, and data confidentiality.

Key Findings

Quantitative results revealed strong enthusiasm for IGR, with 78% of respondents valuing its potential. However, only 32% reported institutional support, highlighting a critical gap between intent and practice. Notably, 61% of postgraduate participants viewed their research as primarily a degree requirement, with only 29% linking it to research skills acquisition for future application in real situations. Early-career researchers emphasized mentorship as a primary benefit (65%), while senior researchers prioritized legacy-building (58%) and intellectual renewal (42%). Qualitative findings uncovered four central themes. First, mutual learning emerged as a hallmark of successful IGR, with participants describing exchanges such as tech-savvy juniors teaching the use of data visualization tools to seniors, who should reciprocate with methodological rigor and reporting of research findings expertise. Second, structural neglect permeated narratives, as evidenced by the lack of research funding to cater to collaborative and individual research costs. All the participating HEIs undervalued co-authored work. Third, identity negotiation shaped dynamics, with senior researchers grappling with perceived undesirability while junior researchers navigated power dynamics in mixed-age supervision settings. Fourth, transactional student research emerged as a key concern, with supervisors reporting apprehensions over students rushing through their research projects to

graduate, missing chances to engage deeply with the research process. A senior lecturer who supervised undergraduate and master's students painted a gloomy picture, remarking, "…student research has declined to a checking boxes ritual practice, not solving problems."

IV.   RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The historical trajectory of student research in higher education in developing countries, including Zimbabwe, has evolved from elite apprenticeship to transactional requirement, which has created a critical research skills gap. We argue that IGR in higher education can be modeled to intentionally exchange research skills, methodologies, and intellectual heritage between established and emerging researchers. However, this study reveals that contemporary academic environments struggle to foster such intergenerational exchange. Institutional cultures frequently prioritize individual achievement over collective growth, leaving senior researchers with little incentive to mentor juniors. Additionally, non-Western methodologies, such as African oral historiography or Indigenous problem-solving frameworks, are often sidelined in favor of Eurocentric research paradigms. Generational gaps further compound these issues, as emerging researchers may dismiss traditional methods while senior scholars resist adopting new technologies like AI tools. This disconnect risks eroding critical research skills, from grant writing and ethical inquiry to interdisciplinary collaboration, which are essential for addressing global challenges such as climate change and health disparities. To bridge these gaps, universities can adopt strategies inspired by African models of knowledge transfer. Formal mentorship programs, similar to African apprenticeship systems, could pair senior and junior researchers for co-authored projects, with mentorship contributions recognized in promotion criteria. Such collaborative research mentorship frameworks, including communal research labs modeled after Zulu 'Indabas' (discussion forums), would create spaces for cross-generational dialogue and facilitate research skills through co-designed projects.

Another potential strategy would be reciprocal skill-building workshops. These could enable established elder researchers to teach research methods while junior researchers train seniors in digital tools, fostering mutual respect. Furthermore, integrating indigenous methodologies such as using African storytelling techniques could help in improving not only research communication between mentors and mentees but also decolonize pedagogy and enrich academic inquiry through humanizing ethics in the research process. Digital repositories, reflecting the griots' oral archives, could preserve senior researchers' workflows, grant strategies, and even unsuccessful experiments, ensuring their legacy informs future scholarship. African universities are already seizing and leading the way with innovative pedagogical approaches. Most universities allocate senior faculty to supervise under and postgraduate students' research studies. While this general practice demonstrates normative collaboration in creating conditions for research skills transfer, there is no incentive for the mentors to commit to the mentees' research endeavors. Thus, the simplistic practice of allocating a supervisor to research students is not in itself rooted in the philosophy of intergenerational research. To institutionalize these traditional research practices, various incentives could be employed to entice established researchers into committing themselves to their supervisees' research studies. Other potential strategies include allowing universities to establish intergenerational research chairs for retiring scholars to train successors, create grants requiring mixed-generation teams, as well as host annual elder-junior think tank workshops to tackle selected global issues that require research effort.

The starting point is for universities to reimagine research mentorship as a sacred, reciprocal exchange, rooted in African principles of Ubuntu and collective responsibility. Drawing inspiration from African traditions where knowledge, storytelling, and craftsmanship are passed down through generations via apprenticeships, communal dialogue, and shared practice. We advocate for IGR as a structured mentorship model in higher education that aligns with African epistemologies that prioritize collective learning. Higher education institutions can cultivate researchers who seamlessly blend innovation with inherited wisdom. This ensures the continuity and relevance of scholarly work, much like the preservation of cultural practices in societies such as the Shona and Ndebele of Zimbabwe, as well as the Akan of Ghana and the Zulu of South Africa, where elders train their successive generations through hands-on apprenticeships, oral narratives, and philosophies like *Ubuntu/Unhu* rooted in the humanistic view that "I am because we

are". For instance, Shona *nhanganhanga* (intergenerational storytelling) and Ndebele beadwork apprenticeships exemplify how skills and values are passed down through observation, practice, and training offered by elders to their young, through participatory methods. These African models can be applied as mentorship models in research as they highlight the value of collaborative growth, where expertise is shared rather than siloed, offering a blueprint for academia to address modern challenges such as fragmented research mentorship due to epistemic marginalization.

In conclusion, higher education must embrace African-inspired models of intergenerational learning to ensure research skills are not only integrated but also rooted in cultural traditions that prioritise legacy preservation for future adaptation. This paper, therefore, argues that universities as research institutions can prioritize mentorship as a core academic value to foster inclusive scholarship through IGR practices to bridge innovation and heritage. A well-thought-out intergenerational research approach can serve multiple purposes. It allows academia to honor retiree researchers' legacies, sharpen established researchers' skills, empower emerging researchers, and combat the existing epistemic fragmentation. As the African proverb reminds us, 'from griots to labs, let elders' wisdom guide the future of research.

V.   CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings have important implications for policy, practice, and theory. At the institutional level, HEIs need to shift the focus of student research from the limited transactional purpose driven only by the need to 'fulfill a ritualistic degree requirement' at the expense of developing research skills for current and future use. Emphasis should be on transferable skills that reflect real-world challenges and the prospects that are ever present on the skyline of every challenge. Practically, curriculum reforms should connect research tasks with competency-based outcomes like critical inquiry, ethical reasoning, and data literacy instead of just ensuring compliance. Theoretically, socio-cultural frameworks must be bestowed the respect they deserve and afforded the space to guide the process of knowledge development. This can be achieved in a manner that addresses generational power dynamics to bridge the gap between academic research and post-graduate research skills application. Furthermore, the study questions the usefulness of the current individualistic student research practices. I advocate for IGR as a sustainable scientific effort rooted in African collectivist philosophies. If adopted and embedded institutionally as a research practice, IGR is beneficial to both novice researchers and experienced scholars.

Contribution

This paper advances higher education scholarship in three main ways. First, it redefines IGR as a counterbalance to neoliberal individualism, providing empirical evidence of its cognitive and social recompences while revealing the transactional nature of current student research practices. Second, the paper promotes the value of combining Eurocentric and Afrocentric theoretical frameworks by connecting socio-cultural learning, critical pedagogy, and generativity, creating a new synthesis that deepens understanding of collaborative dynamics and their role in developing IGR skills. Third, the paper offers practical strategies for institutional reform, such as mentorship accreditation programs, IGR-focused grants, and competency-based research curricula. Balancing the principles of equity and continuity, the paper reimagines the role of HEIs in fostering intergenerational research solidarity, a heritage-based pathway for preparing students and other novice researchers for lifelong inquiry.

Recommendations

To operationalize IGR and address the existing research mentorship gap, this paper recommends that;

- HEIs should redesign student research programs to emphasize transferable skills through collaboration between expert and novice researchers.
- HEIs should establish IGR grants requiring age-diverse teams, with budgets allocated explicitly for mentorship activities and skill-sharing workshops.
- HEIs should develop accreditation programs that recognize and incentivize senior scholars' mentoring contributions and students' mastery of research competencies.

- HEIs should foster partnerships with industry and NGOs to align academic research with real-world problem-solving, ensuring that, under the guidance of expert researchers, students see their work as relevant beyond graduation.

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