

Beyond Isomorphic Research Models: The ASPIRE Framework as a Theory of Mission-Aligned Research Capability Under Constraint

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Abstract

Purpose: Many teaching-intensive, mission-driven, and resource-constrained higher learning institutions are now expected to demonstrate research performance without possessing the fiscal slack, doctoral density, administrative infrastructure, or historical research ecology of the conventional research-intensive university. The result is often institutional isomorphism without institutional capability. This article addresses the unresolved question of how such institutions can convert legitimacy pressure into durable research capability without reproducing the organizational and cost assumptions of the classical research university. **Design:** The article is a conceptual and framework-building study. It synthesizes scholarship on research culture, entrepreneurial and third-mission universities, students-as-partners, pedagogical scholarship, and socially distributed knowledge production, and integrates these literatures through institutional theory, dynamic capabilities, and Mode 2 and engaged scholarship. **Findings:** The article develops the ASPIRE framework, a middle-range theory of Aligned and Selective Partnership-based Inquiry for Research Ecosystems. It argues that research capability under constraint emerges when external legitimacy demands are translated into mission-aligned priorities, concentrated through domain stewardship, distributed through dissertation-led inquiry and faculty coaching, and converted through knowledge-translation routines into cumulative institutional value. The framework specifies three interlocking layers, contextual alignment, strategic capability, and inquiry-to-translation processes, and identifies the mechanisms, risks, safeguards, and boundary conditions that govern their interaction. **Originality/value:** The article reconceptualizes research promotion as an institutional capability rather than a diffuse aggregate of individual output. It contributes a theory of conversion showing how institutions under constraint can transform dispersed inquiry into coherent, cumulative, and legitimate research capability. **Practical implications:** The framework offers a differentiated research architecture through which higher learning institutions can pursue scholarly seriousness, educational credibility, and societal usefulness without collapsing into prestige imitation, managerial utilitarianism, or symbolic compliance.

Keywords: research mission; higher learning institutions; African higher education; research capability; research culture; research centres; students' dissertations; knowledge translation

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1. Introduction

Research is not an ornamental supplement to higher learning. It is one of the constitutive practices through which higher learning institutions justify their existence as knowledge institutions. Universities and analogous institutions do not merely transmit settled knowledge. They test, revise, extend, contextualize, and circulate knowledge, and in doing so renew both curriculum and public purpose. Once this epistemic role is taken seriously, research cannot be confined either to elite laboratories or to symbolic compliance exercises performed for rankings, accreditation, and institutional theatre. It is a core basis of intellectual credibility, curriculum renewal, staff development, and graduate formation because it positions students not only as consumers of knowledge but as participants in its production (Boyer, 1990; Gibbons et al., 1994; UNESCO Global Independent Expert Group on the Universities and the 2030 Agenda, 2022).

This problem has particular urgency in contemporary African higher education. Africa has more than 400 million young people aged 15 to 35, and 75% of the continent's population is under 35 (UNESCO, 2024c). Yet in sub-Saharan Africa only 9.4% of youth are enrolled in higher education, compared with a global average of 38%, while the region allocates just 0.78% of gross domestic product to research and development against a global average of 1.93% (UNESCO International Institute for Capacity Building in Africa [IICBA], 2024). At the same time, the developmental significance of research capacity is increasingly visible. By April 2025, the Africa Higher Education Centers of Excellence programme had established more than 80 centres across more than 50 universities in 20 countries, enrolled more than 90,000 students, and generated more than 10,350 internationally peer-reviewed publications (World Bank, 2025). The implication is clear: research matters profoundly, but building it requires institutional design rather than aspiration alone.

The difficulty is that many higher learning institutions, especially private, faith-based, emerging, regional, and teaching-intensive institutions, are pressed to demonstrate research seriousness without possessing the fiscal slack, staffing profile, doctoral density, or accumulated infrastructure of the conventional research-intensive university. Under these conditions, institutions often imitate visible research forms rather than build underlying capability. They adopt generalized publication expectations, diffuse mandates, nominal centres, terminal dissertations, and untested pedagogical claims. What emerges is frequently not durable research capability but symbolic compliance and organizational incoherence.

That incoherence is reinforced by a deeper philosophical error. Debates about research in higher education are too often framed through a false opposition between intrinsic and instrumental accounts of inquiry. On one side, universities are said to exist to protect theoretical freedom, disciplinary autonomy, and truth-seeking unconstrained by immediate utility. On the other side, research is justified only insofar as it produces short-term policy, labour-market, managerial, or commercial returns. Both positions identify something important, but neither is sufficient. A purely intrinsic account can understate institutional feasibility and developmental urgency. A purely instrumental account can collapse higher learning into managerial utilitarianism. The real theoretical challenge is therefore to explain how institutions can sustain scholarly seriousness while also organizing research in ways that are institutionally feasible, educationally generative, and publicly credible.

This article addresses that challenge by asking a more precise question than whether resource-constrained institutions should do research. The question is how such institutions convert legitimacy pressure into durable research capability without reproducing the organizational and cost assumptions of the classical

research-intensive university. The article argues that the key problem is not low productivity in the abstract, but failed conversion: the inability to transform external demands for research into coherent priorities, concentrated agendas, distributed inquiry, and cumulative institutional learning.

To address that problem, the article develops the ASPIRE framework, a middle-range theory of Aligned and Selective Partnership-based Inquiry for Research Ecosystems. Drawing on institutional theory, dynamic capabilities, and Mode 2 and engaged scholarship, the article argues that research capability emerges when legitimacy demands are translated into mission-aligned priorities, concentrated through domain stewardship, distributed through dissertation-led inquiry and faculty coaching, and converted through knowledge-translation routines into cumulative institutional value. In theoretical terms, the article reconceptualizes research promotion as an institutional capability

rather than a diffuse aggregate of individual output. In practical terms, it offers a differentiated research architecture for institutions that must be serious about research without pretending to be something they are not. The remainder of the article proceeds by examining the problem of research, legitimacy, and institutional differentiation; reviewing the relevant literature and the unresolved conceptual gap; specifying the theoretical foundations and conceptual development procedure; developing the ASPIRE framework; presenting propositions, risks, and safeguards; and concluding with the discussion, implications, limitations, and future research agenda.

2. Research, Legitimacy, and Institutional Differentiation in Higher Education

2.1. Research as a constitutive institutional function

Context snapshot. Why a differentiated research architecture is strategically necessary

Indicator	Current evidence	Strategic implication
Demographic pressure	More than 400 million young people aged 15-35 and 75% of the population under 35 (UNESCO IICBA, 2024).	Higher learning institutions face rising demand for knowledge, skills, and socially useful research.
Participation gap	Tertiary enrolment in Africa is around 9%, versus a global average of 38% (UNESCO IICBA, 2024).	Research architectures must scale without assuming elite levels of infrastructure or fiscal slack.
Sector expansion	Higher education institutions grew from roughly 30 in the 1960s to more than 600 by the 2000s; enrollment rose from under 200,000 to over 5 million (Zavale & Schneijderberg, 2022).	System complexity increases the need for differentiated institutional design rather than prestige imitation.
Focused capacity proof	By 2025, the Africa Higher Education Centers of Excellence programme had supported more than 80 centres across over 50 universities in 20 countries, generating over 10,350 peer-reviewed publications (World Bank, 2025).	Domain-focused research structures can generate scale and output when coupled to agenda discipline and infrastructure.

These conditions make differentiated research architecture not a managerial convenience but an institutional necessity. Rapid demographic expansion, persistently low tertiary participation, constrained research investment, and the uneven distribution of high-capacity research infrastructure mean that many

institutions must widen access, improve quality, support employability, and contribute to innovation without assuming the organizational density of the classical research university. Under such conditions, the relevant question is not whether research matters, but what form of research organization permits

scholarly seriousness under conditions of finite capability (UNESCO, 2024c; UNESCO IICBA, 2024; World Bank, 2025).

The modern university has long been understood through the interplay of teaching, research, and public contribution, even if the balance among these functions has varied historically and institutionally. Boyer's (1990) classic intervention remains important because it challenged the narrowing of scholarship to a single prestige script centered almost exclusively on discovery. His broader account of scholarship as discovery, integration, application, and teaching did not diminish research; it clarified that research belongs within a wider ecology of scholarly work. This is especially useful for higher learning institutions whose social value depends not only on publication counts but on their capacity to connect inquiry to learning, professional formation, and public problem-solving.

Gibbons et al. (1994) sharpened the issue by arguing that knowledge production increasingly occurs not only within disciplinary hierarchies but also in transdisciplinary, problem-focused, and socially distributed settings. While the Mode 2 thesis should not be used to romanticize relevance at the expense of rigor, it remains analytically powerful because it identifies a shift in the conditions under which knowledge is generated and judged. Universities are not merely repositories of disciplinary authority. They are increasingly expected to participate in the co-production, circulation, and application of knowledge across institutional and societal boundaries.

The implication for this article is straightforward. If research is constitutive of higher learning institutions, then the key question is not whether institutions with limited resources should engage in research. The key question is what organizational form the research mission should take when institutional resources, staff profiles, and external ecosystems do not approximate those of long-established research-intensive universities.

2.2. Legitimacy pressures and the problem of institutional mimicry

Research also functions as a legitimacy signal. Quality assurance bodies, accreditation standards, ministerial expectations, professional norms, rankings systems, and peer comparisons all exert pressure on institutions to demonstrate scholarship, curriculum renewal, ethical oversight, and forms of student inquiry. Rwanda's quality assurance guidance, for example, embeds expectations around internal quality systems, continuous improvement, research ethics, and evidence of academic standards (Rwanda Higher Education Council, 2024). Its 2025–2030 sector strategic plan likewise places research and innovation within the core reform agenda of higher education (Rwanda Higher Education Council, 2025). Mauritius similarly ties tertiary education, science, research, and digital transformation to broader national modernization goals (Government of Mauritius, 2025; Mauritius Ministry of Education, Tertiary Education, Science and Research, 2022).

Institutional theory helps explain why these pressures matter. Organizations seek legitimacy by aligning with the norms and expectations of their fields (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2001). In higher education, research is one of the central currencies through which seriousness, credibility, and “university-ness” are signaled. However, the same theory also warns against isomorphism. Mimetic responses to uncertainty often lead institutions to copy prestigious models whose visible features are easier to imitate than whose underlying resource conditions are to reproduce.

Recent work on academic drift strengthens this point by showing that institutional mimicry is not merely aspirational imitation but a mechanism of internal misalignment. In their study of Chinese universities of applied sciences, Wei and Welch (2026) argue that drift emerges through contradictions among policy logic, academic logic, and market logic, producing evaluation misalignment and strategic tension inside the institution. The context is different from that of many African institutions, but the underlying mechanism is analytically transferable. When

institutions are judged against prestige scripts whose requirements exceed their organizational form, they do not simply become more research capable. They become more internally conflicted. This clarifies why the core problem is not insufficient resemblance to the research university, but the failure to convert external legitimacy demands into institutionally coherent capability.

Contemporary ranking systems intensify this pressure by institutionalizing comparative scripts of worth that reward conformity to globally visible metrics (Brankovic et al., 2023). For resource-constrained institutions, especially those with teaching-intensive mandates, such pressures can generate a pattern of symbolic adoption: research units without agenda coherence, publication targets without support systems, and student research without institutional afterlife. The result is compliance without capability.

2.3. Resource constraint and the case for differentiated research architectures

Resource constraint is not incidental to the problem. It is constitutive of it. OECD analysis shows that higher education has become more costly over time because institutions carry expanding teaching, research, and engagement responsibilities while productivity gains remain difficult to achieve in labor-intensive knowledge work. In many systems, research is funded below full cost, producing chronic cross-subsidies and fiscal strain (OECD, 2020). Although the OECD's evidence is not Africa-specific, the underlying cost logic is directly relevant to institutions everywhere: research requires staff time, supervision, data access, ethics infrastructure, libraries, software, dissemination support, and increasingly specialized administrative coordination.

Recent quantitative evidence also cautions against governance optimism. In a multinational European study, Painsi et al. (2025) find that greater institutional autonomy has mostly minor and, in some cases, contradictory effects on universities' teaching, research, and knowledge-transfer missions. The implication is not that autonomy is unimportant. It is

that formal freedom does not automatically become substantive capability. Institutions still require strategic concentration, organizational routines, and translational pathways if structural discretion is to yield durable research performance. This reinforces the present argument that research capability under constraint is less a product of generalized autonomy than of selective institutional orchestration.

Under such conditions, undifferentiated expectations are rarely neutral. They usually privilege institutions that already possess research density, doctoral pipelines, and infrastructure. For newer or smaller institutions, the challenge is not simply to “do more research” but to differentiate the research function intelligently. This article therefore proceeds from a simple claim: sustainable research capability requires *institutional differentiation*. Institutions should not be judged by whether they replicate the most resource-intensive model, but by whether they build a coherent research architecture that fits their mission, capabilities, and societal context.

3. Literature Review and the Unresolved Conceptual Gap

3.1. Research culture and institutional research capacity

The literature on research culture makes clear that research output does not emerge from exhortation alone. Research culture depends on governance arrangements, mentoring, collaboration, incentives, time allocation, infrastructure, and dissemination support. Fussy's analyses of Tanzanian universities remain especially instructive because they show that the principal obstacles to research development are not reducible to personal motivation. They include funding constraints, weak institutional support, dissemination barriers, workload pressures, and limited strategic coherence (Fussy, 2018, 2019, 2026). Balandya et al. (2021) reinforce this point by showing that deliberate mentoring structures can strengthen sustainable research capacity.

Recent work also suggests that contextual support influences research interest and confidence among

students and early researchers, indicating that research capability is socially and institutionally cultivated rather than individually given (Ahmad et al., 2025). This literature is valuable because it moves the discussion beyond abstract appeals to “research culture” and toward the institutional arrangements that make inquiry possible. However, it still tends to assume that the desired outcome is some version of generalized research intensification rather than a differentiated architecture of research capability.

3.2. Mission-driven and entrepreneurial universities

The entrepreneurial university literature broadens the frame by examining how universities strategically align research, teaching, governance, and engagement. Clark’s (1998) account of entrepreneurial transformation emphasized a strengthened steering core, a diversified funding base, and an extended developmental periphery. Etzkowitz (2003) argued that the entrepreneurial university is not a departure from the research university but one of its historical mutations under changing conditions. More recently, Compagnucci and Spigarelli’s (2020) systematic review of the university’s third mission shows how universities increasingly mediate between knowledge production and societal contribution.

This literature is highly relevant, but it often proceeds from systems in which research capacity is already institutionally embedded. Guerrero and Menter’s (2024) dynamic-capabilities analysis of universities’ third mission likewise demonstrates the importance of adaptive institutional capacity, yet the study presumes an organizational density that many lower-resource institutions do not possess. The gap is therefore not that this literature ignores strategy; it is that it insufficiently addresses how institutions without mature research infrastructures can build research capability without simply importing models designed elsewhere.

3.3. Student inquiry, students as partners, and dissertation-led research

The literature on undergraduate research and students-as-partners provides an important corrective to faculty-centered accounts of academic knowledge production. Healey and Jenkins (2009) argued that students should encounter research not only as consumers of established findings but as participants in inquiry. Adebisi et al. (2022) synthesize evidence that research engagement can strengthen academic identity, skills, and preparedness for knowledge-intensive work. Mercer-Mapstone et al. (2017) and more recent reviews of co-creation in higher education emphasize student agency, partnership, dialogue, and shared decision-making (Geurts et al., 2024; Omland et al., 2025).

Yet this literature rarely treats student inquiry as a core institutional mechanism for building research capability. Student-staff partnership is often discussed pedagogically or relationally, not strategically. This is where the notion of *students’ dissertations* becomes useful. In this article, the term is used broadly as a widely recognizable umbrella for substantial student-authored culminating research projects across higher learning contexts, including projects that some systems would classify as dissertations, theses, or capstones. Properly structured, such work can function not merely as terminal assessment but as a recurring institutional input into research production. Recent African work on undergraduate research pedagogy further shows that student inquiry becomes institutionally valuable only when methodological coaching, contextual relevance, supervision reform, and dissemination pathways are deliberately built into the curriculum rather than left to chance (Sangwa & Mutabazi, 2025).

3.4. Research centres as domain stewards

Specialized institutional structures have long been used to concentrate expertise and signal excellence. However, the term “centre of excellence” often carries both symbolic prestige and policy specificity. A more general and analytically useful term is

research centre, used here to include research clusters, institutes, hubs, and similar domain-focused units. Research centres matter not because they are fashionable organizational labels, but because they can curate agendas, consolidate scarce expertise, sustain repositories, and broker external relationships.

Evidence from African higher education suggests that domain-focused research structures can be powerful when they are more than symbolic. The ACE programme's scale and outputs indicate that specialized research structures can build cross-border capacity, attract accreditation, and produce substantial publication and doctoral training outputs when properly resourced (World Bank, 2025). UNESCO's Campus Africa agenda similarly frames research clusters and innovation hubs as vehicles for building integrated, inclusive, and quality tertiary systems through research and innovation capacities, doctoral studies, and labour-market linkages (UNESCO, 2024a, 2024b). What the literature still under-theorizes, however, is how such structures can function inside teaching-intensive institutions that need to connect domain stewardship to curriculum, student dissertations, and institutional learning.

3.5. Pedagogical inquiry and institutional learning

Many higher learning institutions make ambitious claims about distinctive pedagogies, graduate attributes, employability models, digital learning designs, or transformative forms of student formation. Yet the scholarship of teaching and learning has long insisted that pedagogical claims should be systematically investigated, made public, and subjected to scrutiny (Boyer, 1990; Hutchings & Shulman, 1999). This is not only a faculty-development issue. It is a question of institutional credibility. Recent work on post-COVID digital transformation further shows that pedagogical redesign, quality assurance, and governance adaptation are deeply intertwined, which strengthens the case for treating institutional pedagogies as a serious research object rather than a merely operational concern (Sangwa et al., 2025).

Pedagogical inquiry matters because it links research to the heart of the institution's educational mission. It creates evidence for curriculum renewal, offers proof of distinctive educational value, and supports quality assurance processes that increasingly require evidence of student learning, information literacy, and improvement systems (Rwanda Higher Education Council, 2024; New England Commission of Higher Education, 2021). However, pedagogical research is still too often treated as an auxiliary function rather than as part of the institution's research architecture.

3.6. African higher education, epistemic asymmetry, and the problem of imported models

The African higher education context is not merely a geographic setting for the present argument. It is a source of theoretical pressure. Agbaje (2023) argues that curriculum reform in African higher education cannot simply replicate Western models if higher learning is to solve societal problems and meet societal needs. Gumbo et al. (2024) extend this critique to the doctorate, showing how colonial inheritances and knowledge hierarchies continue to shape advanced research training. Zavale and Schneijderberg (2022) likewise show that research on African higher education is itself unevenly distributed, with substantial concentration in a small number of national contexts. These analyses matter because they expose a double asymmetry: institutions are asked to perform research legitimacy within a globally stratified field, yet the dominant scripts of legitimate research organizations are themselves historically situated and unequally resourced.

The point is therefore not simply that imported models are expensive. It is that they encode assumptions about staffing density, fiscal capacity, infrastructural depth, doctoral pipelines, and evaluative prestige that many institutions do not share. Under such conditions, the African case reveals a more general theoretical problem that mainstream university theory often obscures: legitimacy pressures are widely diffused across institutions, but capability conditions are not. The

challenge is not whether non-elite institutions can approximate an already completed model of the university. It is whether they can construct forms of research organization that are contextually responsive, developmentally relevant, and epistemically serious without surrendering their mission or their intellectual integrity.

3.7. The unresolved conceptual gap

Taken together, the literature on research culture, entrepreneurial and third-mission universities, students-as-partners, pedagogical scholarship, and socially distributed knowledge production offer substantial insight. Yet one question remains inadequately answered: by what mechanism do institutions under constraint convert legitimacy pressure, curricular inquiry, and domain specialization into durable research capability? The missing contribution is not another affirmation that research matters, nor another inventory of barriers and enablers. What is missing is a theory of conversion: an account of how institutions that cannot and should not replicate the classical research-intensive university can nonetheless transform dispersed inquiry into coherent, cumulative, and legitimate institutional research capability. The ASPIRE framework is proposed as a response to that unresolved problem.

4. Theoretical Foundations

4.1. Institutional theory

Institutional theory explains why research matters beyond intrinsic scholarly aspiration. Higher learning institutions operate in fields structured by coercive, normative, and mimetic pressures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Accreditation standards, ministry expectations, public accountability, peer comparisons, and rankings all shape what institutions perceive they must do to appear legitimate. In this article, institutional theory clarifies why research is difficult to refuse. An institution that claims university-level seriousness while neglecting research risks appearing incomplete or deficient.

Yet institutional theory also helps explain why legitimacy pressure alone is insufficient. Mimetic adaptation can generate symbolic conformity without capability. This article therefore uses institutional theory not only to explain the pressure to do research but also to distinguish between legitimacy through imitation and legitimacy through coherent institutional design.

4.2. Dynamic capabilities

Dynamic capabilities theory focuses on how organizations sense changing environments, seize strategic opportunities, and reconfigure resources to sustain performance (Teece, 2007). Applied to higher learning institutions, this perspective shifts attention from static resources to institutional orchestration. Research capability is not the simple sum of talented faculty, enthusiastic students, or formal structures. It is the institution's ability to align agendas, coordinate resources, develop support routines, and convert inquiry into cumulative value.

This is especially relevant under conditions of constraint. Institutions rarely have enough time, money, infrastructure, and expertise to support every possible research agenda equally well. Dynamic capabilities therefore justify selective portfolio design and focused domain stewardship. They also illuminate why research centres, dissertation systems, mentorship, pedagogical inquiry, and dissemination routines should be understood as interdependent capabilities rather than isolated initiatives. In a higher education context, dynamic capabilities help explain how teaching- and research-related functions can be reconfigured to strengthen wider institutional missions (Guerrero & Menter, 2024).

4.3. Mode 2 knowledge production and engaged scholarship

Mode 2 knowledge production and engaged scholarship provide the epistemic logic of the framework. Gibbons et al. (1994) emphasize socially distributed, application-oriented knowledge production, while Van de Ven (2007) argues that rigorous research can and should be produced in

dialogue with stakeholders and practical problems. These traditions do not abolish disciplinary standards. Rather, they challenge the assumption that valuable knowledge is only that which travels through insulated disciplinary channels.

For the present argument, these perspectives do three things. First, they legitimate dissertation-led and partnership-based inquiry as potential sites of knowledge production. Second, they support the idea that educational institutions should investigate their own pedagogies. Third, they foreground translation, that is, the movement of research into curriculum, policy, practice, and institutional learning.

4.4. Integrative theoretical logic

Taken together, the three theoretical lenses specify a conversion model of research capability under constraint. Institutional theory explains why research becomes difficult to refuse: higher learning institutions operate in fields structured by accreditation demands, quality assurance expectations, ministerial priorities, ranking systems, and professional norms that treat research as a core marker of institutional seriousness. Dynamic capabilities explain why legitimacy pressure alone is insufficient: institutions must sense priorities, seize strategically viable domains, and reconfigure scarce resources into routines that can support inquiry, supervision, dissemination, and organizational learning. Mode 2 knowledge production and engaged scholarship explain why these routines need not reproduce a narrow disciplinary or laboratory-centered model of knowledge production: rigorous inquiry can also be generated through pedagogical investigation, dissertation-led research, external partnerships, and translational engagement with societal problems. The core theoretical claim of this article is therefore that research capability in resource-constrained higher learning institutions emerges when field-level legitimacy pressures are converted, through selective institutional orchestration, into mission-aligned agendas, distributed inquiry systems, and

knowledge-translation routines that generate cumulative institutional value.

5. Approach to Conceptual Development

5.1. Nature of the article

This article is a conceptual and framework-building study. Following Jaakkola's (2020) guidance on conceptual research design, it combines theory synthesis and model development. It does not claim to offer causal proof in the empirical sense. Rather, it seeks to build an analytically coherent and empirically tractable framework that integrates fragmented literatures into a stronger explanatory account.

5.2. Unit of analysis and scope

The unit of analysis is the higher learning institution as an organizational actor. The article is not primarily about the psychology of individual researchers or students. Nor is it a national policy model in the macro sense. It is an institutional theory of how research capability is generated, structured, and sustained. The framework is designed principally for teaching-intensive, mission-driven, resource-constrained institutions, though some of its elements may travel beyond that context.

5.3. Logic of construct selection

The framework was developed through four linked judgments. First, it identifies the focal phenomenon as research capability under constraint. Second, it selects theories capable of explaining legitimacy pressure, strategic orchestration, and translational knowledge production. Third, it identifies recurrent constructs across the literature, including research culture, student inquiry, research centres, pedagogical scholarship, and knowledge translation. Fourth, it reorganizes these constructs into a layered model that specifies mechanisms, tensions, and scope conditions.

5.4. Conceptual development procedure and analytic delimitation

Conceptual development proceeded in four iterative stages. First, the article delimited the explanandum as

durable institutional research capability under constraint, rather than individual research productivity, national policy performance, or generic research culture. Second, it selected theoretical lenses according to explanatory necessity. Institutional theory was retained because the problem begins with field-level legitimacy pressure; dynamic capabilities were retained because the problem concerns orchestration under finite capacity; and Mode 2 knowledge production together with engaged scholarship were retained because the framework requires an epistemic account of inquiry that extends beyond the classical disciplinary laboratory model. Third, the article reviewed five adjacent literature clusters, research culture and capacity, entrepreneurial and third-mission universities, student inquiry and partnership, pedagogical scholarship, and socially distributed knowledge production, and extracted recurrent constructs that appeared repeatedly across them. Fourth, only those constructs that met three criteria were retained in the final framework: indispensability to the explanandum, complementarity with the selected theories, and empirical tractability for future testing.

This procedure was designed to avoid conceptual sprawl. The framework does not attempt to explain all determinants of research output, nor does it collapse institutional research capability into any single proxy such as publication volume, autonomy, or grant income. Instead, it focuses on the mechanisms through which institutions under constraint translate external pressure into aligned priorities, organized inquiry, and cumulative institutional learning. In that sense, the article offers a middle-range conceptual explanation: abstract enough to travel beyond a single case, but delimited enough to specify mechanisms, scope conditions, and propositions for empirical examination (Jaakkola, 2020).

6. The ASPIRE Framework: A Theory of Mission-Aligned Research Capability Under Constraint

6.1. Core assumptions

The ASPIRE framework rests on five assumptions. First, research is a constitutive function of higher learning institutions. Second, institutions differ in mission, resources, maturity, and external context, so research architectures should differ accordingly. Third, resource constraint requires selectivity, but selectivity need not imply anti-intellectual utilitarianism. Fourth, students are legitimate research actors, and their dissertations can be structured as recurring institutional inputs into knowledge production. Fifth, research has institutional value only when it is translated into cumulative knowledge assets rather than left as isolated outputs.

6.2. Defining the framework

ASPIRE stands for Aligned and Selective Partnership-based Inquiry for Research Ecosystems. It explains how institutions build research capability through three interlocking layers: contextual alignment, strategic capability, and inquiry-to-translation processes.

For analytic clarity, five core constructs should be defined explicitly. **Research capability** refers here to the institution's durable ability to generate, coordinate, validate, and translate inquiry into cumulative knowledge assets. **Legitimacy pressure** refers to the external coercive, normative, and mimetic demands through which research becomes a marker of institutional seriousness. **Mission alignment** refers to the strategic filtering of research priorities through the institution's declared educational and social purpose without converting mission into doctrinal closure. **Domain stewardship** refers to the agenda-curating role performed by research centres or analogous units that concentrate expertise, route inquiry, maintain repositories, and sustain external linkages. **Knowledge translation** refers to the conversion of research outputs into reusable institutional value, including publications,

curricular redesign, policy briefs, repositories, tools, and future agenda formation. **Cumulative institutional value**, finally, refers not to output in the abstract but to the durable accumulation of scholarly, pedagogical, organizational, and societal assets generated through translated inquiry.

6.3. Contextual alignment layer

The outer layer consists of three forms of alignment.

Regulatory and legitimacy alignment refers to the institution's need to satisfy external expectations around scholarly quality, ethical review, curriculum renewal, and institutional seriousness. This layer explains why research is not optional in the contemporary field.

Mission alignment refers to the fit between research activity and the institution's declared educational and social purpose. Research strategy should not be conceived as detached prestige acquisition. It should be organized around the institution's understanding of why it exists, whether that purpose emphasizes educational transformation, employability, leadership formation, social responsibility, innovation, faith-informed service, or other legitimate missions.

National-priority alignment refers to the relationship between research agendas and wider developmental transitions, including digitalization, entrepreneurship, public sector reform, agribusiness, health, finance, energy, conservation, and tourism where relevant. This is not a call for narrow state instrumentalism. It is a recognition that research ecosystems are stronger when they can articulate credible relevance to societal needs.

6.4. Strategic capability layer

The second layer translates alignment into organizational design.

Selective research portfolio design is the first capability. Under conditions of finite capacity, institutions must decide what kinds of research to privilege, sequence, and support. ASPIRE argues for a differentiated portfolio in which applied, empirical, qualitative, analytical, and selected quantitative

inquiry often occupy strategic priority because they can more readily support curriculum renewal, pedagogical validation, institutional decision-making, and social problem-solving. Descriptive and larger-scale quantitative work remain important, especially for accreditation and validation purposes. More abstract conceptual work is not rejected, but it is sequenced and selectively supported according to institutional maturity and demonstrated capability.

Research centres as domain stewards are the second capability. Research centres are defined broadly to include research clusters, institutes, hubs, and other domain-focused units. Their purpose is not merely to display organizational seriousness. They curate living agendas, define domain boundaries, sustain partnerships, develop repositories, identify what counts as impact, and prevent institutional inquiry from becoming diffuse. In ASPIRE, research centres are not ornamental. They are agenda-setting infrastructures.

Pedagogical validation is the third capability. Institutions that claim distinctive educational models must investigate those claims empirically. This includes evaluating learning design, student experience, dissertation quality, employability pathways, and the effects of curricular innovations. Pedagogical validation is therefore treated not as a peripheral scholarship track but as a core mechanism through which research capability and educational credibility reinforce one another.

6.5. Inquiry and translation layer

The third layer concerns how research is generated and converted into value.

Students' dissertation-led inquiry is the first mechanism. The student dissertation is positioned as a recurring, structured, and institutionally anchored site of inquiry. Rather than treating dissertations as terminal exercises undertaken only for assessment, ASPIRE treats them as institutionally valuable research events. This view is consistent with recent work arguing that undergraduate and dissertation-level inquiry can move from terminal assessment to socially useful scholarship when

curricula are redesigned around stronger methods formation, supervision quality, and impact-oriented translation pathways (Sangwa & Mutabazi, 2025). This is particularly important for teaching-intensive institutions, because dissertations distribute inquiry across the curriculum and across cohorts.

Faculty coaching and co-authorship is the second mechanism. Faculty remain central to rigor, but their role shifts from being exclusively originators of research problems to also being designers of inquiry environments, methodologists, editors, ethics stewards, and co-authors. This does not diminish academic leadership. It repositions it so that faculty effort strengthens the quality, coherence, and translatability of student-led work.

Knowledge translation and reinvestment is the third mechanism. Research outputs must not end as archived dissertations or isolated reports. High-value work should be translated into journal manuscripts, case repositories, curriculum redesign, policy briefs, sectoral tools, employer-facing products, community interventions, and future research agendas. Translation is the point at which research becomes cumulative institutional capital.

6.6. Causal mechanisms and feedback loops

ASPIRE is a mechanism-based theory of conversion. Its first mechanism is legitimacy concentration. External pressure to demonstrate research seriousness generates capability only when diffuse demands are translated into explicit priorities rather than absorbed as generalized compliance. Its second mechanism is resource economization. Selective portfolio design and domain stewardship reduce fragmentation by concentrating scarce supervisory, infrastructural, and dissemination capacity where cumulative returns are most plausible. Its third mechanism is epistemic participation. Dissertation-led inquiry enlarges the

pool of legitimate research actors by moving students from peripheral participation to structured knowledge production, while faculty coaching increases the probability that such work meets methodological and conceptual standards. Its fourth mechanism is translation and reinforcement. Once high-value inquiry is translated into publications, curriculum redesign, institutional repositories, policy outputs, and external partnerships, research ceases to be episodic and becomes cumulative institutional capital. The framework therefore explains a specific process: institutions move from pressure to priority, from priority to organized capability, from organized capability to distributed inquiry, and from inquiry to cumulative value. Feedback occurs when translated outputs refine agendas, strengthen legitimacy, deepen partnerships, and improve the institution's subsequent capacity to conduct research.

6.7. Scope conditions and failure modes

The framework is not universally applicable. It is strongest where institutions are teaching-intensive, strategically mission-driven, and able to sustain at least minimal supervisory, ethical, and dissemination infrastructure. It is weaker in contexts where high-cost laboratory science dominates, where faculty are already embedded in advanced grant ecosystems, or where doctoral and postdoctoral structures already generate strong research pipelines independent of curriculum-embedded inquiry.

ASPIRE can also fail. It fails when research centres become bureaucratic shells, when dissertation supervision is treated as mere assessment management, when translation pathways are absent, when selective portfolios harden into anti-theoretical dogma, or when mission alignment becomes ideological narrowing rather than scholarly prioritization.

Figure 1. The ASPIRE framework for mission-aligned research capability under constraint

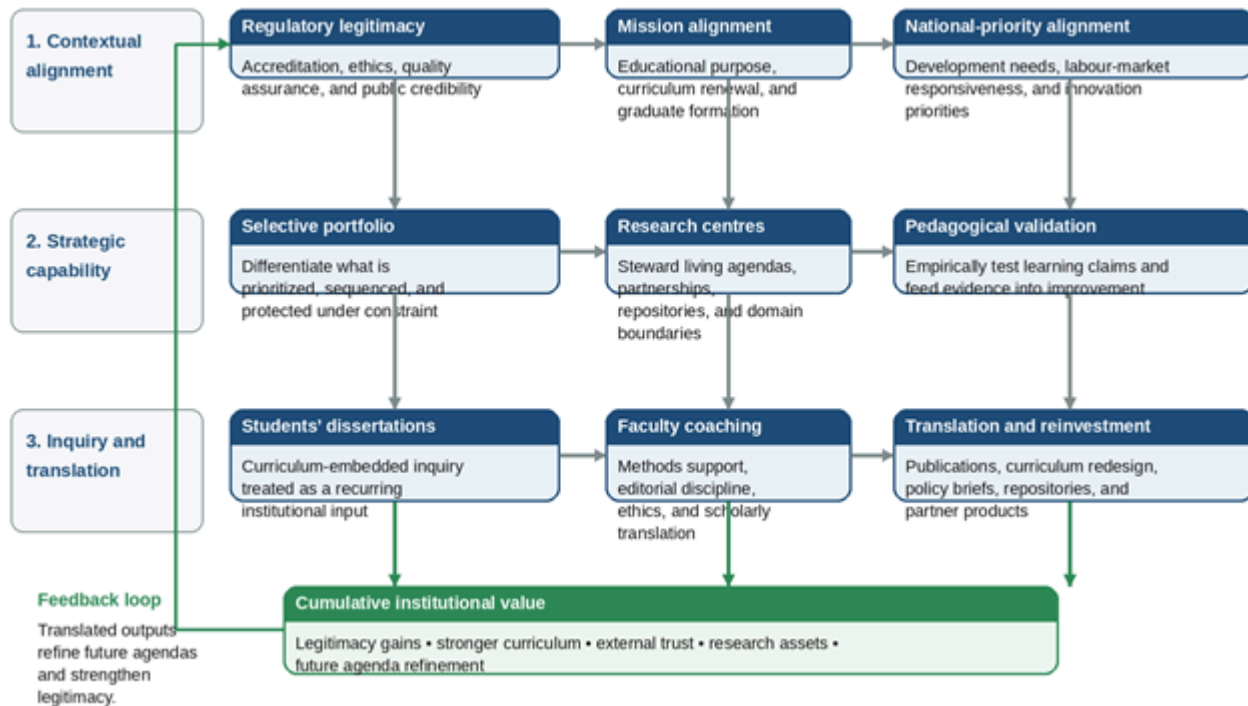


Table 1. Strategic research portfolio alignment matrix

Research band	Priority logic	Typical outputs	Key safeguard
High priority	Applied, empirical, qualitative, analytical, and carefully scoped mixed-methods inquiry best support curriculum renewal, pedagogical validation, and institutional problem-solving.	Students' dissertations, program evaluations, sector analyses, case studies, practice-oriented articles, employer-facing reports	Protect conceptual framing so applied work does not become short-termist.
Secondary priority	Descriptive and quantitative work is indispensable for benchmarking, accreditation, tracer studies, and scale validation.	Graduate tracer studies, survey diagnostics, dashboards, institutional analytics, comparative profiling	Require explanation and translation so data does not accumulate without interpretation.
Selective and sequenced	Conceptual, foundational, and highly abstract theoretical inquiry remains crucial where institutional capability can sustain it.	Conceptual articles, theory-building essays, epistemological interventions, foundational syntheses	Sequence support carefully so abstract agendas do not diffuse scarce institutional capacity.

7. Research Propositions

7. Research Propositions

The framework yields eight propositions suitable for future empirical examination. Together they specify the sequential logic through which legitimacy pressure may, or may not, become durable institutional research capability.

- **P1.** Under conditions of resource constraint, external legitimacy pressure strengthens institutional research capability only when mediated by explicit mission-aligned prioritization rather than absorbed as generalized compliance.
- **P2.** The positive effect of mission alignment on research capability is stronger when institutions adopt a selective research

portfolio than when they impose diffuse expectations of generalized research output.

- **P3.** Domain stewardship by research centres positively mediates the relationship between selective research portfolios and institutional research coherence.
- **P4.** Dissertation-led inquiry contributes positively to institutional research capability only when student projects are formally routed through domain agendas, minimum-quality supervisory systems, and dissemination triage mechanisms.
- **P5.** Faculty coaching and co-authorship positively moderate the relationship between dissertation-led inquiry and publishable or institutionally usable outputs.

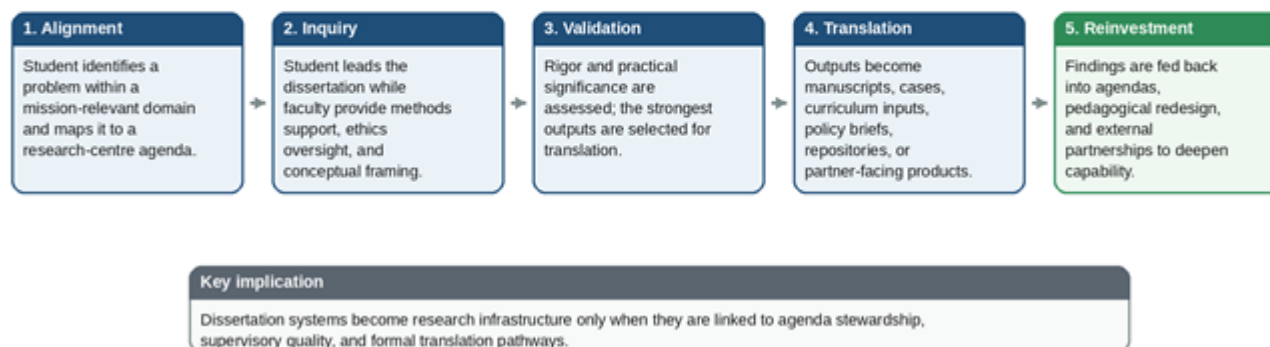
- **P6.** Pedagogical validation strengthens research legitimacy in teaching-intensive institutions when evidence about learning design, student experience, and educational distinctiveness is reintegrated into curriculum and quality-assurance systems.
- **P7.** Knowledge-translation routines positively mediate the relationship between research activity and cumulative institutional value.
- **P8.** Research ecosystems become self-reinforcing when translated outputs are reinvested into subsequent agenda formation, curricular redesign, repository development, and external partnerships

Table 2. Conventional research model and the ASPIRE model

Dimension	Conventional diffuse model	ASPIRE model
Agenda origin	Primarily faculty-defined and individually dispersed	Institutionally aligned and domain-guided through research centres
Student role	Peripheral assistant or assessment candidate	Legitimate inquirer whose dissertation contributes to research production
Faculty role	Originator, gatekeeper, and sole primary driver	Coach, methodologist, editor, translator, and co-author
Curricular location	Often separated from the core teaching architecture	Embedded through students' dissertations and pedagogical inquiry
Value criterion	Publication output and prestige signaling	Publication plus curriculum renewal, institutional learning, external usefulness, and cumulative knowledge assets
Systemic risk	Fragmentation, overextension, and symbolic compliance	Instrumental narrowing if safeguards are absent

Figure 2. Dissertation-to-impact lifecycle within the ASPIRE research ecosystem

How dissertation work is converted into cumulative institutional knowledge



8. Scope Conditions, Risks, and Safeguards.

8.1. The charge of instrumentalism

The deepest objection to ASPIRE is normative rather than managerial. If research is organized through mission, priorities, translation, and external relevance, does the framework not risk subordinating inquiry to institutional branding, labour-market signalling, donor preference, or managerial utility? This objection must be taken seriously because universities are not consultancy firms, and research loses its dignity when its value is reduced to immediate performative usefulness. The point of the university is not exhausted by service delivery. It includes truth-seeking, disciplined criticism, conceptual exploration, and the preservation of intellectual spaces in which the most important questions may initially appear impractical.

This concern is sharpened by the wider condition of higher education itself. Lott (2024) shows that academic freedom has entered an ongoing global decline wave since 2013, reminding us that the institutional conditions of free inquiry cannot be taken for granted. In such a context, any framework that links research to mission or external relevance will rightly attract suspicion. ASPIRE is defensible only if the mission is treated as a principle of strategic concentration rather than a criterion of

epistemic conformity. The framework therefore rejects both prestige imitation and managerial utilitarianism. It argues not that all inquiry must prove immediate utility, but that institutions under finite capacity must organize support in ways that protect a plural ecology of scholarship while preventing scarce resources from being dissolved into symbolic diffusion.

8.2. The risk of epistemic narrowing

A second objection is that prioritizing applied or mission-aligned inquiry may reinforce epistemic narrowing and marginalize disciplines or methods whose value becomes visible only over longer horizons. This is a real danger, especially in postcolonial contexts where imported metrics of relevance can coexist with local anti-intellectualism.

The answer is not indiscriminate inclusion. It is principled pluralism. Research centres should define priority domains without reducing all scholarship to immediate utility. Portfolio design should therefore preserve a protected minority space for conceptual, historical, theoretical, and critical work, especially where such work strengthens the institution's capacity to interpret and challenge prevailing assumptions.

8.3. Uneven quality in students' dissertations

A third objection is practical. Student dissertations vary widely in quality. Many are underpowered,

methodologically weak, or insufficiently original. Can they really function as research infrastructure?

Not automatically. Dissertation-led inquiry becomes valuable only under institutional conditions that support it: clear domain alignment, robust supervision, staged milestones, methodological coaching, ethics review, and triage mechanisms that identify which outputs warrant translation into wider institutional use. ASPIRE is therefore not a romantic theory of student agency. It is a structured theory of how student inquiry can be institutionalized without diluting standards.

8.4. The bureaucratization of research centres

Research centres can fail by becoming bureaucratic containers rather than epistemic drivers. Without agenda discipline, repositories, external linkages, and leadership, they risk becoming mere prestige structures.

ASPIRE therefore treats research centres as a capability only when they perform six concrete functions: agenda setting, impact framing, partnership brokering, repository maintenance, dissertation routing, and translation support. Institutions should resist proliferating centres faster than they can sustain them.

8.5. Mission alignment and academic freedom

A final objection concerns the relationship between mission alignment and academic freedom. If research must align with mission, who defines mission, who interprets it, and what prevents that language from becoming a euphemism for control, especially in faith-based or otherwise normatively distinctive institutions? This objection is decisive because the difference between strategic coherence and epistemic closure is often much narrower in practice than in principle.

ASPIRE addresses this risk by distinguishing mission alignment from ideological enclosure. Mission alignment means that an institution makes public, contestable, and revisable judgments about which areas deserve strategic concentration because of

mission fit, educational relevance, partner need, and feasible capacity. It does not mean that inquiry must confirm institutional preferences or avoid critical scrutiny of the institution's own assumptions. The safeguard must therefore be procedural, not merely rhetorical: transparent agenda setting, peer review, ethics oversight, shared governance where possible, protected room for critique, and an explicit commitment that strategic emphasis does not determine acceptable conclusions. In this sense, mission defines where the institution concentrates support; it must not define what scholars are permitted to find.

9. Discussion

9.1. What ASPIRE explains that existing models do not

ASPIRE explains a problem that existing models leave insufficiently specified: why some institutions under constraint convert legitimacy pressure into cumulative research capability while others remain trapped in symbolic adoption. Its explanatory value lies in identifying the missing conversion mechanisms. Rather than treating research performance as the aggregate effect of individual faculty productivity, the framework shows how capability depends on the alignment of priorities, the concentration of agendas, the distribution of inquiry, and the translation of outputs into reusable institutional assets.

This differentiates ASPIRE from three rival models. Unlike the classical research-intensive university model, it does not assume abundant fiscal slack, dense doctoral pipelines, or diffuse disciplinary autonomy as normal institutional conditions. Unlike the compliance model, it does not equate research with documentation, reporting, or procedural assurance. Unlike entrepreneurial-university accounts that slide too quickly toward commercialization, it proposes a broader ecology of value in which publications, curriculum renewal, pedagogical credibility, institutional learning, and public problem-solving are analytically connected. The

novelty of ASPIRE therefore lies not simply in naming a framework, but in specifying the mechanism through which research becomes cumulative institutional capability under constraint.

9.2. Originality, utility, and portability

The originality of ASPIRE lies in specifying a generative institutional logic rather than offering another normative appeal for “more research.” Legitimacy pressure does not automatically produce capability. It produces capability only when filtered through mission-aligned prioritization, domain stewardship, dissertation systems, pedagogical validation, and knowledge-translation routines. This is the article’s central theoretical claim.

The framework also has analytic portability. Although developed with serious attention to African higher education, it is not reducible to a regional adaptation argument. On the contrary, the African context makes the underlying theoretical problem unusually visible because legitimacy expectations are strong while research infrastructures remain highly uneven. In that sense, Africa is not a peripheral application site. It is the vantage point from which the hidden assumptions of prestige-based university theory become clearer. The framework should therefore travel, with adaptation, to regional, open, teaching-intensive, and mission-specific institutions elsewhere that face strong research expectations under finite capability conditions.

10. Theoretical Contributions

This article makes four theoretical contributions. First, it reconceptualizes research promotion as an institutional capability under constraint rather than as a diffuse aggregate of individual output. Second, it integrates previously adjacent but insufficiently connected literatures on research culture, entrepreneurial and third-mission universities, student inquiry, pedagogical scholarship, and socially distributed knowledge production into a single explanatory account of research-capability formation. Third, it extends institutional theory in higher

education by arguing that legitimacy need not be pursued through isomorphic replication alone; differentiated architectures can also produce legitimacy when they are coherent, credible, and cumulative. Fourth, it contributes to knowledge-production theory by showing how dissertation-led inquiry, faculty coaching, and pedagogical validation can function not as secondary educational practices but as components of a translational research ecosystem.

11. Practical and Policy Implications

For institutional leaders, the framework suggests that research strategy should begin with hard prioritization rather than generic aspiration. Institutions should identify a limited number of domains where they possess mission fit, partner relevance, and some realistic prospect of cumulative knowledge development. Those domains should be anchored in research centres or analogous structures that can steward agendas over time.

For faculty, the framework implies a shift from a narrow model of supervisory labour to a broader model of scholarly coaching. Faculty effort is maximized when it improves methodological rigor, strengthens conceptual framing, and converts strong dissertations into wider institutional assets.

For curriculum designers, the implication is that students’ dissertations should be redesigned as knowledge-producing infrastructure. This requires clearer problem framing, better research methods, scaffolding, stronger ethical review pathways, and formal mechanisms for identifying outputs with translation potential. This is particularly important in digitally mediated and hybrid environments, where pedagogical quality, governance capacity, and institutional credibility increasingly rise or fall together (Sangwa et al., 2025).

For regulators and quality assurance agencies, the framework suggests that demanding evidence of research engagement is reasonable, but prescribing a single model of research intensity is not. Policy should reward coherent differentiation and

demonstrable capability, not simply the performance of prestige scripts.

For African higher education systems, the framework offers a way to avoid two false choices: between teaching and research, and between scholarly seriousness and societal relevance. Research can remain central without presuming the replication of historically specific and highly expensive Northern models.

12. Limitations and Future Research

ASPIRE is a middle-range conceptual theory, not an empirically validated law-like model. Its value lies in analytic integration, mechanism specification, and design guidance. The next task is empirical testing.

Future studies should examine whether institutions that embed dissertations within domain-guided research centres produce stronger translation outcomes than institutions that treat student research as isolated assessment. Comparative studies across private and public institutions would be particularly valuable. Longitudinal work is also needed to test whether pedagogical validation strengthens legitimacy and curriculum quality over time.

The framework also invites disciplinary differentiation. It is likely to work differently in laboratory science, professional education, humanities-based institutions, and digital or open universities. Future research should therefore test where the model travels well, where it requires adaptation, and where its assumptions break down.

13. Conclusion

Higher learning institutions cannot credibly separate teaching from knowledge creation, nor educational relevance from research capability. Yet acknowledging the indispensability of research does not require every institution to imitate the classical research-intensive university. The more difficult and more important task is to explain how institutions under real constraints can still build research systems that are legitimate, intellectually serious, strategically coherent, and cumulative.

This article has argued that the central problem is one of conversion. Legitimacy pressure does not itself generate research capability. It does so only when institutions translate external demands into mission-aligned priorities, concentrate effort through domain stewardship, distribute inquiry through dissertation-led research and faculty coaching, validate their pedagogical claims empirically, and convert strong outputs into reusable institutional assets. The ASPIRE framework is proposed as a middle-range explanation of that process.

The broader implication is that differentiated research architecture should not be mistaken for lowered academic ambition. Properly designed, it is the opposite: a refusal of prestige theatre in favor of institutionally honest, philosophically serious, and publicly credible scholarship. For many institutions, especially but not only in Africa, the future of research will depend less on symbolic resemblance to elite models than on the capacity to organize inquiry in ways that are intellectually plural, strategically selective, and cumulatively valuable.

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