



A Policy Framework for Building a Sustainable Research Culture in Emerging Universities: A Conceptual Review

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ABSTRACT

The sustainability of university research systems remains a persistent challenge for emerging and private universities, particularly in developing regions. While research is widely acknowledged as central to innovation, institutional credibility, and societal relevance, many universities struggle to move beyond fragmented and short-term research activities. Adopting a conceptual, policy-analytic approach grounded in a purposive review of higher education policy literature and reflective practitioner engagement, this paper presents an institutional policy framework for fostering a sustainable research culture that deliberately bridges innovation with quality assurance. Drawing on global best practices, higher education policy literature, and practical engagement with institutional development, the paper proposes an integrated approach covering research governance, funding, ethics, capacity development, postgraduate research, collaboration, innovation, and monitoring mechanisms. Rather than treating innovation and quality assurance as competing priorities, the framework positions them as mutually reinforcing pillars of a robust research ecosystem. The paper offers context-sensitive guidance and actionable recommendations for emerging universities, particularly in West Africa, seeking to institutionalize research excellence, relevance, and long-term impact.

Keywords: Research Culture; Research Policy; Innovation; Quality Assurance; Emerging Universities; West Africa

1. Introduction

Universities have long been recognized as critical spaces for knowledge creation, innovation, and societal transformation. Beyond teaching, research increasingly defines institutional relevance, credibility, and contribution to national and regional development (Marginson, 2011). In West Africa, this role has become even more significant as universities are expected to respond to complex challenges such as youth unemployment, technological change, climate vulnerability, and social inequality.

Despite these expectations, many emerging universities, particularly new and private institutions, struggle to cultivate a sustainable research culture, a challenge widely documented across Sub-Saharan African higher education systems (Teferra & Altbach, 2004). Research activities are often driven by individual motivation rather than institutional systems, resulting in fragmented outputs and limited long-term impact. In some contexts, innovation initiatives develop without adequate quality assurance, while in others, rigid compliance mechanisms unintentionally constrain creativity.

This paper emerges from practical engagement with institutional development in higher education. It argues that sustainable research culture does not occur organically but must be intentionally designed through coherent institutional policies that integrate innovation with quality assurance, in line with global aspirations toward strengthened, world-class research systems (Altbach & Salmi, 2011). By proposing an adaptable policy framework, the paper contributes to ongoing conversations on how West African universities can strengthen research ecosystems that are both innovative and credible.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

Specifically, this paper seeks to: (i) examine the institutional and policy conditions necessary for sustaining research culture in emerging universities, particularly within the West African context; (ii) develop an integrated policy framework that bridges innovation and quality assurance in university research systems; (iii) identify practical governance, funding, ethics, and capacity-building mechanisms that support long-term research sustainability; and (iv) propose actionable recommendations for university leaders and policymakers seeking to institutionalize research excellence.

2. Literature Review

A sustainable research culture refers to an institutional environment in which research activities are consistently supported, ethically conducted, and aligned with long-term academic and societal goals (Cummings & Shin, 2014). It extends beyond the volume of research outputs to include the quality of research processes, the continuity of research capacity, and the relevance of research to societal needs.

In practice, such a culture is reflected in stable governance structures, predictable support systems, opportunities for capacity development, and clear expectations regarding ethical conduct and quality standards. Sustainability, in this sense, implies that research activity can be maintained and renewed over time, rather than depending on individual enthusiasm or temporary funding opportunities. This is complicated by the persistent tension between teaching obligations and research expectations, particularly where institutional reward systems favour teaching load over knowledge production (Cummings & Shin, 2014). At the same time, global competition for visibility and institutional prestige, reflected in international rankings, has intensified pressure on universities, including emerging ones, to demonstrate measurable research quality and output (Hazelkorn, 2015). A recent systematic review of organizational culture change at higher education institutions similarly finds that embedding any institution-wide norm, whether around sustainability or research, depends less on isolated initiatives than on aligning incentives, governance, and communication across the wider higher-education system, not just within a single university (Holst et al., 2025). Taken together, this literature suggests that sustainable research culture is shaped as much by institutional design choices as by resource availability, emphasizing the need for a deliberate policy framework of the kind proposed in this paper.

3. Methodology

This paper adopts a conceptual and policy-analytic approach rather than an empirical research design. It draws on a purposive review of higher education policy literature, institutional research governance reports, and international frameworks, including publications by the OECD, UNESCO, and the World Bank, combined with reflective engagement drawn from practical experience in institutional development within an emerging university context. The review prioritized peer-reviewed literature and major international policy reports addressing university research governance, funding, ethics, and quality assurance, with particular attention to studies focused on African and other developing-region higher education systems. Sources were selected on the basis of their direct relevance to these themes rather than through a systematic, protocol-driven search, consistent with the exploratory, framework-building purpose of the study.

The resulting framework was constructed thematically: recurring policy dimensions identified across the reviewed literature were synthesized into an integrated model comprising governance, funding, workload and incentives, ethics, capacity development, postgraduate research, collaboration and innovation, and monitoring and evaluation. As a conceptual paper, this study does not present primary empirical data; rather, it offers a synthesized policy framework intended to guide institutional practice and to serve as a foundation for subsequent empirical validation.

4. The Policy Framework: Eight Dimensions of Sustainable Research Culture

Building on the literature reviewed above, this section presents the policy framework itself. It comprises eight interrelated dimensions — governance, funding, workload and incentives, ethics, capacity development, postgraduate research, collaboration and innovation, and monitoring and evaluation. The eight dimensions are designed to function as an integrated whole, as illustrated in Figure 1.

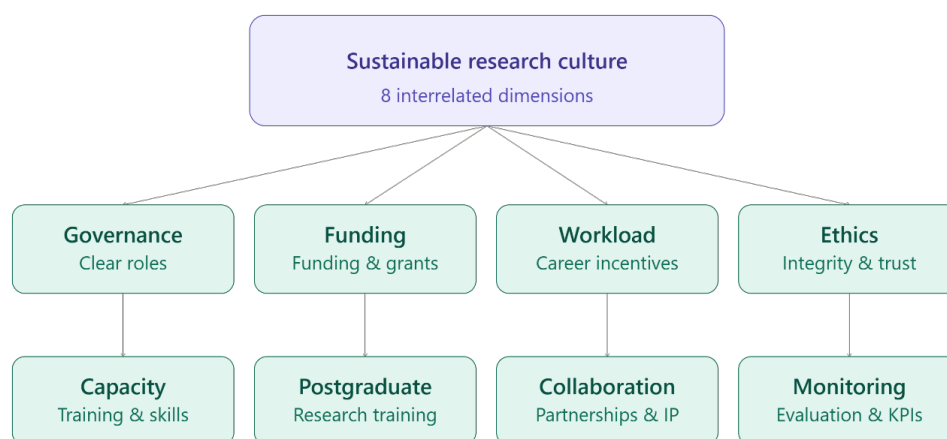


Figure 1. Eight-Dimension Policy Framework for Sustainable Research Culture

4.1 Research Governance and Institutional Leadership

Effective research governance forms the backbone of any sustainable research culture. For emerging universities, clarity of roles and decision-making processes is particularly important, as weak or ambiguous structures have been widely documented to produce duplication, inconsistency, and loss of institutional memory across African higher education systems more broadly (Teferra & Altbach, 2004).

The framework proposed in this paper emphasizes the establishment of a central research coordination structure, supported by faculty- and department-level committees. Leadership commitment, especially at the level of the Vice-Chancellor and Senate, signals the institutional value placed on research and ensures alignment between research priorities and broader strategic goals. When governance systems are transparent and stable, they provide

both accountability and confidence for researchers to pursue innovative work within clear quality boundaries.

4.2 Research Funding and Resource Mobilization

Funding constraints remain one of the most visible challenges facing universities in West Africa and the wider Sub-Saharan African region (World Bank, 2009). However, the absence of large research budgets does not necessarily preclude the development of a sustainable research culture. What matters equally is the presence of clear funding policies and predictable support mechanisms. A large qualitative study of academic staff across Nigerian tertiary and research institutions found that the absence of dedicated research funding, more than any other single factor, undermines research productivity and career progression, and recommended establishing a functional national research trust fund (Igiri et al., 2021).

Internal seed funding, even when modest, can play a catalytic role by enabling pilot studies and supporting early-career researchers. Equally important is institutional support for external grant acquisition, including proposal development, institutional endorsement, and transparent financial management. Over time, policies that allow a portion of indirect costs to be reinvested in research infrastructure contribute to sustainability and institutional learning, consistent with broader calls for strengthened research infrastructure investment in developing-country universities (Altbach & Salmi, 2011).

4.3 Academic Workload, Incentives, and Career Progression

One of the most frequently cited barriers to research productivity in emerging universities is excessive teaching and administrative workload, compounded by the increasingly precarious and under-resourced nature of academic careers in many developing higher education systems (OECD, 2021). When research is treated as an optional or extracurricular activity, sustained engagement becomes difficult.

The policy framework therefore recognizes research as a core academic responsibility, integrated into workload allocation and promotion criteria. Incentive systems that reward quality, relevance, and mentorship, rather than sheer quantity of publications, help align individual motivation with institutional goals. Such alignment reduces tension between innovation and quality assurance by embedding both within academic career pathways.

4.4 Research Ethics and Integrity

Ethical conduct is fundamental to research credibility and public trust. In many emerging institutions, ethics procedures are either underdeveloped or perceived as bureaucratic obstacles rather than supportive mechanisms.

In line with international guidance on responsible and open research conduct (UNESCO, 2021), this framework positions research ethics as an enabling component of quality assurance rather than a constraint on it. This is consistent with recent evidence that African quality assurance systems remain overly compliance-driven, in part due to resource constraints, stressing the need for QA structures that are educative rather than merely regulatory (Obeng-Kyereh, 2026). The establishment of functional ethics review committees, combined with regular training on responsible research practices, helps researchers internalize ethical standards. When ethics systems are transparent and educative, they protect both researchers and institutions while enhancing the overall quality of research outputs.

4.5 Capacity Development and Mentorship

Sustainable research culture depends heavily on deliberate investment in human capacity. Capacity development remains one of the most consistently identified needs across African higher education research systems, and investment in structured research training has been shown to strengthen research networks and collaborations among early-career researchers (Paina et al., 2013). Training in research methods, academic writing, and grant development strengthens institutional competence, while mentorship fosters confidence and continuity among early-career researchers; a recent systematic review of manuscript-writing and publishing interventions across low- and middle-income countries confirms that structured, sustained programmes (rather than one-off workshops) are most effective at building lasting authorship capacity (Busse et al., 2022).

Formal mentorship arrangements and research clusters encourage collaboration and knowledge sharing. Over time, these practices reduce isolation, promote interdisciplinary work, and help institutions retain emerging scholars who might otherwise disengage from research activities.

4.6 Postgraduate Research as a Driver of Sustainability

Postgraduate students play a central role in sustaining research ecosystems. Postgraduate education has long been recognized as a mechanism through which universities renew their research capacity and reward structures over time (Cummings & Shin, 2014). Research-led postgraduate programmes contribute directly to institutional output while also serving as training grounds for future academics and researchers.

Clear supervision guidelines, structured progress monitoring, and access to research support improve completion rates and research quality. Supporting postgraduate researchers is therefore not merely a student welfare issue but a strategic investment in institutional research capacity; recent evidence from an East African university shows that targeted structural interventions, such as dedicated writing support and structured mentorship, can meaningfully reduce common barriers to postgraduate research completion in resource-constrained settings (Mwangi et al., 2024).

4.7 Collaboration, Innovation, and Knowledge Translation

Collaboration expands both the reach and relevance of university research. Partnerships with industry, government agencies, and international organizations provide opportunities for funding, practical application, and policy influence, while also enhancing institutional visibility within an increasingly competitive global higher education landscape (Hazelkorn, 2015). A recent scientometric analysis of two decades of research output at a major Nigerian university found that international collaboration was consistently associated with higher citation impact, reinforcing the strategic value of deliberate partnership-building rather than treating collaboration as incidental (Ahmad & Ubi, 2025).

Innovation, when supported by clear intellectual property and commercialization policies, allows research to translate into tangible societal and economic benefits. Within this framework, quality assurance provides the standards and accountability needed to ensure that innovation remains ethical, credible, and impactful.

4.8 Monitoring, Evaluation, and Continuous Improvement

Monitoring and evaluation are essential for sustaining research culture over time. Rather than focusing solely on publication counts, the framework emphasizes a balanced set of indicators, including ethical compliance, postgraduate outcomes, grant participation, collaboration, and societal impact. Internationally recognized frameworks for measuring research and experimental development activity (OECD, 2015), alongside the Sustainable Development Goals agenda (UNESCO, 2017), offer useful reference points for constructing such balanced, multidimensional indicators. Institution-level scientometric tracking, of the kind recently applied to a decade of publication and citation data at a Nigerian university, illustrates how such monitoring can move beyond raw output counts to reveal disciplinary strengths, collaboration networks, and productivity trends that can directly inform policy (Ahmad & Igligli, 2026).

Regular review processes enable institutions to learn from experience, adapt to changing contexts, and refine policies as research capacity evolves.

5. Bridging Innovation and Quality Assurance

A recurring tension in higher education discourse is the perceived incompatibility between innovation and quality assurance. This paper argues that such tension arises not from inherent contradiction but from weak institutional design.

When quality assurance is reduced to compliance, it constrains creativity. Conversely, when innovation is pursued without standards, it becomes unsustainable and risks undermining the broader public-good role that research is expected to serve (Marginson, 2011). The proposed framework demonstrates that intentional policy integration

allows innovation and quality assurance to reinforce each other, producing research cultures that are both dynamic and credible.

6. Conclusion

This paper has presented an institutional policy framework for building a sustainable research culture in emerging universities, with particular relevance to the West African context. It argues that sustainable research culture is the outcome of deliberate institutional choices rather than individual effort alone, and that this is especially pertinent for universities in Sub-Saharan Africa seeking to strengthen research systems under conditions of resource constraint (World Bank, 2009). For university leaders, the framework highlights the importance of aligning innovation initiatives with governance, ethics, and quality assurance systems. For policymakers and development partners, it highlights the value of supporting institutional capacity and policy coherence alongside research outputs.

7. Recommendations

Arising from the framework presented above, the paper offers the following recommendations for university leaders, regulators, and development partners:

- i. Establish a central Directorate of Research and Innovation, with clear terms of reference, reporting directly to the Vice-Chancellor, to coordinate research governance across faculties and departments.
- ii. Institutionalize internal seed-funding schemes, however modest, to support pilot studies and early-career researchers, alongside dedicated support offices for external and TETFund grant acquisition.
- iii. Integrate research output explicitly into workload allocation, promotion, and incentive structures, rewarding quality, relevance, and mentorship rather than publication volume alone.
- iv. Strengthen institutional Research Ethics Committees and mandate periodic training in responsible research conduct for academic staff and postgraduate students.
- v. Develop formal mentorship programmes and interdisciplinary research clusters to build sustained capacity among early-career academics.
- vi. Adopt structured postgraduate supervision guidelines with defined progress-monitoring milestones to improve completion rates and research quality.
- vii. Pursue strategic partnerships with industry, government agencies (including TETFund and the National Universities Commission), and international bodies to expand funding and translate research into societal impact.
- viii. Institute a balanced monitoring and evaluation framework that tracks ethical compliance, postgraduate outcomes, grant participation, and societal impact, rather than publication counts alone.

8. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

As a conceptual policy paper, this study is not based on primary empirical data and does not test the proposed framework against institutional outcomes. The framework was derived from a synthesis of global higher-education policy literature and practitioner reflection, which, while valuable for framework-building, cannot substitute for context-specific empirical validation. Future research should therefore employ empirical designs, such as comparative case studies, surveys of research administrators and academic staff, or mixed-methods evaluations, to test the applicability, feasibility, and impact of the proposed policy dimensions across different emerging university contexts in West Africa and beyond. Such studies would also help refine indicators for monitoring research culture sustainability and assess how institutional size, ownership status (public or private), and resource levels moderate the framework's effectiveness.

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