

Beyond Compliance: Rethinking Pedagogy and Creative Epistemologies in Nigerian Postgraduate Education

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ABSTRACT

Nigerian postgraduate education drives the nation's research capacity, yet it risks pedagogical inertia when quality assurance, including the National Universities Commission's minimum academic standards and accreditation, is reduced to procedural compliance. This paper rethinks postgraduate education by shifting attention toward pedagogies that foster intellectual agency, dialogue, epistemic plurality and context-sensitive knowledge production. Drawing on critical pedagogy, decolonial theory, Ubuntu and Igwebuike, and situated-learning theory, it uses a critical-integrative conceptual method and a purposive review of policy documents and Nigerian, African and international literature. The evidence is strongest for structural constraints on supervision and staff retention and for the Eurocentric orientation of methodological training in African research, but thin or inferential for prevailing pedagogy and examination practice; these claims are therefore advanced as nine testable hypotheses rather than established facts. The paper proposes four connected commitments (relational supervision, epistemic plurality, creative rigour and public relevance), operationalised through the CARE model (Criticality, Agency, Relationality and Epistemic creativity). It argues that standards should be an enabling floor rather than an intellectual ceiling, that resourcing rather than intent is the main obstacle to reform, and that CARE can be adopted through a staged, low-cost, workload-neutral pathway viable for early-career supervisors and under-funded state universities.

Keywords: Compliance; Creative epistemologies; Decolonisation; Nigerian postgraduate education; Pedagogy

1. INTRODUCTION

Postgraduate education represents one of the most intellectually demanding stages of formal schooling. Unlike undergraduate study, which primarily introduces students to established bodies of knowledge, postgraduate education is expected to cultivate the capacity to interrogate existing knowledge, formulate original questions, conduct systematic inquiry, and contribute new insight to scholarship. The postgraduate student is therefore not merely a learner but an emerging producer of knowledge: an apprentice member of a scholarly community rather than a technician executing a prescribed procedure [19,48].

In Nigeria, this aspiration is especially consequential. Universities carry substantial responsibility for generating knowledge relevant to public health, education, agriculture, technology, governance, culture, climate adaptation and social development. Yet the institutional conditions under which postgraduate education takes place frequently make this aspiration difficult to realise: Nigerian academics themselves report poor conditions of service, weak research funding and limited autonomy [3], and lecturers identify poor technological infrastructure as a leading barrier to pedagogical innovation [34]. There is, in a phrase, a quiet crisis in Nigerian postgraduate education: one that is not reducible to funding, though funding is a serious constraint, nor to infrastructure. At its core it is a crisis of imagination: the gradual displacement of creative ways of knowing by bureaucratic

adherence. Consider a hypothetical but recognisable case. When a doctoral candidate spends eighteen months perfecting a research proposal not because the ideas require refinement but because the proposal must satisfy a rigid template of "acceptable" methodology, something fundamental is lost. The student is not being trained to think; the student is being trained to comply. Nigerian universities must respond simultaneously to regulatory expectations, global rankings, national development priorities, community needs, students' economic realities and the demands of academic publishing. The National Universities Commission (NUC) performs an indispensable quality-assurance role through programme approval, benchmark minimum academic standards, and accreditation [27,28,35]. Such mechanisms protect students from arbitrary assessment and exploitative supervision, and they support mobility, comparability and public trust. Yet the existence of standards does not, by itself, settle the deeper pedagogical question: what kind of intellectual person and public knowledge-maker should postgraduate education help to form?

This question matters because the language of quality can narrow as it travels through institutions. Quality assurance may become quality control; quality control may become documentary evidence; and documentary evidence may become compliance for its own sake [13,37]. A postgraduate programme may appear successful because its forms are complete, while its students experience supervision as silence, correction, gatekeeping or delayed feedback. A thesis may conform to a recognisable structure while asking questions weakly connected to Nigerian realities. A student may publish in an approved outlet while learning little about intellectual independence, ethical judgement or the responsibilities of knowledge-making. The problem is not that standards, formats, assessment criteria or publication practices exist. The problem is that these instruments can become substitutes for educational purpose.

The title of this paper signals a deliberate orientation. "Beyond compliance" does not reject regulation or academic rigour; it questions the sufficiency of procedural fidelity as the primary measure of educational success. "Rethinking pedagogy" calls for a re-examination of the teaching-learning relationship at postgraduate level, particularly the dynamics of supervision, seminar culture and assessment. "Creative epistemologies" points to ways of knowing that are generative rather than purely reproductive: ways that draw on indigenous intellectual resources, foster originality, and enable scholars to address the complex realities of Nigerian and African societies [16,25].

This paper therefore asks whether Nigerian postgraduate education can move beyond a predominantly compliance-oriented culture toward a more creative, dialogic and epistemically plural model of learning and research: one in which compliance functions as a foundation rather than a destination. The argument is not that standards, supervision or institutional regulation should be abandoned; a critique of compliance is not an argument against academic standards, research ethics, methodological discipline or institutional accountability. Rather, the paper argues against treating these necessary conditions as the whole meaning of quality, and proposes a richer conception of postgraduate quality as the formation of independent, reflexive, ethically responsible, contextually responsive and creatively capable scholars. The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows: the Introduction (Section 1) reviews the theoretical and empirical literature on compliance, supervision and decoloniality in African higher education; Section 2 outlines the paper's conceptual, literature-based methodology; Section 3 presents the Results and Discussion, analysing the compliance paradigm and its manifestations across the postgraduate lifecycle, developing creative epistemologies as a theoretical alternative, synthesising the reviewed literature on barriers and emerging reform initiatives (with an evidence-strength map and testable hypotheses), proposing an integrated framework for pedagogical and institutional reform, addressing contextual constraints and strategic responses (including low-resource adoption pathways), discussing the

complementarity of rigour and creativity, and considering objections, safeguards and future research directions; Section 4 sets out the Conclusions; and Section 5 presents Recommendations for stakeholders.

1.1 Related Literature

1.1.1 *Regulatory Frameworks and the Logic of Compliance*

The formal architecture of Nigerian postgraduate education is anchored in the regulatory work of the National Universities Commission (NUC), which approves programmes, accredits them at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, and coordinates benchmark minimum academic standards, including standards for postgraduate programmes [27,28,35]. For first-degree programmes, the earlier Benchmark Minimum Academic Standards (BMAS) have been succeeded by the Core Curriculum and Minimum Academic Standards (CCMAS), developed from 2018 to reflect "21st Century realities" [29]. Accreditation panels evaluate programmes against these standards, with outcomes ranging from full accreditation to interim status or denial [28]. While benchmarking serves legitimate quality-assurance functions, the wider quality-assurance literature warns that audit-style regimes can privilege verifiable procedure over educational purpose [13,37], and scholars of African higher education argue that standardised, Western-derived methodological training can marginalise indigenous and qualitative ways of knowing [5,36]. This paper applies these general concerns to the Nigerian postgraduate context as a matter of conceptual argument; it does not claim that NUC frameworks have been shown empirically to produce the effects described.

Nigerian postgraduate regulation also sits within a widening continental policy space. The African Union's Continental Education Strategy for Africa 2016–2025 identifies the harmonisation of higher education and its quality-assurance arrangements as a strategic aim [2]. The African Continental Qualifications Framework (ACQF), developed under the African Union Commission with European partners between 2019 and 2022, seeks to enhance the comparability, quality and transparency of qualifications and to facilitate their recognition across Africa [8]. Continental credit accumulation and transfer arrangements (CATS) are a further instrument of this agenda: proposals for a continent-wide system aim to support the recognition of studies, student mobility, curriculum internationalisation and inter-institutional collaboration [1], and initiatives such as the African Credit Transfer system, announced in 2022, aim to ease the movement of students between African institutions [7].

For postgraduate education these frameworks are double-edged. Where credit and qualification descriptors rest on transparent, shared criteria, they can strengthen comparability, protect mobile students and make Nigerian degrees more portable. Yet comparability is typically secured through common, auditable descriptors, so harmonisation may reproduce the compliance logic criticised in this paper unless the descriptors are drafted to recognise methodological, linguistic and epistemic plurality [31,36]. Practice-based, multilingual and community-engaged theses, in particular, may be difficult to credit under descriptors written for conventional written dissertations. This paper therefore treats the NUC standards, the ACQF and CATS as successive layers of the regulatory floor within which CARE-based pedagogy must operate. As with NUC frameworks, it does not claim that these continental instruments have been shown to produce compliance effects in Nigerian postgraduate programmes; their implications for the recognition of plural forms of postgraduate work are taken up in Section 3.9.

1.1.2 *The Crisis of Postgraduate Supervision*

Postgraduate supervision is the crucible in which scholarly identities are forged, yet there are indications that the supervisory relationship in Nigerian universities is under strain. A survey of 919 postgraduate students in twelve universities in south-western Nigeria identified inadequate mentorship and support, lack of funds and limited access to research materials among the challenges

to their scholarly publishing [42]. Daramola's [6] autoethnographic account of supervision in two African institutions, drawn mainly from the computing disciplines, illustrates the tension between pressure to produce publishable output, the operational difficulties of the working environment, and the lives of students, and recommends practices for supervisors in similar contexts. Writing from an African perspective, Tsotetsi and Omodan [43] argue that supervision carries inherited power differentials between supervisor and student, and that framing supervision through Ubuntu can support more collaborative, mentoring relationships. International scholarship identifies the relational and psychosocial dimensions of supervision (trust, communication, emotional support and inclusive academic socialisation) as important for doctoral persistence, achievement and well-being [41,48], and stresses the need for deliberate supervisor development [20]. A more recent multi-institution survey of 282 PhD students in 16 Nigerian public universities found that supervision practices varied across supervisors, departments and universities, that guidelines on regular supervisory meetings were weakly enforced, and that mentoring was a significant, though modest, predictor of time to completion [18]. Taken together, these sources suggest that constraints on time, resources and support can limit the relational side of supervision; but the evidence specific to Nigerian postgraduate supervision remains thin and largely survey-based, a limitation returned to in Section 3.9.

1.1.3 Brain Drain and the Erosion of Intellectual Capacity

The exodus of academic talent from Nigeria is both symptom and cause of the compliance trap. A survey of 431 academic staff in Nigerian federal universities identified poor conditions of service, inadequate compensation, weak research funding, limited autonomy, poor staff development and inadequate university funding as conditions underlying academic emigration [3]. Popular accounts cite large numbers of Nigerian professors working in other African countries, but because such figures derive largely from press statements rather than systematic data, they are not relied upon here. What the peer-reviewed evidence does support is the underlying diagnosis: the problem is less a deficit of talent than a deficit of enabling structures. When experienced supervisors leave, they may take with them not only technical expertise but the informal pedagogical cultures (the tacit knowledge of how to nurture original thinking) that cannot be captured in benchmark documents; this is an inference from the supervision literature [48] rather than a documented finding.

1.1.4 Epistemological Hegemony and the Decolonial Imperative

African higher education remains substantially shaped by Western epistemologies despite serving predominantly African student populations. Scholars have documented how colonial education, extended across the continent, subordinated indigenous knowledge systems, and how this dismissal continues to structure perceptions of African intellectual inferiority ([4,32]; see also Heleta [14], on epistemic violence and Eurocentrism in South African higher education). Santos [40] describes the destruction and devaluation of non-Western knowledges as epistemicide, while Fricker's [11] concept of epistemic injustice names the wrong done to people in their capacity as knowers. Mungwini [25] similarly argues that the university's universalist canon has sidelined other ways of knowing and of being, and that African higher education should re-affirm them. The decolonial project in African higher education, as articulated by Mbembe [21] and Ndlovu-Gatsheni [30,31], involves "Africanising" universities: not as nativist closure but as an opening toward epistemic pluralism and hybridity [36], including calls for an African university oriented toward the practical problems of societal development [30]. Nabudere's [26] concept of Afrikology offers a further framework: a universal emancipatory epistemology that retraces the evolution of knowledge from its sources and situates it within historical and cultural context. A key theoretical distinction in this literature is between colonialism, understood as formal political and

territorial domination, and coloniality, the continuing patterns of power, classification, knowledge and value that outlive formal colonial administration [24,38,39]. In higher education, coloniality persists when certain languages are treated as naturally scholarly and others as merely cultural [32]; when Euro-American theories are assumed universally explanatory while African intellectual traditions are treated as supplementary; when community knowledge is mined as raw data but not recognised as theory; or when the image of the legitimate researcher remains detached, individualised, written and English-dominant [36].

1.1.5 Critical Thinking, Creativity and Pedagogical Inertia

This paper proceeds from the premise, informed by critical pedagogy [10], that lecture-based, examination-oriented practice remains influential in Nigerian higher education; direct evidence of its prevalence at postgraduate level is limited (see Section 3.9). The available Nigerian evidence concerns undergraduate teaching and is largely perceptual. In a survey of 410 lecturers in four Anambra State institutions, poor technological infrastructure and resistance from traditional educators were identified as key barriers to integrating new technologies, and lecturers expressed stronger concern about the negative effects of generative artificial intelligence (reduced intellectual struggle, uncritical acceptance of AI outputs and surface-level learning) than about its benefits, recommending critical AI-literacy courses and redesigned assessment [34]. These are lecturers' perceptions of undergraduate learning rather than measures of student outcomes. The implication for postgraduate education is nonetheless worth stating: the risk is not merely that students will use AI to produce work dishonestly, but that AI will become another compliance tool: a means of generating "acceptable" research without cultivating the underlying creative capacity it is meant to represent.

1.1.6 Comparative Insights and Gaps in the Literature

Comparable tensions between standardisation and judgement recur in competency-based frameworks in fields such as medical education, where assessment of physician competencies has struggled to balance the two [46]. What is comparatively underdeveloped in the Nigerian literature reviewed here, however, is a framework that integrates regulatory analysis, supervision literature, decolonial theory and indigenous epistemology into a single, actionable pedagogical model. In the sources reviewed, studies tend either to document structural barriers empirically without proposing an integrated pedagogy (for example, [3,42]), or to argue for decolonisation and creative epistemologies at a high level of theoretical abstraction without translating the argument into supervisory, curricular and assessment practice (for example, [16,25]). This paper addresses that gap by synthesising these strands into a single conceptual and practical framework.

2. METHODS

This paper adopts a conceptual, critical-integrative approach rather than a primary empirical design, consistent with its aim of synthesising and reorganising a dispersed body of theoretical and empirical scholarship into a coherent pedagogical argument. The analysis draws on three interrelated sources: (1) policy and regulatory documents describing the National Universities Commission's approval, accreditation and minimum-standards functions [27,28,29] and continental harmonisation instruments [1,2,8]; (2) published empirical and theoretical scholarship on postgraduate supervision, academic staff retention, critical pedagogy, decolonial theory and African epistemology, drawn from Nigerian, African and international sources; and (3) a small number of illustrative cases of reform in Nigerian and African contexts [6,33]. Sources were selected purposively rather than through a systematic search protocol; peer-reviewed articles and scholarly books were preferred, and official documents and a

doctoral thesis were used only where they were the primary source. The analytical approach is thematic: sources were read and coded for indicators of compliance-oriented practice (rigid curricula, procedural gatekeeping, hierarchical supervision, examination-centric assessment) and indicators of creative-epistemological practice (dialogic supervision, methodological plurality, indigenous-knowledge engagement, process- and originality-oriented assessment). Themes were then organised around the recurring tension between conformity and creativity that structures the literature, and synthesised into an integrated conceptual framework. Where the paper offers interpretation, illustration or proposals that go beyond the reviewed evidence, it says so. As a conceptual article, it does not claim to represent every Nigerian university or discipline, and its evidential base on postgraduate education in Nigeria is thin; its purpose is to organise existing evidence into a framework that can subsequently be tested empirically, a task taken up in Section 3.9.

The study is conceptual rather than doctrinal-legal or socio-legal: regulatory texts were read as policy documents whose stated purposes and criteria were compared with the pedagogical literature, not interpreted as legal norms, and no primary legal or empirical data were collected. Analytic validity is therefore pursued through four safeguards rather than through empirical depth. First, source triangulation: each theme is supported, where possible, by at least two kinds of source (policy, empirical, theoretical). Second, evidence grading: every substantive claim about Nigerian postgraduate practice is classed as partially supported, inferred or theoretical, and the grading is reported openly in Table 2. Third, separation of evidence from interpretation: proposals, illustrations and hypothetical examples are labelled as such in the text. Fourth, an explicit audit trail, in which each recommendation can be traced to a theme and each theme to its sources (Figure 1). The review prioritised works published since 2016 wherever suitable sources existed; earlier works are retained only where they are foundational theoretical statements or primary sources (for example, [10,38,47]) or the only available source on a specific point.

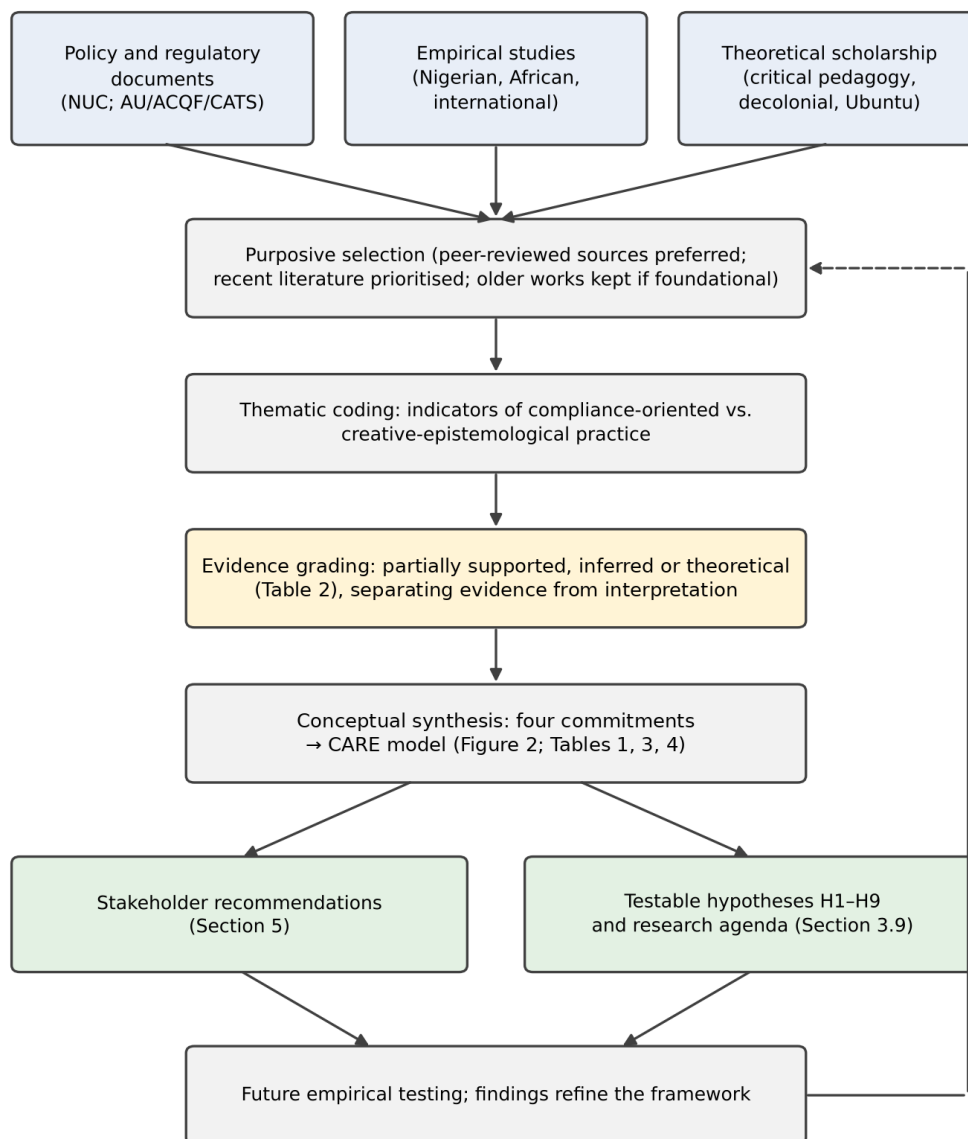


Figure 1. Analytical process of the study: from source selection and thematic coding, through evidence grading and conceptual synthesis, to recommendations, hypotheses and empirical testing

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 The Compliance Paradigm in Nigerian Postgraduate Education

3.1.1 Compliance Without Intellectual Agency

Compliance is an unavoidable feature of formal education. Universities require structures through which academic quality can be monitored and degrees evaluated; research proposals must meet certain standards, theses must follow prescribed conventions, ethical procedures must be observed, and examination processes must be transparent. The difficulty is not compliance itself but compliance without intellectual agency. In this paper's analytical reading, a compliance-oriented postgraduate culture is

characterised by several recurring features: excessive dependence on supervisors for intellectual decisions; rigid adherence to conventional research formats; reluctance to challenge established academic positions; preference for topics perceived as "safe" or easily approvable; overemphasis on formatting at the expense of intellectual substance; reproduction of imported theoretical frameworks without adequate contextual interrogation; limited recognition of students' experiential and indigenous knowledge; and assessment practices that reward conformity more readily than originality. These features are derived conceptually from the audit-culture and decolonial literatures [13,36,37]; they are offered as an analytical typology to be tested empirically, not as documented findings about particular Nigerian programmes.

Such tendencies produce what may be described as the compliance paradox: the more postgraduate education is organised around demonstrating conformity to established expectations, the greater the risk that students become academically competent without becoming intellectually independent. This distinction matters because research is inherently exploratory; genuine inquiry involves uncertainty, questioning, revision, and occasionally the discovery of findings that challenge existing assumptions. A postgraduate system that unintentionally teaches students to fear uncertainty may therefore undermine the very research capacity it is intended to develop.

3.1.2 Compliance Across the Doctoral Lifecycle

The following account is an analytical illustration rather than a report of documented cases (its propositions are labelled H1–H4 and graded for evidential strength in Table 2): it traces how a "template trap" may operate from admission through examination. At the admission and coursework stage, standardised metrics (grade-point averages, entrance scores, prerequisite transcripts) can privilege conformity over potential, screening out candidates with deep experiential knowledge (for example, of traditional medicine or indigenous conflict resolution) whose undergraduate record does not match a prescribed template, even where such candidates might produce important contextual research. Coursework may itself be dominated by teacher-centred instruction, with heavy reliance on lectures and examinations that test recall rather than critical engagement: the pattern that Freire [10] described as the "banking" model of education. The empirical basis for this claim is indirect: the Nigerian evidence cited in this paper concerns undergraduate teaching and lecturers' perceptions [34], and Freire's account is a theoretical critique rather than a description of Nigerian postgraduate classrooms. The claim that banking-style teaching and recall-oriented examination persist in Nigerian postgraduate coursework is therefore stated as a hypothesis (H1), not as a finding.

At the proposal-development stage, students may be required to fit research questions into predetermined methodological templates (quantitative surveys, qualitative interviews, or standard mixed-methods designs) that are ill-suited to the research problem, a concern echoed in critiques of Eurocentric methodological training in African research [5,36]. Proposals may then be evaluated less on the originality or significance of the research question than on whether they contain the "correct" number of hypotheses, the "appropriate" sampling frame, and "standard" ethical-clearance documentation. Such a template trap is not merely bureaucratic; it is epistemological. It communicates to students that knowledge must be packaged in recognisable forms to be legitimate: a student wishing to use Ifá divination as a model of spatial knowledge in urban planning, ogbu egwu (Igbo ritual drama) as a method of data elicitation, or Ubuntu-based focus-group protocols could face institutional resistance not because these methods are inherently flawed but because they fall outside the recognised template. (These examples are hypothetical illustrations.) Whether template constraints of this kind operate in Nigerian proposal-approval practice is treated as hypothesis H2.

At the supervision stage, high workloads, limited time for sustained mentoring, irregular meetings and delayed feedback can push supervision toward a transactional model in which the supervisor's primary role becomes ensuring compliance with institutional requirements rather than nurturing intellectual risk-taking. The Nigerian evidence on mentorship gaps [42], the operational pressures described by Daramola [6] and the inherited power differentials analysed by Tsotetsi and Omodan [43] are consistent with this possibility, although none of them tests it directly. The most directly relevant recent evidence, a survey of 282 PhD students in 16 Nigerian public universities, is mixed: supervision practices varied widely and meeting guidelines were poorly enforced (31 per cent of students were unaware of any rule requiring regular supervisor meetings), and mentoring was a significant predictor of time to completion, yet more than 70 per cent of students reported receiving feedback within a month and the model explained only about 12 per cent of the variance in completion time [18]. These findings support variability and weak enforcement but not, on their own, the claim that feedback is systematically delayed or that supervision is predominantly transactional; that claim is treated as hypothesis H3. A supervisor who repeatedly asks "will the examiner accept this?" teaches compliance; a supervisor who also asks "what does your evidence allow you to argue?" teaches scholarship. A supervisor who says "that is not how it is normally done" may unintentionally foreclose intellectual possibility; a supervisor who asks "why might another approach be appropriate here?" opens space for experimentation.

At the examination and defence stage, external examiners (often trained in Western methodological traditions) may evaluate dissertations against international standards of rigour that can function as mechanisms of epistemic gatekeeping, marking down research that does not conform to dominant paradigms as "weak" or "under-theorised," even when its departure from convention is methodologically justified. This possibility follows from the broader argument that methodological training in African research remains Eurocentric [36]; it has not been demonstrated for Nigerian examination practice in the sources reviewed. It is accordingly framed as hypothesis H4.

3.1.3 Epistemic Injustice and the Pedagogy of Compliance

At the postgraduate level, compliance culture may manifest as examination-centric assessment that rewards memorisation over original thinking; hierarchical student-supervisor relationships in which students feel compelled to adopt their supervisors' theoretical frameworks uncritically (on inherited power differentials in supervision, see Tsotetsi & Omodan [43]), sometimes struggling even to identify and critique the analytical tools their programme expects them to use; and a homogenisation of research methods that overemphasises procedural correctness at the expense of intellectual creativity. The cumulative effect can be interpreted through Fricker's [11] concept of epistemic injustice and Santos's [40] notion of epistemicide: students are socialised into a narrow conception of legitimate knowledge that privileges positivist methodology and textual representation while marginalising oral tradition, artistic practice and community-based ways of knowing, leaving many students, it may be argued, feeling that their prior intellectual resources do not "count" within the academy.

3.2 Toward Creative Epistemologies

3.2.1 Conceptual Foundations

Creative epistemologies refer to disciplined, reflexive and ethically accountable ways of producing, representing and validating knowledge that exceed a single inherited model of scholarly form [16,25]. The concept does not imply that every belief automatically constitutes knowledge, nor that academic rigour should be abandoned. Rather, it asks: can rigorous knowledge emerge through multiple intellectual, cultural, linguistic and methodological pathways? This question is especially pertinent in

Nigeria, where extraordinarily diverse knowledge traditions are embedded in oral tradition, proverb, storytelling, indigenous languages, community practice, artistic expression, music, performance, traditional craftsmanship, professional experience, religious and philosophical tradition, ecological practice and social memory. The challenge for postgraduate education is to determine how such resources can enter academic research without either romanticising or dismissing them.

As synthesised by the author from critical pedagogy, decolonial theory and situated-learning scholarship, creative epistemologies can be characterised as: generative rather than reproductive, producing new knowledge rather than merely replicating existing paradigms; pluralistic rather than monocultural, legitimising multiple knowledge traditions and methodological approaches; situated rather than abstract, grounded in the specific contexts and cultural landscapes from which research problems emerge; relational rather than individualistic, emerging through dialogue, collaboration and community engagement rather than solitary genius; and transformative rather than compliant, aiming to change how a problem is understood rather than merely describing it within acceptable parameters. Creative epistemologies thus expand rather than weaken the notion of rigour. Rigour should mean that a claim can be followed, questioned, situated and defended: not that every project must reproduce the same style of writing, the same theoretical canon, or the same sequence of chapters.

3.2.2 Theoretical Integration: Dialectics, Decodification and Situated Learning

Three theoretical traditions converge productively in this framework. Critical pedagogy [10,12,15] provides the starting critique: Freire's account of the "banking model" of education, in which learners are treated as receptacles for deposits of knowledge, offers a theoretical lens on the compliance dynamics hypothesised for Nigerian postgraduate training (H1, Table 2). The extent of banking-style teaching at postgraduate level in Nigeria has not been established empirically and is inferred here from undergraduate and non-Nigerian literature. Freire's alternative, decodification ("reading the world with words," or problematising social conditions as the subject of dialogue) implies, for postgraduate pedagogy, situating knowledge in context rather than teaching abstract theory disconnected from lived experience; problematising taken-for-granted disciplinary assumptions; and treating knowledge as a tool for transformative action (praxis) rather than an end in itself. hooks extends Freire by emphasising the passionate, relational dimension of teaching, underscoring that the supervisor-supervisee relationship is not merely instrumental but deeply relational and political.

A complementary resource is the tradition of dialogic, question-driven teaching, in which claims are tested through conversation rather than transmitted. A structured three-step cycle can be adapted for supervision: students articulate existing assumptions; those assumptions are systematically exposed to counter-argument and alternative perspective; and students are guided toward more nuanced, defensible positions through dialogue and critical reflection. Applied to supervision, this becomes a structured practice of guided intellectual risk-taking rather than a mechanical checklist, and it moves from teacher-centred toward learner-centred pedagogy in the spirit of Freire's [10] dialogical education.

Decolonial theory [23,24,30,31,38,39] supplies the epistemological architecture for challenging the hegemony of Western knowledge frameworks. Quijano's concept of the "coloniality of power" offers a lens for understanding how knowledge production in African universities, including Nigerian ones, may remain structured by colonial hierarchies decades after political independence; Ndlovu-Gatsheni's call for "epistemic freedom" (the right of African scholars to think from their own geopolitical and cultural locations) directly informs the case for legitimising indigenous knowledge systems in postgraduate research.

Situated learning and communities of practice [19] contribute the insight that learning is fundamentally social, occurring within communities of practice through which newcomers move from legitimate peripheral participation toward full membership. For postgraduate education this implies that creative epistemologies cannot be cultivated in isolated supervisory dyads; they require vibrant intellectual communities (research clusters, writing groups, doctoral colloquia) including digital communities of practice that could extend scholarly networks beyond institutional and infrastructural boundaries, embracing tools for oral interaction in African indigenous languages (a proposal of this paper rather than an evidenced practice).

3.2.3 African Philosophical Resources: Ubuntu and Igwebuike

Two African relational philosophies offer particularly generative resources for humanising postgraduate pedagogy. Ubuntu, commonly glossed through the phrase "I am because we are," understands the individual as constituted through relationship with others [22]. Applied pedagogically, Ubuntu challenges an excessively individualistic conception of scholarship: research need not be understood solely as the student's private struggle to obtain a degree but can be understood as participation in a community of knowledge, in which supervisors mentor rather than merely police, students collaborate rather than compete destructively, researchers recognise communities as knowledge partners, and intellectual disagreement does not collapse into personal hostility [36,43].

Igwebuike, the Igbo concept of strength in solidarity and complementarity [17], offers a related but distinct critique of the individualistic assumptions underpinning much Western pedagogy. Where Western models often frame learning as an individual cognitive process, Igwebuike emphasises the relational and communal dimensions of being and, by extension, of knowing. Applied to postgraduate education, an Igwebuike-informed pedagogy could imply collaborative learning communities that support mutual inquiry; sustained engagement with communities outside the university, challenging the isolation of academic knowledge production from lived social realities; and explicit recognition that legitimate knowledge can be produced through oral tradition, artistic practice and community-based method, not only through written academic text. This pedagogical extension is proposed here and is not drawn from the cited philosophical literature.

3.2.4 Language as an Epistemological Resource

Nigeria's linguistic diversity constitutes both a challenge and an opportunity for postgraduate knowledge production. English dominates formal academic communication, and its importance for international scholarship is undeniable; however, that dominance can create the false impression that sophisticated academic thought must originate in English. Indigenous languages carry conceptual resources (proverbs, idioms, culturally embedded distinctions) that translation does not fully preserve, and that risk becoming invisible when research is conducted exclusively through English [32]. This does not require abandoning English; rather, Nigerian postgraduate education can encourage epistemic multilingualism: the strategic, transparent use of English alongside Nigerian languages where the research question demands it, with translation treated as an interpretive act requiring explanation rather than a transparent technical transfer. For disciplines such as linguistics, literature, education, anthropology, sociology, history, communication and cultural studies, this issue is especially significant, and postgraduate research should be defensible (with appropriate translation and review mechanisms) in Nigeria's major languages as well as English.

3.2.5 Arts-Based, Indigenous and Practice-Based Methodologies

A creative research-methods curriculum exposes students to methodological plurality beyond the standard survey-interview-analysis sequence, including ethnography, autoethnography, narrative inquiry, participatory action research, oral history,

discourse analysis, multimodal and digital research, indigenous methodologies, arts-based research and community-based inquiry [5,47], deployed where methodologically appropriate rather than as an alternative for its own sake. In this paper's usage, artistic research treats artistic practice as a form of knowledge production rather than merely an object of study. Nigerian musical and performance traditions, including tonal language, call-and-response, storytelling and communal performance, illustrate the kind of creative resource such research could draw on; how far these are currently recognised in postgraduate research training is an empirical question this paper does not settle. Indigenous research methodologies already treat storytelling, proverb and oral tradition as legitimate sources of evidence [5,47], so treating such resources as methodological rather than merely cultural background would be one concrete route to curriculum reform and culturally grounded pedagogy. The pedagogical implication is that methodology should be treated as an intellectual choice justified by the research question, not merely a procedural prescription.

Table 1 summarises the shift this section proposes across six dimensions of research design and representation.

Table 1. From conventional reduction to creative and rigorous alternatives

Dimension	Conventional reduction	Creative and rigorous alternative
Research question	Begins from an imported problem definition	Emerges through dialogue among scholarship, lived experience, community concern and disciplinary debate
Evidence	Privileges written and easily standardised sources	Uses multiple forms of evidence while explaining their limits and warrant
Language	Treats English as the unquestioned medium of thought	Uses multilingual resources and translates carefully without erasing conceptual difference
Researcher	Presents the researcher as detached and invisible	Makes positionality, relationships and interpretive responsibility explicit
Representation	Treats the thesis as the only serious scholarly form	Allows justified combinations of analysis, narrative, image, performance, artefact and conventional prose
Validation	Relies on conformity to disciplinary habits	Relies on coherence, evidence, ethics, reflexivity, methodological fit and contribution

Note. Conceptual synthesis by the author, informed by Chilisa [5], Freire [10], Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o [32] and Wilson [47]; it is not an empirical result.

3.3 Synthesis of the Literature: Barriers, Perspectives and Emerging Reform

This paper is conceptual and literature-based; it reports no primary data of its own. The observations in this section are accordingly presented as a thematic synthesis of the sources reviewed in Sections 1.1 and 3.1–3.2, rather than as original empirical findings.

3.3.1 Indications of Compliance-Driven Practice in the Literature

Across the sources reviewed for this paper, four recurring themes emerge, of differing evidential strength. First, curricular structures are shaped by national standards-setting: the NUC coordinates benchmark minimum academic standards for postgraduate programmes and accredits programmes against them [27,28], and scholars of African postgraduate research argue that the methodological content of such curricula tends to remain Eurocentric [5,36]. Whether Nigerian postgraduate curricula are prescribed tightly enough to limit interdisciplinary or student-initiated inquiry has not been established empirically in the sources reviewed, and is treated here as a hypothesis for Section 3.9. Second, evidence on supervision points to gaps in mentorship and support [42], tension between publication pressure and students' circumstances [6] and inherited power differentials [43]; international scholarship links supervisory relationships to doctoral outcomes [41] and to the need for supervisor development [20]. Third, the audit-culture literature suggests that quality and assessment regimes can privilege formal

correctness over substance [13,37]; Nigerian evidence on postgraduate assessment specifically is limited. Fourth, Nigerian academics operate under weak research funding and promotion systems that depend on research output [3], which is consistent with, though not proof of, reward systems that favour measurable output over qualitative innovation.

3.3.2 Manifestations of Creative Stagnation

These structural conditions may manifest, in the experience of students and supervisors, as a narrowing of intellectual ambition: a preference for "safe," easily approvable topics; the replication of prior research designs with minor variation rather than genuine innovation; and a felt tension between the stated philosophy of national education policy, which holds that education should maximise individuals' creative potentials and skills and be functional and relevant to the needs of society [9], and teacher-centred, examination-oriented practice. These are proposed as plausible manifestations rather than documented findings; the sources reviewed do not measure them directly. Related decolonial scholarship argues that students whose experiential, linguistic and cultural knowledge is not recognised as academic knowledge may experience epistemic marginalisation [11,25,40].

3.3.3 Illustrative Examples of Reform

Against this backdrop, the literature offers examples suggesting that reform is possible. Okofu's [33] doctoral research developed and evaluated a negotiated pedagogy for Nigerian architectural education with educators, students and practitioners, seeking to decolonise an inherited curriculum without simply replacing it with an indigenous one. Daramola's [6] autoethnographic account documents supervision practices, and recommends good practices, for supervisors working under similar resource constraints; it is an illustration of a rigorous-and-humane approach, though a single-author reflection drawn mainly from computing disciplines rather than evidence of general effectiveness. Digital communities of practice, extending the situated-learning insight that scholarly formation is fundamentally social [19], are proposed here as a plausible route to collaborative and multilingual knowledge production that outruns the capacity of any single, overburdened department, notwithstanding the infrastructural constraints documented in Nigerian higher education [34]. These examples are few and illustrative: they indicate that the reforms proposed in this paper build on practices that exist, at least in pockets, but they do not show that such reforms work at scale.

3.3.4 Evidence Strength and Testable Hypotheses

Because the claims in Sections 3.1 to 3.3 vary in their evidential support, Table 2 grades each by the evidence reviewed and states the empirical test that would confirm, refine or refute it. Three grades are used: partially supported (Nigerian or African empirical evidence exists but is limited or mixed), inferred (the claim is extrapolated from undergraduate, non-Nigerian or theoretical literature), and theoretical (the claim rests on conceptual argument alone). No claim about Nigerian postgraduate practice is strong enough to be graded above partially supported, which is itself a finding of this review. The hypotheses should be read as the paper's empirical agenda, not as conclusions. H1 and H4 in particular are expected to vary by discipline, institution type (federal, state, private) and access to supervisor development, so tests should be comparative rather than pooled.

Table 2. Evidence strength and testable hypotheses

ID	Claim advanced in this paper	Evidence reviewed	Grade	Suggested empirical test
H1	Banking-style, lecture- and recall-oriented teaching persists in Nigerian postgraduate coursework	Freire [10]; Okonkwo et al. [34], undergraduate lecturers' perceptions	Inferred	Audit of syllabi and assessment tasks; classroom observation; student and lecturer survey
H2	Methodological templates in proposal approval constrain unconventional or indigenous designs	Chilisa [5]; Oparinde & Govender [36]; no Nigeria-specific study	Inferred	Document analysis of proposal guidelines and approval records; interviews with students whose designs were modified or rejected
H3	Supervision is strained by workload, mentoring gaps and power differentials, pushing it toward a transactional model	Tella & Onyancha [42]; Lamidi et al. [18]; Daramola [6]; Tsotetsi & Omodan [43]	Partially supported (mixed on feedback timing)	Multi-site mixed-methods study comparing federal, state and private universities
H4	External examiners tend to rate dissertations that conform to dominant methodological and representational conventions more favourably than justified non-standard (indigenous, arts-based, practice-based) ones	Oparinde & Govender [36], general African evidence	Inferred	Analysis of examiner reports; examiner interviews; vignette-based experiments
H5	Reward and promotion systems favour measurable output over innovation	Akinwale et al. [3]; Power [37]	Partially supported (consistent with, not proof of)	Content analysis of promotion criteria; staff survey
H6	Staff emigration erodes informal cultures of pedagogical mentoring	Akinwale et al. [3] on drivers of emigration; Wisker [48]	Inferred	Interviews with remaining supervisors; departmental case studies
H7	Students whose research engages Nigerian languages or indigenous knowledge systems experience more epistemic marginalisation in supervision and examination than those working in English and conventional frameworks	Fricker [11]; Santos [40]; Mungwini [25]	Theoretical	Narrative inquiry and interviews with students; analysis of thesis-language policies
H8	CARE routines can be implemented in low-resource settings without increasing supervisory workload	None; proposal of this paper (Table 4)	Theoretical	Pilot study with workload logs and comparison departments
H9	Students who experience more dialogic, relational supervision report greater intellectual agency, willingness to take scholarly risks and ownership of their research	Tsotetsi & Omodan [43]; Sverdlik et al. [41]; no Nigeria-specific test	Partially supported (international evidence on relational supervision and doctoral outcomes)	Cross-sectional survey with validated agency and supervision-quality measures; follow-up interviews

Note. Grades are the author's judgement of the evidence reviewed in this paper; they are not the result of a systematic review. *H* = hypothesis.

3.4 Rethinking Pedagogy: From Transmission to Dialogue

Pedagogy is sometimes associated primarily with undergraduate teaching, yet postgraduate education is deeply pedagogical: supervision is pedagogy, research-methods courses are pedagogy, seminars are pedagogy, academic-writing workshops are pedagogy, and even the everyday texture of the supervisor-student relationship communicates a pedagogical philosophy [20,48].

Transforming postgraduate education therefore requires transforming the pedagogical practices through which postgraduate researchers are formed.

A transmission model assumes that knowledge flows primarily from expert to learner. A dialogic model understands knowledge development as an interactive process in which expertise is used to scaffold intellectual independence rather than produce dependence [49]. In dialogic supervision, the supervisor increasingly asks: Why do you believe this? What evidence supports it? What alternative interpretation is possible? Why is this theory appropriate here? What happens if we approach the problem differently? What does the Nigerian context reveal that the existing literature does not? What assumptions are embedded in this framework? Such questions move supervision from correction toward intellectual development.

A pedagogy of supervision organised around dialogue should contain at least five dimensions. It should be dialogic, so that students can explain, question, disagree and propose alternatives; developmental, so that feedback identifies not only what is wrong but what the student is learning to do; contextual, recognising that students' research lives are shaped by employment, family responsibility, finances, geography, disability, gender, language and institutional condition; epistemically open, so that the supervisor does not confuse familiarity with validity or unfamiliarity with error; and ethically bounded, so that care does not collapse into favouritism, dependency, surveillance, or an excuse for weak standards. These five dimensions are proposed here, drawing on Tsotetsi and Omodan [43] and Zembylas [49]. These dimensions are not merely interpersonal preferences; they affect knowledge production directly. A student who fears ridicule may conceal uncertainty and avoid ambitious questions; a student who receives only fragmented correction may imitate surface conventions without understanding their intellectual purpose; a student whose conceptual resources are repeatedly dismissed may produce a technically acceptable but intellectually thin thesis. Conversely, a student who experiences rigorous and respectful dialogue is more likely to develop the confidence to take scholarly risks, test assumptions, and produce a contribution that is both locally meaningful and internationally intelligible.

Seminar and coursework culture should similarly prioritise open-ended inquiry, critical dialogue and the testing of ideas over the demonstration of mastery of prescribed content, while curriculum design at postgraduate level should create structured opportunities for interdisciplinary work, engagement with indigenous knowledge systems, and research addressing pressing national and continental challenges. Assessment, correspondingly, must move from error detection toward intellectual development. A postgraduate student whose work is evaluated almost exclusively on whether every conventional requirement has been followed learns to minimise intellectual risk; a more developmental assessment system instead considers originality, analytical depth, theoretical understanding, methodological appropriateness, contextual relevance, critical reflection, intellectual independence and contribution to knowledge. This does not mean lowering standards: originality in fact requires higher-level intellectual engagement than reproduction. The central assessment question should shift from "has the student followed all the rules?" to "has the student demonstrated the capacity to think, investigate and contribute as an independent scholar?" Concretely, this can involve process-oriented evaluation through reflective journals and documented iterations of research design; explicit originality criteria that ask not only "has this been done before?" but "does this change how we understand the problem?"; community-impact assessment that evaluates research partly by its relevance to the communities it studies; and portfolio-based defences that include policy briefs, community-engagement reports and creative outputs alongside the written thesis.

3.5 An Integrated Framework for Reform

3.5.1 Four Connected Commitments

Synthesising the theoretical resources reviewed above, this paper proposes that Nigerian postgraduate education be reoriented around four connected commitments.

Relational supervision recognises that research is learned through interaction. It replaces the image of supervision as intermittent approval with a structured educational relationship: not requiring supervisors to become therapists or erase professional boundaries, but requiring clear expectations, regular communication, timely feedback, respectful disagreement, and sustained attention to the student's developing agency. Departments can support this through supervisory agreements, co-supervision where appropriate, peer writing groups, supervisor development programmes, and transparent escalation procedures when relationships break down.

Epistemic plurality means that postgraduate programmes distinguish between universal scholarly principles and historically specific conventions [31,36]. Honesty, ethical treatment of participants, logical coherence, engagement with relevant scholarship and defensible evidence are broadly important; the exclusive use of one language, one canon, one genre or one image of the legitimate researcher is not. Programmes should make space for African scholarship, local intellectual histories, indigenous concepts, multilingual resources and interdisciplinary problem-framing: not to exclude global scholarship, but to place it in genuine dialogue with Nigerian and African knowledge.

Creative rigour combines methodological discipline with formal and epistemic flexibility. The criterion for evaluation is not whether a project looks conventional but whether its choices are justified: is the research question significant; is the method appropriate; are sources and participants treated ethically; is the analysis persuasive; does the representation communicate the contribution clearly; does the researcher acknowledge limitation and positionality? Such criteria can evaluate a conventional thesis, a mixed-methods study, a practice-based project or a participatory inquiry without pretending that they are identical, or that any one of them is automatically superior.

Public relevance holds that postgraduate knowledge should not be judged solely by its capacity to circulate within academic journals. This does not require every project to yield an immediate policy solution; it means researchers should be able to explain why their questions matter, to whom, and under what conditions: whether through policy engagement, community feedback, professional innovation, open data, a creative work, a local-language summary, or a new conceptual vocabulary. The relevant question is not whether scholarship is "useful" in a narrowly instrumental sense, but whether it contributes responsibly to the worlds from which its questions emerge.

3.5.2 The CARE Model: Operationalising the Framework

These four commitments can be operationalised through a complementary pedagogical model (CARE) describing the disposition postgraduate education should cultivate in students themselves.

Criticality (C): students are encouraged to interrogate assumptions, theories, methods and established knowledge rather than accept them as given.

Agency (A): students progressively assume responsibility for their own research decisions and intellectual development, moving from dependence toward self-directed scholarship.

Relationality (R): postgraduate education is built around respectful relationships among students, supervisors, communities and wider scholarly networks, consistent with Ubuntu and Igwebuike.

Epistemic Creativity (E): students are encouraged to explore legitimate alternative ways of producing, interpreting and communicating knowledge, consistent with the principle of creative rigour.

The model can be summarised as a set of four reorientations: from compliance to criticality; from dependence to agency; from hierarchy to relationality; and from reproduction to epistemic creativity. This does not mean eliminating compliance: it means that compliance should become the foundation; it should not become the destination. Figure 2 depicts the logic of the framework as a whole. Table 3 extends this logic across the institutional dimensions where reform is most needed.

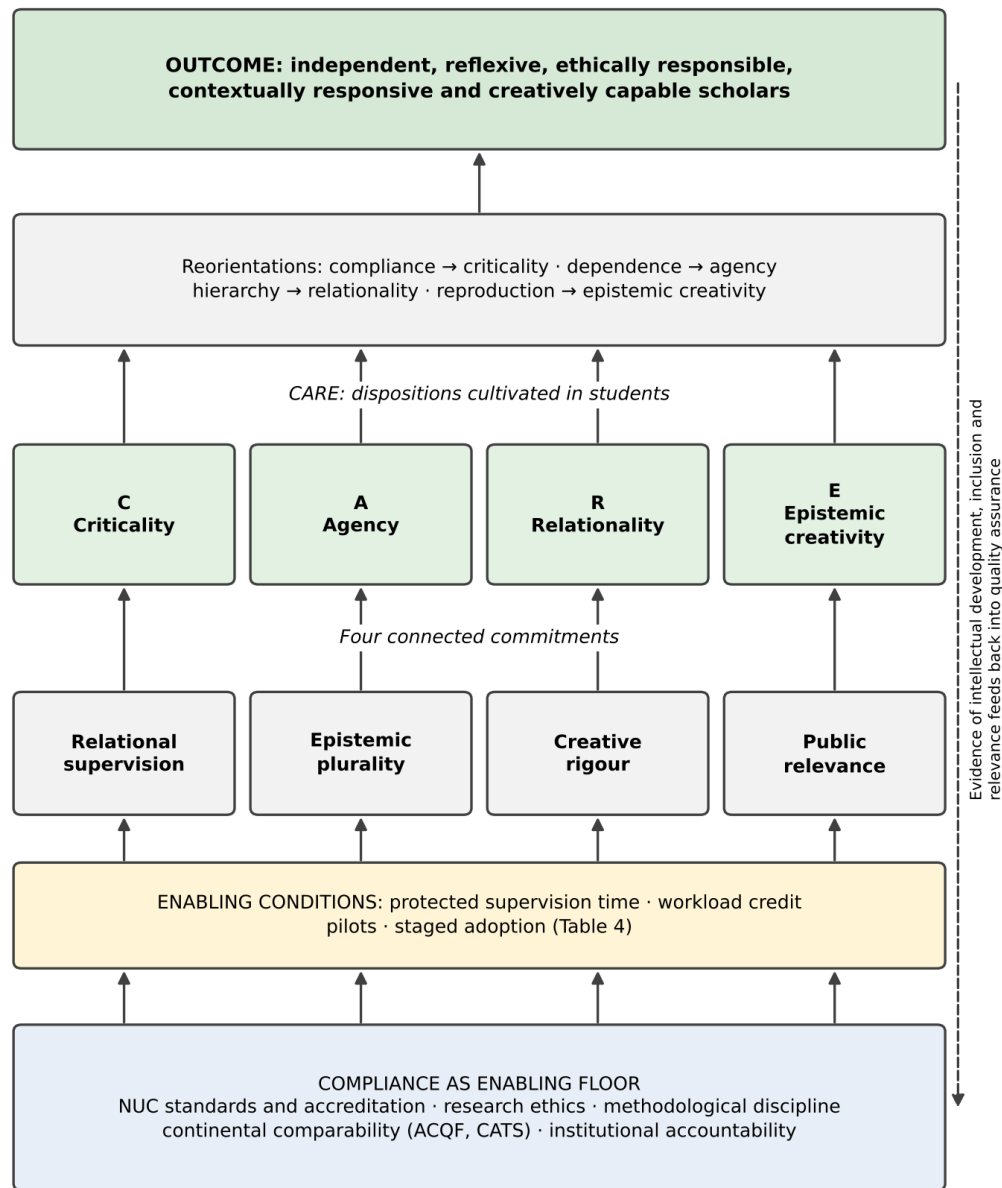


Figure 2. The CARE framework: compliance as an enabling floor, four connected commitments and the dispositions they cultivate

Table 3. From compliance-only practice to beyond-compliance reform

Institutional area	Compliance-only orientation	Beyond-compliance reorientation
Governing logic	Compliance	Critical agency
Supervision	Individual, hierarchical, reactive; supervisor as examiner and gatekeeper	Relational, scheduled, collaborative; supervisor as critical mentor and interlocutor
Curriculum	Generic, prescriptive research-methods requirements	Philosophy of knowledge, positionality, ethics, African scholarship and methodological plurality
Knowledge orientation	Reproduction of imported theoretical universality	Contextual and global scholarship in dialogue
Assessment	One dominant thesis form; formal correctness	Transparent criteria applied across justified textual, visual, oral, digital and practice-based forms
Language	English-only assumptions	Strong academic English plus multilingual, translation-aware scholarship
Progress monitoring	Forms and milestone signatures	Milestones paired with developmental conversation and documented feedback
Quality assurance	Evidence of prescribed inputs	Evidence of intellectual development, inclusion, ethical practice, relevance and contribution
Research impact	Publication and completion counts	Multiple, contextually interpreted forms of scholarly and public contribution

3.6 Contextual Challenges and Strategic Responses

Any reform agenda must confront the material realities of Nigerian higher education. Four challenges are especially pressing (followed by a fifth, implementation-focused discussion of low-resource adoption), each paired here with strategic responses that acknowledge resource constraints rather than assuming them away.

Infrastructure and resource constraints. Nigerian academics identify inadequate university funding and weak research funding as persistent problems [3], and lecturers report poor technological infrastructure as a barrier to pedagogical innovation [34]. These constraints cannot be wished away, but they can be creatively navigated through aggressive adoption of open-access resources, open-source software and collaborative online platforms; digital pedagogies designed for low-bandwidth environments, using asynchronous communication and offline-capable tools; and regional consortia of universities sharing specialised equipment and expertise to reduce duplication and expand access.

Brain drain and faculty retention. Addressing the exodus of academic talent requires both push- and pull-side strategies: competitive conditions of service, research funding and sabbatical opportunities, informed by UNESCO's benchmark of allocating at least 15 to 20 per cent of public expenditure to education [45]; legally protected and institutionally respected academic freedom; and active diaspora-engagement strategies (visiting professorships, remote co-supervision, collaborative research projects) that treat the diaspora as a resource to be engaged rather than simply a loss to be mourned.

The artificial-intelligence challenge. AI tools present both opportunity and threat to creative epistemologies [34]. Strategic responses include embedding critical AI literacy in postgraduate training so that students learn to use AI as a tool for augmenting rather than replacing thought; requiring documentation of how AI was used in the research process, with explicit reflection on its influence on the student's own thinking; and redesigning assessment toward oral defences, live presentation and process portfolios that cannot be AI-generated, as traditional written assessment becomes increasingly vulnerable to automation (a redesign of assessment also recommended by the lecturers surveyed by Okonkwo et al. [34]).

Regulatory inertia. Quality-assurance frameworks can resist change because change introduces administrative uncertainty and disturbs established audit routines [37]. Strategic responses include authorising pilot programmes that test creative-

epistemological approaches within controlled parameters rather than attempting system-wide reform immediately; sustaining continuous dialogue between regulators, administrators, faculty and students so that standards evolve in response to emerging needs; and pursuing international benchmarking with critical adaptation, so that Nigerian programmes aspire to global standards without adopting them uncritically, ensuring that "global best practice" does not become a new form of imposition.

Adopting CARE in low-resource settings without overwork. A further question is whether the framework can be adopted by those with the least slack: early-career academics who carry heavy teaching loads and are supervising for the first time, and staff in under-funded state universities where supervisee-to-supervisor ratios are high. CARE must not become an additional layer of unpaid labour (Section 3.8). Four design principles, offered as proposals of this paper rather than evidenced practice, guard against this. First, substitution rather than addition: CARE-informed routines should replace existing activity, for example by converting some of the one-to-one meetings that now serve mainly to check formatting into a single, agenda-led dialogue, and by using a transparent shared rubric in place of repeated line-by-line correction. Second, collectivisation: moving selected supervisory functions from the dyad to the group, through cohort supervision clinics, peer writing groups and doctoral colloquia, so that one hour of staff time serves several students and students learn to give one another feedback, in line with the communities-of-practice argument [19]. Third, staging: beginning with a minimum viable set of low-cost routines and adding more demanding elements only as resources allow. Fourth, shared load and protection: early-career supervisors co-supervise with experienced colleagues who model dialogic practice [20], while departments cap supervision loads (with reduced loads in the first years of appointment where possible), credit mentoring in workload and promotion systems, and treat any additional practice as optional until it is resourced. Individual strategies cannot substitute for systemic reform: evidence from small pilots should be used to argue for funding, fairer workloads and regulatory flexibility, so that the aim is to reduce overwork, not to make it sustainable. Table 4 sets out this pathway. Guardrails against burnout are built into it: supervisors and students agree in writing on meeting frequency, feedback turnaround and response hours; asynchronous, low-bandwidth channels replace open-ended availability (messaging groups such as WhatsApp or Telegram can carry such dialogue, but only within agreed response hours and with attention to participants' privacy and data protection); and a practice that cannot be sustained within existing workload is deferred, not forced. Whether these routines in fact reduce or at least do not increase workload is an empirical question (H8, Table 2).

Table 4. A staged, low-cost pathway for adopting CARE

Stage	Core practices	Additional resources and staff time	Led by	CARE element
1. Foundation (within existing resources)	One-page supervisory agreement (meeting frequency, feedback turnaround, authorship); shared assessment rubric including originality criteria; one routine feedback round replaced by a short dialogue on three questions (Why do you believe this? What evidence supports it? What alternative reading is possible?); in the first year, one or two CARE elements only (for example criticality and relationality) rather than simultaneous change to curriculum, assessment and supervision	None; designed to be time-neutral because it substitutes for existing meetings and corrections	Any supervisor, including early-career staff	Criticality; Agency

Stage	Core practices	Additional resources and staff time	Led by	CARE element
2. Collective (low cost)	Monthly cohort supervision clinic or writing group; peer-feedback protocol; peer observation of supervision within existing departmental meetings; asynchronous written or voice feedback suited to low bandwidth; open-access reading lists	Meeting room and a convenor; staff time pooled across students (a hypothesised saving, H8)	Department, with a rotating senior convenor	Relationality; Agency
3. Plural methods (modest cost)	Methods seminar series with colleagues from partner institutions; a short "justify your method" memo in every proposal; multilingual abstracts; remote co-supervision or guest input from the diaspora	Occasional hours of colleague or visiting input; free online tools	Faculty postgraduate committee; regional consortia	Epistemic creativity; Relationality
4. Institutionalised (requires decision)	Workload credit and caps for supervision; supervisor-development programme; pilot portfolio-style assessment; accreditation criteria that recognise plural forms	Institutional and regulatory decisions; modest funding	Deans, vice-chancellors, NUC	All four

Note. Conceptual proposal by the author; no cost or time-saving figures are claimed. Stages are cumulative but can be adopted selectively.

3.7 Rigour and Creativity as Complementary

The central proposition of this paper is that the difficulties facing Nigerian postgraduate education should not be understood exclusively as a problem of standards; they are also a problem of what standards are designed to produce. A university may have excellent regulations, carefully designed curricula, detailed thesis guidelines and rigorous examination procedures, and still produce postgraduate researchers who lack confidence in their own intellectual voices. Conversely, an intellectually creative postgraduate system cannot afford to disregard methodological rigour, ethical research, evidence or scholarly accountability. The challenge, therefore, is not to choose between rigour and creativity but to recognise that rigour and creativity are complementary, consistent with the critical-pedagogy tradition's insistence that rigorous inquiry and imagination reinforce one another [10,12,15]: a creative scholar without rigour may produce interesting but unreliable claims, while a technically competent scholar without creativity may produce carefully executed but intellectually derivative research. The ideal postgraduate researcher should possess both.

This is why the shift from compliance to agency proposed in this paper should not be read as a call for academic permissiveness; it is a call for more mature academic responsibility. The postgraduate student should eventually reach a point at which they can say: I understand the rules, I understand why they exist, and I can make a defensible scholarly decision when my research requires me to adapt, question, or extend them. That is intellectual maturity, and it is also, ultimately, what "rigour" in postgraduate research should mean: rigour as the capacity to have one's claims followed, questioned, situated and defended: not rigour as mere conformity to inherited form. Rigour without creativity produces sterile scholarship; ethics without imagination produces hollow moralism; standards without flexibility produce intellectual prisons. What is needed is a both/and orientation: rigorous and creative, ethical and imaginative, standardised and flexible.

3.8 Risks, Objections and Safeguards

A serious reform proposal must address its own risks. One objection is that creative epistemologies may lower standards. The response is that standards should be made more explicit, not abandoned: a creative project should be assessed for clarity of question, methodological fit, evidentiary warrant, ethical integrity, reflexivity and contribution: criteria that can be more

intellectually demanding than formal conformity, since the researcher must justify not only what was found but how the form of inquiry shaped what could be known.

A second objection is that decolonial language can become fashionable without changing institutional power [44]: that universities may add "indigenous knowledge" to a curriculum while retaining the same hierarchies of appointment, citation, language, assessment and authorship. This is a genuine danger. Decolonial transformation therefore requires attention to material conditions, not only vocabulary: funding, libraries, research time, staff development, student welfare, fair authorship and institutional participation.

A third objection concerns the risk of cultural essentialism. Treating "African" knowledge as pure, unified or automatically emancipatory can reproduce the very simplification that decolonial scholarship seeks to challenge; even advocates of indigenous knowledge stress that it must be subjected to critical evaluation [36]. Nigerian knowledge traditions are diverse, historically changing, internally contested, and shaped by exchange among local, Islamic, Christian, colonial, diasporic, scientific and popular cultures. Epistemic plurality must therefore include the right to critique tradition as well as the right to recover what colonial and institutional hierarchies have marginalised; indigenous knowledge is not a single, timeless or internally uniform category, and researchers must obtain appropriate consent, respect community protocols, avoid extractive practice, and distinguish knowledge that may be publicly circulated from knowledge that should remain protected [47].

A fourth objection concerns workload. Supervisors already operate under intense pressure, and more dialogic or creative supervision can appear to demand unlimited labour. This objection points to a structural requirement rather than an individual failing: humane pedagogy cannot be sustained by individual goodwill alone (see [3,6]). Universities must resource supervision, regulate student-supervisor loads, recognise mentoring labour, and build collective structures of support: otherwise the language of care risks becoming another unfunded demand placed on already overworked academics. Section 3.6 outlines a staged, workload-neutral pathway (Table 4) that departments with limited resources can use to begin without exceeding existing capacity.

3.9 Directions for Future Research

This paper is conceptual and does not claim to provide empirical evidence about every Nigerian university or discipline; its framework should therefore be tested through research attentive to institutional variation. Future studies could examine how postgraduate students and supervisors themselves understand quality; compare supervision practices across federal, state and private universities; investigate the role of language in thesis writing and examination; document creative and practice-based postgraduate projects already under way; and study how accreditation processes shape pedagogical choice at departmental level. Participatory and mixed-methods research would be particularly well suited to this agenda: surveys could map the prevalence of supervisory practices, while interviews and focus groups explore how students experience feedback, authority, silence and intellectual recognition; autoethnography and narrative inquiry could further illuminate the lived realities of supervisors and students; and institutional case studies could examine programmes that have introduced doctoral colloquia, co-supervision, multilingual research or alternative assessment. Such studies should avoid representing Nigerian universities only through deficit, and should also identify local innovations, informal support networks, and forms of scholarly creativity already present but not always recognised by formal systems.

The nine hypotheses in Table 2 form the most immediate agenda, and the table pairs each with a feasible design. Two additions are important. First, studies of the practices described in Sections 3.1 and 3.2 should sample postgraduate programmes

themselves, not undergraduate teaching, because most of the Nigerian evidence reviewed here concerns the latter. Second, the staged pathway in Table 4 should be piloted and evaluated in a small number of state and federal departments, with supervisor workload logs, student progression and student-reported experience tracked against comparison departments. Research should also examine how continental credit-transfer and qualifications frameworks (CATS and the ACQF) treat practice-based, multilingual and community-engaged postgraduate work, since this determines whether harmonisation widens or narrows epistemic plurality. Findings from such work would feed back into the framework, as shown in Figure 1.

4. CONCLUSIONS/IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

Nigerian postgraduate education stands at an important intellectual crossroads. Compliance with academic regulation, accreditation requirement and institutional standard remains essential to the integrity of higher education; it is necessary because quality assurance protects academic standards and assures employers and the wider community of graduate competency [28]. But compliance becomes educationally impoverished when detached from intellectual purpose. A completed form cannot substitute for a meaningful supervisory conversation. A publication count cannot substitute for independent thought. A familiar thesis structure cannot substitute for a well-justified contribution. Accreditation can establish a floor; it cannot, by itself, create a culture of inquiry. Because the evidence on postgraduate pedagogy in Nigeria is still thin, the claims advanced here should be read as hypotheses to be tested (Table 2), not as established findings.

The deeper purpose of postgraduate education is to cultivate researchers who can think critically, ask meaningful questions, generate knowledge responsibly, and contribute original perspectives to society. This requires a pedagogical shift in which postgraduate students are treated not simply as candidates completing degrees but as emerging members of scholarly communities. Supervision must move beyond correction toward mentorship and dialogue; research-methods education must move beyond procedural instruction toward methodological reasoning; assessment must move beyond error detection toward intellectual development; and knowledge production must move beyond epistemic conformity toward responsible plurality.

The Nigerian university does not need to choose between global scholarship and African knowledge, between academic standard and creativity, or between rigour and contextual relevance. What is required is a more confident synthesis. Nigerian postgraduate education can meet international academic standards while producing scholarship rooted in Nigerian realities; it can engage global theory while critically interrogating its assumptions; it can use English while recognising the epistemic resources of Nigerian languages; and it can maintain rigorous methodological standards while permitting methodological creativity. To move beyond compliance is, in this sense, to recover the pedagogical heart of postgraduate education: to see supervision as teaching, research as formation, and knowledge-making as a relationship among evidence, interpretation, history, language, community and responsibility.

The challenges Nigeria faces (climate vulnerability, economic instability, public-health crisis, governance deficit) require original thinking, not compliance alone. Beyond compliance lies a postgraduate education in which a student can propose research on Ifá divination as an urban-planning methodology and be taken seriously; in which a dissertation can be written in Hausa, Igbo or Yoruba and receive full academic credit; in which supervision is a relationship of mutual growth rather than hierarchical oversight; in which assessment recognises that the most important knowledge is often the most difficult to categorise; and in which Nigerian scholars do not need to leave their country to think freely. This is not a utopian vision but a practical necessity. Ultimately, the question is not whether Nigerian postgraduate students can comply with the requirements of the university, but

whether the university can create the conditions under which those students become capable of thinking beyond the requirements of the university. That is the movement from compliance to scholarship; it is the deeper meaning of rethinking pedagogy and creative epistemologies in Nigerian postgraduate education.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

For the National Universities Commission. The NUC should review the BMAS/CCMAS framework to create explicit space for epistemic and methodological pluralism [27,28,35]. This does not mean lowering standards but expanding the criteria by which standards are defined: accreditation panels should include scholars trained in diverse methodological traditions, and accreditation criteria should explicitly value creativity, community engagement and interdisciplinary research alongside conventional inputs. Continental harmonisation instruments such as the ACQF and credit accumulation and transfer arrangements should be aligned in ways that preserve recognition of justified methodological and linguistic plurality [2,8].

For university administrators. Vice-chancellors and deans should build institutional cultures that reward intellectual risk-taking: protecting supervision time, moderating teaching loads for active supervisors, funding pilot pedagogical innovations, and recognising research that productively crosses disciplinary boundaries rather than penalising it for "lack of disciplinary focus." Quality assurance should not become synonymous with procedural conformity.

For faculties and departments. Departments should create intellectual spaces (seminars, colloquia, writing groups) where postgraduate students can present unconventional ideas without premature dismissal, and should treat supervision as a recognised teaching practice: promotion and workload systems should value the quality of supervision, not merely the number of completed students or associated publications.

For supervisors. Supervisors should interrogate their own epistemological assumptions and be willing to support students whose research questions, methods or theoretical frameworks fall outside their own expertise. This requires humility, continuous learning, and a genuine commitment to student intellectual autonomy, supported by professional development in mentoring, dialogic supervision, intercultural competence and researcher development [20,43].

For early-career academics and under-resourced departments. Begin with the foundation stage of the pathway in Table 4, which substitutes for rather than adds to existing work; share supervision through cohort clinics and co-supervision with experienced colleagues; agree boundaries in writing; and treat further practices as optional until they are resourced. Departments should not expect early-career staff to carry dialogic supervision alone.

For postgraduate students. Students should be encouraged to see themselves not merely as consumers of knowledge but as producers of knowledge: cultivating the courage to ask uncomfortable questions, the resilience to persist through methodological uncertainty, and the ethical commitment to ensure that their research serves the communities it studies, while also developing the intellectual independence not to treat supervisors as the sole source of academic authority.

For research-methods training. Research-methods courses should move beyond methodological prescription toward methodological reasoning, exposing students to a genuine plurality of designs and asking, of each, why it is appropriate to the problem at hand rather than presenting method as a fixed sequence to be executed.

For the broader academic community. Nigerian scholars, at home and in the diaspora, share responsibility for building intellectual networks that support creative scholarship: mentoring early-career researchers, reviewing for journals that publish

unconventional work, and advocating for institutional reforms that value epistemic diversity. Researchers should also test the hypotheses in Table 2, including through comparative studies across federal, state and private universities.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This is a conceptual, literature-based paper that did not involve the collection of data from human or animal subjects. It draws only on published scholarship and publicly available policy documents. Accordingly, no ethics committee or institutional review board approval was required.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

No new data were created or analysed in this study; data sharing is not applicable to this article. All sources analysed are cited in the reference list, and the National Universities Commission documents consulted are publicly available at the addresses given there.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author confirms sole responsibility for the conceptualisation, literature review, analysis, and writing (original draft, review and editing) of this manuscript.

DECLARATION ON THE USE OF GENERATIVE AI

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used Claude (Anthropic) only to correct spelling, grammar, and punctuation at the word and sentence level. No paragraphs or sections were written, rewritten, or paraphrased by AI, and no content, ideas, analysis, or references were generated by AI. The author takes full responsibility for the content of the article.

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