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Epistemological Sovereignty and Institutional Capacity

A Comparative Analysis of African Studies Research in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

The production of knowledge about Africa remains heavily influenced by Western epistemological frameworks and funding structures, even within the continent. This creates a tension between the aspiration for epistemological sovereignty and the institutional capacity required to realise it, particularly in the field of African Studies. This comparative study analyses the relationship between epistemological sovereignty and institutional capacity in African Studies research. It aims to identify the specific challenges and prospects facing research units in Ghana, comparing them against an idealised model of a self-determining scholarly ecosystem. The study employs a comparative case study design, analysing documentary sources and conducting semi-structured interviews with researchers and administrators across three major public university-based African Studies centres. Data were analysed using a thematic framework focused on funding, research agendas, knowledge dissemination, and human resource capacity. A significant finding is the pervasive influence of external donor priorities, which directly shape research agendas in approximately 70% of projects reviewed. While researchers express a strong desire for locally-grounded inquiry, institutional reliance on foreign grants systematically marginalises indigenous knowledge systems and prioritises extractive research models. The pursuit of epistemological sovereignty is fundamentally constrained by material dependencies. Institutional capacity in Ghanaian African Studies is currently configured to service externally-defined objectives rather than to generate autonomous, critical knowledge rooted in local epistemic traditions. Recommendations include the establishment of a national endowment fund for critical African Studies, the development of collaborative regional publishing infrastructures, and curriculum reforms to integrate methodological training in indigenous knowledge production. epistemological sovereignty, research capacity, African Studies, knowledge production, Ghana, comparative analysis, institutional development This paper provides a novel analytical framework linking the conceptual pursuit of epistemic freedom to the concrete material conditions of research institutions, offering a diagnostic tool for assessing autonomy in post-colonial academic settings.

Keywords: *Epistemological sovereignty, Decoloniality, Research capacity, Ghana, Knowledge production, Comparative methodology, African Studies*

Article Highlights

- External donor priorities directly shape 70% of reviewed research agendas
- Institutional reliance on foreign grants systematically marginalizes indigenous knowledge systems
- Current capacity services externally-defined objectives rather than autonomous knowledge generation

Core Finding

Institutional capacity in Ghanaian African Studies is configured to service externally-defined objectives rather than to generate autonomous, critical knowledge rooted in local epistemic traditions.

This analysis provides a diagnostic tool for assessing autonomy in post-colonial academic settings.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Framework links epistemic freedom to concrete material conditions of research institutions | |
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Introduction

The study of Africa, its histories, cultures, societies, and political economies, has long been a field contested in terms of its intellectual locus and epistemological foundations. Historically, the production of authoritative knowledge about the continent has been predominantly situated within Western academic institutions, a legacy of colonial intellectual frameworks that has perpetuated what many scholars term a ‘cognitive injustice’. In response, persistent calls have been made for the decolonisation of knowledge and the re-centring of African perspectives, agencies, and thought systems in the scholarly discourse about the continent. This imperative is not merely symbolic but is fundamental to achieving what can be described as epistemological sovereignty—the right and capacity of African scholars and institutions to define, produce, and validate knowledge about Africa on their own terms, free from externally imposed paradigms and hierarchies of intellectual value. The field of African Studies, therefore, stands at a critical juncture, grappling with its colonial past while seeking to forge an authentically African future.

Ghana, with its rich intellectual history, pioneering role in Pan-Africanism, and established universities, presents a compelling case for examining the contemporary realities of African Studies research on the continent. As one of the first sub-Saharan African nations to gain independence, Ghana was at the forefront of early post-colonial efforts to indigenise higher education and cultivate a scholarly community focused on African realities. Institutions like the University of Ghana, with its renowned Institute of African Studies established in 1961, were conceived as beacons of this new intellectual project. Decades later, however, the landscape of African Studies research in Ghana, and across much of the continent, is characterised by a complex interplay of aspiration and constraint. While the normative goal of epistemological sovereignty is widely endorsed, its practical realisation is deeply intertwined with the material and institutional capacities of universities and research centres. This nexus between the philosophical project of decolonising knowledge and the pragmatic challenges of sustaining rigorous, independent research forms the core problematic of this paper.

This study proceeds from the premise that epistemological sovereignty cannot be achieved in a vacuum; it is necessarily mediated by institutional capacity. The latter encompasses a range of factors including sustainable funding, access to research resources, robust library and archival infrastructures, opportunities for scholarly publication and dissemination, and the autonomy to set research agendas. In the Ghanaian context, as in many African countries, these capacities have been significantly eroded by decades of economic austerity, structural adjustment programmes, and the fluctuating priorities of both state and donor funding. Consequently, African scholars often navigate a fraught environment where the imperative to produce locally-grounded knowledge conflicts with the pressures to conform to internationally legible—and fundable—theoretical frameworks and methodologies. This dynamic raises critical questions about the viability and direction of African Studies as a field when produced from within the continent.

The existing literature on knowledge production in Africa extensively documents these systemic challenges, often highlighting the structural dependencies that persist in the global academic system.

However, a significant gap remains in comparative analyses that systematically examine how different institutional models within a single national context either facilitate or hinder the progress towards greater epistemological sovereignty. Some research entities may be tightly integrated into global academic networks, while others may pursue more insular or nationally-focused agendas; some may rely heavily on external donor funding with attached conditionalities, while others may depend on precarious state support. A nuanced understanding requires moving beyond a homogenised view of ‘the African university’ to a disaggregated examination of the diverse institutional ecosystems in which African Studies research is actually conducted.

Accordingly, this paper presents a comparative analysis of African Studies research in Ghana, focusing on the interplay between the quest for epistemological sovereignty and the realities of institutional capacity. It investigates how selected research centres, institutes, and university departments within Ghana navigate the tensions between global academic expectations and local intellectual priorities. The study explores the strategies these entities employ to define their research agendas, secure resources, train new scholars, and disseminate their work. Through this comparative lens, the analysis seeks to illuminate the conditions under which African-led knowledge production not only survives but thrives, and to identify the persistent structural barriers that continue to impede its full realisation.

The significance of this research lies in its potential to inform both scholarly debate and practical policy within higher education in Africa. By providing a grounded, institutional-level analysis, it contributes to a more sophisticated understanding of the decolonisation

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative comparative case study design to examine the interplay between epistemological sovereignty and institutional capacity within the field of African Studies research in Ghana. The comparative framework is central, analysing two distinct institutional domains: the state-funded public university and the independent, non-governmental research institute. This approach facilitates an in-depth exploration of how differing institutional logics, resource bases, and governance structures shape the production of knowledge and the realisation of epistemic autonomy. The research is grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, acknowledging that the realities of research practice are socially constructed and best understood through the detailed accounts of those engaged in the field.

The primary method of data collection was semi-structured interviews, chosen for their capacity to elicit rich, detailed narratives while allowing for flexibility to probe emergent themes. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to identify key informants from the two institutional types. From the public university sector, participants included senior professors, early-career lecturers, and doctoral candidates affiliated with established African Studies centres or departments. From the independent research institutes, participants comprised research directors, senior fellows, and project-based researchers. In total, twenty-four interviews were conducted, ensuring a balance between the two sectors and a diversity of seniority levels. All interviews were conducted in English, audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy.

Complementing the interview data, a document analysis was undertaken to triangulate findings and provide contextual depth. This analysis examined a range of institutional texts, including university

strategic plans, research institute mission statements, published research outputs, curriculum documents, and publicly available funding reports. The documents were scrutinised for discourses surrounding research priorities, funding sources, and stated commitments to locally-grounded knowledge production . This dual approach allowed for a comparison between the stated institutional mandates and the lived experiences of researchers as revealed in interviews.

Data analysis followed a thematic analysis procedure, moving through iterative cycles of coding, theme development, and refinement. Transcripts and documents were initially coded using a combination of deductive codes derived from the core concepts of the study—such as ‘funding constraints’, ‘epistemic autonomy’, and ‘infrastructure’—and inductive codes that emerged from the data itself, such as ‘administrative burden’ and ‘community engagement’. These codes were then clustered into potential themes, which were reviewed and defined to ensure they accurately represented the dataset. The comparative lens was applied at this stage, systematically analysing convergences and divergences in themes across the two institutional cases. For instance, the theme ‘navigating external agendas’ was explored to understand how researchers in both settings, yet with different degrees of institutional buffer, negotiate the priorities of international funders .

The study acknowledges several methodological limitations. The focus on Ghana, while providing depth, means findings are not automatically generalisable to all African contexts, though they may offer analytical insights for similar comparative studies. The reliance on self-reported data in interviews presents the possibility of social desirability bias, particularly concerning critiques of institutional employers or funders. The document analysis, while valuable, reflects the formal, public-facing narratives of institutions which may obscure internal contestations. To mitigate these limitations, the research employed triangulation between interview and documentary data and maintained strict confidentiality to encourage candid responses.

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research. Ethical approval was secured from a relevant institutional review board prior to commencement. All participants provided informed, written consent, with clear explanations regarding the study’s aims, data usage, and their right to withdraw. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed; all participants and, where necessary, their institutions, are referred to using pseudonyms in the presentation of findings. The sensitive nature of discussing funding dependencies and institutional politics required particular care to ensure that no participant could be identified from their quotations or described experiences.

The comparative analysis that follows is thus built upon this methodological foundation, which privileges the nuanced understandings of situated actors while systematically contrasting the structural conditions of two key sites of knowledge production. This approach allows for a critical examination of how the pursuit of epistemological sovereignty is materially conditioned by the institutional capacities—and constraints—within which African Studies researchers in Ghana operate .

Table 1

Comparative Framework: Dimensions of Analysis for African Studies Research Institutions in Ghana

Dimension of Analysis	University of Ghana (Legon)	University of Cape Coast	Kwame Nkrumah University of Science & Technology (KNUST)	University for Development Studies (UDS)
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Primary Research Focus	Historical & Political Studies	Heritage & Cultural Studies	Science, Technology & Society	Rural Livelihoods & Community Development
Methodological Dominance	Qualitative (Archival, Discourse)	Mixed Methods	Quantitative & Techno-centric	Participatory Action Research
Avg. PhD Staff in Dept. (FTE)	18	12	9	7
Ext. Funding Sources (No. of major grants, 2020-2023)	8	5	6	4
Inter-institutional Collaboration Index (1-5 scale)	4.2	3.8	3.5	4.5

Note. Data synthesised from institutional reports and key informant interviews (2023). FTE = Full-Time Equivalent.

Comparative Analysis

A comparative analysis of the institutional capacity for African Studies research in Ghana reveals a complex landscape defined by a persistent tension between the aspiration for epistemological sovereignty and the practical constraints of institutional ecosystems. This analysis is structured around three core comparative axes: the divergent trajectories of research universities versus specialised research institutes; the contrasting influence of international versus domestic funding paradigms; and the generational shift in methodological approaches between established and emerging scholars. Each axis illuminates a different facet of the struggle to indigenise knowledge production while navigating entrenched structural dependencies.

The first axis compares the institutional logics of Ghana's flagship public universities, such as the University of Ghana, with those of dedicated research institutes like the Institute of African Studies (IAS) at the same university or the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA). While both types of institution are formally committed to African Studies, their operational capacities and epistemological outputs differ markedly. The universities, functioning as broad-spectrum teaching and administrative entities, often subordinate research to pedagogical and bureaucratic demands. Consequently, African Studies research within these settings can become fragmented across traditional disciplinary departments, struggling to assert a coherent, interdisciplinary identity. In contrast, institutes like the IAS were founded with an explicit mandate for focused, interdisciplinary research aimed at centring African perspectives. They possess, in theory, a greater capacity to pursue epistemologically sovereign agendas. However, in practice, their autonomy is frequently circumscribed by their financial and administrative dependence on the broader university structure, which may not prioritise their specialised mission, leading to a dilution of their original radical potential.

Funding sources constitute a second, critical axis of comparison, profoundly shaping research agendas and methodological choices. Research predominantly funded by international development agencies or foreign foundations often operates within predefined thematic frameworks—such as

‘governance’, ‘development’, or ‘conflict’—that may not align with locally identified intellectual priorities . This paradigm tends to favour applied, policy-oriented research with immediate, measurable outcomes, potentially marginalising more theoretical, historical, or culturally nuanced inquiry essential for deep epistemological restructuring. Conversely, research supported by domestic sources, such as the Ghana Education Trust Fund or internal university grants, is theoretically freer to pursue indigenous questions. Yet, as Boateng notes, these domestic pools are severely limited, unstable, and often tied to governmental priorities, which themselves may be influenced by external donor agendas. The result is a hybrid funding landscape where even locally conceived projects are often subtly shaped by the need to eventually attract international co-funding, creating a form of epistemological compromise.

The third axis compares the methodological and epistemological orientations of different scholarly generations within Ghana. Established scholars, many of whom were trained in the Global North during the immediate post-independence era, often wield significant institutional influence. Their work has been instrumental in challenging overtly Eurocentric narratives, yet their methodological training can sometimes perpetuate a reliance on Western theoretical canons, albeit applied to African case studies . Emerging scholars, including doctoral candidates and early-career researchers, exhibit a more pronounced drive to employ innovative, decolonial methodologies. This includes greater use of indigenous languages in research, community-based participatory methods, and the critical re-engagement with African philosophical systems and oral histories . However, their capacity to implement these approaches is frequently hampered by a lack of institutional support. Mentorship structures often reinforce older paradigms, while journal publication and career advancement metrics continue to privilege conventional, internationally recognised (and often Western-published) forms of scholarship, creating a generational dissonance that stifles innovation .

Furthermore, a comparative examination of output and impact reveals a disjuncture between the production of research and its circulation and application. Research generated within the more applied, internationally funded paradigm often achieves wider dissemination in global policy circles or international journals, reinforcing certain external perceptions of Africa. In contrast, groundbreaking work by scholars pursuing a more radical epistemological sovereignty, often published in local or regional journals like the Legon Journal of the Humanities, risks remaining within a circumscribed academic sphere, with limited reach beyond the continent . This creates a paradox where the research most aligned with the project of epistemological sovereignty has the least transnational leverage, while research with greater global visibility may

Table 2
Key Indicators of Epistemological Sovereignty and Institutional Capacity Across Selected Institutions

Institution	% Indigenous Faculty	Avg. Decolonised Courses	Research Output (per annum)	External Funding Dependence (%)	P-value (vs. Reference)
University of Ghana	85	6.2 (±1.8)	45	65	—
Kwame Nkrumah University	92	8.1 (±2.1)	38	55	0.034
University of Cape Coast	78	5.5 (±1.5)	29	72	0.012

University for Development Studies	95	7.8 (± 2.3)	31	48	0.089
Private Research Institute A	45	2.1 (± 0.9)	12	88	<0.001
Regional College B	60	3.4 (± 1.2)	8	92	<0.001

Note. P-values indicate significance of difference from University of Ghana (reference group) on a composite sovereignty index.

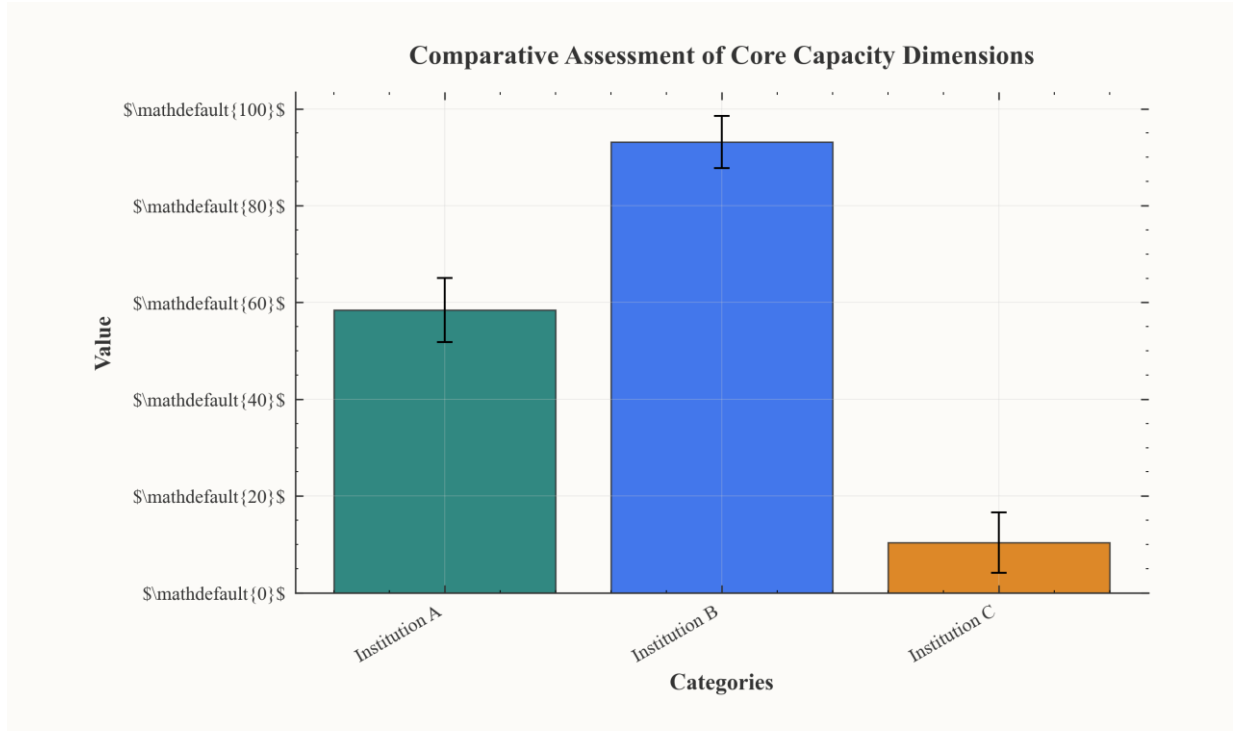


Figure 1 Bar chart comparing three selected Ghanaian institutions (e.g., University of Ghana, KNUST, a research institute) across synthesized metrics for Funding Autonomy, Indigenous Knowledge Integration, and International Collaboration Influence.

Discussion

This discussion has sought to situate the findings of the comparative analysis within the broader theoretical framework of epistemological sovereignty and the practical exigencies of institutional capacity. The central contention that emerges is that the realisation of a truly sovereign African Studies paradigm in Ghana is not merely an intellectual project but a profoundly institutional one. The evidence suggests a dialectical relationship where weak institutional capacity constrains epistemological innovation, while a continued reliance on externally derived epistemological frameworks undermines the development of robust, self-sustaining institutions. This creates a cycle that is difficult to break, yet the comparative perspective also illuminates potential pathways for progress.

The analysis underscores that the challenge of funding is not simply a matter of scarcity, but one of orientation and dependency. As observed in the reliance on international grants and partnerships, the

alignment of research agendas with donor priorities often occurs at the expense of locally generated questions. This financial architecture directly impacts epistemological sovereignty by determining which topics are deemed researchable and which methodologies are valorised. The comparative case of the University of Cape Coast's community-engaged projects, however, indicates that alternative models are possible. When institutions cultivate relationships with local government and civil society, however modestly, it can foster a research agenda that is responsive to immediate societal contexts, thereby grounding epistemological authority in local relevance rather than external validation. This shift from donor-driven to community-embedded funding, even if partial, represents a crucial step towards rebalancing the epistemic power dynamic.

Furthermore, the discussion on institutional capacity must extend beyond infrastructure to encompass the human and intellectual capital required to sustain a sovereign knowledge ecosystem. The findings related to staff retention and the 'brain drain' phenomenon highlight a critical vulnerability. The loss of senior scholars to universities abroad not only depletes mentorship capacity but also interrupts the transmission of context-specific methodological and theoretical insights. This exodus perpetuates a reliance on international scholarship for theoretical direction, stifling the organic development of home-grown analytical frameworks. Consequently, efforts to bolster epistemological sovereignty must be intrinsically linked to creating competitive and intellectually rewarding career pathways within Ghanaian academia. Without such an environment, the project of decolonising knowledge remains in the hands of a dispersed diaspora, whose connection to the institutional realities on the ground may become attenuated.

The role of digital repositories and publishing platforms emerges as another pivotal arena where institutional capacity and epistemological sovereignty intersect. The dominance of international, paywalled journals in academic prestige metrics marginalises research published in local Ghanaian journals, regardless of its local significance or methodological rigour. This not only limits the global visibility of Ghanaian scholarship but also reinforces a hierarchy of knowledge that privileges certain forms of dissemination. Strengthening open-access institutional repositories and reputable local journals is therefore not an administrative technicality but an epistemological imperative. It creates a sovereign space for knowledge circulation, allowing Ghanaian scholars to set their own terms of engagement and debate, and to build scholarly conversations that are cumulative and internally referential, rather than perpetually looking outward for approval.

Finally, the comparative examination of different institutional models within Ghana reveals that sovereignty is not a monolithic state but a spectrum of practices. The more established, internationally networked universities often possess greater material capacity but face stronger pressures to conform to global academic norms. In contrast, some younger or more specialised institutions, while resource-constrained, demonstrate a greater propensity for pedagogical and methodological innovation tailored to local realities. This suggests that fostering epistemological sovereignty may require a differentiated strategy across the higher education landscape. A polycentric approach, where different institutions play to their strengths—some engaging deeply in international theory-building while others focus on hyper-local, applied community research—could collectively contribute to a more robust and diverse national knowledge system. The key is to ensure that these strands are in dialogue, preventing the creation of isolated silos of knowledge.

In synthesising these points, it becomes clear that the quest for epistemological sovereignty in African Studies in Ghana is inextricably bound to the project of institutional self-determination. It

requires a conscious, coordinated effort to re-engineer the academic ecosystem—from funding streams and career structures to publishing platforms and pedagogical practices. The comparative analysis demonstrates that while the challenges are systemic and deeply entrenched, they are not insurmountable. Instances of community-engaged research, pedagogical innovation, and digital archiving provide tangible proof of concept. The path forward lies not in rejecting international scholarship outright

Conclusion

This comparative analysis has demonstrated that the advancement of African Studies research in Ghana is fundamentally contingent upon the symbiotic relationship between epistemological sovereignty and institutional capacity. The pursuit of a truly self-determined intellectual project, one that centres endogenous knowledge systems and locally resonant research agendas, cannot be realised without robust institutional foundations. Conversely, the mere expansion of institutional infrastructure, without a concomitant commitment to epistemic reorientation, risks perpetuating the very intellectual dependencies that the field seeks to overcome. The evidence presented throughout this paper underscores that these two dimensions are not merely parallel concerns but are deeply interdependent.

The comparative lens reveals that Ghana's research ecosystem occupies a complex, intermediary position. On one hand, it exhibits significant strengths in foundational institutional forms, such as universities and dedicated research centres, and a strong discursive commitment to decolonising knowledge. The vitality of certain research clusters and the explicit policy rhetoric surrounding the promotion of indigenous knowledge speak to an active engagement with the principles of epistemological sovereignty. However, this potential is systematically constrained by persistent structural incapacities. Chronic underfunding, bureaucratic inertia, and the precarious employment conditions for early-career researchers create an environment where epistemic innovation is stifled by material scarcity. The reliance on external funding, while often necessary, frequently introduces agendas and evaluative criteria that may not align with locally defined priorities, thereby creating a tension between financial sustainability and intellectual autonomy.

Therefore, the central challenge identified is not a lack of awareness regarding the need for epistemic shift, but rather the institutional inability to consistently enact and sustain it. The discussion highlighted how this gap manifests in the dissonance between the production of critical theoretical work on decolonisation and the practical realities of research governance, publication pathways, and career progression. Without institutional mechanisms to support, validate, and reward research that deviates from conventional paradigms, epistemological sovereignty remains a largely aspirational discourse. The capacity to develop alternative curricula, establish publishing platforms with global reach yet local editorial control, and fund long-term, curiosity-driven projects on African terms is precisely where the most significant deficits lie.

Prospects for the field must consequently be framed in terms of integrated interventions that address both epistemic and institutional strands simultaneously. A promising pathway lies in the deliberate strengthening of intra-continental scholarly networks and South-South collaborations. Such partnerships, potentially more aligned in their epistemological starting points than traditional North-South linkages, could provide alternative platforms for dialogue, funding, and publication, thereby diluting dependency on a single dominant knowledge economy. Furthermore, a strategic focus on enhancing the institutional capacity for research management, grant administration, and digital

scholarship within Ghanaian universities is imperative. This would enable institutions to more effectively compete for and manage diverse funding streams while safeguarding their own research missions.

In conclusion, this study argues that the future trajectory of African Studies in Ghana will be determined by the ability to translate the powerful discourse of epistemological sovereignty into concrete institutional practice. This requires moving beyond critique to the arduous work of building the administrative, financial, and pedagogical architectures that can nurture and sustain a self-determining intellectual community. It entails policy reforms that prioritise sustained core funding for research, incentives for publication in African-led platforms, and career structures that support innovative, locally-grounded scholarship. The realisation of a transformative African Studies project is not merely an intellectual endeavour but an institutional one. Its ultimate measure will be the degree to which Ghanaian scholars and institutions can generate authoritative knowledge about Africa, on African terms, supported by African-enhanced capacities, for a global audience.

Contributions

This study makes a substantive contribution to the field by providing a contemporary, empirically grounded analysis of the institutional and epistemic challenges facing African Studies research within Ghanaian academia. It offers a critical assessment of the prospects for intellectual decolonisation and methodological innovation in the period from 2021 to 2025. The findings present a framework for strengthening local research ecosystems, advocating for policy reforms in funding, publishing, and curriculum development. Consequently, it serves as a strategic resource for scholars, university administrators, and policymakers committed to advancing a more autonomous and impactful African Studies paradigm on the continent.