

INDIGENOUS RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES ADOPTION IN POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract

This systematic literature review examines the adoption and utilisation of Indigenous Research Methods (IRMs) in postgraduate research. Although extensive scholarship on Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) has focused on their integration into teaching, pedagogy, curriculum, and policy, far less attention has been given to their use in research methodologies. This imbalance sustains a disconnect between the decolonial aspirations of higher education and the epistemic practices through which knowledge is produced. Despite the cultural relevance and epistemic value of IRMs, their application in postgraduate research remains limited due to structural, ideological, and institutional factors that continue to privilege Western research paradigms. Using the PRISMA approach, the review systematically analysed peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2010 and 2025. Studies were identified, screened, and included based on clearly defined inclusion and exclusion criteria. The review synthesised empirical and conceptual literature to identify dominant patterns, recurring challenges, and gaps relating to the adoption of IRMs in postgraduate education research. The findings indicate persistent barriers to IRM uptake. These include the absence of formal training in IRMs for postgraduate students and supervisors, limited inclusion of IRMs in research methodology curricula and textbooks, inadequate supervisory expertise, and Western-centric examination and peer-review standards that marginalise Indigenous methodologies. Additional constraints include fears of examiner bias and journal rejection, limited funding opportunities for IRM-based research, and the lack of institutional policies that formally support the use of IRMs in postgraduate research. The review recommends embedding IRMs within postgraduate research methodology curricula, strengthening supervisory capacity through targeted training, developing institutional policies and funding mechanisms that support IRM-based research, and broadening research evaluation standards to recognise epistemic diversity. It further calls for empirical studies that evaluate strategies for mainstreaming IRMs in postgraduate programmes.

Keywords: *Indigenous research methods, indigenous knowledge systems, cognitive justice, decolonisation, postgraduate research.*

1. Introduction

Contemporary research involving Indigenous communities remains entangled in colonial legacies that have historically positioned Indigenous peoples as objects of inquiry rather than co-constructors of knowledge. Although there has been a growing shift toward recognising Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) within higher education, this recognition has largely been confined to curriculum and pedagogy (Drawson et al., 2017), with limited transformation in the methodological foundations of research. Scholars such as Datta (2018) and Owusu-Ansah and Mji (2013) argue that meaningful decolonisation requires more than the inclusion of Indigenous content; it demands the centring of Indigenous epistemologies, values, and participatory practices throughout the research process. However, this epistemic shift remains uneven and, in many cases, superficial.

Indigenous Research Methodologies (IRMs) offer a critical pathway for reconfiguring research practices toward more ethical, relational, and culturally grounded approaches (Keane et al., 2017). These methodologies prioritise respect, reciprocity, and active community involvement, aligning with principles of wholism and relational accountability (Pidgeon & Riley, 2021; Dawson et al., 2017). Empirical examples such as storytelling, sharing circles, participatory action research, and the use of cultural artefacts demonstrate the richness and contextual sensitivity of IRMs (Khuphe & Keane, 2017; Pidgeon, 2021). Yet, despite their potential to produce authentic and contextually relevant knowledge, their adoption in postgraduate research remains limited. This paradox reflects a deeper structural tension within academia: while IRMs are theoretically endorsed as tools for decolonisation, institutional practices continue to privilege Western paradigms as the benchmark of methodological rigour and legitimacy (Keane et al., 2017).

This dominance is reinforced through interconnected systems of knowledge production, including research training, supervision, publication, and evaluation. Postgraduate students are often socialised into Western methodological traditions through curricula that marginalise or exclude IRMs (Datta, 2018). At the same time, concerns about examiner expectations, peer-review standards, and publication prospects discourage experimentation with Indigenous approaches (Khuphe & Keane, 2017). Furthermore, IRMs are frequently mischaracterised as simplistic or lacking systematic rigour due to their oral, relational, and context-specific nature (Owusu-Ansah & Mji, 2013). Such perceptions not only undermine their legitimacy but also reproduce epistemic hierarchies that contradict the transformative goals of decolonial research.

The persistence of these constraints reveals a critical misalignment between the stated commitment to decolonising knowledge and the methodological practices through which knowledge is generated. As Dawson et al. (2017) caution, the continued reliance on Western frameworks in studies aimed at challenging coloniality risks reproducing the very forms of marginalisation such research seeks to dismantle. This contradiction is particularly pronounced in postgraduate research, where emerging scholars navigate institutional expectations while attempting to engage with Indigenous epistemologies in meaningful ways. Consequently, the underutilisation of IRMs cannot be understood solely as an individual choice but must be situated within broader structural, ideological, and institutional dynamics.

Against this backdrop, the present study responds directly to the persistent gap between the recognised value of IRMs and their limited application in postgraduate research. It critically examines the opportunities that IRMs present for transforming research practices, alongside the challenges that constrain their adoption. In doing so, the study moves beyond advocacy to interrogate the conditions under which IRMs can be meaningfully integrated into postgraduate research.

The significance of this study lies in its focus on an underexplored dimension of decolonisation—methodological practice. While existing literature has extensively documented the importance of integrating IKS into teaching and learning, far less attention has been given to how research itself can be decolonised through the adoption of IRMs. By synthesising insights on both the enabling and constraining factors, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of why IRMs remain marginal despite their recognised value. It further addresses gaps related to the role of postgraduate training, supervisory capacity, and institutional structures in shaping methodological choices. Ultimately, the study provides a basis for rethinking research training, policy, and evaluation in ways that support epistemic plurality and more inclusive knowledge production.

2. Theoretical frameworks

This study is underpinned by the theory of cognitive justice as conceptualised by Visvanathan (1997). Cognitive justice advocates for the recognition and coexistence of multiple knowledge systems, particularly those historically marginalised, such as IKS (Odora-Hoppers, 2021). In the South African context, higher education continues to privilege Western epistemologies, often overlooking Indigenous ways of knowing (Lebowitz, 2017). This creates an epistemic imbalance that extends beyond curriculum content to the methodologies through which knowledge is produced.

Cognitive justice provides a critical lens for understanding the marginalisation of IRMs in postgraduate research. While IKS is increasingly acknowledged, its methodological foundations remain underutilised, reflecting a disconnect between decolonial intentions and research practices. The theory therefore supports the need to align research methods with the nature and context of the research problem, particularly in studies involving IKS (Khuphe & Keane, 2017).

Importantly, this study does not reject Western methodologies but advocates for epistemic pluralism—where IRMs are adopted alongside other approaches when appropriate. Within this framework, the study examines the opportunities and challenges of IRM adoption as expressions of broader epistemic conditions. In doing so, it positions the use of IRMs as essential for advancing inclusive, contextually relevant, and socially just research practices in postgraduate studies.

3. Research methodology

A systematic literature review was conducted to synthesise scholarship on the adoption of IRMs in postgraduate research in a transparent and reproducible manner (Lame, 2019). The review followed the PRISMA framework—identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion (Nazir & Das, 2025). A comprehensive search was conducted across Google Scholar, Scopus, ProQuest, and ERIC to ensure both breadth and disciplinary relevance. Using predefined keywords and their synonyms, an initial 5,600 records were identified. Following preliminary filtering based on titles and keywords, 65,248 records that did not sufficiently align with the search terms were removed, leaving 2,352 studies for screening.

Clear inclusion and exclusion criteria were established to ensure alignment with the study's focus. The review included peer-reviewed, full-text articles published in English between 2010 and 2025 that explicitly addressed IRMs within postgraduate or higher education research contexts. Studies were excluded if they were non-peer-reviewed, review papers, abstracts or summaries without full text, non-English publications, or unrelated to the study focus. During the screening phase, titles and abstracts of the 5,352 studies were examined, resulting in the exclusion of a substantial number of studies that addressed Indigenous knowledge broadly but did not engage with research methodologies. This process yielded 168 studies for full-text assessment.

In the eligibility phase, the full texts of the 168 articles were critically examined, focusing on their aims, methodological approaches, and relevance to IRM adoption. This stage resulted in 15 studies meeting all inclusion criteria. To enhance comprehensiveness, an ancestral search was conducted by reviewing reference lists of the selected studies, leading to the identification of five additional relevant articles. This brought the final sample to 20 studies included in the review.

To ensure methodological rigour and reliability, the author independently conducted the screening and coding processes using the predefined criteria. A pilot coding exercise was first undertaken to refine the review instrument and ensure consistency. Thereafter, the author applied the criteria, and results were analysed. These procedures strengthened the transparency, consistency, and trustworthiness of the review process, ensuring a robust and credible synthesis of the literature.

4. Research findings

The systematic literature review identified and analysed 30 publications examining the adoption of IRMs in postgraduate research. The findings are presented in two interrelated sections: (1) The opportunities associated with the adoption of IRMs and (2) The challenges constraining their adoptions. The following sections provide a critical synthesis of these findings.

4.1. Opportunities associated with the adoption of IRMs in postgraduate research

The review reveals that IRMs offer significant opportunities for transforming postgraduate research by advancing epistemic inclusion and relational modes of knowledge production. Across the literature, IRMs are consistently positioned as approaches that shift research from extractive practices toward collaborative, participatory, and contextually grounded processes (Chilisa, 2012; Kovach, 2010; Koster et al., 2012). This shift is not merely methodological but epistemological, as it repositions Indigenous communities from passive subjects to active knowledge holders and co-creators. Studies emphasise that such engagement enhances the authenticity and cultural relevance of research, ensuring that knowledge produced resonates with community realities and priorities (Datta, 2018; Owusu-Ansah & Mji, 2013).

A recurring insight is the centrality of relationality in IRMs. Methods such as storytelling, talking circles, and community-based participatory approaches foreground dialogue, trust, and reciprocity, thereby strengthening the ethical foundations of research (Drawson et al, 2017; Galla & Goodwill, 2017). These approaches align with Ubuntu-informed perspectives, which emphasise interconnectedness and collective meaning-making (Bhuda & Marumo, 2022; Seehawer, 2023). In this sense, IRMs extend beyond data collection techniques to embody value systems that prioritise respect, responsibility, and mutual benefit. This orientation contributes to more socially responsive research practices and facilitates the preservation and validation of IKS within academic spaces (Odora-Hoppers, 2021; Mkhwebane, 2024).

Importantly, the literature also highlights the adaptability of IRMs within contemporary research contexts. Rather than existing in isolation, IRMs can be integrated with or inform conventional qualitative approaches, creating hybrid methodologies that remain contextually sensitive while meeting academic expectations (Simonds & Christopher, 2013; Keikelame & Swartz, 2019). This flexibility expands methodological possibilities for postgraduate researchers and supports epistemic pluralism. Collectively, these opportunities position IRMs as critical tools for advancing decolonial research agendas and fostering more inclusive and contextually meaningful knowledge production.

4.2. Challenges constraining the adoption of IRMs in postgraduate research

Despite their transformative potential, the adoption of IRMs in postgraduate research remains constrained by entrenched structural and epistemic barriers. A dominant theme across the literature is the continued privileging of Western research paradigms within higher education institutions (Datta, 2018). These paradigms are reinforced through research training, supervision, and evaluation systems that define methodological rigour in narrowly Western terms (Keane et al, 2017; Khupe & Keane, 2017). As a result, postgraduate students are often socialised into conventional methodological frameworks, with limited exposure to or support for IRMs (Pidgeon & Riley, 2021).

This institutional bias is further compounded by publication and validation systems that marginalise Indigenous approaches. Studies indicate that academic journals and peer-review processes frequently perceive IRMs as lacking systematic rigour due to their oral, relational, and context-specific nature (Owusu-Ansah & Mji, 2013). Such perceptions create a climate of uncertainty, where postgraduate researchers may avoid IRMs due to concerns about examiner bias, publication prospects, and academic credibility (Keane et al., 2017). This reflects a broader epistemic tension, where Indigenous methodologies are acknowledged in principle but remain undervalued in practice.

The review also identifies gaps in institutional support as a significant barrier. There is limited inclusion of IRMs in research methodology curricula, alongside a lack of supervisory expertise to guide students in applying these approaches effectively (Datta, 2018; Pidgeon & Riley, 2021). Furthermore, the absence of clear policies and frameworks supporting IRM-based research contributes to their marginalisation, leaving students to navigate these approaches without adequate guidance (Keane et al., 2017). This lack of structural support reinforces the dominance of Western methodologies and constrains methodological innovation.

When analysed closely, these challenges reflect ongoing epistemic injustice within academia. As Morgensen (2012) and Odora-Hoppers (2021) suggest, the marginalisation of IRMs is not incidental but embedded within the historical and institutional fabric of the academy. Consequently, the underutilisation of IRMs cannot be reduced to individual choice; it is shaped by systemic conditions that regulate what counts as legitimate knowledge and method. Addressing these barriers therefore requires not only increased awareness but structural transformation in research training, supervision, and evaluation practices.

5. Implications, recommendations and conclusions

The findings of the study indicate that while IRMs are widely recognised for their potential to advance decolonial and culturally responsive research, their actual use in postgraduate research remains limited and largely superficial. Postgraduate researchers continue to rely predominantly on Western methodological frameworks, often due to institutional expectations, limited training, and concerns about academic legitimacy. This results in a partial and inconsistent integration of IRMs, which undermines the broader goal of epistemic justice in research practices and restricts the transformation of knowledge production in higher education.

The findings suggest that meaningful adoption of IRMs requires more than theoretical acknowledgement; it demands structured methodological support within postgraduate training programmes. This includes the deliberate inclusion of IRMs in research methodology curricula, targeted supervisory development, and the creation of academic environments that validate diverse epistemologies. In addition, institutional and publication systems need to be more open to evaluating research quality beyond Western-centric standards. Collaboration with Indigenous knowledge holders is also essential to ensure that IRMs are applied authentically and ethically, rather than symbolically or selectively.

In conclusion, the study demonstrates that without deliberate institutional transformation and sustained methodological support, the adoption of IRMs in postgraduate research will remain constrained and inconsistent. This limits the potential for genuine decolonisation of research practices and perpetuates epistemic imbalance in knowledge production. Strengthening postgraduate training, supervisory capacity, and institutional policy support is therefore essential for enabling meaningful, contextually grounded, and epistemically just research practices.

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