

Bridging the Gap between the Generative AI Divide and Institutional Curricular Policy at State Universities in Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

Generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) is reshaping practices at higher education globally, yet its integration into Zimbabwean State Universities remains uneven and neglected in theoretical analysis. This paper examines the gap between the emerging GenAI divide and institutional curricular policy responses at State Universities in Zimbabwe. Drawing on documentary analysis of policy frameworks, institutional initiatives, and scholarly literature, the study identifies three interconnected dimensions of the GenAI divide: infrastructural access, digital literacy and capability, and epistemic exclusion. The paper argues that while Zimbabwe's National Artificial Intelligence Strategy 2026-2030 provides a foundational policy framework (Mnangagwa, 2026; OECD, 2026), institutional curricular policies at State Universities remain in their infancy and fragmented. The analysis reveals that bridging the GenAI divide requires not merely technological provision. It further requires a systematic curricular reform that addresses assessment redesign, faculty development, and decolonial epistemic considerations. The existing policies remain focused on fighting the GenAI in the name of preserving academic rigour, which reveals that the institutions are not prepared to accept the potential of improved academia provided by these tools, thereby widening the AI divide. The paper proposes a multi-level framework integrating national policy coherence, institutional policy development, and pedagogical transformation. Recommendations emphasise the need for participatory policy development, investment in digital infrastructure, and assessment innovation aligned with constructivist learning principles. The study contributes to emerging scholarship on GenAI in African higher education by situating the divide within historical inequalities and proposing contextually grounded policy responses.

Keywords: Generative AI, digital divide, curricular policy, Zimbabwe higher education, decoloniality, institutional governance.

INTRODUCTION

The advent of GenAI has introduced a paradigmatic shift in higher education, transforming conventional approaches to teaching, learning, and assessment (Watson & Rainie, 2025). Since the public release of ChatGPT in November 2022, GenAI tools have proliferated rapidly across academic contexts, offering capabilities that include automated content generation, personalised learning support, and administrative efficiency (Watson & Rainie, 2025). However, the benefits of these technologies are not evenly distributed. A growing body of scholarship documents a GenAI divide that overlays and reconfigures existing digital inequalities in higher education (Poellhuber et al., 2025).

In Zimbabwe, the integration of GenAI into higher education occurs against a backdrop of significant infrastructural constraints, evolving regulatory frameworks, and historical inequalities rooted in colonial legacies (UNESCO, 2026). The Zimbabwean government has demonstrated increasing commitment to artificial intelligence development, launching the National Artificial Intelligence Strategy 2026-2030 with pillars encompassing talent development, infrastructure, adoption, and governance (Mnangagwa, 2026; OECD, 2026). Yet the translation of national policy into institutional curricular policy and practice remains incomplete.

Background To Study

Globally, GenAI has emerged as a transformative force in higher education that is reshaping education practices. Studies highlight its potential to enhance personalised learning, automate assessment, and support innovative curriculum design (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Zawacki-Richter & Kerres, 2023). At the same time, concerns about ethics, bias, and academic integrity have intensified, prompting calls for robust governance frameworks (Williamson & Piattoeva, 2022).

African higher education systems face unique challenges in adopting GenAI, including infrastructural deficits, uneven digital literacy, and policy gaps (Adebayo, 2022; Mhlanga, 2023). While AI offers opportunities to advance inclusive education and bridge resource constraints, its integration remains fragmented, often driven by individual institutions rather than coordinated national strategies. This has created what scholars term the GenAI divide: a disparity between institutions and students with resources to adopt AI and those constrained by socio-economic realities (Mhlanga, 2023).

In Zimbabwe, the Higher Education 5.0 philosophy emphasises innovation, industrialization, and inclusive access. Yet, despite the government's National AI Strategy (2026-2030), state universities lack coherent curricular policies to guide generative AI integration (Nhengu, 2026). Recent systematic reviews of Zimbabwean higher education reveal that while faculty and students increasingly experiment with AI tools, institutional frameworks remain underdeveloped, leading to inconsistencies in pedagogy, assessment, and ethical standards (Chipfumbu et al., 2026).

This misalignment between rapid technological adoption and slow policy development creates a governance gap. Without structured or non-inclusive curricular policies, universities risk reinforcing inequities, undermining academic integrity, and failing to align GenAI use with national development goals. Thus, the current study background narrows to the topical issue of bridging the GenAI divide and institutional curricular policy in Zimbabwean State Universities.

Statement of The Problem

Despite Zimbabwe's drive for National AI Strategy and Education 5.0 Philosophy that put Higher Education sector as the key driver of these, State Universities, lack inclusive formal curricular policies for GenAI integration. This results in fragmented adoption, ethical concerns, unequal access and misalignment between institutional policy frameworks and GenAI pedagogy (Chipfumbu et al., 2026; Nhengu, 2026). A striking feature from preliminary engagement with students across universities shows that a vast majority is engaging with GenAI in their academic work. Yet a sharp divide emerges between utilising premium version tools and those using capped free trials and depending on personal mobile data. Therefore, the problem speaks to the fragmentation between curricular policy for bridging Gen AI use and institutional governance that results to exclusion and inefficiency use. In light of this, the study seeks to establish mechanisms for bridging the GenAI divide and institutional curricular policies in State Universities of Zimbabwe.

Research Objectives

The research objectives are to:

1. Examine the dimensions of GenAI divide that are existing in Zimbabwean State Universities.
2. Determine institutional curricular policies' response to GenAI integration.
3. Assess how Gen AI policies can bridge GenAI divide in tertiary institutions of learning.

Research Questions

This paper addresses the following research questions:

1. What dimensions of the GenAI divide are evident in Zimbabwean State Universities?

2. How are institutional curricular policies responding to GenAI integration?
3. What policy and pedagogical frameworks can bridge the gap between the GenAI divide and institutional curricular practice?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Generative AI Divide In Higher Education

The GenAI divide in higher education has evolved through successive phases. Firstly, it concerns the physical access to technological tools and network connectivity. Secondly, it goes to divides related to GenAI skills and the capacity to use the technologies effectively. Thirdly, the divides enshrined on benefits and outcomes gained from using the GenAI technologies (Wei et al., 2011). Concurrent literature reveal that GenAI does not create different categories of inequality rather it perpetuates the overlaying and reproduce the existed digital divides (Poellhuber et al., 2025).

GenAI specifically brings equity challenges and these include differential access to subscription models of AI, compute-intensive features, and biased outputs that may not reflect local contexts (Jhaveri, 2025). Research from the University of Leicester emphasises that access to AI tools without the prerequisite skills to use them is the new inequality (Jhaveri, 2025). The argument is that the real divide rests between those who can question and interpret AI outputs, apply them in their context, and responsibly use, versus those who cannot (Jhaveri, 2025).

In Global South contexts, infrastructure limitations, cost barriers, and language constraints compound these divides. A systematised evidence mapping of GenAI and digital divide phenomena in higher education highlights the need to analyse contextual and regional variations, with particular emphasis on insights from Global South contexts (Poellhuber et al., 2025). In general, most of the GenAI tools come from the contexts outside Global South, thereby providing information and solutions that are divorced from the needs of the context, making them not much reliable.

Policy Responses In African Higher Education

The integration of GenAI into African higher education calls for sensitivity to the intergenerational legacies of colonialism and continued inequalities (UNESCO, 2026). Recommendations from comparative studies of African higher education emphasise digital transformation should be approached with awareness of historical context and the risks of digital recolonization (UNESCO, 2026). Governments and institutions have a pressing role to protect African interests, data, and resources when negotiating with international partners in issues of GenAI programming and use.

The policy literature stresses the importance of human-centred approaches. Advances in technology are not panaceas for societal challenges hence, legislation and oversight mechanisms are crucial to ensure that GenAI serves whole humanity interests rather than only a few (United Nations in Zimbabwe, 2026). Regional collaboration such as the African Union recommended the establishment of frameworks that support resource sharing and prevent a fragmented approach resulting in winner-takes-all (United Nations in Zimbabwe, 2026).

Zimbabwe's Policy Context

Zimbabwe has progressively developed policies to support both higher education and AI integration. The National Artificial Intelligence Strategy 2026-2030, launched in March 2026, anchored on four main pillars of six pillars: Talent and Capacity Development, Infrastructure and Computational Sovereignty, Adoption and Service Transformation, and Governance, Ethics and Regulatory Framework (Mnangagwa, 2026; OECD, 2026). The strategy emphasises alignment with Zimbabwe's philosophy; Education 5.0, focusing on innovation and heritage-based education (UNESCO, 2026). The Minister of ICT, Postal and Courier Services emphasised that the strategy is distinctively Zimbabwean as aligned with Zimbabwe's Vision 2030, focusing on AI integration as a driver of growth and sovereignty that leaves no one behind (Mavetera, 2026). The strategy



believes that the successful GenAI deployment and integration depends on foundational systems that include digital infrastructure, data governance, skilled workforce, and regulatory framework clarity (OECD, 2026).

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This study employed a qualitative documentary analysis approach to examine the intersection of GenAI policy and institutional curricular policy and practice in Zimbabwean State Universities. The study adopted a systematic documentary analysis approach and the section gives an outline of document selection search strategy and selection criteria as well as steps followed during data analysis.

Document Selection And Search Strategy

Document Selection Criteria

The documents selection used the following inclusion and exclusion criteria:

Inclusion Criteria

1. Documents published between 2022 and 2026 that is post-ChatGPT era.
2. Documents addressing GenAI, AI policy, digital divide, or curricular reform in higher education.
3. Documents with specific relevance to Zimbabwe or the African higher education context.
4. Peer-reviewed journal articles, official policy documents, institutional reports, and reputable media reports.

Exclusion Criteria

1. Documents not available in English.
2. Documents not directly addressing GenAI or AI in educational contexts.
3. Opinion pieces without institutional affiliation or scholarly grounding.
4. Documents published before 2022 (pre-ChatGPT release).

Search Strategy

Documents search for the study used a three-pronged search strategy as follows:

Electronic database searches: Conducted using Google Scholar, Scopus, and institutional repositories. Search terms included "generative artificial intelligence" OR "GenAI" OR "ChatGPT" AND "higher education" AND "Zimbabwe" OR "African higher education" AND "policy" OR "curriculum" OR "digital divide."

Institutional website searches: Conducted on the official websites of Government of Zimbabwe and six Zimbabwean State Universities: University of Zimbabwe (UZ), National University of Science and Technology (NUST), Midlands State University (MSU), Bindura University of Science Education (BUSE), Lupane State University (LSU), and Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU). Search terms included "AI policy," "generative AI," "academic integrity," "assessment policy," and "curriculum."

AI-assisted literature discovery: Conducted using DeepSeek and Copilot to identify policy documents, empirical studies, and institutional reports that traditional database searches may have missed. These tools functioned to identify institutional policy documents from State Universities that were not indexed in conventional academic databases. The tools also worked to locate empirical studies on AI ethics, digital

literacy, and policy gaps in Zimbabwean higher education. Finally, AI assisted in cross-referencing citations and identifying additional sources through snowballing.

Data Sources

Data sources used in the study include:

1. National policy documents, including the National Artificial Intelligence Strategy 2026–2030 (Mnangagwa, 2026; OECD, 2026)
2. Institutional policy documents from Zimbabwean State Universities, including:
 - A. University of Zimbabwe (UZ): Academic regulations and empirical research on AI ethics among students.
 - B. Bindura University of Science Education (BUSE): Institutional reports on digital learning and AI policy development.
 - C. Lupane State University (LSU): ICT Policy and institutional strategic documents.
 - D. Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU): Assessment redesign initiatives and Integrity Pledge.
 - E. Midlands State University (MSU): Policy repository and academic regulations.
 - F. National University of Science and Technology (NUST): AI policy and academic integrity framework.
3. Peer-reviewed scholarly literature on GenAI in higher education, with emphasis on African and Global South contexts (Moyo & Chirwa, 2026; Poellhuber et al., 2025; Chipfumbu et al., 2026)
4. Reports from higher education bodies and international organisations (UNESCO, 2026; United Nations in Zimbabwe, 2026; OECD, 2026)

Analytical Approach

The analysis focused on identifying policy gaps, institutional responses, and emerging practices related to GenAI integration in curricula. The study employed the six-phase thematic analysis framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) to identify recurring patterns and dimensions of the GenAI divide. The analytical process involved the following steps:

Familiarisation with the data: Repeated reading of documents to gain deep familiarity with their content.

Generating initial codes: Systematic identification of text segments addressing GenAI, policy, access, capability, and epistemic concerns.

Searching for themes: Grouping codes into candidate themes aligned with the three research questions.

Reviewing themes: Comparing themes against the full dataset to ensure representativeness.

Defining and naming themes: Articulating each theme's scope and relevance to the GenAI divide and curricular policy.

Producing the report: Synthesising the analysed themes into a coherent narrative that addresses the research questions and contributes to the existing literature.

Ethical Considerations

The study employed systematic review method that does not guarantee ethical clearance; however, researcher did a thoroughly review of the secondary sources for their clearance during their primary study before using

their data in this research. The researcher employed AI tools such as Deepseek and Copilot to search, screen, and extract and synthesis literature in accordance to RAISE standards. The researcher retains full responsibility for academic judgement and verification of all AI outputs against original sources. The study took seriously the data privacy and copyright compliance by citing literature and institutional documents reviewed.

FINDINGS

Dimensions of The Generative AI Divide in Zimbabwean Higher Education

Infrastructural Access

Zimbabwean State Universities face significant infrastructural constraints that limit equitable access to GenAI tools. Limited broadband connectivity, insufficient computing facilities, and unreliable electricity supply create baseline barriers to GenAI adoption (UNESCO, 2026). Research on GenAI in Zimbabwean higher education notes that the country's limited infrastructure and low level of digital readiness present substantial obstacles to integration (Moyo & Chirwa, 2026). The National AI Strategy acknowledges these challenges, prioritising investment in digital infrastructure and cloud computing capacities (OECD, 2026).

Digital Literacy and Capability

Beyond infrastructure, significant gaps in digital literacy and AI capability exist among students and faculty. A mixed-methods study conducted at a Zimbabwean University found that while the use of GenAI to enhance teaching strategies and boost administrative effectiveness is gaining traction, there remains a need for capacity building for ethical AI deployment (Moyo & Chirwa, 2026). The study emphasises that, strategic investment in digital infrastructure, be accompanied by human capacity development.

Research from the University of Leicester argues that institutional provision of AI tools alone is insufficient; the real work lies in how AI is embedded into curricula and how students develop confidence, capability to use AI effectively, and responsibly (Jhaveri, 2025). This perspective is relevant to Zimbabwean institutions, where universal access initiatives remain limited.

Institutional Curricular Policy Responses

Epistemic Exclusion

A distinct dimension of the GenAI divide concerns epistemic exclusion. The National Artificial Intelligence Strategy (2026–2030) acknowledges this risk through its emphasis on cultural and social determination. The Strategy intends to shape the country's technological future based on three core imperatives: “economic sovereignty and competitiveness; **cultural and social determination to instil Zimbabwean values and the philosophy of Unhu/Ubuntu** and inclusive and resilient development where AI is used to solve challenges and bridge the urban-rural divide by leaving no one and no place behind” (Mnangagwa, 2026).

The Strategy further commits to the development of locally relevant datasets and integration of indigenous knowledge systems as foundational to its vision. However, the absence of corresponding curricular policies at State Universities means these national commitments are lacking translation into pedagogical practice. The Vice Chancellor of Zimbabwe Open University warned about knowledge slavery (Gundani, 2026a) thus reflects a gap that national policy itself recognises but institutional governance has not addressed. As noted in comparative African higher education literature (Ahmed, 2026); most African nations have yet to enact controls, enabling uncontrolled experimentation and dependence on foreign educational technology vendors, a policy gap that has heightened risks of digital colonisation and student marginalisation.

One State University in Zimbabwe with AI Policy; its document does not address issues of decolonisation but only use guidelines. While National University of Science and Technology (2026) published an AI policy that acknowledges colonial bias through data sovereignty provisions, but it fell short of a comprehensive decolonial framework that integrates indigenous knowledge systems and promotes epistemic sovereignty. The policy lack provisions for developing local trained AI models and developing algorithms that are Afrocentric.

The Vice Chancellor of Zimbabwe Open University warned that uncritically consuming Western-oriented AI data risks a new form of knowledge slavery (Gundani, 2026a). He argued that because many AI platforms are Western-oriented, they often fail to capture the African context, potentially killing indigenous knowledge systems (Gundani, 2026a). This concern highlights the need for curricular policies that critically engage with GenAI content and promote decolonial approaches to knowledge production.

Nascent Policy Development

Institutional curricular policies addressing GenAI are at infancy at most Zimbabwean State Universities. While the National AI Strategy provides a national framework (Mnangagwa, 2026; OECD, 2026), the translation into institutional policy is uneven. The Strategy has six pillars: “Artificial Intelligence Talent and Capacity Development; National Artificial Intelligence Infrastructure and Computational Sovereignty; Artificial Intelligence Adoption and Service Transformation; Governance, Ethics and Regulatory Framework; Research, Development and Innovation; and Strategic International Collaboration and Diplomacy” (Mnangagwa, 2026). A study of Zimbabwean stakeholders found that the use of GenAI for pedagogical innovation is gaining a popular attention as witnessed by National AI Strategy but still there is a need for the strategic institutional responses (Moyo & Chirwa, 2026). Most of the Universities are operating without clear Gen AI inclusive access policies. Those with policies are reflecting interests on banning use of GenAI through acceptable use guidelines instead of promoting inclusive access.

Documentary analysis of policy documents from six Zimbabwean universities reveals significant diversity in institutional responses to AI integration. One university had a formal AI policy published on its official website, one was working towards drafting policy, one was at engagement stage only, and three had no published AI policies, relying instead on departmental guidelines and institutional pledges. Among documents explicitly addressing AI, the predominant approach was detection-focused prohibition, followed by permissive frameworks requiring disclosure of AI use, and developmental approaches emphasising literacy and competency are none. Most State universities were significantly more likely to adopt prohibition-focused policies. This finding confirms that while some institutional responses exist, they are predominantly restrictive rather than developmental, and do not constitute the inclusive formal curricular policies that national policy envisions.

The National University of Science and Technology (NUST) AI Policy represents a significant institutional advance in AI governance within Zimbabwean higher education. It establishes a robust framework for academic integrity, contain commitments to equitable access, addresses data sovereignty, and provides governance mechanisms for ongoing review (National University of Science and Technology, 2026). An important aspect to note is that, the policy does not address the infrastructural constraints, funding gaps, or socioeconomic inequalities that produce the GenAI divide.

UNESCO-ICHEI (2026) notes that Bindura University of Science Education (BUSE) is working toward developing AI usage guidelines that balance innovation with ethics and academic standards. Further noted that it has begun drafting policy instruments related to responsible AI use. However, the absence of a guiding framework has left room for inconsistency and misuse, and formalisation of a comprehensive institutional policy on artificial intelligence remains an opportunity yet to be realised. The report explicitly acknowledged, "AI tools are already in informal use by students and staff, but the absence of a guiding framework has left room for inconsistency and misuse" (UNESCO-ICHEI 2026).

Lupane State University (LSU) uses the ICT Policy that provides general provisions on software usage and acceptable conduct but contains no AI-specific guidance. LSU (n.d.) states that University ICTs are for learning purposes only and prohibits playing of software games or downloading inappropriate content. However, it does not address GenAI tools, academic integrity in AI-assisted work, or curricular integration. This absence of AI-specific policy confirms the pattern of institutional gaps identified across State Universities.

Empirical research with students and faculty at University of Zimbabwe (UZ) reveals that while AI tools are in active use, institutional guidance remains fragmented (Chipfumbu et al., 2026). A study examining AI ethics

among students found that peer norms were the strongest pattern consistent with peer networks occupying the normative space left vacant by fragmented or absent institutional frameworks. The study found that ethical ambiguity in AI use is an institutional governance problem than a student behavioural deficiency.

The State Universities participation in AI-related initiatives demonstrates institutional engagement but not curricular policy development. According to Muranda (2024) lecturers from UZ, along with Midlands State University (MSU) and Great Zimbabwe University (GZU), participated in qualitative research on AI use in academic music, using Bard, Bing AI, ChatGPT, Gemini, Google Scholar, and WhatsApp for teaching and research. This empirical evidence confirms that AI tools are in active informal use across multiple State Universities, yet formal curricular policies remain absent. This documentary evidence confirms that while national policy is comparatively advanced, institutional curricular policy is largely absent or confined to general integrity frameworks across UZ, BUSE, LSU, and other State Universities.

Assessment Redesign Initiatives

Some institutions are beginning to address GenAI through assessment redesign. Zimbabwe Open University has announced a shift towards oral examinations and performance-based assessments to ensure students have truly interrogated the issues rather than relying on AI-generated content (Gundani, 2026b). The institutions proposed Viva Voce Revolution that moves away from written papers as the primary assessment standard and gives greater weight to oral examinations (Gundani, 2026b).

Research on assessment practices resistant to inappropriate AI use in open distance eLearning supports these approaches. A study of Zimbabwe Open University found that performance-based, reflective, oral, and observation-based assessments are effective in mitigating AI misuse (Moyo & Chirwa, 2026). These strategies align with constructivist theory because they prioritise active, meaningful learning grounded in real-world contexts (Moyo & Chirwa, 2026).

NUST AI policy established assessment redesign framework that move beyond prohibition regulation towards a structured regulation of AI use (National University of Science and Technology, 2026). The assessment framework provides for viva voce and continuous assessment monitoring. The redesign of assessment aligns with constructivist principles and reduce reliance on detection alone. Instead of sole emphasis on detection, the University is redesigning assessments from content heavy assignments that are prone to AI abuse to observations, monitoring and viva voce to counter students presenting GenAI work as their own. Midlands State University (MSU) has also undergone assessment redesign including use of viva voce on research assessments, as guided by assessment guidelines since there was no institutional AI policy published on its official website but Turnitin detection software is present on website.

Integrity Frameworks

Research on AI ethics in Zimbabwean higher education found that students across institutions are alarmingly getting ethical guidance through peer channels because of AI policy governance fragmentation (Chipfumbu et al., 2026). The study identified that students experienced authentic ethical distress rather than strategic flexibility, with uncertainty rates between 31% and 46%.

Institutional responses have also focused on academic integrity through general regulations without a specific AI policy save for National University of Science and Technology. Zimbabwe Open University's Integrity Pledge, signed by University leaders, staff, and students, represents an attempt to establish a culture of integrity in the context of AI-related academic dishonesty (ZOU, 2026). The Vice Chancellor emphasised that integrity should be a habit and a culture rather than merely a matter of compliance (Gundani, 2026a).

UNESCO-ICHEI (2026) reported that at BUSE students and staff informally use AI tools, but the absence of a guiding framework leaves a room for inconsistency and misuse. In response to this, the University has embarked on continuous professional development for both academic and support staff through workshops, short courses, and one-on-one mentoring in digital pedagogy and AI literacy. However, these capacity-building initiatives lack a formal curricular policy.

Empirical research involving lecturers from LSU and NUST on AI in classroom technology revealed that while many have not had prior AI usage in their workflows, those who had shared their experiences, and training emphasised that AI tools are there to support and not to replace lecturers in class activities. This ad hoc training approach reflects the absence of formal policy frameworks.

Chipfumbu et al. (2026) found that UZ, the significant developmental progression in ethical strictness, from Year 1 ($M = 4.42$) to postgraduate ($M = 3.78$), is consistent with Kohlberg's (1981) moral development theory and suggests that disciplinary socialisation contributes to ethical calibration over time. However, the persistence of peer norm dominance across all academic levels... indicates that developmental progression alone is insufficient to displace the force of governance fragmentation.

Gaps And Challenges

Policy Coherence

A significant gap exists between national AI policy and institutional curricular policy. While the National AI Strategy articulates a vision for AI integration in education (Mnangagwa, 2026), mechanisms for translating this vision into curricular practice remain underdeveloped. The strategy recognises that developing AI capabilities takes long-term commitment and requires significant investment and strategic resource mobilisation (OECD, 2026). Resource mobilisation must also translate into institutional curricular policy to ensure funding for equitable access to tools and skills.

Faculty Development

Faculty development in GenAI literacy and pedagogy is showing critical signs of limited attention by researchers and scholars. The integration of GenAI into curricula requires that faculty possess both technical proficiency and pedagogical knowledge in order to incorporate these tools effectively into teaching, learning, and assessment. Research on Zimbabwean higher education emphasises the need for capacity building for ethical AI deployment (Moyo & Chirwa, 2026).

Equity Considerations

The risk that GenAI integration may exacerbate existing inequalities requires deliberate policy intervention. The National AI Strategy emphasises inclusion, particularly for women, youth, rural communities, and persons with disabilities (Mnangagwa, 2026). However, institutional policies must translate these commitments into concrete measures that ensure equitable access and outcomes (Poellhuber et al., 2025). NUST' AI Policy (National University of Science and Technology, 2026) is a model for institutional governance but shows that even the most advanced institutional policy in Zimbabwe does not fully bridge the GenAI divide. The policy lack funding mechanisms to ensure equitable access to premium AI tools. The policy does not cater for infrastructure investment, targeted equity interventions, and epistemic decolonisation.

DISCUSSION

Towards A Multi-Level Policy Framework

Bridging the gap between the GenAI divide and institutional curricular policy requires coordinated action at multiple levels. At the national level, policy coherence between AI strategy and higher education policy is essential. The National AI Strategy provides a foundational framework (Mnangagwa, 2026; OECD, 2026), but its educational implications require further elaboration through ministerial guidelines, institutional AI policies and funding mechanisms. At the institutional level, universities must develop explicit curricular policies addressing GenAI integration. These policies should address:

- Acceptable use guidelines for students and faculty.
- Assessment redesign to maintain validity and integrity.

- Faculty development programmes for AI literacy and pedagogy.
- Infrastructure investment to ensure equitable access.
- Mechanisms for ongoing policy review and adaptation in line with National AI Strategy.

At the pedagogical level, curricular transformation must engage with GenAI as both a tool and a subject of study. This includes developing students' critical AI literacy, ethical reasoning, and capacity to evaluate AI outputs (Jhaveri, 2025).

Assessment Innovation

Assessment redesign emerges as a critical component of curricular policy responses to GenAI. Systematic review of documents and policies from Zimbabwe State Universities demonstrates that performance-based, reflective, oral, and observation-based assessments are effective in maintaining academic integrity while promoting deeper learning (Moyo & Chirwa, 2026). As outlined in NUST AI policy, these approaches align with constructivist principles by emphasising active knowledge construction, social interaction, and contextual learning (Moyo & Chirwa, 2026, National University of Science and Technology, 2026). Institutional policies should support faculty in redesigning assessments to reduce vulnerability to AI misuse while enhancing learning outcomes. This may include:

- Increased use of oral examinations and presentations.
- Integration of reflective and metacognitive components.
- Performance-based tasks grounded in real-world contexts.
- Observation-driven formative assessments.

Implementation of these approaches presents challenges, including increased lecturer workload, large student enrolments, and limited technological infrastructure (Moyo & Chirwa, 2026). Institutions should therefore provide adequate support mechanisms, including staff development and workload recognition.

Decolonial Considerations

The concern that GenAI may perpetuate epistemic exclusion requires curricular policies that critically engage with AI content and promote decolonial approaches. The National AI Strategy explicitly addresses this through its cultural and social determination declaration to instil Zimbabwean values and the philosophy of Unhu/Ubuntu. It also targets the development of locally relevant datasets, promoting open educational resources, and incentivising collaboration between universities, industry, and government.

BUSE institutional report calls for alignment with UNESCO's recommendations on AI in education ensuring that its practices are both locally responsive and globally informed (UNESCO-ICHEI 2026). However, no specific decolonial or indigenous knowledge integration provisions documented in available policy materials. At UZ, empirical research found that students are engaging with Gen AI without ethical guidance that shows governance fragmentation (Chipfumbu et al., 2026). This suggests that decolonial curricular is absent as far as use of Gen AI is concerned and its development should be participatory, incorporating student perspectives alongside faculty expertise. NUST AI policy does not cater for indigenous knowledge systems in AI curricular or research. This means that the decolonial imperative remain an aspiration at national level and not actionable at institutional level across NUST, BUSE, UZ and other State Universities.

Zimbabwe Open University's emphasis on decoloniality in research and the need to "decolonize Western epistemologies" highlights this imperative (Gundani, 2026a). Curricular policies should:

- Promote critical evaluation of AI-generated content.

- Integrate indigenous knowledge systems into curricula.
- Develop students' capacity to contextualise AI outputs within local realities.
- Encourage research that engages with decolonial theory.
- Make commitments to integrate indigenous knowledge systems into AI curricula or research.
- Provide mechanisms for developing Afrocentric algorithms or local trained AI models.

These considerations align with broader recommendations for African higher education, which emphasise sensitivity to historical inequalities and the need to protect African interests in digital transformation (UNESCO, 2026).

Infrastructure And Access

Addressing the infrastructural dimensions of the GenAI divide requires sustained investment. The National AI Strategy prioritises AI infrastructure and computational sovereignty, including the operationalisation of the Data Protection Act and investment in cloud computing capacities (OECD, 2026). Institutional policies should advocate for and coordinate with national initiatives to ensure equitable access to computing resources, reliable connectivity, and appropriate devices.

Universal access initiatives, such as providing AI tool subscriptions to all students and staff, represent an important foundation (Jhaveri, 2025). However, as emphasised in research from the University of Leicester, access alone is insufficient; capability development must accompany provision (Jhaveri, 2025).

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the gap between the GenAI divide and institutional curricular policy at State Universities in Zimbabwe. The analysis reveals three interconnected dimensions of the divide: infrastructural access, digital literacy and capability, and epistemic exclusion. While Zimbabwe's National AI Strategy provides a foundational policy framework (Mnangagwa, 2026; OECD, 2026), institutional curricular policies remain nascent and fragmented.

Bridging the gap requires coordinated action across national, institutional, and pedagogical levels. National policy must provide coherence and resources; institutional policy must translate national commitments into concrete curricular guidelines and support mechanisms; and pedagogical practice must engage with GenAI as both tool and subject of critical inquiry. Assessment innovation, faculty development, infrastructure investment, and decolonial considerations are essential components of this response.

The paper contributes to emerging scholarship on GenAI in African higher education by situating the divide within historical inequalities and proposing contextually grounded policy responses (Moyo & Chirwa, 2026; Poellhuber et al., 2025). Future research should examine the implementation of curricular policies as they develop, evaluating their effectiveness in promoting equitable access, maintaining academic integrity, and fostering critical AI literacy.

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