Advancing Interdisciplinary Research Excellence in the Indian Ocean Region: Methods and Strategies

Françoise Driver

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ABOUT THE SERIES

The APN Lecture Series provides an avenue for influential thinkers, practitioners, policy makers, and activists to reflect on and speak to the critical issues and challenges facing African peacebuilding. This publication series documents lectures given on the platform of the African Peacebuilding Network (APN) program, and its institutional partners. These lectures provide an analysis of processes, institutions, and mechanisms for, as well as the politics of, peacebuilding on the continent, and contribute towards broadening debates and knowledge about the trajectories of conflict and peace in conflict-affected African countries and regions. The APN Lecture series seeks to address knowledge gaps in African peace and security, including its links to local, national, and global structures and processes. These publications also provide critical overviews and innovative reflections on the state of the field, including new thinking critical to knowledge production and dissemination in overlooked or emerging areas of African peacebuilding.

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Introduction: Reclaiming the Purpose of Research

This lecture opens with a contextual reflection on the deeper purpose underpinning our collective efforts to advance excellence in research. Rather than viewing research as merely an academic or technical exercise, it seeks to reaffirm a broader commitment: to reclaim research as a transformative endeavour - intellectually rigorous, socially purposeful, and regionally grounded in the specific realities of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

In this context, the paper invites researchers, institutions, and policymakers to look beyond the procedural aspects of research - such as refining proposals or enhancing academic outputs - and instead engage with the foundational values and critical questions that shape our research work. It calls for a renewed emphasis on research that not only advances theoretical knowledge but also contributes meaningfully to the public good. Such research must be grounded in critical thinking, responsive to the socio-political and environmental challenges of the region, and oriented toward outcomes that are policy-relevant, socially responsible, and ultimately in the service of peace and justice in the IOR.

As Professor Michael Anthony Samuel (University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa) observed at the opening of the APN and Next Gen Research Methods Workshop, held at the University of Mauritius (UoM) in July 2025, the term research originates from the Old French re-chercher - meaning "to search again" - a combination of re (again, anew) and chercher (to search). This etymology serves as a powerful reminder: research is not a linear or finite process, but an ongoing, iterative, and deliberate pursuit of understanding.

Such an understanding is particularly critical for scholars working in policy-relevant spaces.

1

To generate meaningful impact, research must move beyond theoretical abstraction to engage substantively with real-world problems. This engagement demands a commitment to producing knowledge that not only informs but also influences evidence-based policymaking and delivers tangible public value.

For research to fulfil this transformative potential, it must be guided by a clear set of principles:

- Rigor – grounded in robust methodology and sustained critical inquiry;
- Ethics – attentive to the societal implications of knowledge production, accountable to communities impacted by research, and deserving of public trust;
- Impact – capable of generating actionable insights and durable solutions;
- Relevance and Inclusivity – aligned with the lived experiences and pressing needs of diverse communities across the IOR, particularly those marginalised or underrepresented in academic and policy arenas.

With this framework in mind, a fundamental re-engagement with the purpose and practice of research is required. This calls for intentional reflection and collective commitment, prompting key questions:

- What kind of research ecosystem is necessary to support ethical, impactful, and inclusive scholarship in the IOR?
- What strategies, methods, and institutional partnerships will enable this vision to be realised - effectively and sustainably?

Serving Society through Research: Reaffirming Our Social Mandate

Research cannot be viewed as an insular or academic pursuit. It is a social and moral imperative to position ourselves as knowledge producers with a responsibility to serve society. The motto of the University of Mauritius (UoM), Scientia Salus Patriae" ("Knowledge at the Service of the Nation"), encapsulates this responsibility. Research, when guided by purpose and linked to public policy, has the capacity to influence legislation, shape public discourse, and promote more equitable resource distribution.

This imperative is echoed on the global stage. Rt Hon Gordon Brown, former UK Prime Minister, has remarked (2023):

> *"Many of the challenges we face today are international—and whether it's tackling climate change or fighting disease—these global problems require global solutions. That is why it is important that we create a new role for science in international policymaking and diplomacy, to place science at the heart of the progressive international agenda."*

Such a call reinforces the need for research to transcend disciplinary boundaries and contribute directly to shaping inclusive, forward-thinking public policies - locally, nationally, and globally.

The Critical Role of Early-Career Researchers

For early-career researchers and PhD candidates, this is a particularly formative time. Their task is not only to develop technical research proficiency but also to cultivate the capacity to ask the right questions - questions that policymakers, communities, and institutions urgently need addressed.

The IOR is navigating a convergence of deeply interconnected challenges: climate change, socio-economic inequality, democratic transitions, educational disparity, and fragile healthcare systems. These are not abstract academic problems - they are urgent, real-world issues that demand context-sensitive, evidence-informed responses.

When strategically designed and effectively communicated, research can play a crucial role in shaping how these increasingly complex challenges are understood, prioritized, and addressed - both nationally and regionally. This is what makes research not only a career but also a significant societal contribution.

FRAMING THE RESEARCH AGENDA: SETTING REGIONAL PRIORITIES

Aligning Research with National Development: The 2025–2026 Mauritius Budget

To achieve impact, research must be both strategic and responsive. Defining national and regional research priorities is critical to aligning research outputs with real development outcomes.

The 2025–2026 Mauritius National Budget, From Abyss to Prosperity: Rebuilding the Bridge to the Future (Republic of Mauritius, 2025), places Research, Development, and Innovation (RDI) at the centre of the country's development strategy. As Dr. Kaviraj Sharma Sukon, Minister of Tertiary Education, Science and Research, noted at the opening of the APN and Next Gen Research Methods Workshop at the UoM in July 2025, the budget offers both a policy blueprint and an urgent call to action for the research community.

The government's focus on revitalising sectors such as tourism, ICT, financial services, manufacturing, and the blue economy is complemented by a strong emphasis on innovation, skills development, and digital transformation. The proposed establishment of the National Research and Innovation Institute (NRII) affirms a central principle: research is not an end, but a *catalyst for future innovation.*

Regional Alignment: Shared Challenges, Shared Priorities

The IOR is characterised by shared challenges that require coordinated and interdisciplinary responses: climate vulnerability, economic fragility, geopolitical instability, and disruptive technological change.

Drawing from key regional and international policy frameworks, several priority research areas have emerged and resonate beyond national boundaries:

1. Marine and Coastal Sustainability – advancing the blue economy while addressing pollution and overfishing (Indian Ocean Commission, 2022).
2. Climate Adaptation and Disaster Risk Reduction – building climate-resilient infrastructure and risk-aware governance (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2023).
3. Maritime Security and Geopolitics – promoting regional cooperation, tackling piracy, and addressing illegal fishing (Indian Ocean Rim Association, 2024).
4. Sustainable Economic Integration – strengthening trade, regional digital connectivity, and economic diversification (African Union, 2020; Indian Ocean Commission, 2022).
5. Human Development and Social Equity – improving health, education, youth engagement, and migration governance (World Health Organization, 2023).
6. Energy and Resource Management – promoting sustainable resource use and investing in renewables (International Renewable Energy Agency, 2022).
7. Cultural Heritage and Indigenous Knowledge – promoting community-driven, decolonised knowledge systems (Neergheen & Obi, 2024).

Higher Education as a Driver of Innovation

Realising these priorities depends heavily on the capacity of the region's higher education institutions, which serve as both a prerequisite and a driver of national development (UNESCO, 2024). Universities in the IOR are critical actors in building the knowledge, skills, and infrastructure necessary to support sustainable development.

With a population exceeding 1.5 billion, the IOR possesses immense human potential - but this is underutilized due to uneven access to higher education. According to the Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Mauritius, the Gross Tertiary Enrolment Ratio (GTER) rose from 48.3% in 2021 to 49.5% in 2022 - the highest in the last eight years (Higher Education Commission – Mauritius, 2022). By contrast, regional partners like Madagascar (6.4%), Comoros (9.6%), and Seychelles (14%) remain well below 15% (World Bank, 2023). India, meanwhile, aims to increase its GTER from 33.1% in 2023 to 50% by 2035 (World Bank, 2023).

Doctoral research capacity remains a particular bottleneck. In Mauritius, research-based postgraduate enrolment rose from 0.58% in 2010 to just 1.44% in 2021 (Higher Education Commission – Mauritius, 2022). While this reflects notable progress, the absolute numbers remain low, as Table 1 indicates.

Table 1: Tertiary Enrolment by Level and Field of Study - Mauritius

Field	2010	2021	Growth (x Ratio)
Non S&T undergraduate	31231	35749	1.14 x
S&T undergraduate	12848	13034	1.01 x
Research Programmes	255	714	2.80 x
Total Enrolment	**44334**	**49497**	**1.12 x**
% Enrolment in Research	0.58%	1.44%	2.48 x

(Source: Higher Education Commission – Mauritius, 2022)

To meet regional ambitions, universities must:

- Expand access to doctoral training and academic development.
- Strengthen regional and international research collaborations.
- Build institutional capacity for producing policy-relevant, interdisciplinary knowledge.

A Collective Responsibility

This is a moment of opportunity - and of responsibility. The government's clear commitment to research must be met with equally robust and collaborative responses from universities, researchers, and policy institutions. The Government's commitment to research must be met by researchers, universities, and institutions ready to respond with bold, collaborative, and impact-driven agendas.

The message is clear. As researchers, we are expected to be at the forefront.

As outlined in the 2025-2026 Mauritius Budget (Republic of Mauritius, 2025):

> *We must imperatively unlock growth, contain external deficits, boost productivity and investment to create well-paid jobs for our youth and raise the standard of living for all. We will not let financial restraints stand in the way of economic growth..."*

This message challenges us to reflect deeply and act decisively. As we shape the future of research in the IOR, several key questions emerge:

- What strategies will enable us to build and sustain robust research capacity?
- What real-world problems are we aiming to solve, and for whom?
- How can we ensure our research is inclusive, equitable, and transformative?
- Are we constructing knowledge systems that genuinely serve the needs of our communities and the broader region?
- Moreover, what methods, collaborations, and institutional arrangements will get us there most effectively?

Ultimately, the future of research in the IOR will be shaped by the choices we make today - through the questions we ask, the partnerships we build, and the values we uphold.

CORE THEMES INFORMING INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH EXCELLENCE IN THE INDIAN OCEAN REGION (IOR)

This brief overview of research priorities and higher education challenges across the IOR underscores both the scale of opportunity before us and the responsibility that universities, scholars, and institutions must assume to respond effectively.

As the IOR grapples with interconnected social, environmental, economic, and geopolitical challenges, the need for interdisciplinary, collaborative, and contextually-grounded research has never been more urgent. To frame this imperative, I propose four (4) core themes that are central to strengthening the research ecosystems of the region.

These themes reflect critical dimensions of research practice and institutional development. Together, they offer both a conceptual lens and a strategic framework to advance interdisciplinary research excellence in the IOR.

1. **Embedding Research Excellence through Ethics and Integrity**
   a. Emphasising that high-quality research must be grounded in strong ethical foundations, institutional accountability, and trusted partnerships.
2. **Breaking Silos: The Urgent Need for Interdisciplinary and Transdisciplinary Inquiry**
   a. Promoting integrative research approaches, with the social sciences playing a pivotal role in addressing complex, cross-cutting challenges.
3. **Reclaiming Narratives: Decolonising Knowledge Production**
   a. Challenging dominant paradigms and repositioning local knowledge systems and epistemologies at the centre of scholarly inquiry.
4. **From Knowledge to Action: Strengthening the Research–Policy–Diplomacy–Peace Nexus**
   a. Enhancing the real-world relevance of research by establishing meaningful linkages with governance, policy, diplomacy, and peacebuilding processes.

In exploring these four themes, I will draw on my own experiences as a researcher and academic at the UoM. I have had the privilege of working closely with multiple generations of scholars locally and across the African continent. These collaborations have deeply informed my understanding of both the challenges and the transformative potential of research in our region.

If there is one message I hope will remain with you, it is this: at its best, research is a tool for peace—a familiar phrase, perhaps - even a cliché. However, peace, as we know, does not arise spontaneously. Peace is built - brick by brick - through dialogue, evidence, collaboration, and innovation. Your research contributes to that construction.

Let us now turn to the first of these four themes: Embedding Research Excellence through Ethics and Integrity.

EMBEDDING RESEARCH EXCELLENCE THROUGH ETHICS AND INTEGRITY

To strengthen the research ecosystem in the IOR, we must begin with a foundational question: What does it mean to conduct research well, achieving excellence both rigorously and responsibly?

This theme prompts us to reflect on several critical considerations:

- What indicators do universities currently use to assess research excellence? Are they primarily metrics-driven - focusing on citation counts, journal impact factors, grant income, or university rankings?

- Are such measures sufficient? Should we rely solely on quantitative benchmarks, or also recognise qualitative dimensions such as societal relevance, ethical conduct, and community engagement – particularly within our regional context?

- How might we redefine research excellence to reflect not only prestige and competition, but also values such as trust, contribution, and inclusion?

- Why is it essential to cultivate excellence among students and early-career researchers? How do we ensure that future scholars are not only technically proficient but also ethically grounded and socially conscious?

- Why must ethics and integrity be embedded throughout the research process? How do these principles safeguard credibility, protect communities, and sustain public trust in science?

- Moreover, what kind of research environment is required to foster this vision of excellence? What institutional policies, mentorship frameworks, and accountability mechanisms can embed these values at every level?

The Regional Context

Recent global university rankings have, for the first time, included institutions from five African countries—Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Today, 17 African nations are represented, compared to just two in 2012 (Times Higher Education, 2024). While this signals notable progress, it also highlights a deeper imperative: research excellence must not be reduced to rankings alone. Instead, it must be measured by our capacity to drive economic transformation, social justice, and innovation through knowledge production.

The region cannot remain a passive consumer of external expertise. It must become an active producer of ideas, a shaper of solutions, and a contributor to global knowledge systems. Enhancing research capacity is not a luxury; it is a necessity for sustainable, inclusive development.

However, between 2001 and 2018, Africa accounted for only 7.6% of the world's scientific publications - and half of this output came from just two countries: South Africa and Egypt (Sooryamoorthy, 2022).

The remaining 50% is distributed among 52 other countries, often characterised by weak collaboration, limited research infrastructure, and minimal linkages between academia and industry. This imbalance must be urgently addressed.

Research-Led Graduate Training: Building Talent for the Future

High-quality, research-led graduate education is essential to address the complex socio-economic and environmental challenges facing the IOR. It is also key to retaining talent and reducing dependency on institutions in the global North.

Locally trained doctoral graduates are vital for building the scientific and technological capacities necessary for innovation, entrepreneurship, and sustainable development.

To achieve this, institutions must invest in:

- Improved access to research resources and laboratories,
- Strong international partnerships to expand the quantity and quality of PhD training,
- Robust institutional support for postgraduate research,
- Structured postdoctoral opportunities for ongoing scholarly development.

At the undergraduate level, teaching must foster critical thinking, analytical reasoning, and a research-oriented mindset. Students should be encouraged not only to ask "what," but also "why," "how," and "what if" - nurturing the curiosity and capabilities needed to become future researchers. This investigative orientation can lead to practical innovations and policy-relevant insights with direct applications across sectors.

Creating and Sustaining a Culture of Integrity

At the heart of a resilient research ecosystem lies trust—among researchers, institutions, communities, and the wider public. Research excellence depends not only on technical rigour, but on ethical conduct, responsible practices, and reciprocal relationships.

Promoting integrity must go beyond regulatory compliance. It should be embedded into the very culture of research institutions, underpinned by shared values and reinforced through training and leadership.

Core ethical principles include:

- Honesty in all aspects of research and communication,
- Accountability in the conduct and reporting of findings,
- Professional fairness and mutual respect in collaborative settings,
- Responsible stewardship of public funds and institutional resources.

Recommended institutional strategies include:

- Strengthening doctoral schools with comprehensive training in ethics, research methodology, and proposal development,
- Expanding opportunities for international exchanges, conferences, and industry placements,
- Establishing and enforcing clear research integrity policies,
- Cultivating enabling research environments with transparent and equitable advancement frameworks.

Both researchers and institutions have a collective ethical obligation to ensure that research maximises societal benefit, minimises harm, and sustains public trust.

Expanding Capacity for Doctoral Programmes

Despite efforts to transition towards research-intensive university models, doctoral-level training across the IOR remains limited. Many institutions face significant barriers - including inadequate facilities, insufficient supervisory capacity, and fragmented funding systems.

According to national data (Table 1), research enrolment in Mauritius increased from just 0.58% of total tertiary enrolment in 2010 to 1.44% in 2021 (Higher Education Commission - Mauritius, 2022). While this marks progress, the figures remain far below what is required to meet national development goals and regional knowledge demands.

These trends signal the urgent need for a renewed strategic focus on doctoral training. Recommended actions include:

- Developing collaborative PhD programmes across institutions, with shared supervision and mentorship,
- Mobilising national and international funding to enhance research infrastructure and facilities,
- Establishing split-site PhD models, allowing candidates to engage with institutions across Africa, Europe, Australia, and North America,
- Launching an annual regional PhD/Postdoctoral Research Conference, hosted on a rotating basis by universities in the region, to showcase emerging scholarship and build a stronger academic community.

BREAKING SILOS: THE URGENT NEED FOR INTERDISCIPLINARY AND TRANSDISCIPLINARY INQUIRY

Increasingly complex regional challenges - such as climate change, food insecurity, public health crises, and digital transformation - cannot be addressed by single disciplines working in isolation.

The fragmentation of knowledge limits our ability to understand interconnected systems and design effective interventions (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2023).

What is needed is a deliberate shift toward integrative and collaborative research models that transcend disciplinary boundaries. This shift is particularly vital within small island and coastal states of the IOR, where limited resources and high vulnerability demand collective, innovative approaches. Moving beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries is not just beneficial; it is increasingly necessary to generate effective solutions to complex, interconnected challenges.

The Role of the Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) in Research Priorities

In recent years, funding bodies have increasingly recognised the vital contributions of the social sciences and humanities (SSH) to addressing complex global challenges. As a result, SSH research is no longer viewed as peripheral, but as essential to shaping inclusive, context-sensitive, and sustainable solutions.

Funding bodies are progressively prioritising interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary proposals that integrate SSH perspectives, particularly in areas such as climate action, social justice, technological innovation, and conflict resolution. Programmes like the European Commission's Horizon 2020 have demonstrated a clear shift toward embedding SSH within broader research agendas, allocating significant resources to ensure human-centred approaches are not only included but central to innovation strategies (European Commission, 2023).

This marks a decisive move toward recognising that effective responses to today's global challenges demand insights from across the full spectrum of academic disciplines.

Case Study: Interdisciplinary Collaboration in Practice

A strong example of successful interdisciplinary research comes from the Faculty of Agriculture at the UoM, which led an EU-funded project titled "Development of a Sustainable and Inclusive Value Chain for Smallholder Dairy Farmers in the Republic of Mauritius."

This project exemplified integrative research by bringing together expertise from a wide range of disciplines and institutions:

- Academic disciplines included: biotechnology, microbiology, animal science, food science and technology, economics, and management.
- Collaborators spanned international institutions, the local feed industry, the Food and Agricultural Research and Extension Institute (FAREI), the Veterinary Division, as well as interns from France and the University of Pretoria.
- Importantly, the project was co-designed and implemented with farmers, ensuring that the research was grounded in local realities and yielded tangible outcomes:
  - Improved dairy farm management practices,
  - Production of value-added milk products,
  - Enhanced marketing and income-generation strategies for smallholder farmers,
  - PhD training is embedded within the project.

This case underscores the transformative potential of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research when designed and implemented strategically.

RECLAIMING NARRATIVES: DECOLONISING KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

Achieving research excellence in the IOR requires a critical engagement with the historical power imbalances that continue to shape global knowledge systems. Much of what counts as 'expertise' remains rooted in Northern paradigms, marginalising local epistemologies and silencing indigenous and local knowledges (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021).

Decolonising research and knowledge production is not about rejecting science or rigor - it is about broadening the terms of inclusion, recognising diverse intellectual traditions, and building models of knowledge production that are context-sensitive and socially accountable.

This also means empowering local scholars, strengthening regional publishing platforms, and shifting our research focus closer to the communities and contexts we study. A decolonised research ecosystem must empower scholars from within the region to lead and shape the knowledge agendas that affect their own societies. This includes:

- Strengthening regional publishing platforms and academic journals to promote local scholarship and reduce dependency on Northern publishing editors.
- Enhancing editorial and peer review capacity within regional institutions to raise quality while retaining control over content and discourse.
- Ensuring equitable participation in international collaborations, where Southern partners are not merely data providers but co-creators of knowledge.

- Investing in South–South research networks to foster collaboration across shared contexts and challenges within the Global South.

These shifts require not only new institutional policies, but also a transformation in our mindset and research culture - one that embraces intellectual plurality as a foundation for research excellence.

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FROM KNOWLEDGE TO ACTION: STRENGTHENING THE RESEARCH–POLICY–DIPLOMACY–PEACE NEXUS

As emphasised by both the African Union and the Indian Ocean Commission, peace must not be understood merely as the absence of conflict—but as the presence of justice, equity, and inclusive development (African Union, 2020; Indian Ocean Commission, 2022). In the IOR, where complex challenges such as climate insecurity, socio-economic inequality, and geopolitical tensions converge, effective responses require collaborative action across sectors. Policymakers alone cannot resolve these issues, nor can researchers working in disciplinary silos.

For knowledge to shape action, a strong interface between science, policy, diplomacy, and peacebuilding is essential. Policymakers require credible, timely, and context-relevant scientific advice. Equally, researchers must recognise that knowledge disconnected from the policy arena often fails to achieve its transformative potential.Bridging this gap requires more than consultation - it calls for a genuine partnership between researchers and policymakers, grounded in mutual respect, trust, and a shared commitment to the public good.

Translating Research into Actionable Insights

Despite widespread calls for evidence-informed policymaking, a persistent disconnect remains. Academic research is often published in technical language and housed within journals that are inaccessible to decision-makers. Conversely, policymakers require concise, actionable insights, communicated in clear and compelling ways that are aligned with their priorities.

This does not mean abandoning scholarly publication - which remains vital for academic credibility and peer validation - but it does demand that scholars develop the skills to translate complex findings into practical recommendations, tailored to the needs of non-specialist audiences.

Researchers must therefore be able to produce not only peer-reviewed outputs, but also policy briefs, executive summaries, strategic notes, and evidence-based recommendations that are accessible, timely, and relevant.

Moreover, science advice must be delivered in a manner that is transparent, objective, and independent of political or ideological influence. Trust and engagement are essential ingredients in the science–policy relationship - particularly in the realm of science diplomacy, where research intersects with questions of governance, identity, and power.

Building Capacity for Science–Policy Engagement

To institutionalise this nexus, it is critical to equip research students and early-career scholars with the skills needed to communicate beyond academia. Science advice can take various forms: policy briefs, stakeholder dialogues, or advisory panels. As such, researchers must be trained not only in the rigorous production of knowledge, but also in its strategic communication and dissemination.

Supporting this vision requires the creation of inclusive, cross-sectoral platforms where scholars, policymakers, civil society, and practitioners co-produce knowledge and shape its application. A functional science–policy ecosystem should include:

- Government science advisors.
- National and regional research councils.
- Sectoral ministries and policy units.
- Civil society organisations and think tanks.
- Professional associations.

Perfect alignment may not always be achievable, but meaningful collaboration and synergy across this ecosystem are essential for long-term impact.

Three Core Challenges in Science Advice

Efforts to institutionalise science–policy engagement must address three persistent challenges: relevance, timeliness, and inclusivity.

- Relevance
  - Research must respond to policy needs - but researchers also bear the responsibility of highlighting emerging or overlooked issues that demand public attention.
- Timeliness
  - Scientific advice must be delivered at the right moment, when it can still shape decisions and influence implementation.

- Inclusivity
  - Science advice must be inclusive in both process and outcome. This means recognising and incorporating gender, age, ethnicity, language, and cultural and local knowledge systems - especially within the region's diverse and multi-ethnic societies.

Moreover, science advice must be delivered in a manner that is transparent, objective, and independent of political or ideological influence. Trust and engagement are essential ingredients in the science–policy relationship - particularly in the realm of science diplomacy, where research intersects with questions of governance, identity, and power.

Strategic Priorities for the IOR

To strengthen the science–policy–diplomacy–peace nexus in the IOR, the following strategic interventions are proposed:

- Train doctoral candidates and early-career researchers: from the UoM and other regional institutions - to write and disseminate evidence-based policy briefs that translate academic research into actionable insights.
- Build capacity among sectoral experts, including PhD supervisors, faculty research advisors, and doctoral school leaders, to guide the production and review of high-quality policy outputs.
- Launch a dedicated Policy Brief Series focused on regional implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This series should showcase doctoral and postdoctoral research with clear policy relevance across national, regional, and continental agendas.

By embedding these practices within academic institutions and national research strategies, the region can move decisively from knowledge generation to real-world application. In doing so, we reaffirm the social and strategic role of research in advancing diplomacy, development, and peace in the IOR - and beyond.

CLOSING REFLECTIONS

The four core themes explored in this article - ethics and integrity, interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity, decolonisation of knowledge, and science–policy engagement - together provide a foundational framework for advancing interdisciplinary research excellence in the IOR. Far from being abstract or aspirational, these are practical imperatives, deeply rooted in the lived realities of our societies and the developmental challenges we collectively face.

They also reflect a broader commitment: to build research ecosystems that are inclusive, context-sensitive, and impact-driven. In doing so, we reaffirm the vital role of universities and scholars in shaping just, sustainable, and peaceful futures.

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As I close, I offer one enduring reflection:

Research - at its best - is a tool for peace.

This may sound idealistic - but it is a truth borne out by history and experience. Peace does not emerge spontaneously. It is constructed - brick by brick - through evidence, dialogue, collaboration, and innovation.

Our work, as researchers, educators, and thought leaders, contributes directly to this process. Whether through shaping policy, challenging injustice, preserving cultural memory, or empowering the next generation, our efforts are integral to the construction of more peaceful and equitable societies.

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ABOUT THE KEYNOTE SPEAKER

Professor Brigitte Marie-Françoise DRIVER, *OSK I, is the SSR Chair of African Studies at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, University of Mauritius (UoM). She holds a PhD from Massey University, New Zealand, and was a Senior African Fulbright Research Fellow at Cornell University, USA. With over 30 years of academic experience, particularly within the Faculty of Agriculture (UoM), she has led and collaborated on multi-country research projects with universities and institutions across Africa. Her work focuses on sustainable agriculture, inclusive food systems, and strengthening science-policy linkages. As SSR Chair, she champions interdisciplinary research and fosters dialogue between the natural and social sciences to address development challenges across the continent. She has worked on projects funded by the UNDP, GEF, FAO, and the European Union, and serves on several boards and research networks. Her current research promotes African-led approaches to evidence-based policymaking and locally grounded development strategies. She is a member of the Women for Science Working Group (WfS) of the Network of African Science Academies (NASAC), and the Secretary of the Mauritius Academy of Science and Technology (MAST), and a MAST Fellow (FMAST).*