

Bridging Generations: A Case Study on Intergenerational Relationships in Academic Settings at Sunway University's ADTP ProgramSujitra Sockanathan¹, Jaslina Mohd Tajuddin²¹Senior Teaching Fellow, School of American Education, Sunway University²Senior Teaching Fellow, School of American Education, Sunway University¹jaslinamt@sunway.edu.my, ²sujitras@sunway.edu.my**Orchid Id number:** ¹0009-0000-1161-5156, ²0009-0008-3775-1365, **Corresponding Author*:** Sujitra Sockanathan**Abstract:**

This study explores the intergenerational relationships between Generation Z students and older generation educators in academic settings. By examining the differences and similarities in communication styles, educational values, and teaching preferences, this research aims to foster greater cooperation and understanding between generations. A qualitative approach was employed, consisting of interviews with five Generation Z students and five university lecturers representing Generation X and Y. Findings indicate that while most Gen Z students do not struggle with communication, some experience generational barriers, particularly in language and preferred communication platforms. Conversely, lecturers acknowledge differences in communication styles and emphasize the importance of adaptation. Teaching preferences also vary, with educators valuing traditional methods such as textbooks and lectures, whereas Gen Z favors technology-driven, flexible, and interactive learning environments. Moreover, while older generations view education as a prestigious pursuit, Gen Z tends to prioritize its practicality and career applicability.

Keywords: Intergenerational relationships, Generation Z (Gen Z), Generation X and Y educators, qualitative approach.**1) Introduction**

In contemporary academic environments, intergenerational dynamics between students and educators have become increasingly significant. At the university level, students from Generation Z (born 1997–2012) are often taught by lecturers from Generation X and Y, resulting in diverse perspectives on communication, learning, and educational values. These differences, shaped by varying cultural and technological contexts, influence classroom interactions, expectations, and the overall learning experience (Androshchuk et al., 2022; Surya Atmaja, Ibnu Khalid, 2023)

Generation Z tends to prefer flexible, tech-integrated, and application-based learning, while older generations often emphasize structure, discipline, and traditional teaching methods (Surya Atmaja, Ibnu Khalid, 2023). This generational divide can lead to both challenges and valuable opportunities for mutual learning and collaboration.

This study focuses on Sunway University's American Degree Transfer Program (ADTP), a setting where multigenerational interaction is frequent and impactful. By examining how students and lecturers navigate these differences, the study aims to better understand the role of generational perspectives in shaping academic relationships and to offer insights into fostering more inclusive and responsive teaching and learning practices.

To guide this investigation, the study is structured around a set of research questions that aim to capture the nuances of intergenerational dynamics in academic contexts. Specifically, the research seeks to explore the following research question:

RQ1: How do communication preferences differ between Generation Z students and senior lecturers (Gen X and Y) in academic settings?

RQ2: What are the benefits of intergenerational collaboration in a university environment?

RQ3: What are the challenges of intergenerational collaboration in a university environment?

2) 2. Literature Review

Research on communication in academic settings has increasingly highlighted the generational divide between students and lecturers, particularly with the rise of Generation Z in higher education. Studies show that communication preferences are shaped by differences in technological exposure, cultural values, and pedagogical traditions, resulting in both opportunities and challenges for teaching and learning (Yanto, 2024). Communication Preferences Across Generations Generation Z, often described as digital natives, exhibits a strong preference for technology-mediated communication. They are highly reliant on digital platforms such as social networking sites for both academic and personal interactions due to their convenience and immediacy (Vinh, 2020). Furthermore, the increasing use of generative AI tools has reinforced Gen Z's expectations for personalized, efficient communication and academic support. In contrast, senior lecturers from Generations X and Y tend to favor traditional communication methods such as face-to-face interactions and email, particularly in formal academic contexts (Mohr, 2017). Although many have begun adopting digital tools, their approach is often cautious, reflecting concerns about overreliance on technology and the importance of maintaining structured and formal modes of communication (Jauregui et al., 2020). Bridging the Generational Divide Given these differences, scholars have called for blended communication strategies that integrate both digital and traditional approaches. Training programs for lecturers can improve their digital literacy and help them better understand Gen Z's communication preferences, while structured models that balance efficiency and formality may support effective student-lecturer interactions (Tran & Anderson, 2017). Such adaptations are necessary to ensure inclusivity and maintain engagement in higher education settings. Intergenerational Collaboration in universities beyond direct communication, intergenerational collaboration within universities has been recognized as a valuable pedagogical and social practice. Research highlights several benefits: it facilitates mutual knowledge exchange, combining older generations' life experiences and historical perspectives with younger students' innovative thinking and technological expertise (Mohd Ishak et al., 2022). These collaborations also promote social cohesion and empathy by reducing age-related stereotypes, thereby fostering a more inclusive campus culture (Guimarães et al., 2023). Additionally, participation in such programs has been linked to enhanced personal growth, professional development, and civic engagement for both students and older participants (Helaluddin et al., 2023). However, challenges remain. communication barriers, often rooted in differing levels of technological proficiency and stereotypes, can hinder effective collaboration (Bauder et al., 2023). Role ambiguity and conflict may also emerge when responsibilities and expectations are unclear (Suryani et al., 2024). On a structural level, institutional limitations—such as rigid schedules, resource constraints, and accessibility issues—further complicate program implementation. Sustaining engagement is another critical issue, as participants may lose motivation if benefits are not immediate or program objectives lack clarity (Andrade & Duarte, 2023).

In the context of Sunway University's American Degree Transfer Program (ADTP), where students and lecturers from different generations regularly interact, intergenerational collaboration plays a critical role in shaping both academic and personal development. Such interactions foster essential skills such as communication, cooperation, and critical thinking, which are vital for navigating diverse and complex societies (Novia et al., 2024). At the institutional level, intergenerational learning fosters co-creation, strengthens organizational climate, and extends positive impact to the wider community (ÇetiNkaya, 2022a)

While these benefits are significant, intergenerational interactions are not without their challenges. Generational differences in universities often manifest in communication styles, technological preferences, and work values, which can create barriers to collaboration. Older generations may prefer face-to-face interactions, whereas younger generations often rely on digital platforms, leading to potential misunderstandings and conflicts (Gruber et al., 2022). Similarly, younger cohorts tend to be more adept with emerging technologies, which may widen the digital divide in academic environments (Chan & Lee, 2023). Beyond communication, variations in work values and expectations can also generate tensions; younger generations frequently prioritize flexibility and work-life balance, while older faculty members may emphasize stability and traditional work structures (McConatha et al., 2022). These differences extend to learning and knowledge transfer, where older faculty members often carry extensive institutional experience, while younger participants contribute innovative approaches and technological skills (ÇetiNkaya, 2022b). Effective collaboration, therefore, requires deliberate strategies such as mentoring programs, cross-generational teams, and flexible faculty development initiatives that promote mutual understanding and knowledge exchange (Silver & Gavini, 2023).

Together, these studies highlight that intergenerational collaboration fosters essential skills and mutual respect, while also revealing barriers linked to communication, technology, and work values. These insights strengthen the case for examining such dynamics within Sunway University's ADTP program, where they directly influence teaching, learning, and the academic experience.

3) Methodology

The qualitative methodology was conducted to examine the research problems and objectives whereby semi-structured interviews, and open-ended questions were used to answer the research questions. In this research, Gen Zs who were the university students and millennial who are the lecturers were the informants. 5 informants, ages 19 to 24 (Gen Z) and 5 more informants aged between 35 to 50, were chosen using purposive sample approaches and participated in semi-

structured interviews to gather details on their field visits and the cognitive and affective involvement they experienced. The selection of informants was predicated on the need that they be in the Gen Z and millennial age.

Interview sessions were conducted in separated sessions between the students and the lecturers. The data were captured and transcribed from the in-person interview sessions. Thematic analysis was used to find themes and codes in the data that addressed the research questions. Drawing conclusions or drawing inferences is based on the analysis that followed.

4) Findings

Demographic Information

Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the student participants. Five university students took part in the study, comprising two females and three males, all representing Generation Z. Table 2 presents the demographic profiles of the lecturer participants, which include five individuals identified as part of the X and Y generation. Together, these two groups provide a basis for examining intergenerational dynamics in academic settings.

Table 1: Demographic of Student Informants

Participants ID	Gender	Generational Group
P1	Male	Gen Z
P2	Male	Gen Z
P3	Female	Gen Z
P4	Female	Gen Z
P5	Male	Gen Z

Table 2: Demographic of Lecturer Informants

Participants ID	Gender	Generational Group
P6	Female	Gen X
P7	Female	Gen X
P8	Male	Gen Y
P9	Male	Gen Y
P10	Female	Gen Y

This section presents the findings according to the three research questions, supported by perspectives from both Generation Z students and senior lecturers (Gen X and Y). The analysis revealed three main themes:

Theme 1: Generational communication gaps and adaptations,

The findings indicate a clear mismatch in communication preferences. Gen Z students favor fast, informal, and interactive platforms such as WhatsApp or face-to-face communication, while lecturers tend to prefer formal, structured modes such as email, Telegram, or traditional classroom discussion. Students often perceived lecturers as prioritizing their own convenience, while lecturers acknowledged the growing dominance of technology in student learning. Despite these differences, both groups recognized the importance of adaptation, with lecturers attempting to integrate digital tools and students accepting that multiple methods can coexist.

Table 3: Communication platform, communication approach and learning styles.

Participant	Coding	Evidence
P1	Communication platform	“Lecturers wanted to only use Telegram and email. He would have rather used WhatsApp.”
P2	Communication platform	“Teachers only care about their convenience, and not about what students prefer.”
P3	Communication platform	“He doesn’t like to use emails... his most preferred method of communication is talking face-to-face.”
P4	Communication platform	“Older generations do take into consideration the younger generations’ preferences in communication, as there is less misunderstandings.”
P5	Communication platform	“The older generations do consider the preferences of younger generation’s communication methods, as it is also easier for them.”
P6	Communication approach	“She has tried to show and help younger generations understand her perspectives, trying to be open-minded.”
P7	Learning style	“Younger generations rely a lot on technology to gain knowledge and study these days, compared to her preferences toward textbooks.”
P8	Learning style	“He does not see any differences in learning preferences so far, but thinks younger generations may want more hands-on and group-based work.”
P9	Learning style	“She prefers hands-on work and individual learning, while younger generations may prefer more videos or PowerPoints.”
P10	Learning style	“He thinks younger generations feel teaching and learning methods are irrelevant, as they can achieve knowledge elsewhere.”

Theme 2: Mutual learning and the benefits of intergenerational collaboration

Both students and lecturers highlighted the reciprocal nature of intergenerational learning. Students appreciated the experience, structure, and storytelling provided by older lecturers, while lecturers valued the digital fluency and innovative perspectives offered by Gen Z. Together, these contributions created an enriched academic environment where collaboration fostered mutual respect, innovation, and inclusivity.

Table 4: Value learning benefits from students and lecturers

Participant	Coding	Evidence
P1	Experience	“Both generations can share their experiences and also learn from each other.”
P2	Experience	“Education will move forward... instead of sticking to textbooks which someone has been using for the past 15 years.”
P3	Storytelling	“Every generation has different perspectives on studying, and when you combine, it will make a better place for everyone.”
P4	Structure	“Both generations can help each other out and give ideas.”
P5	Digital learning	“Older generations learn more about the latest technology.”
P6	Digital learning	“Always learning something new from a new generation... younger ones are more active. Learning a lot of new tools for everyday life.”
P7	Innovative	“The main benefit is the different perspectives... these perspectives create a new world and make decisions that are more optimal.”
P8	Innovative	“The older generation learns a lot and it builds a mutual understanding, and Gen Z will give more value to what the older generation has to say.”
P9	Innovative	“Both the older generation and Gen Z learn from each other.”

Theme 3: Challenges of bridging educational values and practices.

Despite the benefits, intergenerational collaboration is complicated by differing values and practices. Senior lecturers often felt undervalued when their traditional methods were dismissed as outdated, while students criticized rigidity and over-reliance on textbooks and long lectures. Furthermore, while older generations view education as prestigious and knowledge-centered, Gen Z tends to emphasize practicality, career relevance, and technological tools such as AI. These conflicting expectations create tension in teaching and learning environments.

Table 5: Values clash between prestige (lecturers) and practicality (students).

Participant	Coding	Evidence
P1	Communication challenge	"Older generations do not understand jargon/language that Gen Zs use, therefore making communication harder."
P2	Communication challenge	"There were times... it's hard to convey messages [to older lecturers]."
P3	Teaching method	"Older generations usually have less energy so they sometimes prefer just sitting down and doing lectures."
P4	Traditional method	"Older generations value their textbooks a lot."
P5	Educational value	"Older generations see higher education as prestigious, whereas Gen Z sees it as a common requirement and norm."
P6	Feeling undervalued	"Feels that she is undervalued in many situations and cannot do anything about it if not students will complain."
P7	Decision-making challenge	"He is seen as too 'young' to decide, even at a higher decision-making level."
P8	Perceived student priorities	"Knows Gen Z's priorities are on online businesses instead of education."
P9	Learning style	"She finds that Generation Zs are too comfortable with online learning and prefer it overall, which makes it hard for her as a communications lecturer."
P10	Intergenerational tension	"He thinks younger generations disregard and view older generational ideas as redundant and outdated."

5) Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined communication preferences, benefits, and challenges of intergenerational collaboration between Generation Z students and senior lecturers (Gen X and Y) in a university context. The findings highlight three central themes: communication gaps and adaptations, mutual learning, and challenges in bridging educational values and practices.

The findings show that Gen Z students preferred fast, informal communication channels such as WhatsApp or face-to-face interaction, while lecturers relied on formal and structured methods such as email or institutional platforms. This is consistent with recent studies highlighting Gen Z's reliance on instant and mobile-first communication in educational settings (Asino et al., 2021). By contrast, senior academics continue to value formal, written channels that reflect established norms of professionalism (Watermeyer et al., 2024). The evidence that both groups demonstrated willingness to adapt points toward the effectiveness of hybrid communication strategies that balance speed, accessibility, and academic rigor (Ramdan & Lubis, n.d.).

Students and lecturers consistently acknowledged reciprocal benefits in intergenerational collaboration. Students valued the guidance, experience, and structured approaches of lecturers, while lecturers appreciated Gen Z's technological fluency and fresh perspectives. This mirrors recent findings that intergenerational collaboration enhances creativity and inclusivity in higher education (Rae, 2023). When diverse perspectives are integrated, teaching and learning become more dynamic, supporting pedagogical innovation and student engagement (Barrett et al., 2021; Molina-Luque, 2023).

Tensions emerged around reconciling differing educational values. Students described lecturers as rigid and too reliant on traditional approaches, while lecturers felt undervalued and skeptical of students' dependence on technology and AI (Dzhanegizova et al., 2024). For lecturers, education retains a sense of prestige, while Gen Z students tend to view it as a pragmatic requirement for career advancement (Gupta et al., 2024). Unless addressed, these gaps risk reinforcing stereotypes and eroding collaboration. Institutions must therefore create frameworks that balance traditional academic values with Gen Z's demand for relevance, flexibility, and digital integration (Schnackenberg & Johnson, 2019).

This study contributes to understanding intergenerational dynamics in academic settings by identifying communication gaps, benefits, and challenges between Gen Z students and senior lecturers. The findings demonstrate that while communication and learning preferences differ significantly, both groups value adaptation and recognize opportunities for mutual learning. These results suggest that universities can leverage intergenerational collaboration by promoting hybrid communication strategies, encouraging digital-traditional pedagogical integration, and fostering dialogue across generational lines (Dzhanegizova et al., 2024; Surya Atmaja, Ibnu Khalid, 2023)).

Nevertheless, the challenges of bridging educational values remain critical. Students' emphasis on practicality and career relevance contrasts with lecturers' traditional perspectives on the prestige of higher education. For collaboration to be sustainable, universities should design pedagogical practices that respect these differences while creating opportunities for cross-generational mentoring and co-teaching models (Sá et al., 2024). Future research could examine targeted interventions, such as structured intergenerational learning programs or technology-driven collaborations, that reduce tensions and strengthen inclusive academic environments.

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