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ENHANCING
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RESEARCH
IN AFRICA (EERA)

Intervention 4:

Strengthening administrative capacities of research institutions


NOVEMBER 2024

This concept note is one of eight developed as part of the Enhancing Education Research in Africa project. For an overview of the project and to view the other concept notes, please visit <https://essa-africa.org/node/1831>.

This concept note describes a proposed intervention to strengthen the administrative capacity of research institutions in Africa. The intervention includes activities such as mentoring and training aimed at enhancing the ability of individuals and systems to effectively manage administrative research responsibilities.

This intervention is designed to be part of a [wider system of interventions](#). It was identified through an intensive consultation and participatory planning process with African


education researchers and policy-makers, who highlighted the need to strengthen the administrative capacity of research institutions as a strategic leverage point.

 To maximise effectiveness, [Intervention 4](#) should be implemented alongside the proposed [Intervention 3](#) 'Strengthening research and leadership capacity through Research Chairs'.

Please visit the EERA project page at bit.ly/300ssDV.

Why is this a crucial intervention for education research in Africa?

In order to enhance education research in Africa, it is essential to build a strong field that supports and enlivens the education research eco-system (see the box below). Without adequate administrative capacity, other interventions aiming to build this field run the risk of having less impact than expected. Evidence suggests¹ that administrative capacity is constrained in many African higher education institutions. The education researchers who participated in formulating this intervention noted that research institutions in Africa have limited human and financial resources to strengthen administrative capacity and that systems are often outdated. By addressing this weakness in the eco-system, the field for education research will be fortified as follows:

- The **knowledge base** in education will be enabled to grow and deepen, by providing education researchers and administrators with the support they need. The African continent has many talented researchers with significant domain expertise, yet their work is constrained by administrative obstacles. Reducing these constraints will help to unleash the enormous potential that already exists in the education research terrain, particularly work geared to improving education outcomes.
- Increasing sustainable **resources** for education research depends in large part on improved capacity for attracting and managing grants. The administrative work involved can be experienced as tedious and overwhelming without adequate skills and systems. Appropriate capacity building in this area will directly boost the potential for research institutions to secure more and diverse funding, especially African funding.
 [See Intervention 2](#) for more information on the importance of catalysing African funding.
- Greater administrative capacity in education research institutions will promote African **research agendas** by augmenting relationship-building and collaboration amongst education researchers, policy-makers, practitioners, researchers in other disciplines, civil society and community members.

A strong field for education research in Africa

Based on extensive input from African education researchers and policy makers, these five factors are critical to building a strong field for education research:

- A robust **knowledge base**, aligned with local African priorities.
- Sustainable **resources** to enable African-led research and dissemination.
- A dynamic research **agenda** that reflects African education research priorities.
- A vibrant research **culture** that champions collaboration, gender equity and social inclusion.
- Reliable **infrastructure** to support knowledge repositories, exchange and communication.

Acknowledgement: The consultation process above made use of Bridgespan's [Strong Field Framework](#).

¹The sources referred to in this section are cited in full in the reference list at the end of the document, and include ESSA & Southern Hemisphere 2024; Kiweewa, 2024; Jackson-Malete, Dyason & Mpye, 2017.

Consultative processes, knowledge exchanges, peer learning events and so forth all require planning, funding and management. Without adequate capacity, these essential activities are often compromised, making it more difficult to ensure alignment between education research, policy and practice.

 See also [Intervention 1](#) to find out more about promoting African research agendas.

- The ability of research institutions to develop a collaborative and inclusive **research culture** is likewise highly affected by the nature and extent of its administrative capacity. This intervention will support institutions to implement training, mentorship and other workplace innovations that can contribute

to enabling environments for women and other marginalised researchers, early career researchers and research administrators.

 See also [Intervention 5](#) on training for education researchers.

- Most notably, this intervention will help ensure reliable **infrastructure** for education research, by improving systems for grant management, compliance and research administration. It will also provide for training opportunities for administrative staff to build skills and capacity, and build viable careers in research administration.

In recognition of the pivotal role administration and management play within the larger research field, a growing number of initiatives have sprung up around the continent to strengthen these capacities. Relevant examples will be considered later in this document.

For more background information on why this intervention is crucial, read the [situational analysis](#) undertaken as part of this project, and/or explore how this intervention responds to the [strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats](#) identified by African education research stakeholders.

Aims and objectives of the intervention

The broad aims of this intervention are to strengthen the field for education research by:

- Ensuring that adequate administrative support is available to allow education researchers to undertake cutting-edge, impact oriented research that speaks to African education priorities.
- Enhancing the ability of research institutions to manage partnerships, connect researchers with policy-makers, and catalyse more and more diverse funding for education research.
- Contributing to a dynamic and inclusive research culture in which education researchers, research administrators and other critical role-players have opportunities to develop and share their skills and expertise.

In order to pursue these broad aims, the specific objectives of the intervention are:

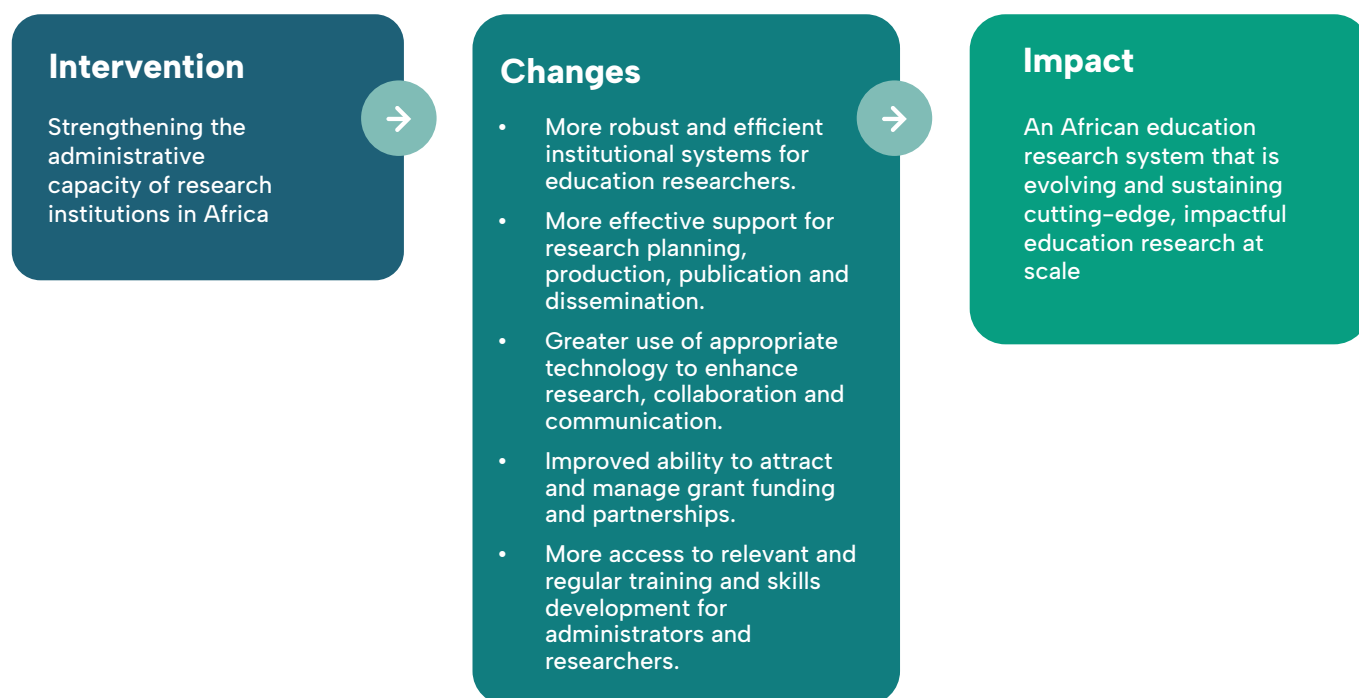
- To establish new, or strengthen existing, research offices in higher education institutions to support education-specific Research Chairs, respond to grants, manage research proposals, coordinate training for researchers and collaborate with governments to ensure adequate research funding.
- To equip support staff and fundraising/ grant management staff with the necessary skills for fundraising, grant management and partnership-building.
- To ensure that appropriate administrative systems and infrastructure are in place to support the activities above.

Expected outcomes

Based on the input from education researchers and policy-makers, the expected outcomes of this intervention are as follows:

- ➔ **Outcome 1: Research institutions have stronger administrative capacity to manage research grants.**
The kinds of capacity required to attract and manage research grants include being able to develop and maintain partnerships for sustainable funding, respond to grant opportunities, write grant proposals and manage research implementation and publication. This has been identified as a critical enabler for the production of relevant, actionable and high-quality research.²
- ➔ **Outcome 2: Enabling environment for preparing the next generation of education researchers.** Investing in institutional capacity for research has long-term benefits, providing support not only to current researchers, but helping to build a field that catalyses sustainable opportunities, career paths and working environments for women researchers, early career researchers and research managers, amongst others.




These outcomes are seen to contribute to the following impact pathway:



² Tijssen & Kraemer-Mbula, 2017

Relevant examples of initiatives to strengthen institutional capacity for research

There are currently a number of initiatives in place that aim to strengthen the administrative capacities of research institutions. The examples below are included here as a foundation for learning from existing experience on the continent and encouraging synergies with other actors in the field wherever possible.

Programme	Detail
<p>Southern African Research and Innovation Management Association (SARIMA)</p> 	<p>Purpose: SARIMA aims to strengthen research and innovation management in Southern Africa. It supports research capacity building, enhancing professional development for research managers, and fostering regional cooperation.</p> <p>Countries of operation: SARIMA operates across the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region, encompassing countries like South Africa, Botswana, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Malawi, and others in Southern Africa.</p>
<p>African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA)</p> 	<p>Purpose: ARUA's primary goal is to enhance research capacity and strengthen the quality and competitiveness of African universities in global research. It focuses on tackling local and global development challenges through research and collaboration.</p> <p>Countries of Operation: ARUA consists of a network of research-intensive universities across Africa, with member institutions from countries like South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria, Ghana, Uganda and others.</p>
<p>The Science Granting Councils Initiatives (SGCI)</p> 	<p>Purpose: The SGCI aims to strengthen the capacities of science granting councils to support research and innovation in their respective countries. It focuses on enhancing their ability to design and manage research programmes and to influence science, technology, and innovation (STI) policies.</p> <p>Countries of Operation: The SGCI works with science granting councils in 17 Sub-Saharan African countries, including Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Senegal, Zambia and Mozambique, amongst others.</p>

Considering these examples, it is useful to take note of the various ways they are structured:

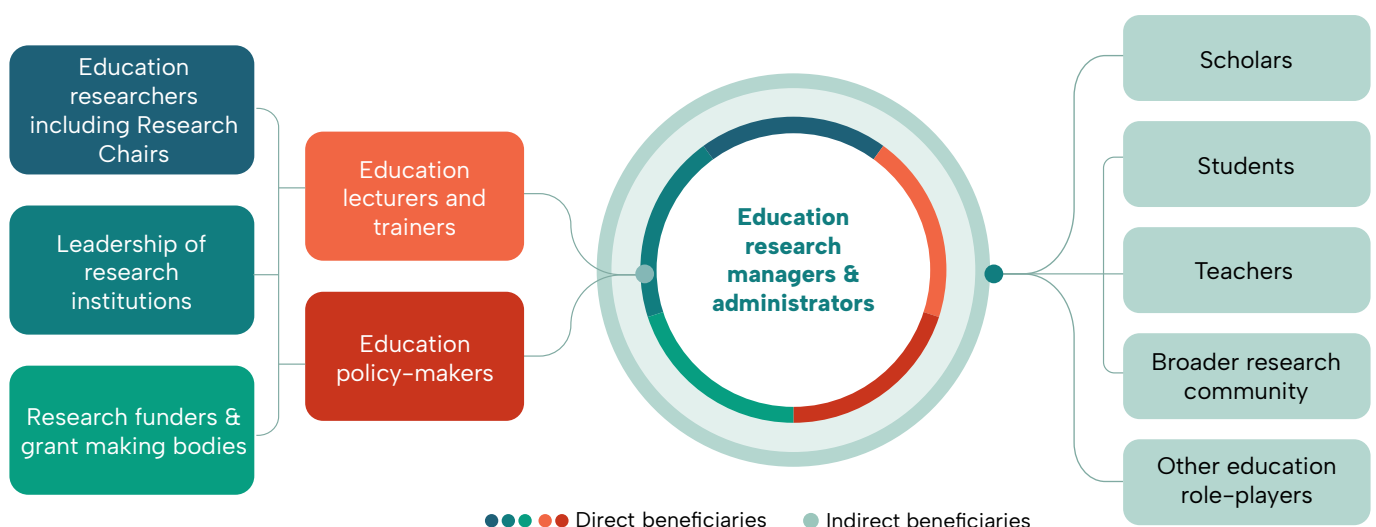
- SARIMA is a professional association with individual and institutional memberships across the Southern African region. It is led by an executive committee comprising professionals from various member institutions, working groups and standing committees focused on specific themes like capacity development and advocacy.
- ARUA is a network of 16 universities across Africa, each representing a leading research institution in its country. It is overseen by a board of directors, with a secretariat based at the University of Ghana. Each of ARUA's centres of excellence is hosted by a member university and focuses on specific research themes.
- SGCI operates as a partnership programme involving African science granting councils, regional and international partners, and funders. It is coordinated by the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) and other partner organisations. Each country's council operates under its own national structure but collaborates regionally through the initiative.

Who will benefit most from this intervention?

Strengthening the administrative capacity of institutions involved in education research will benefit the following actors in the education eco-system:

- ➔ Education research managers and administrators, who would have the skills and systems they need to cultivate partnerships, manage grants, support research implementation and dissemination.
- ➔ Education researchers, including Research Chairs (individuals and teams), who would then have support and the enabling environment they need to undertake cutting-edge, impact-driven education research and share their findings.
 - 📄 For more on Research Chairs, see [Intervention 3](#).
- ➔ Funders, national science granting councils, research funds or other grant-making agencies, who would have effective platforms to direct education research funding.
 - 📄 For more on African funding for education research, see [Intervention 2](#).
- ➔ Members of higher education governance structures, such as senates and Vice Chancellors of research institutions, associated with generating and publishing quality education research.
- ➔ Education faculty and lecturers at the host institutions, whose teaching would be enhanced by the findings and insights emerging from practice-orientated education research.
- ➔ Policy-makers who would have more regular opportunities to engage with education researchers and other stakeholders, and enjoy more increased and easier access to research outputs to inform decision-making and policy planning affecting education.
- ➔ Other education researchers and researchers interested in education at other universities in the same country, and in other countries, who would benefit from more interaction, collaboration and knowledge sharing.
- ➔ Teachers, students and scholars, who would experience the benefits of improved policies and education practice informed by robust, implementation-oriented research.

The chart below depicts the direct and indirect beneficiaries of this intervention.



Designing this intervention: Important considerations

This intervention is about increasing the administrative capacity of research institutions through providing targeted training to individuals to engage in administrative tasks, to work together with government partners, and to invest in institutional systems and processes. This section explores the design features to be taken into consideration when initiating this intervention. It is based on research on similar existing programmes that seek to strengthen administrative capacity for research, as well as consultations with African education researchers and policy-makers.

Geographic scope

The focus of the intervention is at institutional level and is scalable at country level.

Gender, equity and social inclusion (GESI)

The intervention will require gender balance in developing effective support teams for education research. The systems that are put in place should adhere to the institutions' gender policies, and should ensure the advancement of women, people with disabilities and other marginalised groups as relevant to the particular context. Improved administrative capacity should also be used to implement effective tracking of GESI indicators related to the research.

Strengthening capacity of individuals and systems

Administrative capacities can vary depending on the context, but they typically include grant management, business development, fundraising, alumni relations, communications, and marketing. Training in administrative capacity alone has been found to be insufficient, especially in terms of winning grant proposals.³ Capacity-building efforts should focus on training human resources, but critically these should be supplemented with enabling institutional structures. This intervention should therefore give attention not only to human resource development, but also to organisational development (including research management processes and procedures) as well as institutional and policy frameworks.

Tailored activities

The types of activities required to build capacity typically consist of various combinations of training and mentorship, knowledge-sharing, partnership development, networking, interdisciplinary collaboration, policy development, and advocacy. The box below illustrates how other interventions of this kind have implemented tailored combinations of capacity-building activities.

Structure

The education researchers and policy makers informing this intervention cautioned that any capacity-building initiative should be cognisant of existing gaps in the current system, so as to prevent a new initiative from coming up against the same stumbling blocks. With this in mind, it is suggested that the structure of a capacity-building initiative is structured to draw on strengths in the current system. To harness strengths, these programmes can be structured around a network model (such as SGCI) or an individual institutional model (such as ARUA).

Decentralised versus centralised programmes

Related to the above, capacity-building initiatives such as centres of excellence are often founded on a centralised model. In this case, capacity-building takes place at the highest level of research institutions, with the expectation that capacity enhancements will trickle down to lower levels. Commentators⁴ have warned that this approach, whilst logistically less challenging, is vulnerable to becoming elitist, thus limiting diversity and equity.

Accessibility

Although it has increasingly come under scrutiny, the academic environment has a long-standing history of exclusionary practices.⁵ This extends to tasks associated with research administration, which are often experienced as overly technical and difficult to engage with. Grant applications are seen to be complex and time consuming, and include requirements that are often not suited to the contexts within which African researchers work.

Any efforts to strengthen administrative capacity for education research should therefore be designed with accessibility in mind and tailored to meet the needs of African researchers. Beyond this, capacity building activities should be accessible to all, including persons with disabilities, women and early career researchers.

³ The sources of evidence presented in this subsection are cited in full in the reference list and include Bavdekar & Tullu, 2016; Hellström, 2018.

⁴ See Hellström, 2018; Soderbaum, 2001.

⁵ Sources informing this sub-section are cited in full in the reference list at the end of the document and include Edwards et al, 2024; Sukhai & MacDonald, 2021; Waterfield, Beagan & Weinberg, 2018; ESSA & Southern Hemisphere 2024.

Several measures can be taken to boost accessibility. For example, training workshops should be scheduled at reasonable times and take place in convenient locations, ensuring that early career researchers and others with family responsibilities are able to attend. If online, care should be taken to ensure all participants have reliable access to the internet. Capacity-building initiatives, including training workshops, should also be pitched at the right level and not assume a homogenous spread of existing administrative capacity and experiences.

Working with governments

Governments have an important role in supporting research institutions. For this reason, it is imperative that interventions aiming to strengthen administrative capacities include government stakeholders. This can be done, for example, by ensuring beneficiaries have a strong understanding of governmental processes and procedures.

Next Steps

If you would like to fund an intervention to strengthen the administrative capacity of research institutions, the following steps will help you to start planning your process:

1. **Identify geographic scope and scale:** Consider whether this intervention would span across a region or country and entail a network of institutions, or whether it will be located within one research institution.



Ideally, this intervention should be implemented alongside **Intervention 3**, Establishing Research Chairs in education.

2. **Identify the institutions and engage them:** Identify the higher education institutions (most likely universities) in the selected country or region that have strong leadership as well as the strongest track record in education research. These institutions could then be engaged in discussions together with government oversight bodies, to identify which institutions have the most potential to benefit from the intervention.

3. **Needs analysis:** Conduct a needs analysis in collaboration with the institution(s) to establish the capacities that need to be strengthened at an individual level and at an institutional level (systems and processes). For example, capacities in grant management, business development, fundraising, alumni relations, communications, and marketing. The institutional leadership at each university should be included in this process. In addition, it is recommended that the regulatory bodies be involved in this study, given that they should have good oversight of similar interventions within their countries. The aim of this study will be to establish the strengths and weaknesses of an institutions' administrative capacities with a particular view of designing a package of relevant activities to address gaps. Particular emphasis should be placed on assessing universities' policy frameworks to identify universities with supportive, enabling policy

What would it look like to start this Intervention off in Kenya?

- ➔ Identify universities with strong leadership such as the University of Embu and Kisii University Main Campus. Institutions such as these (including leadership and governing bodies) would then meet with government stakeholders to identify universities most likely to benefit from this intervention.
- ➔ Thereafter, during the stakeholder mapping phase, For example, one could approach the Commission for University Education, Ministry of Education, National Research Foundation, ARUA, SGCI and SARIMA to see whether there is potential for collaboration. These stakeholders would then engage in the co-design process.

4. **Stakeholder mapping:** Once you have determined the capacity needs of the institution(s) involved, the next step is to identify key actors and potential partners. Critically, government(s) should be included in this step. Additional partners could include other research institutions or relevant advocacy organisations with an interest in education.

5. Co-design with stakeholders: This would be a consultative design process. The aim of the process would be twofold: to design a relevant intervention to strengthen capacity and to foster stakeholder buy-in. This process should include designing a sustainability plan. Depending on the strength of local institutions, it is recommended that this should be led by an existing body in the country rather than the funder or a consultant. However, in certain instances, consultant support may still be necessary.

6. Monitoring and evaluation: While listed as the final step, monitoring and evaluation would actually be an iterative process. Importantly, this should include a continual assessment of emerging areas needing capacity strengthening. This should be integrated within a country's own system for tracking higher education performance.

Acknowledgements

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Full acknowledgements can be found in the introduction note to this series of concept notes.

Please visit the EERA project page at bit.ly/30OssDV.

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Annexure 1: SWOT Analysis and administrative capacity for education research

The table below depicts how enhancing the administrative capacity of research institutions is expected to address the SWOT analysis undertaken by education research stakeholders as part of the EERA process.

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Skilled research workforce: Institutions often have talented researchers with strong domain expertise. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Limited administrative support: Inadequate systems for grant management, compliance, and research administration.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Established partnerships: Existing collaborations with other institutions and networks create a supportive research environment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Lack of training and professional development: Limited opportunities for administrative staff to build skills and capacity.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Inefficient systems: Outdated financial and project management systems hinder research productivity and effective grant management.
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Capacity building initiatives: Availability of programmes aimed at improving research management and administration. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Inconsistent funding streams: Irregular or insufficient funding for administrative roles and infrastructure can disrupt research processes.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Increased funding for institutional development: Opportunities for securing funding that can be allocated to improve administrative capacity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → High staff turnover: Challenges in retaining well-trained administrative staff lead to a loss of expertise.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Regional and international collaboration: Opportunities for research institutions to collaborate on shared administrative practices, leading to improved efficiency. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Complex regulatory and compliance requirements: Increasingly stringent regulations put additional strain on limited administrative resources.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Resistance and changing priorities: Shifts in government priorities or resistance from established funding bodies.



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