





Intervention 5:

Training and professional development for education researchers

NOVEMBER 2024

This concept paper describes a proposed intervention to fund training¹ and professional development of African researchers in the field of education research, with a particular focus on early career researchers² (ECRs). We propose holistic training and skills development in essential technical and complementary skills, including research methodologies, grant writing, soft skills, project leadership and management; and the provision of structured mentorship and networking opportunities.

This intervention is designed to be part of a wider system of interventions. It was identified through an intensive

consultation and participative planning process with African education researchers and policy-makers³, who highlighted the need for training and professional development of education researchers as a strategic leverage point.



To maximise effectiveness, Intervention 5 should be considered alongside Intervention 3 'Building leadership and capacity through Research Chairs; and Intervention 4 'Strengthening administrative capacities of research institutions'.

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

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

According to the African education researchers who informed this intervention, one of the key strengths of this sector is the diversity of actors involved – government agencies, NGOs, universities, think tanks, and international organisations – who offer varied perspectives and resources and contribute to a relatively vibrant research culture in some countries. However, African education researchers (and research institutions) face unique challenges in accessing funding, conducting quality research and attending networking events and conferences. Crucially, there are significant gaps in capacity and skills development, particularly for ECRs. Limited access to professional development, networking opportunities, mentoring, and guidance leave ECRs struggling to develop their research capacity and secure sustainable funding. These challenges restrict their ability to engage in impactful research and limit their contributions to both regional and global education research landscapes.

Providing tailored training and professional development will not only benefit individual researchers, but also serve to strengthen the broader field of education research (see the box below).

Investing in professional research capacity therefore contributes to longer-term systemic benefits for the sector by:

Enhancing the **knowledge base** of African research institutions by deepening domain expertise and supporting innovation and academic rigour in the growing body of education research being produced on the continent. The EERA consultation process highlighted the commitment of Africa education researchers and institutions to the ongoing development of quality, impact-driven research aligned with developmental priorities.



See also **Intervention 3** on establishing education–specific Research Chairs.



Contributing to more sustainable **resources** for education research by augmenting the skills required to attract and manage research funding on a consistent basis. Cutting-edge research that meets local needs will help to catalyse African funding and motivate for education research to be given more precedence in the research and innovation eco-systems in African countries.



See also **Intervention 2** on African funding for education research.

¹ Some refer to training as capacity strengthening. Both terms emphasise a broader, ongoing process of enhancing skills, knowledge and abilities to support sustainable development and growth.

² There is no general consensus on what defines an ECR. Different interventions use different terms and criteria differ from context to context. Each funding organisation tends to establish a particular definition according to its own agenda and areas of interest (Nicolle, 2024). However, it is clear that gender plays a significant role in career progression, particularly for women, who often experience delays in their research trajectories due to family responsibilities. These factors should be considered when defining and supporting ECRs.

³ Also referred to in this document as the EERA consultations. The process and outcomes are discussed in detail in this report by ESSA & Southern Hemisphere, 2024.

- Promoting African-led research agendas by enabling more extensive and sustainable thought leadership on the continent and deepening the discourse amongst education researchers, policy makers, practitioners, community members and other stakeholders.
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For more guidance on how to support African research agendas, see also **Intervention 1**.

- Further enlivening the **research culture** at higher education institutions by ensuring that women education researchers, other marginalised groups and early career researchers have equitable access to training and mentorship, and can be better connected to regional and international networks for skills development and knowledge exchange.
- Strengthening **infrastructure** by equipping education researchers to actively contribute to knowledge repositories, information systems and other platforms that allow for the dissemination of research findings, discussion and collaboration, information-sharing and learning.

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.

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.

Aims and objectives of the intervention

The intervention will be African-led and will. The broad aims of this intervention are:

- To encourage structured and sustained capacity-building programmes for education researchers, especially ECRs, that are tailored to the realities and needs of African researchers and responsive to local research agendas and priorities.
- To address obstacles to professional development for education researchers as identified through the EERA consultations, including limited funding to deepen research and other skills, and inadequate systems for consistent mentoring and training.
- To offer multifaceted support to ECRs as a means to nurture a new generation of education research leaders, thereby investing in a dynamic and evolving field that will grow and diversify over time.
- To promote South-South fellowship programmes and knowledge exchange amongst education research institutions.

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

- To establish a dedicated funding mechanism that supports the career development of education researchers, from Honours through to Masters, PhD, postdoctoral stages, and fellowships, with a particular focus on Early Career Researchers (ECRs) including short-term courses and training, enabling skill enhancement and professional growth across diverse needs.
- To use emerging networks and education research organisations, such as the Consortium for Advanced Research Training in Africa (CARTA), to mentor and provide capacity-building opportunities, particularly for ECRs.
- To strengthen education researchers' capacity in key areas such as research methods, data analysis, grant-writing, research methodologies and effective communication.

- To cater to the diverse circumstances of education researchers by offering capacity-building opportunities and flexible funding through different channels and modalities, including degree programmes as outlined above, but also short courses, exchange programmes, small grants and fellowships.
- To provide skills development, peer-to-peer mentorship, and results-based grants, offering hands-on opportunities to apply education research in real-world contexts, thereby enhancing both individual and institutional education research capacity.
- To promote networking and collaboration opportunities for ECRs, and the development of sustainable communities of practice amongst education researchers on the continent.

Expected outcomes

The African education researchers and policy makers involved in formulating this intervention identified the following expected outcomes, echoing those already achieved by existing collaborative research programmes.⁴

Outcome 1: Increased production of quality research.

Evaluations from initiatives like CARTA have found that graduates exposed to high-quality post-doctoral opportunities – including research, training, mentoring, networking, and collaboration – are better equipped to apply their skills to produce robust research. Structured mentorship programs and networking opportunities further enhance researchers' capacity to translate their work into high-quality publications and secure funding.

Moreover, training programmes that provide guidance to ECRs to transform their PhD work for publication, secure their first peer-reviewed articles, and offer time and support to define research agendas, design new projects and obtain funding, have been shown to significantly enhance the production of high-quality research. Fostering research excellence not only strengthens the skills of individual researchers but also helps to generate locally-relevant evidence that is more likely to influence education policy reform and implementation, driving greater stakeholder buy-in for impactful, evidence-based solutions.

Outcome 2: Improved research culture for early career researchers (ECRs). Literature indicates that a culture of collaboration and continuous learning is fostered by interventions for ECRs, such as providing opportunities to connect with peers locally, regionally, and internationally through networks, conferences, and participation in their research communities. This, in turn, contributes to a

stronger research culture within institutions, with the focus being on high-impact research over activities conducted solely for promotion or personal career advancement. In other words, a strong research culture is one that recognises the social value of research, which goes beyond being published. Literature confirms that funding organisations are more likely to support research when it has an impact on society. This invites funders and academia to rethink the incentive structure put in place to make researchers more conscientious of their work and its impact.

Outcome 3: Enabling environment for preparing the next generation of researchers. Similar interventions have shown that effective capacity building with ECRs allows them to develop their full potential within and beyond academic settings. This requires an enabling environment where ECRs have varied opportunities to receive training and deepen the skills needed for the knowledge economy.

Apart from building their research abilities and gaining networking skills (for example by participating in conferences and being involved in collaborative work), tailored capacity building can help researchers gain experience in publication, as well as other complementary skills that can contribute to their ongoing career advancement.

⁴ The sources of evidence presented in this section are cited in full in the reference list at the end of the document and include Klugman, 2020; ESSA & Southern Hemisphere, 2024; Harle, 2011; Mentz-Coetzee and Sienaert, 2022; Nicolle et al, 2024.

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

Intervention

Training and professional development of education researchers

Changes

- Education researchers have improved skills in grant writing, research, communication, etc.
- Knowledge and domain expertise is deepened and aligned to African research agendas.
- Improved research quality.
- ECRs have more support to develop their potential and contribute.
- More active and diversified dissemination of research and real-world research applications.
- Enriched networks for knowledge exchange, collaboration and peer learning.

Impact

An African education research system that is evolving and sustaining cutting-edge, impactful education research at scale

Examples of training and professional development initiatives for researchers

While there is no comprehensive professional development programme specifically for education researchers currently in Africa, training and other capacity strengthening methods have been offered through a number of other programmes. These examples are presented here as a foundation for learning from existing experience and to promote collaboration with other actors in the field.

Programme and its purpose **Detail** The Consortium for Advanced Research Training in CARTA is a large-scale programme coordinated between eight African universities, four Africa-based Africa (CARTA) supports the following: research centres, and eight non-African partners, with Time for academics to pursue research. funding from a large number of international donors. It provides: Development of independent projects. Capacity building in research, curriculum design, Development of grant proposals for funding. PhD training, pedagogical training, and technical Exposure to a different research culture. training. Receiving mentorship and providing mentoring to Mentorship, both formal and informal. upcoming researchers. **Funding** of travel costs, monthly stipends, funds for Publishing and dissemination of research work at formation of new research collaborations and international conferences. partnerships, funds for development of pilot projects, funds for training opportunities on specific Formation of appropriate research-related research skills, and international conference networks and partnerships. attendance.

Programme and its purpose

Developing Emerging Academic Leaders (DEAL), based at University of Cape Town (South Africa), aims to:

- Address the gap that occurs between graduating with a PhD and establishing oneself as an independent researcher in the field.
- Strengthen the capacity for research leadership in Africa and ultimately for Carnegie fellows to take on research-leadership roles in African universities, especially in fields crucial to Africa's development.

Detail

In support of researchers, DEAL provides:

- Capacity building through a four-day residential course for all research fellows, a writing-for-publication retreat and writing workshops. An extensive suite of other workshops for both academic and professional skills development is on offer.
- Formal mentorship, with each fellow being assigned at least one mentor. In civil engineering, a teaching mentor assists fellows in developing teaching strategies, preparing content, course administration, exam setting, and marking.
- Time away/residency to participate in joint research with an African or international university and spending time at partner institutions.
- Funding of stipends and publication fees, workshop and retreat attendance, one shared academic meeting and one professional social function per year.

The African Economic Research Consortium (AERC) supports research, training and policy outreach. The organisation integrates economic policy research, postgraduate training and policy outreach, involving a network of researchers, universities and policy makers in Africa and worldwide.

It also hosts several research projects with earmarked funding from regional and international partners.

The AERC offers a **collaborative training** programme that:

- Prings together departments or schools in universities across sub-Saharan Africa that offer postgraduate studies in economics and agricultural economics.
- Builds the institutional capacity of these institutions to offer quality graduate training.
- Facilitates the joint development of a common curriculum, teaching materials and electives.
- Enforces standards through internationally recruited internal/external examiners and advisory boards.

The AESA–Regional Initiative in Science and Education (RISE) is an agenda–setting and funding platform established by the African Academy of Sciences (AAS) in order to:

- Ocatalyse investments, strategies and programmes that promote the brightest minds in Africa;
- Foster scientific excellence;
- Inspire research leadership; and
- Accelerate innovation.

The AESA supports globally competitive research projects at African universities that contribute to knowledge-based economies on the continent. It offers:

- Capacity building in leadership and other areas.
- Structured mentorship.
- Residency outside the fellow's country of full-time employment.
- Training through customised postdoctoral programmes.
- Support for the production, reproduction and transition of knowledge.

These examples of existing capacity building initiatives for researchers provide some guidance on how this intervention might be designed and structured. This will be explored further in the section on design considerations below.

Who will benefit most from this intervention?

Providing training and career development for education researchers at African higher education institutions will benefit the following actors in the education eco-system:

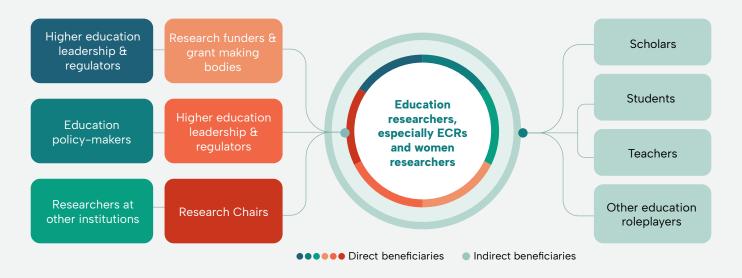
- Education researchers, especially early career researchers, women researchers, other under-represented researchers, as well as senior researchers targeted for refresher courses or advanced training, who will be better equipped to undertake cutting-edge, impact-driven education research.
- Research Chairs in education(see Intervention 3), mentors, training coordinators (ideally located in education research offices) and training providers (for example, local experts) who will contribute to, and participate in, an enriched and enabling environment for continuous learning and innovation in education research.
- Funders, and national science granting councils or research funds, who would have a broader and more diverse array of researchers and institutions to direct education research funding to.

This benefit will be augmented by Intervention 2, which focuses on catalysing African funding for education research

- Other education researchers and researchers interested in education, at other universities in the same country, and in other countries, with whom the trained researchers engage in discussion and knowledge exchange.
- Description

 Education faculty and lecturers at host universities, whose teaching can be enhanced by increased high quality research outputs relevant to education priorities and on-the-ground practice.
- Policymakers who would have access to robust and relevant research outputs that can inform and guide decision-making and policy planning affecting education.
- Members of higher education governance structures, such as university senates and Vice Chancellors at host institutions, who are associated with quality research and enhanced academic reputation.
- Ultimately teachers, students and scholars, who experience the benefits of improved policies and education practice, informed by innovative and rigorous, implementation-oriented research.

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





Designing this intervention: Important considerations

This section explores the design features to be taken into consideration when initiating this intervention. It is based on research on existing professional development programmes and consultations with African education researchers and policy-makers.

Geographical scope

The focus of the intervention is at institutional level and is scalable at country level or across a network of institutions located in different countries.

Programme structure

Capacity building programmes should be intentionally designed to provide ECRs with diverse opportunities to develop the necessary skills for a successful research career. Further consideration should be given to whether this intervention is best suited to an institution-based or network-based approach:

- An **institution-based** capacity-building programme for education researchers could, for example, be located within institutions in which education Research Chairs have been established.
- A **network-based** approach could offer support across a network of institutions with or across countries (led by a hub or lead institution) and with a designated institution responsible to coordinate training. For example, CARTA is jointly led by the African Population and Health Research Centre [APHRC] and the University of Witwatersrand.

However, it is crucial to recognize that ECR support programmes in Africa cannot follow a one-size-fits-all approach. They must be contextually relevant and tailored to the unique challenges of each institution or network. Fosci and Loffreda (2019) made the following practical recommendations to guide research capacity strengthening interventions in Africa:

- The national context shapes which interventions are acceptable, with socio-economic conditions and the government's development vision influencing discourses and approaches in each research area.
- The maturity of the research system shapes what goals can be achieved, but this varies widely. While partnerships with national institutions are beneficial, their effectiveness hinges on the institutions' political will and capacity.

Further Ideas for structuring independent postdoctoral fellowships and fellowships for researchers of different employment statuses can be found here.

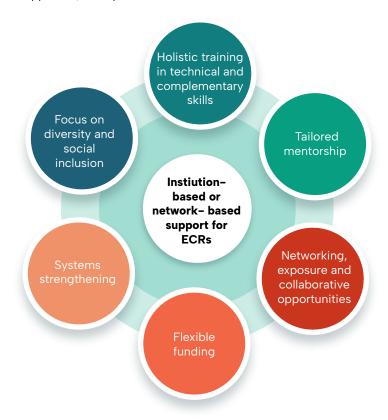
Timescale

In the design of this intervention, funders should commit to a timespan that exceeds the duration of a typical PhD programme, to ensure sustainable impact.

This extended commitment is essential not only for the career development of ECRs, but also to foster meaningful and long-term institutional engagement. Long-term support allows institutions and researchers to build capacity, establish deeper partnerships and develop research agendas that align with local and regional priorities, ensuring the initiative's success beyond the immediate research period.

Multifaceted approach

Supporting ECRs requires a multifaceted and collaborative approach, as depicted in the chart below.



The following section gives brief consideration to each of these facets to prompt further enquiry into:

- a. The various skills areas that may be included in an intervention of this kind;
- b. Issues pertaining to gender and social inclusion;
- c. How to establish flexible funding options;
- d. Tailored mentorship considerations;
- e. Networking, exposure and collaborative opportunities; and
- f. Measures to strengthen the education research system.

A) Training and skills development

Training of education researchers should focus on both the technical research and complementary skills. A recent study by ESSA and the Research for Equitable Access and Learning (REAL) Centre sheds light on the types of training and skills most in demand amongst education

researchers focussing on early childhood development and foundational learning. The box below sets out skills areas recommended most often in the literature⁵ and included in existing capacity-building programmes.

Technical research skills

In addition to deepening knowledge in their specific research areas in education, ECRs need a broad range of research-related skills to navigate the increasingly complex research landscape. During the postdoctoral phase, they should acquire the competencies needed to become independent researchers, skilled in all stages of the professional research process. This includes designing research programmes, supervising other researchers, critically evaluating literature, analysing and interpreting data and publishing as a senior author. There is also a need for training in writing for journal publication (including peer review

skills), writing policy briefs and research training in other languages.

Post-PhD support programs should also help develop skills relevant to multidisciplinary research. This could include introductory training in relevant disciplines such as child psychology, educational anthropology, social psychology and neuroscience, as well as cutting edge tools associated with artificial intelligence and implementation science. To practice their skills, researchers will also need to be linked to grants programmes. As researchers mature, they themselves could provide training as post-docs.

Complementary skills

Researchers need various complementary skills in order to advance research quality, including:

- Supervision and teaching skills: ECRs should develop supervision skills by overseeing postgraduate students or less experienced researchers, as well as gaining experience in teaching.
- Project management: Experience in managing research projects and research grants is vital for career progression, offering practical leadership experience.
- Networking: Intentional training in networking is beneficial, including orientation on how to network and enrol in mentoring and coaching programmes.
- Professional conduct: Developing skills in conflict resolution, and giving and receiving feedback are essential for career development, fostering professional growth, and building productive academic relationships.



⁵ Sources supporting the skills presented here include Asare et al, 2024: Mentz-Coetzee & Sienaert, 2022; Nicolle, 2024; Samson et al, 2023.

- Fundraising and grant proposal writing: ECRs need to learn how to identify potential funding sources and write successful proposals to secure continued funding for their research.
- Communication: Effective communication with both academic and non-academic audiences is crucial, including skills to engage with local communities and understand the use of the evidence. ECRs should know how to develop a communication strategy, translate knowledge into more accessible formats and deliver effective presentations.
- Impact-oriented research skills: ECRs should learn to design research that aims for real-world impact, understanding how their disciplinary expertise can address broader societal or market needs. Exposure to multidisciplinary discussions can help enhance this skill.
- Strategic thinking and leadership skills: This should include decision-making and

- relationship-building skills, such as the capacity to take a collaborative approach, and supporting others. New researchers can learn by having opportunities to lead and manage others on smaller projects.
- Policy engagement: ECRs should be equipped to engage with policy processes to ensure their research informs evidence-based policymaking. Funders can support this by providing policy engagement training and connecting ECRs with policymakers and practitioners.
- Transferable skills for non-academic settings:

 Skills that are applicable outside academia can also be useful to ECRs, for example practical classroom practice. Some funders embed tailored capacity-building within research programmes, offering short-term collaborations with non-academic organisations to develop innovative solutions.

Online versus in-person training

Offering training online expands reach to as many ECRs as possible, giving them support they otherwise wouldn't have. Besides offering courses, online platforms can support learning communities that allow individuals to connect and collaborate. Besides online courses, workshops and retreats can be effective in developing skills, with a focus on practical, real-world applications. Bringing people together *in person*, through fellows or alumni meetings for example, offers a possibility of building networks much stronger than when conducted online. Scalability should be considered here, for example, by focussing on training of trainers or peer-to-peer training.

B) Gender, equity and social inclusion (GESI)

This intervention will require gender balance of trainers and trainees, and the content of the training should be gender responsive – addressing the social norms and structural barriers that inhibit women, and people from marginalised groups, from advancing in their fields. The training must be accessible for women and people with disabilities. The training must be in compliance with the institutions' GEI policies.

Funders should ensure their programmes are inclusive of ECRs from diverse backgrounds, disciplines, and regions.⁶ This can be achieved by revising selection criteria to accommodate non-linear career paths and implementing policies that support gender equality and inclusion. Caretaking responsibilities are significant barriers for researchers, so funders should offer caregiver grants, flexible working hours, and childcare support to help balance family and work commitments. Another consideration could

be around stemming attrition from earlier in the education journey by, for example, strengthening partnerships or linkages between universities and schools.

CARTA exemplifies inclusivity by prioritising gender balance in recruitment, offering higher age limits for women applicants and support for new mothers, such as maternity leave and covering childcare costs during sessions. This approach allows women to pursue PhDs without sacrificing family responsibilities, while also promoting women's leadership is research institutions.

GESI should also be a cross-cutting feature of ECR training across various skills areas, as listed above. This should include capacity building to strengthen specific skills needed to address gender equality and inclusion in the work of every ECR.

⁶ The guidelines on promoting GESI presented in this sub-section derive from Nicolle, 2024; Oak Foundation Learning Review, 2024; Mentz-Coetzee & Sienaert, 2020); Khisa et al., 2019; Klugman, 2020.

C) Flexible funding

Careful consideration should be given to the duration and remuneration of ECRs and fellowships⁷, with grants that are geared to support both:

- Researchers who are not yet employed, as there are limited opportunities within research organisations in Africa and they need opportunities to build up a portfolio of work as they seek more permanent employment.
- Career development of those that are already employed, as many staff in African institutions will obtain their PhD while employed and need targeted support to build an independent research career.

Stable, long-term financial support is crucial in addressing the precarious nature of research careers, especially in low- and middle-income countries where ECRs often face significant financial burdens and job insecurity. Flexible funding models that prioritise the needs and contexts of ECRs can alleviate these pressures and enhance their career development and research productivity. For example, CARTA offers awards to graduates in the form of post-doctoral fellowships, traditional post-docs of one year or split into shorter stays and re-entry grants. CARTA re-entry grants target fellows returning to (or remaining at) their own institutions upon completion of their doctoral training. These grants are designed for graduates who cannot travel away from their home bases for postdoctoral training, especially women with children.

Long-term support, including post-project engagement and career transition grants, can help ECRs navigate the challenges of establishing themselves in academia or related fields.

D) Tailored Mentorship programmes

Mentorship is critical for ECRs in navigating the academic landscape and overcoming personal challenges. Effective mentorship builds confidence, skills and career direction. However, it is important to give attention to the time constraints experienced by mentors and the need for diverse models, such as peer and group mentoring.⁸

Effective mentorship takes time. Many mentors are already overburdened and therefore the pool of available education research mentors also needs to be expanded and strengthened. Funders should invest in tailored mentorship programmes that include innovative models and support mentors with capacity-building resources and incentives. Including mentorship in funding calls and large grants is also recommended. Mentors should receive compensation and acknowledgement for their mentorship duties, and this

role should be formally included when defining roles and responsibilities for Research Chairs and their teams.



See Intervention 3 for more reflections on this theme

The African Education Research Funding Consortium, with the support from On Think Tanks commissioned a background note on "Unlocking the potential of transformative mentoring in Africa" which further emphasises contextually-responsive mentoring models to support systemic change, particularly for women and underrepresented groups in African education research. Training mentors and providing long-term support for ECRs, up to five years, is also key to improving mentoring access and quality.

E) Networking, exposure and collaborative opportunities

As the research world becomes increasingly global, with researchers collaborating in teams across international boundaries, ECRs must be able to develop collaborative networks to remain competitive. Exposure to diverse ideas and opportunities for collaboration is vital. However, many researchers in Africa lack opportunities and resources to access networks and build partnerships, which increases their isolation and diminishes their opportunities for growth and collaboration.

Opportunities to attend professional meetings and conferences provide an important avenue for building such networks and practicing presentation skills. Workshops and interdisciplinary projects also provide platforms for ECRs to broaden their perspectives, engage with the global research community, and foster potential collaborations. The African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA) Centres of Excellence are a case in point, where ECRs are inserted into existing networks of collaboration, enabling them to grow within a community of scholars in their field.

Funders can play a key role in creating these opportunities for ECRs to network, share ideas and collaborate. This can be achieved through funding travel bursaries for conferences, organising interdisciplinary workshops, and supporting collaborative research projects that encourage cross-sectoral and cross-regional partnerships.

CARTA recruits fellows from diverse disciplines and institutions, and requires that they collaborate during Joint Advanced Seminar sessions and assignments, while also exposing them to facilitators and mentors from other institutions. It provides an online platform for continuous engagement and enables fellows to register PhDs with partner institutions, broadening their academic networks. A 10-year evaluation found that CARTA's emphasis on networking and collaboration within and across African universities, and beyond, was crucial to the research success of its fellows.⁹

⁹ The examples given here are from Mentz-Coetzee & Sienaert, 2022; Nicolle 2024; and Klugman 2024.





 $^{^7}$ The suggestions in this sub-section derive from Mentz-Coetzee & Sienaert, 2022; Nicolle, 2024; Klugman, 2020 .

⁸ The observations in this section are borne out by Nicolle 2023; Mentz-Coetzee & Sienaert, 2022; Samson et al, 2023; Nicolle 2024.

F) Strengthening systems

A supportive institutional environment is crucial for early-career researchers (ECRs) to fully benefit from post-PhD programmes. Even a well-designed programme may have limited impact if it is not embedded within an enabling environment. Funders should thus consider supporting both individual and institutional capacity

strengthening, including for example, technical support in monitoring and evaluation, and research administration.



For more guidance on this essential facet, read **Intervention 4** on Strengthening the administrative capacity of education research institutions.

Next steps

If you would like to fund an intervention to support the training and professional development of education researchers, the following steps will help you to start planning the process:

- I. Identify target institutions and geographic scope: Determine whether the intervention will span across multiple countries, or be focused within a single institution. Map key actors such as research institutions, higher education entities, training providers and networks that could serve as potential hubs for training. Contact the collaborative training and capacity building initiatives mentioned in this overview to explore their interest and potential involvement in this intervention.
- 2. Conduct a situational analysis: Build on existing consultations, such as those conducted by ESSA, to avoid redundant data collection and prevent overburdening stakeholders. This analysis should map existing training programmes, identify capacity development gaps for ECRs and assess the specific needs of different institutions. This should include identifying cross-disciplinary capacity-strengthening programmes that are not currently being accessed by education researchers. Leveraging prior findings will help tailor interventions to the research maturity and socio-economic context of each region, ensuring that the approach is contextually relevant and addresses existing challenges effectively.
- 3. Establish or support an existing lead Institution or hub:
 Select an institution, such as a university or research institute, with experience in managing research training programmes, to act as a coordinating hub. The lead institution will set the training agenda, coordinate activities and foster collaboration across institutions. In cases where no suitable institution exists or where a promising institution doesn't yet have adequate capacity, explore alternative coordination mechanisms. This might include partnerships with organisations like ESSA, which is already coordinating similar work in

- collaboration with universities. Consider the long-term sustainability for these efforts from the start. Relying on short-term funding cycles, such as 2-year grants, is insufficient for building meaningful, lasting partnerships. Long-term funding commitments are necessary to ensure consistent support for the institution or hub and allow for deeper institutional engagement over time.
- 4. Design and tailor training programmes: Develop training modules based on the needs identified in the situational analysis. These should cover essential technical skills such as research methodologies, project management, and grant-writing, as well as complementary skills like policy engagement and leadership. The content should be contextually relevant and flexible to accommodate the diverse needs of ECRs across disciplines.

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

- A potential approach would be to model this on existing programmes based in Kenya like CARTA's or the Africa Fellows in Education Program. ESSA has identified potential training providers, and an important first step would be engaging with organisations like APHRC to explore how a CARTA-like programme could be developed specifically for education research.
- One could also approach leading research institutions in Kenya and assess potential for capacity exchange to make most use of what already exists in the system.

- 5. Establish mentorship and networking frameworks: The lead institution or hub should take the lead in designing structured mentorship programmes that accommodate different mentoring needs, including one-on-one, peer-to-peer and group mentoring. This should be done in collaboration with all partners and based on institutional demand. In addition, the lead should set up networking platforms to connect ECRs with mentors,
- peers and policy stakeholders; and use a combination of online tools and in-person events to foster collaborative relationships and build communities of practice.
- 6. Fund, monitor, evaluate, and adapt: Provide funding, implement robust monitoring and evaluation systems to track progress, measure impact, and adapt the initiative as needed.

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

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Annexure 1: SWOT analysis

The table below depicts how this intervention responds to the SWOT analysis undertaken by education research stakeholders as part of the EERA consultation process.

Strengths	Weaknesses
• Growing Research Activity: A growing body of research outputs aligns with emerging priorities, indicating increasing research activity and interest.	Limited Funding and Resources: There is limited access to funding and resources for capacity strengthening, affecting the ability to conduct high-quality research.
Commitment to Capacity Development: Researchers and institutions show strong commitment to developing capacity and improving research quality.	Insufficient Mentoring and Support for ECRs: The lack of structured mentoring, training, and support systems for Early Career Researchers (ECRs) presents challenges in skill development.
Emerging Training Programs: Some training programs and initiatives are beginning to focus on enhancing research skills.	Weak Connectivity to Networks: Gaps exist in connecting ECRs to regional and international networks, which are crucial for skill development and knowledge exchange.
	Reliance on Self-Directed Learning: Due to the lack of structured programs, there is a heavy reliance on self-directed skill development.
Opportunities	Threats
Targeted Training and Mentorship Programs: There is potential to establish targeted training and mentorship programs that provide structured support and professional development for ECRs.	Lack of Institutional Support: Insufficient institutional support and infrastructure hinder talent nurturing, including inadequate mentoring and training programs.
South-South Peer Learning and Networking: Opportunities for South-South peer learning and regional networks can facilitate skill development and experience sharing.	Gender Disparities: Gender disparities and underrepresentation of women in research and leadership roles limit access to training opportunities.
Contextualized Capacity-Building Programs: An increasing awareness of the need for contextually relevant capacity-building programs presents opportunities to enhance skills and address local challenges.	External Funding and Agenda Dominance: A predominance of external funding and agendas may not align with local needs for capacity strengthening.
	Low Sustainability of Programmes: Training programs risk low sustainability and impact without continuous support and institutional integration.









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