RISA
Research and Innovation Systems for Africa

UK International Development
Partnership | Progress | Prosperity

Strengthening Research Quality, Uptake, and Impact

Perspectives from

The Research and Innovation Systems for Africa (RISA) Fund

August 2025

Table of Contents

Introduction

After decades of Challenge Funds and single-Improving research quality, utilisation, and impact is a persistent challenge across Africa. One of the central issues is that research outputs generally fail to be recognised in top-tier international publications and, consequently, fail to be cited by international scholars. This means the research is rarely acknowledged as original or impactful work. As a result, research outputs remain on the periphery of academic publications and struggle to gain recognition as part of the core body of knowledge produced by scholars globally. A collection of seven reports, titled "Assessing the Needs of the Research System in Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda Tanzania and Uganda" (FCDO, 2019–2020), provides a high-level assessment of the research and innovation systems and key research organisations across 7 countries highlights low research capacity as a key factor undermining research quality in the focus countries.

Similarly, UNESCO's International Institute for Capacity Building in Africa (IICBA), through its Priority Africa Flagship initiative, emphasises that enhancing research capacity is essential not only for increasing the quantity of research but also for improving its quality. Nonetheless, **high-quality research alone is insufficient if a research output is not effectively disseminated or utilised. Uptake is critical for ensuring that research findings are applied in practical, impactful ways to address real-world problems relevant to African contexts.**

The 2014 ESSENCE report highlights that the ability to utilise high-quality research in low- and middle-income countries is often hindered by multiple issues, including under-investment in academia further reflected in the **Research and Innovation Systems for Africa** (RISA) Fund[1] on strengthening mechanisms and players across the research-to-impact cycle. Funded projects engaged a broad range of stakeholders spanning both research and innovation ecosystems. These included but were not limited to universities, think tanks, consultancy firms, incubators, financial institutions, not-for-profit organisations, and government agencies. This inclusive approach helped dissolve sectoral silos and enabled the integration of diverse expertise and resources, allowing stakeholders to tackle complex and interrelated issues that challenged research quality, utilisation, and its uptake collectively.

This report presents the programme's learning from reinforcing the infrastructural pillars for research ecosystems (e.g., research capacity, national research policy, and research governance). It also sheds light on three organic models that partners developed to drive research findings to impact. The aim is to highlight how these efforts contributed to creating a more effective ecosystem for research development.

WHAT IS RISA?

Research and Innovation Systems for Africa (RISA) Fund is a UK International Development programme that strengthens research and innovation ecosystems, focusing on six countries: Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, and South Africa.

RISA supports locally driven pathways from research to commercialisation, helps build stronger national research institutions, and facilitates access to finance so innovations can thrive.

28 PROJECTS RECEIVED GRANTS

£23 MILLION MOBILISED BY GRANTEES

POLICY

143

innovation-focused research projects supported in total, advancing evidence-informed policymaking

RESEARCH QUALITY

RISA invests in strengthening research institutions and national standards to build a more reliable and impactful research ecosystem.

41 research products published, increasing accessibility of African-led knowledge

1 https://www.risa-fund.org/

Key Highlights from the RISA Programme

RISA Fund has supported over 218 research products spanning knowledge products, policy papers and research reports at different stages along the Research-to-Publication Pathway

Since its inception in 2021, RISA Fund has collaborated with across six countries, supporting a diverse range of initiatives aimed at **strengthening research and innovation systems**. These initiatives span multiple sectors, reflecting the RISA Fund's commitment to fostering inclusive and sustainable development through research and innovation.

The programme's impact is evident in both quantitative and qualitative dimensions. Over 218 research products have been initiated and supported, marking significant progress along the Research-to-Publication pathway. The support for research development has contributed to a notable increase in translational research[2] through research-to-commercialisation projects, transforming research outputs into products – including those that inform policy and practice - and tools into market-ready products or services. It also supported 89 research projects that provided practical solutions and tools for local development challenges.

Beyond these measurable outputs, RISA has catalysed more profound systemic changes, leading to gradual but meaningful mindset shifts among stakeholders, creating dialogue among academia, industry, and governments, and strengthening confidence and ownership of research outcomes. Rather than focusing solely on isolated challenges, such as funding gaps or capacity constraints, partners began adopting a more constructive view of the research ecosystem. This includes exploring what constitutes an enabling research environment, identifying key actors, clarifying their roles and responsibilities, and understanding how these roles interconnect.

RISA has also observed a growing sense of trust and cohesion among key players, evidenced by a gradual increase in cross-learning initiatives and collaborative efforts in knowledge and resource sharing. These developments signal a strengthening of institutional relationships and a shared commitment to advancing research and innovation across the region. **Collectively, these outcomes demonstrate RISA's role as a catalyst for enabling a more interconnected ecosystem to advance impactful research.**

RISA creates networking opportunities to catalyse collaboration, connect different partners, and spark joint action across sectors.

163 joint initiatives launched

333 collaborative relationships established between research & innovation actors.

370 innovations supported across six countries.

2 Translational research refers to the process of converting academic findings into practical applications that create real-world impact. For the RISA programme, this has meant supporting the transformation of research outputs into commercial products and services, developing tools and technologies that address local development challenges, and informing policy and practice through evidence-based innovations.

Components of a Functional Research Ecosystem

A **well-functioning research ecosystem**[3] is dynamic, adaptable, and defined by strong, interconnected relationships among its various components. It drives knowledge development, fosters innovation, and delivers tangible benefits to society. The ecosystem encompasses all activities of the research cycle, from generating ideas to the ultimate practical application of research findings, ensuring that research is effectively translated into public policy and/or private sector practices.

For a research ecosystem to function effectively, it must operate as a feedback loop where research informs policy and practice. In turn, policy and practice create new challenges that drive further research. Achieving this harmonious cycle requires creating pathways for a seamless flow of resources, talent, and collaboration within the research system. This underpins that a research ecosystem does not operate in isolation from broader societal development. Given the natural continuum between research and innovation, the advancement and impact of research, particularly in applied and translational research, is often shaped by actors, policies, and practices from the innovation ecosystem.

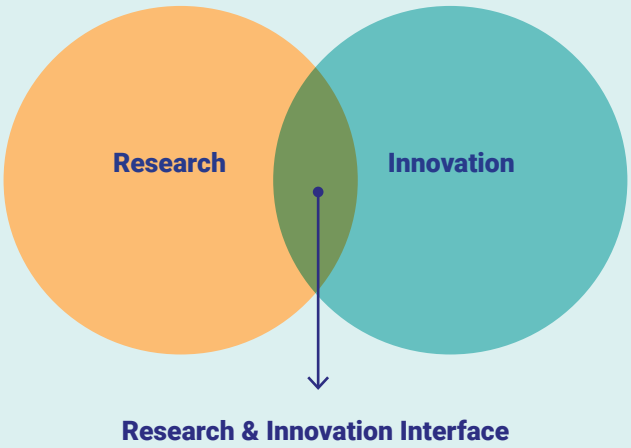
Figure 1: Components of a well-functioning research ecosystem

3 A 'research ecosystem' refers to the interconnected network of individuals and institutions contributing to research production, dissemination, and application.

Research and Innovation Interface

While research and innovation ecosystems can be defined as theoretically separate domains with distinct differences in outputs, incentives, actors, assessment mechanisms, and policy infrastructures, RISA's implementation experience reveals that in the research-to-impact process, many actors and supporting mechanisms for research and innovation ecosystems do not operate in silos. For example, universities are fundamentally core actors in the research ecosystem, yet they are also essential incubators, connectors, suppliers, and consumers of innovation. Likewise, research commercialisation relies on investment actors, innovation networks, private sectors, and even cultural attitudes from broader economic and policy systems to thrive. As demonstrated in the RISA-supported projects, **achieving meaningful research utilisation and impact often requires bridging into the innovation ecosystem.**

Figure 2: Interface of Research & Innovation Ecosystems



In Africa, **The African Union's Science, Technology, and Innovation Strategy for Africa (STISA-2024)** promotes convergence between science, research, and innovation fostering innovation-driven growth by linking research outcomes to value creation and policy interventions. Regionally, **The Rwanda Innovation Endowment Fund (RIEF)**, jointly administered by the Ministry of Education (MINEDUC) and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) under the One UN Fund framework also exemplifies this convergence. The **Fund supports research-driven innovations**, by prioritising young graduates and academic researchers who demonstrate entrepreneurship and innovation capabilities and encourages establishment of business incubators within higher education institutions as part of broader knowledge-transfer efforts. In Kenya, The **Kenya National Innovation Funding Framework**—launched during the 2024 Kenya Innovation Week with RISA's support—**is aligning financing mechanisms with national research priorities**.

The co-designed **Research and Development Policy**, developed collaboratively by the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI), the International Service for the Acquisition of Agri-biotech Applications (ISAAA) AfriCenter, and the State Department for Science, Research and Innovation, sets strategic focus areas in biotechnology, climate resilience, and digital health. The Research Funding Master Plan further streamlines the National Research Fund's (NRF) investments toward priority sectors. Complementary initiatives such as **Kenya National Innovation Agency's (KeNIA) Innovation Bridge Portal** and the Kenya Climate Innovation Center (KCIC) are **connecting researchers to market opportunities** and nurturing commercially viable green innovations respectively. University-based models like the University of Nairobi's Computing for Development Lab (C4DLab) and JKUAT's Industrial Park are embedding business incubation into academic environments, echoing Rwanda's approach.

RISA's approach to Strengthening Research Quality, Uptake and Impact

Key Insight:

Building robust knowledge development and transfer pathways in the research ecosystem, is essential for coherently enhancing research quality, utilisation, and impact.

RISA's Research Footprint

In a robust research ecosystem, research can typically be categorised into three interlinked areas: basic research, applied research, and experimental development/translational research (OECD, Frascati Manual, 2015). These stages are conceptually distinct but interdependent. Basic research refers to scientific investigations that focus on expanding existing knowledge without the need to provide immediate practical solutions. The outputs are often presented as theories and published in scientific journals.

Applied research shares the rigorous scientific procedure of basic research, yet with a well-defined objective of utilising developed knowledge to solve real-world problems, thereby providing new methods, tools, or practical solutions. Translational research combines elements of both basic and applied research, focusing on the application of prior knowledge and the translation of scientific findings to produce new or improved products or processes. Basic research is often measured by the quantity and quality of peer-reviewed publications, as well as its theoretical impact. Applied research is evaluated by its practical utility, and translational research is assessed by its adoption, scalability, or economic value.

The RISA portfolio covered all three categories to varying degrees, yet with an emphasis on applied and translational research. A considerable number of RISA projects focused on bridging research outputs with local development challenges, and in many cases, facilitating initial steps toward innovation and commercialisation. Its support for basic research is limited and primarily reflected in projects that aim to enhance institutional and individual research capacity (e.g., Mawazo Institute) and develop national research policies (e.g., NAS, ISAAA/NACOSTI). This practical orientation explains the inclusion of innovation-related outputs and examples throughout this report.

RISA's Delivery Models and Impact

Through RISA Fund-supported projects, we have identified three models that partners commonly adopted to establish pathways for improving research quality, uptake, and impact. The models were developed organically by partners to address specific systematic barriers, including underdeveloped research capacity, weak institutional connections between academia and policy or practice, stakeholder silos, and challenges in translating research into practice. The implementation of the models reveals the shared infrastructures and functional linkages between research and innovation ecosystems in advancing research development and impact. The following section outlines the strategic rationale behind each model, provides examples of where and how they have been applied, and discusses their advantages, limitations, and broader implications. By capturing the learning from these models, we aim to share adaptable approaches that can be scaled or replicated to strengthen research impact pathways across diverse contexts.

Model 1: Academia and Research Institute-based Capacity Strengthening and Knowledge Transfer

The model centres on leveraging academia and research institutions to build capacity and facilitate knowledge transfer. The core strategy involves providing research facilities, thematic training, mentorship, and networking opportunities, which may be through the establishment of incubation centres, innovation hubs, or specialised programmes. Implementation examples include:

Ethiopia	**Jimma University**	Jimma University **established an Incubation Centre** providing researchers with facilities, funding, training, mentorship, and networking – particularly targeting agriculture, health, technology and engineering sectors. **The Empower Her program** for instance, encouraged female researchers to engage in research, with some securing grants from re-known institutions following the capacity support.
	University of Gondar	Over 100 female researchers from various background received **training and mentorship in research innovation** enhancing their capacity to effectively participate in research. The program also facilitating scaling of agricultural technologies to over 200 farmers in rural Gondar region demonstrating the potential of facilitated uptake of research outputs in addressing community local needs and transforming livelihoods.
Ghana	**Accra Technical University (ATU)**	ATU launched an **incubation centre program** that trained over 175 young researchers in design thinking to address local health challenges. Subsequently, over 20 prototypes were developed and supported, Additionally, 30 faculty members were trained to integrate design thinking into the university curricula facilitating an environment for sustained research capacity access.
Kenya	**Mawazo Institute**	This long-term initiative offers training, mentorship, networking and financial support to address a specific capacity need in Africa's research ecosystem. It focuses on empowering women researchers and developing training programmes across various disciplines.
	Technical University of Kenya (TUK)	TUK established an **incubation hub** that **connected researchers, SMEs and stakeholders**. Researchers collaborated with entrepreneurs to co-develop solutions using a design thinking approach, enabling them to align their research with market needs, which ultimately enhanced uptake. Over 320 SMEs were trained in innovation and digitalisation, which saw an over 40% adoption of new technologies.
Rwanda	**University of Rwanda**	Delivered **Trainer of Trainers programme** to build entrepreneurial and **technology transfer skills** while enhancing institutional **commercialisation strategies** and stakeholder coordination. Over 100 incubates were trained resulting in 6 innovations developed into commercially viable ventures.
South Africa	**University of the Witwatersrand**	Developed a **data analytics platform** focused on maternal health. The platform serves as a **hub for knowledge sharing,** offering evidence-based insights and tools for researchers, policymakers, healthcare professionals and innovators

Strengths of the model

- **Enhancing researcher capabilities:** The model significantly enhances the capabilities of researchers who are central to knowledge creation and dissemination.
- **Support for knowledge exchange:** It facilitates a continuous cycle of research-to-research knowledge exchange, where outputs are utilised to generate further knowledge through publications, training, or market research.
- **Encourages partnership and collaboration:** The model encouraged partnership by helping universities to overcome isolation and build productive collaborations with industry and other academic institutions. facilitating the co-creation of knowledge development and transfer within research ecosystems.

Weaknesses of the model

Despite its strengths, this model often follows a traditional, linear pathway where researchers are expected to drive the entire process, from knowledge production to impact, which can limit the reach and uptake of research outputs.

Figure 3: Conventional pathway of research development and knowledge transfer

While institutions like UGBS, ATU, and UNILAG supported dissemination by helping researchers repackage outputs and connect with stakeholders, securing buy-in from investors and businesses remained a challenge. Universities and research institutions can support dissemination efforts by assisting researchers in restructuring their outputs into more accessible formats and providing networking opportunities for them to connect with demand-side stakeholders during the dissemination process.

To mitigate this weakness, several partners developed their interventions during implementation to engage strategic stakeholders from the earliest stages of research development and align research activities with the priorities of end-users. A strong example of this intervention is the Farm 2 Fork project (F2FinRW), where INES collaborated with SpiderBit and the Rwanda Meteorology Agency by co-designing and co-delivering a Farm Advisory System (FAS). Since its rollout, FAS has supported over 6,000 farmers in accessing soil and weather sensors, along with capacity-building initiatives that empower them to make data-driven decisions.

Similarly, the BRIInG project (Bridging the Research Innovation-Industry Assimilation Gap through Technology Capacity Building in Rural Ghana (BRIING), led by the University of Ghana Business School (UGBS), demonstrated the value of collaborative innovation. By working with researchers from the Dairy Research, Innovation, and Improvement Consortium (DRIIC), rural innovation experts, and community leaders, UGBS co-created training programmes tailored to the needs of rural entrepreneurs in food processing. These partnerships are vital for ensuring that technical support and research outputs are both relevant and accessible.

In Kenya, the University of Nairobi's partnership with KIPI, NACOSTI, KeNIA, University of Johannesburg and the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) has been instrumental in translating research, such as algorithms and big data analysis, into practical training for policymakers. These collaborations ensure that research findings are not only disseminated but also applied in meaningful ways.

The UGBS Innovation and Incubation Hub project initiated a unique approach by adopting a circular model that accelerates research diffusion while integrating capacity building through hands-on practice. A key success factor in this model is the direct and active involvement of researchers in training and delivering solutions to end users. When researchers engage directly with end users, they ensure high-quality implementation, and they clearly explain the science behind their innovations. The interaction also provides researchers with valuable first-hand feedback on how their research work is being utilised, which in turn informs future research and fosters a continuous cycle of learning, refinement and impact.

Implications of the model:

1. **Integrated capacity building** - A blended approach combining training, mentoring, and networking proves to be effective in equipping researchers with both scientific expertise and essential social competencies. This fosters a well-rounded professional capable of complex research-to-impact pathways.

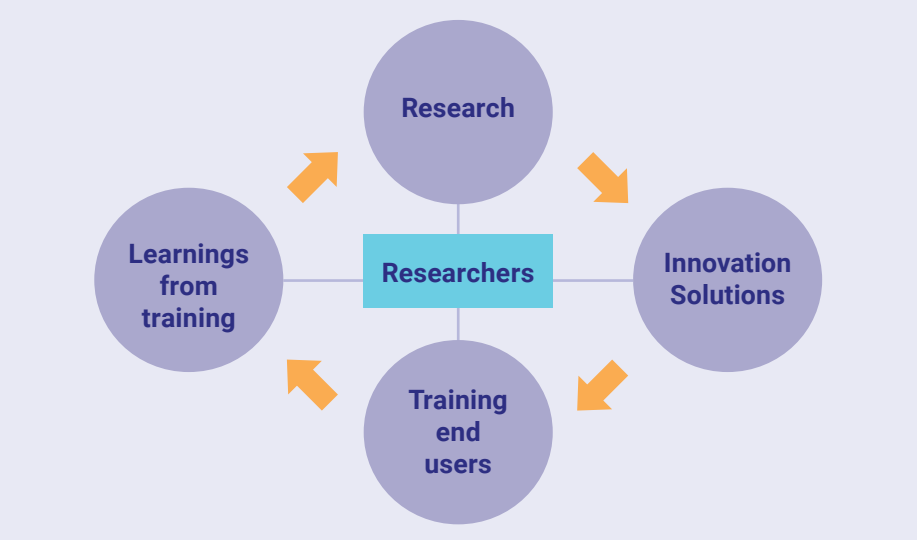
2. **Academia-industry collaboration** - Collaborative capacity-building initiatives between academia and industry can significantly enhance the relevance and applicability of research. A strong example is the partnership between the Design Thinking Ghana Hub (DTGH) and Accra Technical University (AU). DTGH contributed content, trainers, and mentors to ATU's incubation programme, while connecting the university with innovation and health experts, broadening ATU's network and deepening its impact.

3. **Leveraging specialist intermediaries** - University-based hubs and research centres stand to benefit from stronger ties with specialist intermediaries as in the example of INES collaboration with SpiderBit and Rwanda Meteorology Agency above. These partnerships can act as a catalyst for translating research into practical solutions, accelerating the uptake and utilisation of academic outputs.

4. **Researcher engagement across the knowledge cycle** - Involving researchers throughout the entire cycle, from knowledge generation to application, creates a circular pathway that sustains the improvement of research quality, relevance, and impact. This continuous feedback loop enables both academic rigour and societal value.

5. **Participatory Capacity Building** - Supporting participatory models, such as apprenticeships and co-designed training, encourages the exchange of knowledge, resources, and experience between researchers and industry. These models foster mutual learning and ensure that capacity-building efforts are grounded in real-world needs.

Figure 4: UGBS model to facilitate a circular pathway for improving and sustaining research quality, utilisation, and impact.



Model 2: Private Sector-Led Collaborations for Knowledge Transfer and Research Uptake

Within the RISA Fund, private sector engagement has proved instrumental in; **attracting funding for research; translating research findings into commercially viable products and services; facilitating knowledge exchange to enhance research quality; and in providing guidance on ethical standards, regulatory compliance, and product development.** Key strategies employed include creation of collaborative platforms, capacity-building initiatives, multi-stakeholder engagement, and resource mobilisation.

Private Sector Delivering Capacity Building and Resource Mobilisation

- **Aybar Engineering (Ethiopia)** facilitated knowledge exchange by linking/ connecting public researchers with private innovators and end-users. Their initiative trained unemployed rural youth to demonstrate and market innovations to smallholder farmers, significantly boosting the uptake of innovations agricultural technologies in rural communities.
- **Adam Smith International (ASI - Nigeria)** mapped research and innovation centres, offering stakeholder access to cutting-edge technologies and skilled expertise. This matchmaking approach led to new collaborations between research institutions and industry, accelerating technology adoption and commercialisation.
- I**mpact Investing Ghana (IIGh)** established the Ghana Research Industry Collaborative (GRIC), a network of over 62 participants from 25 institutions. GRIC has become a vital platform for connecting academia, industry, government and development partners. Through learning workshops, industry briefs, annual fora, and digital platforms, GRIC has enhanced visibility for researchers and facilitated the translation of research into actionable insights for industry.

Private Sector Championing Translation of Research into Impactful Solutions

- **Impact Investing Ghana (IIGh)**, through the Ghana Research and Industry Collaborative (GRIC), helped researchers convert academic papers into policy and business- briefs enhancing the accessibility and usability of academic research.
- **iSpace (Ghana)** supported 170 early-stage innovators and researchers in developing research-based innovations. Five project teams received intensive mentoring and financial support, enabling them to build prototypes and develop viable business cases for their innovations.
- **Heritors Labs (Ghana)** partnered with the Ghana Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) to develop strategies that enable translation of research to market. This included Intellectual Property (IP) process capacity strengthening, grant writing and research blueprints. This saw successful IP registrations, innovations pitching and securing of grants.
- **Viktoria Ventures (Kenya)** delivered tailored 'Research to Commercialization' technical training leading to increased productivity in higher education and research institutions. At least 11 universities and research institutions have since adopted and institutionalized their own research to Commercialization programs.
- **Intini (South Africa)** co-developed a cooperation framework with researchers and innovators in South Africa and Kenya to support technology access for smallholder farmers. This initiative included training over 220 farmers in sustainable farming practices, enhancing food and nutrition security through improved technology adoption.

Strengths of the model

- **Enhanced knowledge transfer and uptake:** This model addresses the limitation of traditional one-way research dissemination. Private sector actors leverage their market insights and extensive networks to identify the practical value of research outputs and strategically connect them with relevant end users. This significantly increases the likelihood of successful uptake and real-world impact. Moreover, private organisations complement universities by filling gaps in commercial expertise, industry connections and capacity for knowledge transfer.

- **Customised solutions and resources mobilisation:** Beyond matchmaking, private organisations bring specialised knowledge and the ability to mobilise resources to tailor solutions for research uptake. These efforts help translate research findings into practical, scalable innovations that address real-world challenges.

- **Practice-oriented knowledge generation:** maintain competitiveness and address sectoral gaps, private organisations often conduct their own research to develop innovative tools, practices, and technologies. For example, four RISA awardees - Growth Africa, Impact Investing Ghana (IIGh), Heritos Lab, Katapult Africa, and EPI - produced and disseminated a range of knowledge products, including practical research reports, learning briefs, blog posts, case studies and policy papers. These outputs inform their own strategies, contribute to the broader research and innovation (R&I) ecosystem, and support engagement with policymakers and other stakeholders.

Weaknesses of the model

- **Limitation of contribution to research quality:** While private companies excel at accelerating the application of research quality, they may not consistently apply rigorous quality assurance mechanisms, such as those used by academic institutions, which rely on peer review and expert validation. As a result, some research outputs may be selected based on market potential rather than scientific robustness. Initiatives like the Ghana Quality Infrastructure Alliance (GQIA) could help bridge this gap by promoting quality frameworks and tools.

- **Risk of an imbalanced research ecosystem:** Private sector priorities often favour applied or translational research with immediate commercial applications. Over time, this imbalance may skew the research development towards high-demand sectors such as health, AI or engineering, while neglecting niche or non-commercial societal needs. This market-oriented interest can also lead to underinvestment in basic research that lacks short-term market appeal. Nonetheless, the outputs of basic research, such as new theories, new data, or the discovery of previously unknown components of a subject, form the knowledge foundation on which applied or translational research needs to take off.

Implications of the model

1. **Enhancing Research Quality through Peer Review and Benchmarking:** Encouraging individual researchers and research institutions to engage in third-party peer review and benchmarking can help private sector intermediaries address concerns about research quality. For example, Adam Smith International (ASI) demonstrated how structured quality assurance processes can enhance the credibility and utility of research outputs.

2. **Unlocking Two-Way Knowledge Transfer:** While this model has primarily facilitated the flow of knowledge from academia to industry in RISA projects, it also holds untapped potential for reverse knowledge transfer (industry-academia). Future development initiatives could promote the dissemination of industry-generated insights back into academia. This would help break down silos between the two sectors and foster research that is more responsive to real-world industry challenges.

3. **Incentivising in co-production of Research:** Promoting joint initiatives, such as grant schemes for academia-industry collaborations, can foster two-way knowledge exchange. This partnership combines the methodological rigour and peer validation of academia with practical insights and data access of the private sector. A strong example is Growth Africa's collaboration with Systemic Innovation, policymakers, and private sector stakeholders to develop a data observatory that tracks factors influencing firm growth. Involving academic institutions in the development or application of such tools could significantly advance research in fields such as finance, entrepreneurship, and innovation studies.

Strengthening Academia-Public Sector Partnerships:

Continued support for collaboration between universities and public institutions is essential for enhancing research quality and societal impact. Public bodies can provide strategic direction, align research with national or regional development goals, and offer access to valuable datasets. Notable examples included partnerships that involved the University of the Witwatersrand, VSL-KeNIA, Strathmore University's Open PHENCES Hub). Similarly, projects by the University of Rwanda, Growth Africa, and the University of Nairobi demonstrated the value of public sector engagement. Future initiatives could also consider promoting policy-embedded research, which is intentionally designed to inform or integrate into policymaking processes. This approach, as seen in the RISA-KIPPRA collaboration, enhanced the likelihood of research uptake and real-world impact.

Model 3: Strengthening Research Policy to Advance Knowledge Development and Utilisatione

A robust policy infrastructure is essential for fostering research, development, and utilisation within a national research ecosystem. One of the key challenges RISA faces in improving research quality and impact in its focus countries is the absence of comprehensive national research policies and guiding frameworks. These are critical for clearly defining the roles and responsibilities of key stakeholders, and for setting standards in research conduct, assessment, funding, and governance. To address this, RISA adopted a dual approach, supporting both bottom-up initiatives and top-down strategies to strengthen public policies and frameworks. Notable examples include.

- **Ghana, Heritors Labs:** Heritors Lab successfully collaborated with Ghana's Ministry of Environment, Science, Technology, and Innovation (MESTI), securing its support for the development of the National Research Fund (NRF) operational framework and the Ghana Innovation Agency (GIA) Bill. MESTI demonstrated leadership by assisting in the recruitment of a consultant for the development of the NRF framework and establishing a steering committee, thereby laying the groundwork for a robust support system across various sectors, including markets, energy, transport, communication, and infrastructure. Additionally, Heritors Labs facilitated stakeholder engagement with institutions like the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) and the Ghana Standards Authority (GSA). These efforts led to the drafting and finalisation of a charter on standardisation, certification, and conformity assessment - aimed at helping researchers and innovators ensure the quality of market-ready products and services. As part of this initiative, stakeholders proposed the formation of the Ghana Quality Infrastructure Alliance (GQIA), a network designed to address the lack of standards for novel products and to strengthen the overall national quality framework.

- **Viktoria Solutions- Kenya:** To optimise institutional policy frameworks for research and innovations, Viktoria Solutions partnered with nine Universities in Kenya to review and align their policies with national priorities. These included Start-up Policy (University of Embu), Research and Development Policy (JOOUST), IP Policy (University of Kabianga), Research Policy (KCA and Rongo Universities) and Innovation Commercialisation Policy (South-Eastern Kenya University). This initiative aimed to create a more conducive environment for innovation, support for start-ups, and promotion of entrepreneurship within higher education institutions. Furthermore, several universities advocated for the finalisation of the national-level policies, such as the Startup Bill, to serve as a reference for institutional frameworks.

- **National collaboration - Kenya:** In Kenya, RISA facilitated dialogue and collaboration between not-for-profit organisations, including ISAAA, and national agencies, such as NACOTSI, the National Research Fund (NRF), and the Ministry of Education – State Department for Higher Education and Research. This collaboration significantly contributed to the development of a national Research and Development Policy designed to guide research funding and align it with the national development goals and international development commitments. The R&D policy would be integrated with the existing Science, Technology, and Innovation (STI) policy to form a comprehensive framework for advancing research and innovation in Kenya.

Implications of the Model:

1. **Influencing National Policy Requires Long-Term Commitment:** Influencing policies at the national level is inherently a time-intensive process, even when supported by government-led initiatives. For example, the delay in reviewing the ISAAA/NACOSTI's policy draft illustrates how bureaucratic processes can slow progress. This challenge is often compounded by the absence of a centralised policy framework to guide and coordinate the efforts of various research institutions and policy bodies. As a result, development projects aiming to shape or influence national research policies must adopt a long-term perspective and commit to sustained engagement to achieve meaningful outcomes.

2. **From Policy Priorities to Operational Framework:** The RISA Fund explored the foundational elements of national research policy in Kenya, Nigeria, and Rwanda. The next critical step is to develop frameworks that integrate and operationalise the identified priorities. This involves crafting detailed guidelines, standards, and protocols to ensure the effective implementation of policies. A pressing need is the establishment of a Research Quality Assurance and Assessment framework, similar to the UK's Research Excellence Framework (REF). Such a framework would serve as a benchmark for evaluating research quality and promoting best practices in methodology, data management, and reporting. Key features should include: 1. A comprehensive assessment across disciplines to incorporate a unified set of information requirements, standard definitions and procedures applicable to all research fields, 2. Expert panel review comprising evaluations conducted by disciplinary experts using a broad, generic criteria, and 3. Supporting sub-frameworks and guidelines which should outline: criteria for assessing research outputs, data requirements and definitions for submissions, related policies and practical guidance for preparing submissions, and panel criteria and working methods.

Implication of Institutional System-Level Change

Strengthening Research Management in African Universities

RISA Fund has observed a strong demand from both public and private universities to establish centres, hubs, or platforms **aimed at nurturing research ideas, enhancing research-industry linkages and supporting knowledge transfer.**

While African universities, such as the University of Cape Town (South Africa), the University of Nairobi (Kenya), and the University of Ghana (Ghana), have relatively well-developed research support systems, many less-resourced institutions may lack the infrastructure, staffing or expertise to manage research development and knowledge transfer effectively.

In many well-functioning research ecosystems, researchers benefit from structured support provided by a central **Research and Knowledge Exchange Office** or equivalent entity.

Their key core functions include:

- ✓ **Capacity Strengthening:** The office is also responsible for organising workshops, training sessions, and one-on-one consultations for researchers, with the aim of supporting their career development.
- ✓ **Industry Collaboration and Knowledge Exchange**: This service involves facilitating partnerships between academia and industry, as well as managing intellectual property, technology transfer, and commercialisation efforts.
- ✓ **Financing Facilitation:** This includes disseminating information on financing opportunities available facilitating collaboration with funders to co-develop competitive grant proposals, assisting with grant applications, ensuring compliance with funder guidelines and institutional policies, and managing internal funding schemes and seed funds.
- ✓ **Proposal Development:** This process entails providing guidance on crafting competitive research proposals, offering feedback on research design, impact pathways, and budgeting, and facilitating interdisciplinary or collaborative research proposals.
- ✓ **Post-Award Management:** This provides essential financial and administrative management of awarded grants, ensuring compliance with funder reporting, auditing, and deliverable requirements.
- ✓ **Compliance:** This involves ensuring adherence to research ethics, data protection regulations, and other compliance requirements, and provision of training and resources on topics such as research practices
- ✓ **Research Impact:** The office assists researchers in articulating and evidencing the impact of their work and supporting public engagement and pathways to societal and economic impact.

In Conclusion

RISA Fund has played a critical role in strengthening the research-to-impact agenda across its focus countries by advancing a collaborative and systems-thinking approach. Through academia-led capacity building, private sector-driven innovation pathways, and strategic policy engagements, RISA has enabled stakeholders to co-create models for quality knowledge generation, uptake, and application. These efforts have not only enhanced researcher capabilities and institutional infrastructure but also demonstrated scalable practices for bridging the gap between research outputs and real-world impact.

Moving forward, sustained investment in research management systems, cross-sector partnerships, and national policy frameworks will be critical to deepening and institutionalising these gains across the continent. **At the same time, much of RISA's learning on research development and impact has emerged from its focus on applied and translational research. This has left a relatively limited exploration of the research-to-impact pathways for basic research. Yet, basic research occupies a distinct space within the broader research and innovation ecosystem. It is the foundation of the downstream research and innovation. Given its nature as research not intended for immediate application, basic research requires a distinct microclimate within the ecosystem, one defined by its own timelines, incentives, evaluation metrics, funding structures, and supportive policy frameworks.**

Without a deeper exploration of this segment, our understanding of how to strengthen research quality, uptake, and impact remains incomplete. Future initiatives that integrate basic research more explicitly could help generate a more balanced and comprehensive body of learning.

About RISA Fund

The RISA Fund (2020-2025) is a multi-country initiative funded by the UK government, designed to strengthen research and innovation systems across Africa. It brings together two complementary programmes under the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's (FCDO) Research and Evidence Division—Strengthening Research Institutions in Africa (SRIA) and African Technology and Innovation Partnerships (ATIP)—to harness synergies and drive systemic change. Managed by a consortium comprising Chemonics UK, Results for Development, and SOAS University of London, RISA collaborates with a wide range of implementing partners including universities, innovation hubs, government agencies, private sector actors, and international development firms. The programme operates in six countries: Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria, Rwanda, Ethiopia, and South Africa, supporting locally driven solutions and fostering cross-sectoral learning and impact.

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RISA Research and Innovation Systems for Africa

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