RISA
Research and Innovation Systems for Africa

UK International Development
Partnership | Progress | Prosperity

Delivering Value for Money in Innovation: The THENSA Venture Builder Model

Case study Overview

November 2025

Project Name:

THENSA Venture Builder Accelerator Pilot

Implementing Partner(s):

Technological Higher Education Network South Africa (THENSA), Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT)

Location: South Africa

Timeframe: January – December 2023

Project Objectives:

To design a venture builder (VB) model for accelerating technology innovation and commercialisation through the creation of a deep tech microecosystem made up of South Africa's marginalised Universities of Technology (UoTs).

Budget:

$355,002

Table of Contents

This material has been funded by UK International Development from the UK Government; however, the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK Government's official policies.

Project Background

Despite notable progress made in addressing historical inequalities in public universities in South Africa, there are still patterns of systemic exclusions, marginalisation and discrimination. Universities of Technology (UoTs) still lag behind in developing and implementing robust technology innovation platforms. This has hindered commercialisation of research outcomes, resulting in smaller technology innovation portfolios and insufficient budget allocations for Research and Development (R&D) compared to their more developed counterparts. These constraints make it difficult for UoTs to attract funding and investment further entrenching disparities in innovation capacity.

To address this, a venture builder (VB) established as a potential solution for accelerating technology innovation and commercialisation, and a vehicle to enable UoTs to engage more effectively with the National System of Innovation (NSI). The use of Venture Builder (VB) platforms to commercialise research from publicly funded institutions, and more importantly the formation of VBs by multiple institutions, had not previously been explored in the South African context. A VB offers a structured mechanism for UoTs to engage more effectively with the National System of Innovation (NSI), enabling them to translate research into market-ready solutions. Leveraging on such platforms can significantly enhance the country's competitiveness in the global Deep Tech market – which is an urgent priority for South Africa's innovation ecosystem.

RISA has supported the Technological Higher Education Network South Africa (THENSA) - a consortium of technology focused universities in South Africa - to partner with Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) to design a Venture Builder. This initiative supported establishment of formal partnerships between UoTs and other NSI stakeholders, using the VB as the platform for collaboration, to co-develop implementation structures and a quality assurance framework. The platform adopted participatory learning-centred approaches to support collaborative decision-making. To date, A stakeholder map was developed, five partner engagement workshops have been held, and standard operating procedures – including a Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) action plan – have been developed. In addition, marketing materials such as articles and promotional video has been produced to support visibility and engagement.

Overall Contribution to RISA's Value for Money

The THENSA Venture Builder project exemplifies the RISA Fund's commitment to delivering Value for Money (VfM) across all four VfM pillars. It strategically strengthens research institutions, particularly under-resourced UoTs, by positioning them at the centre of an inclusive, collaborative innovation platform. The project has catalysed systemic change within South Africa's Research and Innovation (R&I) ecosystem—most notably by securing formal partnerships with 21 stakeholders, influencing government funding priorities, and aligning with national policy goals under the National Development Plan 2030.

By applying a participatory and learning-centred approach, THENSA demonstrated how RISA Fund's support can drive scalable, locally-led innovation. This has not only enhanced institutional capacity but also helped to establish long-term mechanisms—such as the VBA platform—that are positioned to deliver sustained impact.

The project's timely delivery of outputs, strategic use of existing networks and infrastructure, and operational adaptability exemplify RISA Fund's emphasis on efficiency. Furthermore, it is expected that it will be able to secure further investment from the Technology Innovation Agency (TIA) which will expand its reach to more disadvantaged institutions, reinforcing its sustainability and long-term relevance.

Critically, the integration of GESI into the project's design and implementation ensured that marginalised institutions — particularly those in rural or historically disadvantaged areas—gained access to research, innovation, and commercialisation pathways. This directly supports RISA Fund's vision of inclusive, transformative development across Africa.

The THENSA VBA pilot demonstrates strong VfM through cost-efficient design, timely and resourceful implementation, demonstrable progress toward intended outcomes, and a deep commitment to inclusion. It offers a replicable model for other African countries seeking to democratise access to technology commercialisation.

THENSA Value for Money Highlights:

ECONOMY

- **Workshop Format Distribution:** 4 virtual and 4 in-person workshops.
- **Cost Savings:** $5,488 saved by keeping accommodation below FCDO rates.

EFFICIENCY

- **Key Outputs Delivered:** Stakeholder mapping, 5 workshops, GESI Action Plan, SOPs.
- **Timely Delivery:** Achieved through early planning and leveraging existing networks.

EFFECTIVENESS

- **Stakeholder Engagement:** 21 formal partnerships secured.
- **Expansion:** 5 additional universities included through TIA support.

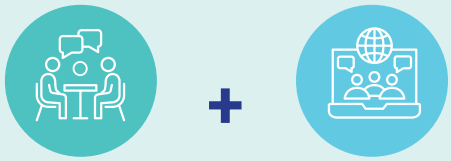
EQUITY

- **Inclusive Participation:** 8 rural universities involved, 2 staff each.
- **GESI Integration:** Mapping, action plan, inclusive language, and regional workshops.

Economy – Were Inputs Procured at the Right Cost?

The design of Digital Technology Venture Builder (DVB) was a collaborative process involving multiple organisations, delivered through 8 workshops - half conducted virtually and half in-person. While in-person engagements fostered deeper participation, virtual formats were strategically chosen to optimise the costs.

THENSA ensured that all accommodation for in-person workshops remained well below FCDO ceilings resulting in cost savings ranging from 5% to as much as 91%. Prudent procurement led to total savings of $5,488 on the project, demonstrating a strong commitment to cost-efficiency without compromising quality or stakeholder engagement.



Integrating in-person with virtual meetings =

$5,488

in total savings

Efficiency – Are Resources Being Used Optimally to Produce Outputs?

The project delivered its key milestones within the reporting period, including stakeholder mapping, five engagement workshops, and the development of a GESI Action Plan and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). These outputs were largely completed on time and within budget, attributed to strong coordination between THENSA and CPUT, early planning, and the use of structured, participatory processes.

Efficiency was further enhanced by leveraging THENSA's existing network of universities and stakeholders, and in-house technical expertise, which reduced reliance on external consultants. Minor delays, primarily due to scheduling conflicts among diverse group of stakeholders, were mitigated through flexible planning and adjustment of timelines.

Efficiency was enhanced by leveraging THENSA's existing network of universities and stakeholder, and in-house technical expertise, which reduced reliance on external consultants. Pre-existing relationships with TIA and other government departments enabled quicker consensus building and mobilisation.

The use of existing resources played a crucial role in optimising delivery. THENSA's established consortium of UoTs provided a ready-made platform for engagement, while CPUT's administrative infrastructure supported streamlined logistics for workshops and documentation. Additionally, pre-existing relationships with TIA and other government departments enabled quicker consensus-building and mobilisation.

Effectiveness – Are the Intended Outcomes being Achieved?

The project has delivered strong results toward its overarching objective of building a sustainable and inclusive platform to accelerate technology innovation and commercialisation within South Africa's UoTs. **Through the development of the VB, THENSA catalysed significant systemic change by connecting previously marginalised universities to the National System of Innovation (NSI).**

A key outcome was the formal commitment of 21 stakeholders—including eight UoTs, key national government institutions, local authorities, legal firms, venture capitalists, and knowledge partners—who signed agreements and actively contributed to the design process. This broad-based engagement reflects the project's success in fostering collaboration across the innovation ecosystem.

The project's influence extended beyond immediate scope. Its participatory design approach inspired the TAI - a major public sector institution - to fund the inclusion of five additional historically disadvantaged universities in the VBA network. TIA hosted a dedicated event in Pretoria, where five universities - Sefako Makgatho Health Science

University (SMU), University of the Western Cape (UWC), Rhodes University, University of Limpopo, and University of Fort Hare (UFH) - were engaged on the initiative. This not only expanded the network's reach to 12 universities – representing half of all South African universities – but also significantly elevated the voice and role of UoTs in national innovation discourse. This engagement also led to ongoing discussions around operational funding for the VB, underscoring its potential for long-term sustainability. The expansion of the VBA to five additional universities highlights the catalytic role RISA's support in scaling impact.

EFFECTIVENESS SUMMARY

The project advanced its goal of fostering technology innovation and commercialisation within South Africa's Universities of Technology (UoTs).

SYSTEMIC CHANGE

Development of Venture Builder connected marginalised universities to the National System of Innovation (NSI).

BROAD STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

21 stakeholders formally committed and actively contributed to the design process.

NETWORK EXPANSION

Network expanded to 12 universities (half of all South African universities).

POLICY INFLUENCE

Collaborative model recognised as aligned with the "New Pathway 2030" strategy.

EQUITY AND INCLUSION

Collaborative model recognised as aligned with the "New Pathway 2030" strategy.

Moreover, the project contributed to shaping national R&I priorities. **The collaborative model was recognised by the Department of Science and Innovation as aligned with the "New Pathway 2030" strategy for strengthening South Africa's R&I system, indicating early signs of policy influence and increased alignment with national development goals.**

Sustainability is embedded in the project's structure. The establishment of a functional and diverse stakeholder network, ongoing engagement with public and private sector actors, and a strong commitment to co-creation positions the VBA platform for long-term impact. **Eight Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) signed participation agreements, demonstrating support for the Venture Builder model and a total of 18 HEIs and NSI institutions were actively involved in the project.** These outcomes reflect not only effective delivery but also a transformative contribution to how innovation is fostered and scaled across South Africa.

Equity – Are Benefits Distributed Fairly, especially among Marginalised Groups?

The project's participatory approach was intentionally to promote inclusion, taking into consideration gender, racial, ethnic, socio-economic, and geographic disparities. All eight of the initial starting universities are located in rural or historically disadvantaged communities, with two staff members from each of institution actively involved in the project. During the stakeholder mapping exercise, geographic and GESI variables within South Africa's venture builder landscape were jointly mapped and analysed, informing the development of GESI Action Plan. **The Action Plan was developed as part of the final VBA design pack, addressing key dimensions in access to resources, infrastructure development, networking and collaboration, local context, and cultural sensitivity.**

The inclusive model not only benefited traditionally marginalised universities but also extended impact to the surrounding communities, increasing access to deep tech commercialisation processes in underserved regions. **To ensure inclusion and increase ownership among partners in the different regions of the country, workshops were decentralised workshops and held not only in Johannesburg but also in Durban and KwaZulu-Natal.** The project team also adapted language and communication strategies to accommodate varying levels of technical knowledge and areas of interest among stakeholders, to effectively co-develop definitions of terms and concepts to foster mutual understanding.

By engaging universities in rural and disadvantaged areas, the project created pathways for individuals outside urban areas to access training, knowledge, and commercialisation opportunities. These skills and exposures have the potential to empower local communities and foster entrepreneurship, contributing to more equitable development outcomes.

By engaging universities in rural and disadvantaged areas, the project created pathways for individuals outside urban areas to access training, knowledge, and commercialisation opportunities. These skills and exposures have the potential to empower local communities and foster entrepreneurship, contributing to more equitable development outcomes.

Key Lessons Learned

1 **Participatory design enhances ownership and sustainability** - Engaging stakeholders from the outset fosters shared commitment, mutual understanding, and long-term buy-in for innovation initiatives. The participatory design approach used in the VBA project ensured that the platform was relevant, inclusive, and positioned for sustained impact.

Participatory Design Enhances Ownership and Sustainability

Leveraging existing networks & knowledge systems promotes efficiency

2 **Leveraging existing networks and knowledge systems promotes efficiency** - THENSA's consortium model demonstrated the value of building on established relationships and infrastructure. This approach accelerated project delivery, eliminated duplication and optimised resource use.

3 **Collaborative, bottom-up approaches shift institutional cultures.** The project helped dismantle entrenched institutional silos, encouraged shared learning, and empowered historically marginalised institutions to engage more actively in the national innovation system.

Collaborative, bottom-up approaches shift institutional cultures.

Inclusive engagement drives systemic change.

4 **Inclusive engagement drives systemic change.** Integrating GESI principles and regional inclusivity influenced national funding decisions and aligned the project with broader policy frameworks such as South Africa's "New Pathway 2030." This demonstrates how inclusive design can lead to wider uptake of innovation policy and practice.

5 **Flexibility and adaptability are key to efficiency** - Adjusting workshop locations and tailoring communication approaches improved participation, reduced logistical burdens, and ensured relevance across diverse stakeholder group.

Flexibility and adaptability are key to efficiency

Conclusion

The THENSA VBA project exemplifies RISA's strategic commitment to delivering Value for Money across all four VfM pillars—Economy, Efficiency, Effectiveness, and Equity.

Economy:

Resources were procured at competitive rates, with cost-saving measures such as virtual engagements and below-FCDO accommodation rates resulting in significant financial savings.

Efficiency:

The project delivered key outputs on time and within budget, leveraging existing networks, infrastructure, and in-house expertise to optimise resource use and minimise reliance on external consultants.

Effectiveness:

The project catalysed systemic change by establishing formal partnerships with 21 stakeholders, influencing national innovation priorities, and securing additional funding from the TIA to expand the initiative.

Equity:

The inclusive design ensured meaningful participation from historically disadvantaged universities and communities, integrating GESI principles and decentralised engagement to democratise access to innovation and commercialisation pathways.

The project not only achieved its intended outcomes but also laid the foundation for sustained impact and scalability, offering a replicable model for other African countries seeking to strengthen inclusive innovation ecosystems. It stands as a compelling example of how targeted investments in under-resourced institutions can unlock transformative potential and contribute to equitable development.

About the RISA Fund

The RISA Fund (2021-2025) is a multi-country initiative funded by UK International Development from 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.

Contact: info@risa-fund.org

www.risa-fund.org/

RISA Research and Innovation Systems for Africa

UK International Development
Partnership | Progress | Prosperity