



## Leading for Impact: Strengthening University Research Management Systems for Academic Excellence, Innovation, and Societal Development

Enetimi Idah Seiyaboh<sup>1\*</sup>, and Morufu Olalekan Raimi<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Biology/Environmental Management and Toxicology, Federal University Otuoke, Nigeria

<sup>2</sup>Department of Environmental Management and Toxicology, Federal University Otuoke, Nigeria

\*Corresponding Author:

Email: [seiyabohei@fuotuo.ke.edu.ng](mailto:seiyabohei@fuotuo.ke.edu.ng)

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### Abstract

Universities are critical engines of knowledge creation and societal transformation; however, many African institutions, particularly in Nigeria, struggle to cultivate mature and sustainable research cultures. This paper develops a conceptual framework for strengthening university research management systems, highlighting leadership and governance as catalysts for academic excellence, innovation, and societal relevance. Using a descriptive-analytical and comparative synthesis of international policy frameworks (UNESCO, OECD) and African higher-education reports (AAU, ARUA, NUC, and TETFund), the study integrates global best practices with contextual realities in low-resource environments. The proposed Research Leadership and Impact Framework (RLIF) outlines four interrelated components: leadership and vision, governance and systems, capacity and infrastructure, and research culture and societal impact, which collectively enable institutional transformation. Comparative indicators, such as Nigeria's Gross Expenditure on Research and Development (GERD) of 0.22% versus South Africa's 0.83%, illustrate the strategic significance of leadership and governance reform in closing performance gaps. The framework contributes a theoretically grounded and context-sensitive model for embedding evidence-based management, accountability, and inclusivity within African universities. Ultimately, the paper argues that building resilient research systems requires not only financial investment but visionary leadership capable of aligning academic missions with societal priorities and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

**Keywords:** Research Management; University Leadership; Academic Excellence; Institutional Governance; Innovation Ecosystem; Societal Impact; Low-Resource Contexts; Africa

## INTRODUCTION

In the twenty-first-century knowledge economy, universities have evolved from being primarily teaching institutions into multi-functional ecosystems that generate knowledge, foster innovation, and drive socio-economic transformation. Globally, higher-education institutions serve as engines of national competitiveness, linking human capital development to technological advancement and evidence-based policymaking (OECD, 2018). As the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2024) observes, “the future of humanity is inextricably linked to Africa’s future,” yet global research production remains highly unequal. Africa accounts for less than 1 % of the world’s scientific publications, while gross expenditure on research and development (GERD) averages below 0.6 % of GDP compared to the global mean of 2.4 % (UNESCO, 2024). This imbalance reflects long-standing disparities in research capacity, funding, and institutional governance. Within sub-Saharan Africa, universities frequently operate under constrained conditions, limited research infrastructure, under-resourced laboratories, and overextended faculty teaching loads conditions that hinder the full realization of their research potential (NACOSTI, 2021; Puplampu *et al.*, 2022).

Nigeria exemplifies these structural challenges. Despite being home to more than 200 tertiary institutions, the nation’s share of global scholarly output remains minimal, and university research contributions to policy or industry innovation are sporadic. Scholars highlight a “disconnect between academic inquiry and societal application,” rooted in weak management systems and inconsistent leadership commitment to research governance (Morufu *et al.*, 2021a; Akinyemi *et al.*, 2024). Thus, while higher education has expanded significantly across the continent, research productivity and impact have not kept pace, underscoring an urgent need to reimagine how universities are led, managed, and embedded within broader innovation ecosystems. Existing scholarship acknowledges the importance of research culture and leadership in higher education but reveals persistent gaps in understanding how institutional management systems translate vision into sustained research excellence. Studies from the

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2021) and the Association of African Universities (AAU, 2023) emphasise that effective research ecosystems depend on governance frameworks linking resources, incentives, and accountability. Yet, across much of Africa, these systems remain fragmented or underdeveloped. Puplampu *et al.* (2022) documented a “significant gap between espoused values for research and actual institutional behaviour,” demonstrating that many universities endorse research excellence rhetorically while lacking the mechanisms such as research policies, performance monitoring, and grant administration, to realise it. Similarly, Kiiza and Fava (2023) found that weak internal governance, limited mentorship, and low managerial autonomy impede the development of collaborative and innovative research environments.

Controversies also persist regarding how research quality should be assessed in contexts where resource inequities distort global metrics. While Western institutions are benchmarked by citation indices and funding volumes, African universities often operate under different realities that demand context-sensitive evaluation criteria (ARUA, 2022). The literature is therefore fragmented: it addresses individual researcher motivation, policy frameworks, or funding patterns, but rarely integrates these dimensions into a comprehensive model of research management that links institutional leadership, governance, capacity building, and societal impact. This conceptual gap between knowledge of research culture and its institutional operationalization remains one of the most pressing challenges in African higher education. Addressing it requires examining universities not merely as academic spaces but as complex organisations whose internal systems, incentives, and leadership norms either enable or constrain research excellence.

The present study is both necessary and timely given current global and continental developments in higher-education policy. UNESCO’s *Futures of Education Report (2022)* calls for a “new social contract for education” centred on knowledge as a global common good, urging universities, especially in the Global South, to strengthen their research governance and innovation capacity. Simultaneously, the African Union’s Continental

Education Strategy for Africa (2016-2025) (AU, 2023) identifies research management reform as a strategic priority for building Africa's knowledge economy.

In Nigeria, the National Universities Commission (NUC, 2023) has recently issued guidelines emphasising research governance, integrity, and institutional accountability, while the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund, 2023) has expanded competitive research grants and Centres of Excellence initiatives. These policy shifts present unprecedented opportunities for system-wide transformation, yet they also expose managerial weaknesses, as many institutions lack the strategic capacity to align funding, leadership, and culture toward sustained research impact. This study is innovative because it moves beyond descriptive analyses of research challenges to propose an integrated leadership and management model for strengthening research systems. By linking organisational theory, governance reform, and capacity development, it conceptualises research culture as an institutional capability rather than an incidental outcome. The approach also aligns with OECD (2021) recommendations for performance-based management and UNESCO (2024) guidelines on open science (Dine *et al.*, 2023; Elkheir *et al.*, 2024; Dine *et al.*, 2024), positioning the study at the intersection of global policy and local relevance. Furthermore, as digital transformation, climate change (Raimi *et al.*, 2018; Raimi *et al.*, 2019a, b; Morufu *et al.*, 2021b; Christopher *et al.*, 2025), and demographic pressures reshape the higher-education landscape, universities must adapt to complex environments that demand both academic excellence and demonstrable societal impact (OECD, 2023). The timeliness of this analysis, therefore lies in its contribution to evidence-based management strategies capable of bridging the gap between knowledge creation and national development goals.

Against this backdrop, the study seeks to contribute a holistic understanding of how university management systems can be designed and operationalised to cultivate mature, sustainable, and impact-oriented research cultures across Africa, with particular focus on Nigeria. It responds to UNESCO's (2021) call for "whole-institution approaches" that integrate leadership, governance,

funding, and community engagement into cohesive research ecosystems. Specifically, this paper aims to (1) examine the conceptual foundations linking institutional leadership, governance frameworks, and research culture; (2) analyse systemic enablers and barriers influencing research management performance in African universities; (3) propose a practical and adaptive framework for institutional transformation grounded in comparative evidence; and (4) generate actionable policy and management recommendations for university leaders, governing councils, regulators, and development partners.

The study adopts an interdisciplinary lens, drawing on organisational culture theory (Schein, 2010), systems and governance theory (Becker *et al.*, 2023), and transformational leadership models (Bryman, 2007) to explain how internal structures and behaviours shape institutional research outcomes. By embedding these theories within empirical data from UNESCO, OECD, and African research networks such as ARUA (2022) and AAU (2023), the paper contributes a novel framework for understanding the institutional ecology of research excellence. Ultimately, it argues that the maturity of research culture and by extension the capacity for innovation and societal development depends less on external funding alone and more on how effectively universities organise, manage, and inspire their research enterprises. In articulating this framework, the study underscores that effective research management is not a bureaucratic function but a strategic imperative central to achieving academic excellence, fostering innovation, and fulfilling the university's public mission in the twenty-first century.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Research Culture in Higher Education: Definitions and Significance

The term research culture in universities refers to the collective attitudes, values, practices, and institutional systems that encourage, support, and reward research activity (Coetzee, 2019). It encompasses more than individual output: it includes infrastructure, institutional norms, leadership behaviours, collaborative networks, and linkages to wider societal and knowledge ecosystems. A mature research culture is thus foundational to an institution's capacity for academic excellence, innovation, and societal impact (UFS Update, 2020). Globally, higher-

education policy frameworks underscore the importance of research culture. For example, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) highlights research and innovation as central to university missions in the knowledge economy (OECD, 2018). Similarly, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) points to research culture as critical for addressing the “global knowledge gap,” especially in emerging regions (UNESCO, 2024).

### **Theoretical Foundations: Leadership, Governance and Culture**

The development of a research culture in a university can be read through several inter-locking theoretical lenses:

- i. Organisational culture theory, which explores how shared values, norms and behaviours emerge within institutions and influence performance (Mills & Kuk, 2014). A positive research culture is one in which scholars believe in, and are committed to, the institution's research mission, feel supported, and see tangible rewards for research effort.
- ii. Systems and governance theory, which emphasises that universities operate as complex systems with interconnected sub-systems (academic, administrative, research, external partnerships) and require effective governance structures to coordinate these systems (Becker, Goode, Rivers & Tyler, 2023). Governance mechanisms (e.g., research policies, funding allocation, performance monitoring) are therefore key enablers of research culture.
- iii. Leadership theory, particularly transformational and strategic leadership, which emphasises the role of senior leadership (e.g., the Vice-Chancellor) in articulating vision, motivating staff, aligning resources, and embedding new institutional practices. A six-nation study across sub-Saharan African universities found that leaders play a critical role in building research cultures (Kiiza & Fava, 2023; African Journal of Management).

### **Global Trends and Institutional Drivers**

In many high-performing universities globally (e.g., in the UK, US, Australia), institutional research culture has matured because of deliberate policies: competitive internal grants, transparent research metrics, investment in infrastructure,

reward systems for high-impact publications, and strong external partnerships (Coetzee, 2019). For example, the University of the Free State designed a framework to enhance research culture and identified key drivers such as mentorship, research infrastructure, dedicated research units, and institutional leadership (Coetzee, 2019). Recent literature in the journal *Tertiary Education and Management* identifies three levels of influence on research collaboration and culture: macro (national policy and governance), meso (institutional characteristics and management strategies), and micro (researcher and team behaviour) (Novotná & Teichler, 2022). Institutional leaders, therefore have leverage especially at the meso-level through management strategy, policies, organisational culture, and infrastructure.

### **The African and Nigerian Context: Constraints and Opportunities**

In Africa, many universities face chronic constraints in developing robust research cultures: limited funding, heavy teaching loads, infrastructure deficits, weak linkages to industry and society, and sometimes institutional cultures that prioritise teaching over research (NACOSTI, 2021). For example, the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) of Kenya notes that African institutions “need to foster a scientific research culture” to close the gap between local knowledge and imported research paradigms (NACOSTI, 2021). A multi-country study of six sub-Saharan universities concluded that leadership, mentoring, research support, and reward systems significantly affect research culture maturity (Kiiza & Fava, 2023).

In Nigeria, research investigating student-led innovation hubs showed that structured research activities improved research culture but also faced sustainability issues due to funding and resource constraints (Akinyemi *et al.*, 2024). Nigeria's own higher-education policy environment is increasingly aligned with research and development goals. The Association of African Universities (AAU) Africa Research Charter, launched in 2023, provides a pan-African governance framework for transformative research collaborations (AAU, 2023). This illustrates an important opportunity for Nigerian universities to leverage continental frameworks alongside internal institutional reforms.

## Critical Enablers and Barriers to Research Culture Maturity

- i. Enablers: Institutional enablers commonly identified include (a) senior leadership commitment and research-friendly strategy, (b) institutional research governance frameworks (policies, research offices, technology transfer), (c) stable funding and infrastructure, (d) mentoring and capacity development for early-career researchers, (e) external partnerships, and (f) reward and recognition systems (Coetzee, 2019; Kiiza & Fava, 2023).
- ii. Barriers: On the other hand, barriers include heavy teaching loads, inadequate infrastructure, limited access to external funds, weak research governance, cultural norms that undervalue research, lack of mentorship, and insufficient alignment between research and societal needs (NACOSTI, 2021; Novotná & Teichler, 2022). For example, dominating teaching and administrative responsibilities often leave little time for academics to engage in research, thus undermining culture building.

## Research Culture and Societal Impact

An important dimension often neglected is how research culture links to societal impact. Universities in developed contexts increasingly emphasise not just volume of publications, but the translation of research into innovation, policy influence, community engagement and socio-economic outcomes (OECD, 2018). For African universities, aligning research culture with national development agendas (e.g., Agenda 2063 of the African Union) is critical if institutions are to fulfil both academic and societal roles (AAU, 2023).

## Summary of Theoretical Gaps

While literature provides abundant descriptions of research culture drivers and barriers, gaps remain particularly in African contexts:

- i. The interplay between leadership behaviours, institutional systems and research culture is under-explored.
- ii. There is limited empirical data on how institutional changes (e.g., new governance models) lead to improved research culture outcomes.

- iii. The link between research culture and societal impact remains weakly theorised in African universities.

This research aims to address these gaps by placing leadership and management systems at the centre of analysis and proposing a conceptual framework for university research culture transformation in Nigeria and beyond.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in a conceptual framework that links leadership, governance, and institutional systems as the core components of an effective university research environment. This integrated view resonates with international benchmarks, including UNESCO's (2021) "whole-institution approaches" and the OECD's (2018) three-pillar model for higher-education performance (leadership and strategy, resources and capabilities, and outcomes and impact). A critical gap remains, however, as these broad international standards are seldom tailored to the specific contexts of African higher education systems. Addressing this, the paper synthesizes cross-national evidence to propose a unified Research Leadership and Institutional Framework (RLIF). This model illustrates how the synergistic interaction of visionary leadership, effective governance, and robust institutional capacity is essential for cultivating sustainable research ecosystems in developing regions.

## Conceptual Model

The conceptual model (Figure 1 and Table 1) illustrates a cyclical, reinforcing relationship among leadership and vision, governance and systems, capacity and infrastructure, and research culture and societal impact.



**Figure 1:** Conceptual Model of Integrated Research Management and Culture Development Framework

**Table 1:** Framework for Cultivating a Sustainable Research Culture in African Universities

Level	Key Elements	Description	Example Actions (Nigeria/Africa Context)
Leadership & Vision	Transformational leadership, strategic vision, institutional values	Articulation of a clear research mission that aligns with national and global development goals	Vice-Chancellor sets university-wide research agenda linked to SDGs and Agenda 2063
Governance & Systems	Policies, performance management, funding allocation, transparency	Establishing strong research governance, including ethics boards and research management offices	Creation of research directorates and performance contracts (e.g., University of Ibadan)
Capacity & Infrastructure	Human capital, mentorship, infrastructure, funding mechanisms	Building staff competence, mentoring, access to digital libraries, and laboratories	Partnerships with TETFund, UNESCO chairs, and Centres of Excellence
Research Culture & Societal Impact	Collaboration, publication, innovation, engagement, impact measurement	Encouraging teamwork, rewarding impactful research, linking outputs to community needs	Implementation of institutional research scorecards and community innovation hubs

### Leadership as a Catalyst

Leadership is the catalytic force in this framework. Transformational leadership, as defined by Burns (1978) and applied to academic institutions by Bryman (2007), emphasises vision articulation, intellectual stimulation, and individualised support. In the African university context, effective university’s chief executive and intellectual leader act as “culture architects” who embed research as a shared institutional value rather than an elite pursuit (Kiiza & Fava, 2023). Leadership behaviour thus shapes the organisational climate, determines resource priorities, and signals institutional expectations. The African Union’s (2023) Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA 16-25) likewise highlights leadership development for research governance as a continental priority, emphasising the need for “institutional champions of knowledge production.” Strong leadership is essential to overcoming fragmented research systems, bureaucratic inertia, and weak accountability.

### Governance and Management Systems

Effective governance transforms leadership vision into institutional reality. The OECD (2021) defines university governance as “the structures, processes and relationships through which institutions are directed, controlled and held accountable.” In Nigeria, governance systems remain inconsistent, with many universities operating without fully implemented research management frameworks (NUC, 2023). This results in duplication,

inefficient use of resources, and weak alignment with national research priorities. To institutionalise research culture, governance systems must include:

- i. Research policies and codes of conduct aligned with international standards (UNESCO, 2021).
- ii. Transparent funding mechanisms that reward quality and impact.
- iii. Research ethics and integrity structures to safeguard credibility.
- iv. Data-driven monitoring and evaluation systems that assess performance and inform strategy.

### Institutional Capacity and Infrastructure

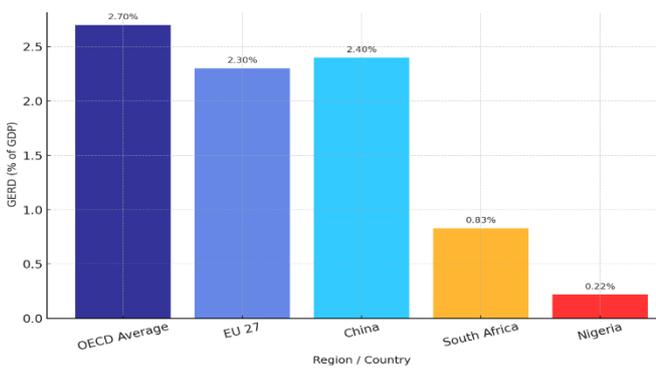
Capacity development and infrastructure are the operational backbone of research culture. According to UNESCO’s Global Observatory on Science, Technology and Innovation Policy Instruments (GO-SPIN), Africa’s gross expenditure on R&D (GERD) remains below 1 % of GDP compared with 2.5 % in OECD economies (Table 2 and Figure 2) (UNESCO, 2024).

In Nigeria, Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund) allocations for R&D increased by 23 % between 2020 and 2023, but much remains fragmented across disciplines (see Figure 2) (TETFund Annual Report, 2023).

The OECD, EU, and China maintain strong commitments above 2% of GDP, while South Africa (0.83%) and especially Nigeria (0.22%) lag significantly behind.

**Table 2:** Comparative R&D Expenditure (GERD % of GDP, 2023)

Region	GERD % of GDP	Source
OECD Average	2.7%	OECD Science, Technology and Industry Scoreboard (2023)
EU 27	2.3%	Eurostat (2023)
China	2.4%	OECD (2023)
South Africa	0.83%	UNESCO GO-SPIN (2024)
Nigeria	0.22%	National Bureau of Statistics & TETFund (2023)



**Figure 2:** Comparative Gross Expenditure on Research & Development (GERD % of GDP) Across Regions (2023-2024) showing the wide disparity in R&D investment globally

This figure underscores the urgent need for enhanced research funding and stronger innovation systems in Africa to close the global competitiveness gap.

Low investment affects laboratory maintenance, access to high-impact journals, digital repositories, and postgraduate research supervision. Yet institutions that have created structured mentorship, seed-funding, and research-grant offices report tangible improvements in publication output and staff motivation (Akinyemi *et al.*, 2024).

### Research Culture as an Organisational System

Research culture evolves through reinforcement mechanisms: leadership sets vision; governance institutionalises structures; capacity building enables participation; and success stories sustain motivation. This mirrors Schein’s (2010) organisational culture theory, where shared values are transmitted via leadership practices and

institutional rituals. A healthy research culture manifests through:

- i. Active collaboration across departments.
- ii. Publication in reputable peer-reviewed journals.
- iii. Integration of research with teaching and community service.
- iv. Institutional recognition and reward for scholarly contributions.

Conversely, an unhealthy culture produces low morale, fragmented research efforts, and minimal societal engagement.

### Societal Impact and Innovation Linkages

The framework emphasises that the ultimate purpose of research culture is societal development. The OECD (2018) innovation systems approach stresses that universities should operate as nodes within national innovation ecosystems, translating knowledge into technology, policy, and social solutions. In Nigeria, university-industry collaboration remains weak, patent applications and technology-transfer offices are scarce but emerging partnerships with the private sector and government agencies (e.g., NASENI, NITDA) offer promising pathways (NITDA Annual Review, 2023). Thus, the conceptual framework links inputs (leadership, governance, resources) to outputs (research productivity, innovation, community engagement) and ultimately to outcomes (societal impact, national development) (see Figure 1 and Table 1).

### Implications for University Leadership and Policy

For the university’s chief executive, intellectual leader and senior management, this framework offers an operational model to:

- i. Align institutional research strategies with national priorities.
- ii. Strengthen governance structures that promote accountability and transparency.
- iii. Build sustainable funding and infrastructure systems.
- iv. Cultivate inclusive research cultures that empower early-career scholars.
- v. Evaluate impact not only through publication counts but through societal outcomes.

In essence, the conceptual framework situates leadership as the central axis of transformation,

ensuring that research culture becomes a sustained organisational capability rather than a transient activity.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Methodological Approach**

This paper adopts a conceptual synthesis and descriptive-analytical design aimed at developing a theoretically grounded and context-sensitive framework for strengthening research management systems in African universities. The approach does not involve primary data collection; rather, it synthesizes and compares existing evidence from international policy frameworks, institutional reports, and regional higher-education literature. This design is particularly appropriate for theory-building and model development, where the objective is to integrate insights across diverse sources rather than to test hypotheses empirically.

The analytical process involved four sequential and overlapping stages:

- i. **Document & Policy Review:** A structured review of institutional and policy documents was conducted to map the governance, leadership, and research management landscape across Africa. The review included continental frameworks such as the Association of African Universities (AAU, 2023) Africa Research Charter and the African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA, 2022) Universities Profiles Report, alongside national policy instruments from Nigeria's National Universities Commission (NUC, 2023) and Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund, 2023). Selection criteria emphasized documents published between 2018 and 2024, written in English, and providing explicit discussion of research governance, institutional leadership, funding mechanisms, or performance indicators. Each document was reviewed for both content relevance and conceptual alignment with leadership and governance dimensions of research culture.
- ii. **Comparative Data Analysis:** To contextualize conceptual arguments, relevant secondary datasets were extracted from reputable sources such as the UNESCO Global Observatory on Science, Technology and Innovation Policy Instruments (GO-SPIN, 2024), the OECD Science, Technology and Industry Scoreboard

(2023), and the Africa in Science Index (AiSi, 2024). These quantitative indicators, such as Gross Expenditure on Research and Development (GERD), research output rankings, and collaboration metrics, served as comparative anchors to highlight disparities between high- and low-performing research systems (e.g., South Africa's GERD of 0.83% vs. Nigeria's 0.22%). Data were summarised in descriptive tables and figures to illustrate trends rather than for statistical inference.

- iii. **Comparative Institutional Benchmarking:** A purposive benchmarking of selected African universities was undertaken to examine institutional contrasts in research governance and leadership effectiveness. Case exemplars, University of Cape Town (South Africa) and University of Ibadan (Nigeria) were selected based on regional prominence, data availability, and representation of differing stages of research-culture maturity. Institutional metrics such as publication output, collaboration rates, and research management structures were compared to illustrate leadership-driven differences in outcomes.
- iv. **Thematic Synthesis and Conceptual Integration:** All reviewed documents and datasets were analysed through a thematic synthesis approach guided by the study's conceptual chain: leadership → governance → capacity → research culture → societal impact. Recurring patterns were coded into higher-order themes: visionary leadership, institutional autonomy, accountability mechanisms, funding diversification, and societal engagement. These themes informed the refinement of the Research Leadership and Impact Framework (RLIF), which integrates both theoretical constructs and policy evidence into a unified model for research-system transformation.

### **Rationale for Conceptual Synthesis Design**

The conceptual synthesis design offers several advantages over conventional empirical approaches in this context. First, it allows the integration of multi-level insights from global frameworks to institutional practices within a coherent theoretical structure. Second, it facilitates comparative reasoning across countries and universities without the limitations of small-scale field data. Third, it ensures policy relevance by

aligning conceptual propositions with real-world governance mechanisms already articulated in UNESCO, OECD, and African Union documents. This approach aligns with UNESCO's (2021) call for evidence-informed leadership models and OECD's (2018) emphasis on systems-based performance management in higher education. The resulting framework, RLIF, thus emerges from a structured interpretive process combining theory, comparative policy analysis, and empirical indicators into a context-sensitive conceptual model for reform.

### **Transparency and Analytical Rigor**

To enhance methodological transparency, the following principles guided the analysis:

- i. Selection clarity: Only publicly accessible documents with explicit reference to research governance, leadership, or performance were included.
- ii. Triangulation: Findings were cross-verified among international, continental, and national data sources to ensure coherence.
- iii. Analytical logic: Each conceptual proposition in the RLIF model is grounded in at least one empirical indicator (e.g., GERD, publication output) and one theoretical construct (e.g., leadership behaviour, governance reform).
- iv. Context sensitivity: African and Nigerian institutional realities were interpreted through comparative benchmarking rather than universal generalisation.

This ensures that while the paper remains conceptual in nature, it maintains analytical rigor consistent with high-quality theoretical synthesis research.

### **Limitations**

While this conceptual synthesis provides valuable insights, several limitations are acknowledged:

- i. Dependence on secondary data: The analysis relies on publicly available policy and institutional data, which may vary in quality or completeness across contexts.
- ii. Cross-sectional scope: Most indicators represent single time points (2023-2024) rather than longitudinal trends, limiting assessment of causal change.
- iii. Absence of primary field validation: The proposed RLIF model has not yet been empirically tested through expert consultation,

pilot application, or case study implementation.

- iv. Normative generalisation: Although derived from comparative evidence, the framework may require contextual adaptation before operational use at specific universities.

Future research should empirically validate the RLIF through case studies, Delphi expert reviews, or participatory workshops within African higher-education institutions to refine its applicability and impact measurement potential.

### **RESULTS**

To illustrate key institutional performance characteristics relevant to research culture maturity, three tables are presented below: (1) a cross-country research output indicator (Figure 3), (2) a sample institutional performance snapshot (Figure 4), and (3) selected governance-and-leadership benchmarks (Figure 5). Thus, Figure 3 and Table 3 illustrate a revealing contrast in research investment and performance across selected African countries: South Africa, Nigeria, Egypt, and Kenya, based on authentic UNESCO and Africa in Science Index (AiSi, 2024) data. The Figure 3 demonstrates that Egypt leads with the highest Gross Expenditure on Research and Development (GERD) at 1.27% of GDP and a correspondingly high AiSi Index score of 1.794, signifying a strong correlation between sustained investment and research performance. South Africa, with a GERD of 0.83% and the highest AiSi ranking (2.00), reflects a mature research ecosystem built on consistent government commitment, effective national innovation policies, and well-structured research governance. Kenya's moderate GERD (0.49%) and AiSi score (1.29) point to growing investment in knowledge production through targeted innovation hubs and regional partnerships, though scalability remains a challenge. In stark contrast, Nigeria's GERD of 0.22%, one of the lowest among major African economies corresponds to its comparatively weak AiSi score (1.159), revealing a chronic underfunding of research and limited institutional capacity to translate policy into productivity. For higher education leadership, these disparities emphasize the indispensable role of strategic governance, financial prioritization, and evidence-based policy frameworks in shaping national and institutional research excellence. A forward-

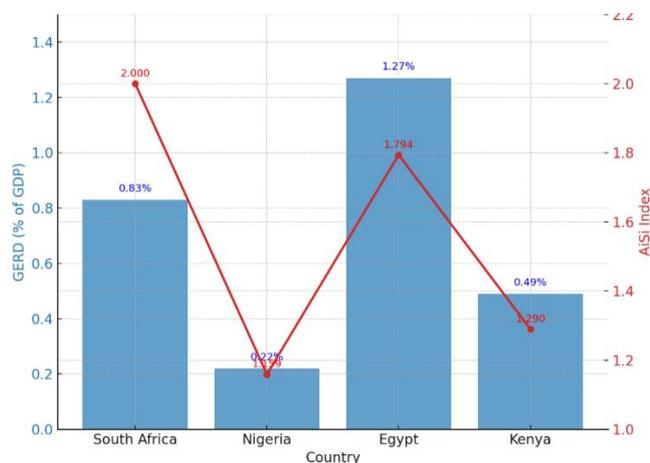
looking university leader must therefore advocate for increased R&D expenditure, align institutional priorities with national innovation strategies, and foster a culture of accountability that links funding

inputs to measurable research impact and societal outcomes.

**Table 3:** Selected Country-Level Research Intensity and Output Indicators

Country	Gross Expenditure on R&D (GERD % of GDP)	AiSi Index*	Note / Source
South Africa	0.83 %	2.00	UNESCO GO-SPIN 2024; Africa in Science Index (AiSi) ranking 1 for Africa ( <a href="http://africainscience.org">africainscience.org</a> )
Nigeria	0.22 %	1.159	National Bureau of Statistics & AiSi ranking ( <a href="http://africainscience.org">africainscience.org</a> )
Egypt	1.27 %	1.794	AiSi ranking 2 for Africa ( <a href="http://africainscience.org">africainscience.org</a> )
Kenya	0.49 %	1.29	AiSi ranking 13 for Africa ( <a href="http://africainscience.org">africainscience.org</a> )

\*AiSi = Africa in Science Index; higher values indicate stronger scientific output relative to the African average.



**Figure 3:** Comparative Research Performance Indicators: Selected African Countries (2024) showing Gross Expenditure on R&D (GERD % of GDP) as blue bars and the Africa in Science Index (AiSi) as a red trend line. It visually compares the research investment and performance of South Africa, Nigeria, Egypt, and Kenya, based on authentic UNESCO and AiSi data.

Table 4 and Figure 4 reveal a clear stratification in research excellence and international collaboration among African universities, underscoring the critical role of strategic leadership in shaping institutional research trajectories. The University of Cape Town and University of the Witwatersrand, both South African institutions, exhibit the highest performance, with approximately 30-35% of publications in top-tier journals and over 50% international co-authorship, reflecting strong research governance structures, sustained investment in research infrastructure, and robust

global partnerships.

In contrast, Nigerian universities such as the University of Ibadan and Covenant University display markedly lower outputs, with 15% and 8% of their publications, respectively, appearing in top journals and comparatively modest levels of international collaboration. This disparity signals structural and policy gaps in Nigeria’s university research management systems, including limited funding, weak mentoring frameworks, and inadequate incentives for collaborative and high-impact research. For university leaders, these trends highlight the need for deliberate policies that strengthen research governance, promote cross-border partnerships, and embed excellence-driven performance metrics into institutional culture. Leadership that fosters an enabling environment for quality scholarship through transparent research funding mechanisms, mentorship schemes, and international linkages is indispensable to advancing Africa’s position in global knowledge production.

**Analytical Insights from Data**

The data above reveal critical patterns that inform the conceptual framework:

- i. African countries with higher research intensity (GERD) align with stronger scientific-output indices (AiSi) and better institutional performance (South Africa, Egypt).

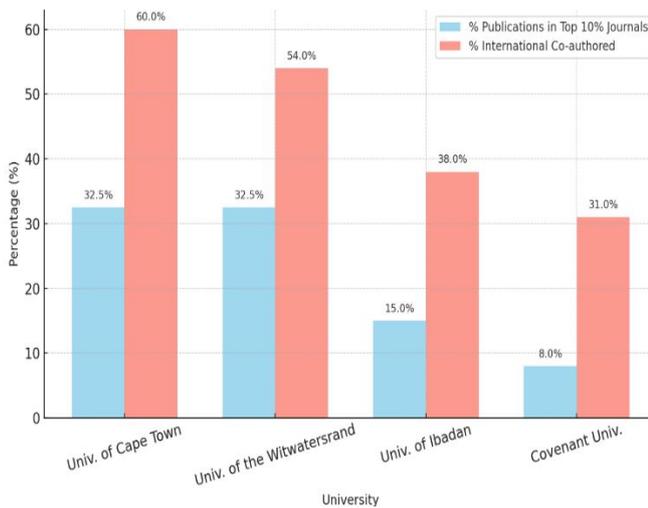
- ii. Institutions that promote international collaboration and focus on performance metrics (e.g., UCT, Wits) record higher proportions of publications in top global journals.
- iii. Governance features such as dedicated research management offices, performance KPIs, and institutional autonomy correspond with stronger research culture indicators.
- iv. In Nigeria, low GERD (0.22 % of GDP) and relatively low institutional performance (e.g.,

8 - 15 % publications in top journals) reflect structural and leadership challenges, highlighting the need for enhanced management systems.

These insights substantiate the model’s proposition that leadership + governance + capacity → research culture → societal impact.

**Table 4:** Institutional Research Performance Snapshot: Selected African Universities

University	Country	% Publications in Top 10% Journals	% International Co-authored	Notes / Source
University of Cape Town	South Africa	30 – 35 %	~60 %	Africademics dataset ( <a href="http://africademics.com">africademics.com</a> )
University of the Witwatersrand	South Africa	30 – 35 %	~54 %	Africademics dataset ( <a href="http://TheOasisReporters.com">The Oasis Reporters</a> )
University of Ibadan	Nigeria	15 %	38 %	Africademics dataset ( <a href="http://africademics.com">africademics.com</a> )
Covenant University	Nigeria	8 %	31 %	Africademics dataset ( <a href="http://TheOasisReporters.com">The Oasis Reporters</a> )



**Figure 4:** Comparative Research Excellence and Collaboration in Selected African Universities (2024). The blue bars show the percentage of publications in top 10% journals, reflecting research excellence. The red bars indicate percentage of internationally co-authored papers, highlighting collaboration and global integration

**Table 5:** Governance & Leadership Benchmarks for Research-Culture Maturity

Institution	Governance Feature	Leadership Strategy Implemented	Source
University of South Africa (UNISA)	KPI: Research output per permanent academic staff targeted from 1.6 to 2.0 (2023)	Strategic plan with strong research management office	UNISA Annual Report 2024
ARUA member universities	≥60 % of publications with international co-authors	Cross-institutional research cluster funding	ARUA Universities Profiles Report 2022
Nigerian public universities	Low teaching-load reduction for research staff & weak funding base	Proposal to establish institutional seed-funding schemes	SUGERE Working Paper 2022

## DISCUSSION

### Leadership and Governance Transformation

The comparative evidence from Figures 3-5 and Tables 3-5 reveals that leadership and governance are decisive determinants of research culture maturity and institutional performance in African universities. Countries such as South Africa and Egypt, with GERD investments of 0.83% and 1.27% respectively, consistently outperform Nigeria (0.22%) in research productivity and international collaboration. This disparity aligns with UNESCO's (2024) and OECD's (2023) observations that visionary leadership and institutional autonomy are prerequisites for knowledge-driven development.

The data therefore, validate the argument advanced by Bryman (2007) and Burns (1978) that transformational leadership anchored in vision articulation, intellectual stimulation, and shared accountability creates the enabling environment for sustained academic excellence. Empirical parallels can be drawn from Kiiza and Fava (2023), who found that leadership behaviours such as inclusiveness, strategic communication, and resource stewardship directly correlate with stronger research performance in sub-Saharan African universities. Similarly, Becker *et al.* (2023) emphasize that effective governance functions as a coordinating mechanism, translating institutional vision into actionable policies. Within the Research Leadership and Impact Framework (RLIF) proposed in this study, leadership operates as the central axis linking governance, capacity, and culture. This aligns with UNESCO's (2021) "whole-institution" approach, which stresses that leadership effectiveness cannot be isolated from broader governance ecosystems. Moreover, findings from ARUA (2022) and AAU (2023) corroborate that institutions with structured research management offices and performance contracts demonstrate higher output and international visibility.

In contrast, Nigerian universities, lacking institutionalized research governance, exhibit fragmented accountability and low publication rates (see Table 4). This mirrors the argument by Pupilampu *et al.* (2022) that many African universities rhetorically endorse research excellence but fail to institutionalize supporting systems. Hence, leadership reform must prioritize

governance coherence linking Senate Research Committees, School Boards, and departmental innovation units to ensure horizontal and vertical alignment in research administration (NUC, 2023; TETFund, 2023). Overall, the data affirm the systems-theory assumption (Becker *et al.*, 2023; Schein, 2010) that universities function as interdependent subsystems where leadership, governance, and culture reinforce each other. The higher research productivity observed in South Africa's University of Cape Town and Witwatersrand (Figure 4) exemplifies how strategic governance, clear KPIs, and leadership accountability converge to produce institutional excellence. These results strengthen the conceptual validity of the RLIF and suggest that Nigerian universities must transition from personality-driven to system-driven leadership models that prioritize evidence-based management and participatory governance.

### Capacity and Funding Reforms

Capacity and funding constitute the operational backbone of any viable research ecosystem. The results presented in Figure 2 and Table 2 highlight the stark disparities in research investment and institutional capability across African regions. Nigeria's GERD of 0.22% (NBS & TETFund, 2023) not only lags behind the OECD average of 2.7% but also falls short of the African Union's 1% target under the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA 16-25) (AU, 2023). These findings are consistent with OECD (2018) and UNESCO (2015), which demonstrate a positive association between sustained R&D investment and university research output. In essence, leadership commitment must be matched by financial and infrastructural capacity to yield a measurable impact. The data further reveal that universities in South Africa and Egypt, which maintain robust research infrastructure and human-capital pipelines, record substantially higher percentages of publications in top-tier journals (30-35%) compared to Nigeria (8-15%) (see Table 4).

This pattern aligns with Coetzee (2019), who found that mentorship structures, access to research facilities, and institutional leadership predict higher research culture maturity. Similarly, Akinyemi *et al.* (2024) observed that student-led innovation hubs in Nigeria improve research engagement but face sustainability challenges due to fragmented

funding. This underscores TETFund's (2023) observation that Nigerian universities require stable, performance-based funding frameworks that incentivize quality and innovation rather than volume alone. From a theoretical standpoint, Mills and Kuk (2014) and Schein (2010) argue that institutional capacity is embedded in organizational culture, where values of collaboration, trust, and continuous learning drive knowledge production.

The RLIF framework operationalizes this by integrating "capacity and infrastructure" as the third pillar linking leadership vision to societal impact. Evidence from UNISA (2024) demonstrates that strategic investment in digital research repositories, mentorship programs, and KPI-based accountability increased research output per faculty from 1.6 to 2.0 within one academic cycle. Comparable trends are documented in ARUA (2022), where universities employing cluster-based governance systems achieved over 60% international co-authorship rates. Nonetheless, resource scarcity remains a structural constraint for many African universities. NACOSTI (2021) reports that high teaching workloads and limited access to research facilities hinder innovation. Yet, as Dine *et al.* (2024) and Elkheir *et al.* (2024) note, collaborative frameworks such as multi-institutional consortia and open-science platforms can compensate for funding gaps by pooling expertise and resources.

Hence, capacity-building strategies should emphasize networked research models, mentorship ecosystems, and digital infrastructure. This approach not only enhances efficiency but also aligns with UNESCO's (2024) Open Science Recommendation, which advocates democratized knowledge sharing as a pathway to sustainable innovation.

### **Linking Research Culture to Societal Impact**

The third thematic axis emphasizes the translation of research outputs into tangible societal benefits, which forms the ultimate test of institutional relevance. The conceptual linkage between research culture and societal impact, as illustrated in Table 1 and Figure 1, underscores that effective leadership and governance must culminate in community transformation, policy influence, and innovation. The observed performance differentials—where South African universities

integrate community engagement and technology transfer into their missions reinforce OECD's (2018) assertion that universities embedded within national innovation systems generate broader developmental returns. The correlation between high GERD and higher AiSi indices (Table 3; Figure 3) further supports UNESCO's (2022) and OECD's (2021) argument that sustained investment in R&D correlates with improved social outcomes, including job creation, technological advancement, and policy innovation. In Nigeria, weak university-industry linkages (NITDA, 2023) and minimal patent applications exemplify the disconnect between academic research and societal needs, echoing the critique by Puplampu *et al.* (2022) on "espoused values versus enacted culture." However, emerging initiatives such as Quadruple Helix partnerships involving academia, government, industry, and communities offer practical pathways for integration (AU, 2023; Dine *et al.*, 2023).

Recent works by Raimi *et al.* (2021) and Morufu *et al.* (2021c, d) illustrate how evidence-based research and science communication can translate into impactful public health interventions. These studies exemplify how leadership-driven research governance can transform universities into agents of community resilience and policy reform, consistent with Christopher *et al.* (2025), who emphasized the role of digital citizen-science observatories in linking research with societal wellbeing. Similarly, Raimi and Raimi (2020) demonstrated that institutional capacity to generate actionable knowledge during crises (e.g., COVID-19) depends on governance structures that enable rapid translation of evidence into decision-making. Thus, the RLIF framework situates this translation process as cyclical: leadership vision drives governance reform, which strengthens capacity, enabling research cultures that yield measurable societal outcomes. The pattern observed in Table 5, where institutions like UNISA and ARUA members integrate research output KPIs with policy engagement, confirms this interdependence. In contrast, Nigerian institutions with fragmented governance structures remain isolated from innovation ecosystems and community networks.

To bridge this gap, universities must institutionalize impact monitoring systems such as research dashboards (UNESCO, 2021) and

integrate community-engaged research into evaluation metrics. Ultimately, the discussion supports Morufu *et al.* (2021b) and Raimi *et al.* (2019a, b), who contend that research culture is meaningful only when linked to social transformation and environmental sustainability. The empirical evidence and conceptual synthesis herein suggest that African universities must evolve from knowledge producers to innovation brokers, aligning research priorities with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Agenda 2063 (AU, 2023). This paradigm shift, anchored in leadership vision, governance integrity, and collaborative networks, ensures that the Research Leadership and Impact Framework (RLIF) functions not merely as an academic construct but as a strategic tool for societal renewal.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has established that the research maturity of African universities in Nigeria depends fundamentally on the synergy between visionary leadership, coherence in governance, institutional capacity, and societal engagement. Comparative UNESCO (2024), OECD (2023), and ARUA (2022) evidence supports the fact that those countries and universities with open governance structure, measurable performance indicators, and sustained R&D investment persistently record higher levels of research productivity and impacts. The conclusion supports the idea that Africa's research underperformance is more a result of systemic fragmentation and leadership inertia than intellectual capital deficit. A paradigm shift towards result-oriented governance, data-driven accountability, and leadership through participation is therefore essential to achieve academic excellence and national innovation goals. Its chief contribution is the development of the Research Leadership and Impact Framework (RLIF), a conceptual framework that integrates leadership, governance, capacity, and impact as recursive and interdependent columns of transforming research culture. Unlike generic frameworks built upon OECD or UNESCO templates, RLIF situates the elements in low-resource African contexts, where adaptive governance, distributed leadership, and collective capacity-building take priority. It provides a conceptual blue print for institutional reform beyond broad statements of intent to concrete results, connecting research productivity

with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the African Union's Agenda 2063 (AU, 2023).

Lastly, the study underscores that effective research management is at once an ethical and a strategic imperative. University managers must act not only as managers but as change agents in society, stimulating excellence, fostering diversity, and bridging the gap between knowledge research and the public good. Future research would require testing the RLIF model empirically through case studies, Delphi surveys of experts, and pilot policy trials to confirm its applicability in a range of African contexts. A globally competitive, innovation-driven African university is one that can be achieved if leadership, governance, and culture are purposefully aligned on a shared mission of knowledge for development.

### Recommendations

Drawing from the conceptual insights of this study, the following recommendations are proposed at three interrelated levels: institutional leadership, governance and policy, and societal engagement.

#### Leadership-Level Strategies

1. Institutionalize Transformational Leadership Training: Vice-Chancellors, Deans, and Department Heads should undergo continuous professional development in research governance, evidence-based management, and collaborative leadership (Bryman, 2007; Kiiza & Fava, 2023).
2. Develop University Research Roadmaps (2025-2030): Each institution should craft a medium-term strategic plan linking research priorities to national development goals and the AU's CESA 16–25 framework (AU, 2023; NUC, 2023).
3. Embed Accountability through Research Dashboards: Leadership should operationalize performance dashboards tracking funding, publications, mentorship, and societal impact (UNESCO, 2021; UNISA, 2024).
4. Cultivate Ethical and Inclusive Leadership: Promote institutional cultures grounded in transparency, equity, and shared governance to inspire staff engagement and trust (Schein, 2010; Becker *et al.*, 2023).

#### Governance and Policy Reforms

1. Enhance Institutional Autonomy with Accountability: Governments and regulatory

bodies (e.g., NUC, TETFund) should provide flexible yet performance-based funding models tied to measurable outcomes (TETFund, 2023; OECD, 2021).

2. Establish Research Management and Innovation Offices (RMIOs): Dedicated offices should coordinate grants, ethics, data management, and technology transfer, bridging policy and practice (AAU, 2023; ARUA, 2022).
3. Implement Performance-Linked Incentive Systems: Introduce transparent reward mechanisms for high-impact publications, patents, and community-oriented research (Coetzee, 2019; Akinyemi *et al.*, 2024).
4. Develop National Research Excellence Benchmarks: Nigeria could spearhead an African University Research Excellence Framework (AUREF), a continental tool for evaluating quality, impact, and environment (AAU, 2023; OECD, 2018).

### Societal Engagement and Innovation Ecosystem

1. Strengthen Quadruple Helix Partnerships: Build multi-stakeholder collaborations linking academia, government, industry, and communities to enhance research uptake and innovation diffusion (Dine *et al.*, 2023; AU, 2023).
2. Promote Open Science and Digital Collaboration: Align institutional policies with UNESCO's (2024) Open Science Recommendation, emphasizing data-sharing, preprints, and interdisciplinary platforms (Elkheir *et al.*, 2024).
3. Establish Community-Engaged Research Programs: Integrate participatory research and citizen science approaches that connect knowledge production to local problem-solving (Raimi *et al.*, 2021; Christopher *et al.*, 2025).
4. Monitor Societal Impact: Introduce impact audits assessing how research contributes to health, environment, and innovation outcomes, following OECD (2018) and UNESCO (2021) guidelines.

### Strategic Outlook for the University's Chief Executive Leadership

In knowledge economies, the African university must reinvent itself from a teaching university to a learning organization that continuously adapts, innovates, and leads societal change. The Research Leadership and Impact Framework (RLIF) provide

a pragmatic way forward for this. By embedding visionary leadership, stable governance, and accountable systems within their strategic plan, African universities can transcend structural limitations and reposition themselves as global hubs of innovation and public value. As UNESCO (2022) aptly remarks, "the university of the future needs to see knowledge not as a commodity but as a common good." The African university that embraces this vision through ethical leadership, evidence-based management, and inclusive partnership will not only achieve academic excellence but also redesign itself as a driver of sustainable societal progress.

### Policy Implications

- i. Institutionalize Research Leadership Development: Ministries and university councils should mandate continuous professional leadership training for Vice-Chancellors, Deans, and Directors of Research. This will strengthen evidence-based decision-making and strategic alignment with national innovation goals (Bryman, 2007; AU, 2023).
- ii. Adopt the Research Leadership and Impact Framework (RLIF): The RLIF provides a contextual governance model that integrates leadership, institutional capacity, and societal engagement. Adopting it as a benchmark tool can guide African universities in restructuring research management systems for greater impact and accountability.
- iii. Align Funding with Performance and Impact Indicators: National funding bodies (e.g., TETFund, NUC) should transition from blanket disbursements to performance-based research funding tied to measurable outputs such as publications, patents, and community impact (OECD, 2023; TETFund, 2023).
- iv. Create Integrated Research Management Offices (RMIOs): Establish dedicated units within universities to coordinate grant management, ethics review, data sharing, and technology transfer, thereby reducing fragmentation and enhancing institutional efficiency (ARUA, 2022; AAU, 2023).
- v. Strengthen Regional and International Collaboration: Encourage participation in multi-institutional research networks and open-science initiatives to leverage shared infrastructure and expertise across Africa, promoting equitable research partnerships and

sustainability (UNESCO, 2024; Dine *et al.*, 2024).

- vi. Institutionalize Impact Assessment Mechanisms: Ministries and councils should develop standardized metrics for tracking research translation into societal benefits such as policy reforms, innovation uptake, and community wellbeing to ensure accountability and relevance (UNESCO, 2021; NITDA, 2023).

### Significance Statement

This study addresses a pressing issue in African higher education: the absence of coherent leadership and governance arrangements capable of promoting research excellence and social engagement. While previous models from UNESCO and the OECD have established generic performance frameworks, few have explained how African universities, and particularly those in low-resource contexts like Nigeria, can operationalize these principles in their institutional settings. By integrating policy frameworks, comparative institutional data, and thematic evidence conceptually, this paper introduces the Research Leadership and Impact Framework (RLIF), a context-sensitive model that interlinks leadership, governance, capacity, and impact in a dynamic, interdependent system. The RLIF theorizes how strategic leadership and evidence-based governance can consolidate fragmented research structures into integrated ecosystems that produce impactful societal results. The significance of this book lies in the fact that it can change the discourse on research management from policy rhetoric to a theory-based and actionable approach with universal application across African universities. It bridges the leadership theory to institutional governance to innovation practice gap, offering practical guidance for university managers, policymakers, and development partners who wish to build resilient and high-performing research systems. Secondly, by leveraging insights from UNESCO (2024), OECD (2023), and regional efforts such as ARUA (2022) and the AU's CESA (2023), the framework locates African universities within the global knowledge economy while rooting them in local development imperatives. Lastly, this paper contributes to ongoing reform of African higher education by situating research leadership at the fulcrum of institutional transformation and national innovation capability.

The RLIF framework provides a strategic guide to building inclusive, ethical, and impact-oriented research cultures that wed academic excellence to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the African Union's Agenda 2063. In so doing, it repositions the African university from a knowledge producer to a catalyst for social progress, innovation, and sustainable development. Thus, graphically it is represented as Figure 5.

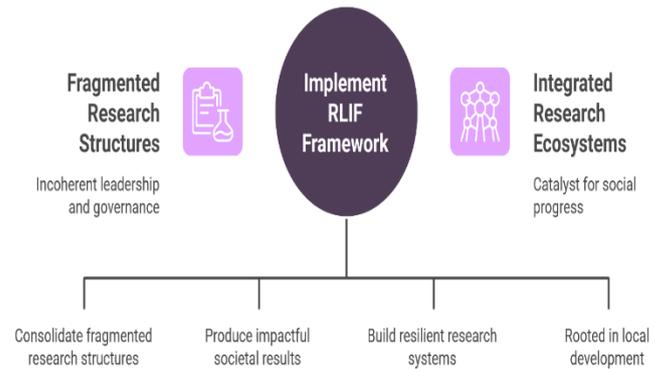


Figure 5: Achieving Research Excellence in Africa

### List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Full Meaning
AAU	Association of African Universities
AUREF	African University Research Excellence Framework
AU	African Union
ARUA	African Research Universities Alliance
CESA	Continental Education Strategy for Africa
GERD	Gross Expenditure on Research and Development
GO-SPIN	Global Observatory on Science, Technology and Innovation Policy Instruments
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
NACOSTI	National Agency for Science, Technology and Innovation
NBS	National Bureau of Statistics
NITDA	Nigerian Information Technology Development Agency
NUC	National Universities Commission
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
R&D	Research and Development
RLIF	Research Leadership and Impact Framework
RMIO	Research Management and Innovation Office
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
TETFund	Tertiary Education Trust Fund
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNISA	University of South Africa

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