



Creating a more equitable research system: lessons from Uganda

LEARNING BRIEF

Partnership between UNCST and INASP to strengthen the research system in Uganda

April 2023

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Cover image: Participants in a gender workshop, Kampala 2019



Executive summary

Research in Uganda has grown significantly in recent years, supported by investments and a strong policy framework. However, the output numbers of Ugandan research publications remain low for the size of the country and many early career researchers struggle to access support and grants. Women, being a minority in the Ugandan research system, face additional barriers.

Having recognised this, the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST) and INASP worked in partnership from 2019 to 2022 to strengthen and make the Ugandan research system more equitable.

An initial dialogue event in 2018 led to the formation of the Gender Equity in Research Alliance (GERA), highlighting gender parity as essential for a strong Ugandan research system. For GERA to reach beyond flagship institutions, regional committees were established, and workshops and activities were held in various regions of Uganda. The alliance now also has a virtual platform to make progress updates accessible to all. The aim is for GERA to become an independent consultative body and resource for the wider national research ecosystem in Uganda. It will continue to be supported by UNCST to work towards this goal and to make the alliance sustainable. Building strategic partnerships and increasing institutional presence, as well as good communication and tailoring conversations to regional and institutional contexts, will be key to maintaining GERA's momentum.

Another outcome of the partnership between UNCST and INASP was the establishment of the National Research Repository of Uganda (NRU). With the aim to make Ugandan research more visible and accessible to local and global research users, the repository is growing quickly and provides the opportunity for researchers and institutions across the country to share their research results with a wider audience. UNCST is committed to improving and developing the NRU further to promote open science.

Key achievements

- **Formation of the Gender Equity in Research Alliance (GERA) with a strong regional presence throughout Uganda.** GERA's vision is "a gender equitable research system that supports national development". The alliance consists of four regional chapters – Central Region, Eastern Region, Northern Region and Western Region – which are coordinated by committed volunteers.
- **Establishment of the National Research Repository of Uganda (NRU).** The objective of the repository is to process, collect, store and share research outputs by facilitating exchange of information among researchers, scientists and research institutions through ensuring effective coordination of Uganda's knowledge ecosystem.
- **Incorporation of GERA and NRU into the UNCST strategic plan.** Continuing to promote research equity is embedded into UNCST's strategic plan and a key element of this will be continued support for GERA and the NRU. This is key for the sustainability of the two initiatives.
- **MoUs between UNCST and other key national players in Uganda's research system.** The activities carried out as part of the collaboration between UNCST and INASP have created opportunities to bring UNCST closer together with other key organisations linked to Uganda's national research system. This shows a continued commitment to work collaboratively and enable greater coherence to ensure that research will become more meaningful and impactful to the lives of Ugandans.

Introduction

Over the last decade Uganda's research activity has grown considerably. New investments in Uganda's research system have helped to enable this, providing new research grants and training opportunities, underpinned by a strong policy framework, which has helped to articulate national priorities and ensure that research is well coordinated (Fosci et al., 2019). Between 2016 and 2022 the number of research protocols submitted to the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology doubled to over 1,000.

Nevertheless, research output, counted in publications, remains relatively low for Uganda's size (Fosci et al., 2019) – a 2012 study found that a typical Ugandan PhD holder produced an average of ten publications during their career and registered 0.6 patents (Ssematya, 2012, as cited in Kasozi, 2019). Despite the considerable expansion of the country's university system in recent years, most research still takes place in a relatively small number of institutions, and it is difficult for many early career researchers to access research training and support, secure grants and establish themselves in their respective fields. Of particular concern is the underrepresentation of women in the research system. Over the last 50 years, women represented only 23.4% of the PhDs awarded by public universities, and 24.4% awarded by private institutions (Etomary et al., 2021).

Recognising both Uganda's ambitions for research and these considerable challenges, and with Uganda's Vision 2040 and National STI Policy – which respectively position science, technology and innovation (STI) as a fundamental pillar of the Ugandan economy and place gender at the heart of aspirations for inclusive growth – providing a clear framework for change, INASP and the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST) came together in 2019 to explore how the research system could not only be strengthened, but could become more equitable and inclusive.

Our starting point was a dialogue event which we jointly developed and co-hosted in October 2018. It was important that we explored the needs, defined the problems, determined a vision, and conceived of next steps together. The dialogue explored how the national research system in Uganda could “nurture a wider pool of research talent and how to foster an inclusive research and knowledge system that enables a diversity of voices and opinions to contribute to national development”. Participants came from research and policy institutions, public and private universities, and civil society organisations. The following statement was co-developed by participants at the event:

“Government has recognized the critical role that Ugandan research plays in development, as articulated in NDP2 and Vision 2040. In order for this vision to be realized we need stronger cohesion and collaboration across the national research system”³

Gender parity was emphasised as a core tenet of a strong Ugandan research system and participants at the dialogue event agreed to form a gender network to support one another and jointly work to

The partnership between INASP and the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST) was part of the Global Platforms for Equitable Knowledge Ecosystems (GPEKE) project. The overarching goal of the project was to enable stronger and more equitable research systems that allow more talent to be unleashed. GPEKE sought to achieve this through enabling the production and communication of quality, credible and relevant research by a more diverse range of individuals and institutions across Southern research systems. Activities were implemented on a global level through INASP's learning platforms – including our [AuthorAID programme](#) – as well as more in-depth nationally in collaboration with partners in Uganda and Ethiopia¹. Uganda was chosen as a focus country for the GPEKE project because there was strong alignment between the national vision for a stronger research system, INASP's history and experience of partnership in Uganda², and because it was a focus country for Sida's bilateral research cooperation.

¹ For learning from the parallel work in Ethiopia in partnership with the Ethiopian Academy of Sciences see: <https://www.inasp.info/publications/gpeke-ethiopia>

² Further information on INASP's history of work in Uganda is available [here](#).

³ <https://blog.inasp.info/uganda-dialogue-event-enabling-equitable-research-system-communique/>

improve gender equity in research in Uganda. This gender network grew into the Gender Equity in Research Alliance.

Addressing inequities in the Ugandan research system together

Why gender?

Only 28% of researchers in Uganda are women (Fosci et al., 2019) and, as noted, the percentage of women PhD graduates is even lower. Improving gender equity in research will provide important opportunities for women to influence research and development agendas. This in turn will help to ensure that the research conducted, and products and technologies developed is relevant to the needs of women as well as men.

According to the 2022 Global Gender Gap Report published by the World Economic Forum, Uganda has closed 92.4% of its gender gap on the Educational Attainment index (World Economic Forum, 2022). At a global level 94.4% of this gender gap has been closed (World Economic Forum, 2022). When it comes to tertiary education enrolment there is a gender gap of 1.51 percentage points with 4.33% of women being enrolled compared with 5.84% of men.

Although women in Uganda now participate in higher education in larger numbers than they have done in the past, a 2020 study on gender parity in 10 colleges and 158 fields of study found that “gender inequality in access to higher education has become much more nuanced and complex than was anticipated” as “Uganda’s higher education system was stereotypic of a system that reinforces the images of women in one field and that of men in another” (Odaga, 2020). The potential of research to contribute to national development can only fully be realised if research conducted in all fields is representative of and responsive to both women’s and men’s priorities and needs.

Engaging men in conversations around gender

From the outset of the establishment of the gender alliance in Uganda, the people forming it insisted that any work to address gender inequities in the Ugandan research system must involve both women and men. The workshops to establish the gender alliance therefore actively sought to include men as well as women.

“I think the word ‘gender’ has not been packaged well. In Uganda the term gender means women and the men will not come for anything around gender. When you talk about women’s issues, the men tend to stay away. However, gender is not women. For us to have gender equity, men need to be on board, they need to be with and for us. [...] I am so glad that in the GERA we have male team members who embrace gender in an unapologetic way. We need to get more male champions on board.” (Sarah Nabachwa, Mbarara University of Science and Technology and GERA Western Region Coordinator).⁴

Reaching beyond Central Uganda

As the partnership between UNCST and INASP aimed to enable a more diverse range of individuals and institutions to take part in research and knowledge production in Uganda, a key principle of the collaboration was to reach beyond capitals and flagship institutions. Deliberate efforts were therefore made to ensure that researchers from various parts of Uganda were engaged. This included delivering some of the activities and trainings online or in a hybrid manner, as well as implementing workshops in different regions of the country. Building on from this, the gender alliance was set up to have a strong regional presence across the country.

⁴ <https://blog.inasp.info/why-improving-gender-equity-in-research-matters-in-uganda/>

Designing for sustainability

Both INASP and UNCST shared a concern to ensure that the results of our work can be sustained beyond a project. One of INASP's core values is 'making change last' and our approaches aim to "enable individuals and institutions to independently and sustainably work towards their desired changes in policy and practice, beyond the life of a project". Sustainability and national ownership were therefore core considerations from the outset of our partnership. This meant that UNCST and INASP worked collaboratively to set priorities and agree workplans and budgets and that we developed strategies for how the work would continue beyond the lifetime of the project. An essential component of ensuring sustainability was to align the initiatives started together with wider strategic considerations of UNCST as an organisation and with Uganda as a nation:

"The work around gender has fitted quite neatly with ongoing conversation around gender in science and the work on the repository [The National Research Repository of Uganda - NRU] fitted into the Open Science conversation. Uganda ratified the UNESCO recommendation for open science in 2021. And the NRU platform speaks to that." (Steven Sebbale, UNCST)

Gender Equity in Research Alliance

Set up and process

Forming the alliance

The [Gender Equity in Research Alliance](#) (GERA) in Uganda was launched in September 2019 following an initial gender champion workshop in Kampala. The alliance is a volunteer network of women and men multidisciplinary researchers from across Uganda's higher education institutions, research institutes, government, and the private sector. GERA's vision is of "a gender equitable research system that supports national development". In line with this vision, GERA aims to raise awareness of the need to create a more gender equitable research system in Ugandan institutions of research and higher education and to strengthen the capacity of individuals and institutions to mainstream gender at institutional level.

As a key principle of the partnership between UNCST and INASP was to work beyond the capital and usual flagship institutions in Uganda, the initial gender champion workshop in Kampala was followed by regional workshops in Arua, Mbarara and Busitema. The workshops aimed to create awareness of the gender related inequities that exist in research systems globally as well as in Uganda specifically and for participants to become gender champions in their institutions following the training.

Following these initial workshops, regional GERA committees were set up for Central, Eastern, Northern and Western Uganda respectively. Each GERA regional committee has a nominated volunteer Regional Coordinator and Deputy Coordinator who support and promote activities in the universities in their region to ensure a full reach across Uganda's diverse research system. Among others, regional activities have so far consisted of institutional visits and meetings to raise awareness of and commitment to GERA and webinars to disseminate information about the work of the alliance more widely.

Consolidating the alliance

Following the initial formation of GERA, a [virtual platform](#) was developed to enable researchers across Uganda to share progress being made in relation to gender equity. The virtual platform is hosted by UNCST. In addition to being a means for members of GERA to share updates and stories of change from their institutions and to spread the vision of the alliance more widely, having a virtual presence also proved beneficial during the COVID-19 pandemic as it contributed to laying the foundations for working as a remote dispersed team with access to digital tools to help facilitate collaboration.

In 2021, the alliance was also registered as an NGO. The hope is that it will become increasingly autonomous of UNCST, eventually becoming an independent consultative body and resource for the wider national research ecosystem. During 2022 a strategic plan for GERA was developed in collaboration between UNCST and the regional committees. The plan outlines four strategic priorities which will guide GERA's work over the coming years:

1. Mainstreaming gender in higher education and research institutions
2. Research and knowledge production
3. Advocacy, outreach, and publicity
4. Partnerships and collaboration

Impact so far

Changed mindsets

Gender equity in research is not something that can be achieved overnight. In addition to taking action to redress gender inequities, sustained efforts are also needed to raise awareness of why gender matters for an equitable research system. Encouraging, we have seen a growing awareness of the importance of gender inclusivity among stakeholders in the Uganda research system and GERA is part of a bigger conversation and actions to address gender gaps.

“For me the greatest impact has been the mindset change because the mindset change is really what you can see in the eyes and the voices of the [regional] stakeholders. For instance, when we were developing the strategy, the kind of comments and feedback they were able to give it really showed that something has changed, that some mindset change is happening. And that's the change that you want: a change that remains with them. And when they go back to the institutions, they can actuate that change. So I think in that sense, the level of ownership and the level of buy in almost becomes second nature.” (Steven Sebbale, UNCST)

Regional reach and ownership

GERA was set up to contribute to a more equitable research environment in Uganda. An important foundation for this was the commitment to ensuring efforts to strengthen the research system should not be focused primarily on Kampala and the Central Region and dominated by men. The establishment of the GERA regions ensures that the alliance can reach across the country and have widespread impact.

The fact that GERA was established as a direct response to a recommendation made at the 2018 dialogue event ensured that the approach was stakeholder driven and that there was shared ownership from the outset. Having the GERA regions coordinate and implement their own activities further helped to ensure that ownership is distributed and decentralised.

Addressing institutional gender gaps

Following their participation in GERA, universities and research institutes have undertaken a range of activities to address institutional gender inequities. This includes activities related to policy development, institutional awareness raising and sensitisation, engagement with senior management, and establishment of gender officers or units. Specific activities include:

- Undertaking institutional gender audits or surveys
- Developing gender policies
- Reviewing existing sexual violence and maternity leave policies
- Setting up a research fund to support gender sensitive research groups
- Training staff on the role of gender equity in research, data management and administration.
- Sensitizing senior management on gender analysis and the need to incorporate this in institutional planning

“It has helped us identify the gender gaps which we had no idea exist. The process of gathering data and statistics revealed the focus areas e.g. administration.” (GERA gender champion workshop participant)

“The training report informed management about gender staffing ratios and highlighted the need to consider affirmative action during recruiting period.” (GERA gender champion workshop participant)

Plans for the future – hopes and what it will take

The strategic plan that has been developed for GERA will set the direction for the work of the alliance over the coming years. Growing attention more broadly to gender inequities, including in research and knowledge, and the need to address these means that the surrounding environment is ready and ripe. Being able to maintain and sustain the momentum will be key to affecting change and mobilising the financial and other resources needed for this. An important element of being able to maintain the momentum will be for GERA to build strategic partnerships with others who are also working to address gender inequities.

Parallel with the efforts to build strategic partnership with other like-minded organisations, GERA will also continue to grow its presence in existing and new member institutions from Uganda’s higher education and research system with a view to potentially having a GERA office in each institution in the future. This increased institutional presence will ensure that the conversation and efforts to address gender inequities in research in Uganda will remain centred in the universities and research institutes.

While there is still work to do to grow and consolidate GERA further, there is a “general appreciation that we are on to something very important, which we need to facilitate, and to allow” (Steven Sebbale, UNCST).

What we learnt

- **Ownership at both national and regional level has been key to the success of GERA so far.** Having regional chapters has meant that GERA has been able to tailor conversations and activities to specific regional contexts and needs. This, along with the strong commitment to GERA from the regional coordination teams, has ensured that GERA has been able to reach beyond Kampala and now has a strong presence throughout Uganda.
- **Timely communication and coordination are important for maintaining momentum – especially when relying on regional volunteers.** In order for a central coordinating team to maintain relationships with a dispersed network and ensure continued motivation, it is important that they are effective and timely communicators keeping everyone involved updated on ongoing activities and progress.
- **Focus is needed to affect change most effectively.** While there remain gender equity gaps to be closed in many areas of society, GERA will most effectively contribute to and affect change by maintaining a specific focus on gender equity in research.

National Research Repository of Uganda

The story so far

As with the gender alliance, the [National Research Repository of Uganda](#) (NRU) was established as a response to recommendations made during the dialogue event held in 2018. Participants at the event noted the lack of an effective platform for collecting Ugandan research and making it more visible to local and global research users.

Following further consultations which UNCST convened during 2021, a National Technical Committee was set up to oversee the development of the NRU as an open science solution for easy

dissemination, access, and coordination of Ugandan research. Collaborators for the platform include Research and Education Network Uganda (RENU), the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE), and Consortium of Uganda University Libraries (CUUL).

The objective of the repository is to process, collect, store, and share research outputs by facilitating exchange of information among researchers, scientists, and research institutions through ensuring effective coordination of Uganda's knowledge ecosystem – and the research collection hosted on the NRU is growing daily.

In line with our partnership's focus on enabling a more diverse range of individuals and institutions in Uganda to take part in research and knowledge production, the NRU is also providing a platform for universities and research institutions outside of Kampala and in rural locations to catalogue and share their research results.

“The National Research Repository of Uganda Platform has put a spotlight on the opportunities and possibilities that a more equitable research system could create... [facilitating] new partnerships in academia, private research organisations; [and] with actors within Uganda's publishing community.” (UNCST)

UNCST has generally integrated the platform into its other tools of research quality assurance and is committed to improving and optimising the platform with more capabilities that can strengthen its utility in terms of system-wide coordination. The activities of the platform are also being provided with budgetary support which will further integrate its functionality and reach.

What we learnt

- **A national platform helps to make Ugandan research efforts and expertise more visible across the country and beyond.** The NRU platform provides a new capability for UNCST to better coordinate across the research system. There are plans to further optimise the NRU to co-integrate with UNCST's other platforms to harness research quality assurance and facilitate better knowledge diffusion for equity and inclusivity.
- **Partnerships between national agencies are an important means to leverage expertise around shared goals.** Through the work to establish the NRU, partnerships between key national players in Uganda's research system have grown and matured into strong strategic networks. The support from the Research and Education Network for Uganda (RENU) in developing the NRU has crystallised into the signing of an MOU with UNCST. As part of this, RENU will be providing digital infrastructure services at UNCST's Technology and Innovation Business Incubation Centre. UNCST's partnership with the National Council for Higher Education has also been strengthened through the work to establish the NRU. This partnership is aiming at strengthening collaboration among regulators for better research quality assurance and system coherence.
- **Tapping into broader trends and conversations can help to build momentum for digital initiatives.** The NRU was timely, not only because it was being established during the COVID-19 pandemic when greater attention was put on doing things digitally, but also because of the prominent global conversation around Open Science. This provided an enhanced momentum for the platform, and it is expected that more universities will see the benefit of the NRU as they aim to make the research conducted at their institutions more visible and discoverable.

Working as partners

Serving research across the entire system

The national mandate of UNCST enabled us to reach a wider range of institutions and individuals in Uganda and this was important as the aim of our partnership was to serve researchers across the whole system. UNCST was also well positioned to convene and engage with other national strategic stakeholders in the Ugandan research system as well as reach beyond the centre to engage higher education and research institutions in all regions of Uganda. The convening authority of UNCST was clearly demonstrated by the diversity of universities and other institutions that attended the 2018 dialogue event, as well as the regional representation of the East African Science and Technology Commission (EASTECO). It was also continuously demonstrated during our partnership, particularly when it came to collaborating with the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE), the Research and Education Network Uganda (RENU) and the Consortium of Uganda University Libraries (CUUL) to establish the National Research Repository of Uganda.

Partnership founded on shared commitment

The partnership between UNCST and INASP was founded on a shared commitment to building equitable research systems that can help to solve national and global development challenges. We also shared the fundamental view that national direction and ownership were essential for ensuring that our collaboration would focus on the right things, namely priorities and agendas identified by actors internal to the Ugandan research system. This shared commitment and belief enabled us to form a partnership that was built on mutual trust and respect. It also meant that at INASP we saw ourselves as playing a more advisory and support role rather than being in direct control of activity delivery. As partners, we listened to each other with patience to build an understanding of each other and the different organisations and systems we were coming from.

Turning challenges into opportunities for learning

Our mutual commitment to the partnership enabled us to navigate through internal structural changes which took place both at UNCST and INASP during our collaboration. It also meant that we were able to approach challenges as opportunities for learning and turn them into strengths. This was the case with the COVID-19 pandemic which became an opportunity for UNCST to tap into the accelerating online learning agenda in Uganda.

“Some of these challenges were also points of learning. And the beauty of this is that we could adjust and then pre-empt the next challenge, having learned what happened. So it was very cascading learning.” (Immaculate Nakamya, UNCST)

Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST)

<https://www.uncst.go.ug/>

UNCST was established in 1990 as a semi-autonomous government agency. Its mandate is to:

- Develop and implement policies and strategies for integrating science and technology into national development policies
- Advise the Government of Uganda on policy matters necessary for promoting science and technology
- Coordinate and guide national research and development in Uganda.
- Act as a clearing house for research in Uganda

Most recently, four new functions have been added to UNCST:

- Regulating all aspects of Science, Technology and Innovation;
- Translating STI policies into regulations and standards to guide the operations of the entire STI system;
- Monitoring and evaluation of the STI activities and compliance to STI regulations; and,
- Homing of science professional institutions and continuing professional development

What we learnt

- **Building equitable partnerships is an ongoing effort.** Shared commitment and mutual understanding are key foundations for equitable partnerships, and these need to be embedded both at an organisational and individual level. However, learning to understand each other's priorities, organisational systems and ways of working requires ongoing time and effort – particularly when there is turnover in staff and new people must learn to work together.
- **A shared commitment to learning enables a constructive approach to dealing with challenges.** When the COVID-19 pandemic spread in 2020 we had to rapidly adapt and change the way we implemented the project moving some activities either wholly online or implementing them in a hybrid manner. Approaching this as an opportunity for UNCST and other project stakeholders in Uganda to benefit and learn from INASP's long experience with online delivery of capacity strengthening activities enabled us to turn the initial challenge into an opportunity of accelerated learning.
- **Strategic partnerships beyond the direct collaboration partners are essential for effecting change across the research system.** UNCST's convening authority made them a strong partner for a collaboration which aimed to affect national-level change in Uganda's research system. The partnership activities created opportunities to bring UNCST closer together with other key organisations linked to the national research system. An important aspect of building these closer links was the opportunity that strategic stakeholders had to engage not only with UNCST, but also with INASP:

“The stakeholders were also able to directly engage with INASP which is sometimes not very common. With some projects you never get to see the partner, but the stakeholders were really able to engage with INASP directly in a conversation and that helps a lot, because it just shows that they are on board all the time. I think that built a lot of ownership.”
(Immaculate Nakamya, UNCST)

Next steps

For research to become more meaningful and impactful to the lives of Ugandans it must be responsive to the needs and priorities of all its people – regardless of gender or location.

As the Gender Equity in Research Alliance continues to work towards “a gender equitable research system that supports national development” and the National Research Repository of Uganda is further consolidated as a platform sharing research from all areas of Uganda, focus will be on:

- **Making Ugandan research more visible and discoverable to researchers and research users in Uganda and internationally.** *“If our research can be more visible and accessible, then it helps improve the use of the research content that we know is there – it's just not well-curated.”* (Immaculate Nakamya, UNCST)
- **Promoting wider engagement in GERA – including of university leadership and government.** Since GERA was launched in 2019, participants from more than 60 institutions across Uganda have been involved in conversations around gender equity in research. To strengthen activities related to addressing gender barriers at institutional and national level, GERA will actively work to widen engagement with key decision makers including university leadership and government actors.
- **Building further partnerships and collaboration to achieve GERA's vision.** A gender equitable research system in support of national development will require collaboration with actors across the system, both nationally and internationally. GERA is actively working to expand its collaboration with key strategic partner including with local and international NGOs, CSOs, and the private sector.

This movement [GERA] is bound to live on way beyond my imagination.... In my current capacity as the acting deputy coordinator for GERA, Central Region I have worked with other committee members to reach out to other tertiary institutions of learning in Uganda. As we continue meeting more and spreading the gospel, the education outlook of this country is bound to shift irreversibly and focus more on ensuring equitable representation in all aspects of our lives" (Drake Tamale, Uganda Christian University and GERA Central Region Deputy Coordinator)

UNCST and INASP are currently exploring how we can build on our partnership, including the establishment of the Gender Equity in Research Alliance.

If you share our ambitions for a more equitable research and knowledge system, and see opportunities to collaborate, get in touch.

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