

Notes from the DELTAS LRP

Selected learnings and discussions from the DELTAS LRP dissemination meeting 2021

The DELTAS Africa Learning Research Programme

The Developing Excellence in Leadership, Training and Science (DELTAS) initiative aimed to improve health in Africa through research driven by the most urgent regional challenges. The Learning Research Programme (LRP) led by the Centre for Capacity Research at the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, worked alongside the DELTAS Africa consortia to produce research-based learning about how to train and develop world-class researchers, foster their careers and collaborations, and promote research uptake. The LRP was designed to achieve three objectives: i. to inform the internal decision-making within DELTAS Africa during the life course of the programme; ii. to contribute to the developing evidence-base pertaining to research capacity strengthening more broadly; and iii. to support the development (through PhD fellowships) of African early career researchers. Activities were distributed across four research themes - equitable career pathways, researcher training and development, knowledge translation, and consortia management.



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This summary report presents the selected learnings and discussions from the DELTAS LRP online dissemination meeting held in March 2021. In addition to a panel discussion on key lessons for funding, implementing, and evaluating research capacity strengthening, each thematic lead presented their research findings. The meeting was attended by 60+ participants, ranging from students and researchers to funders and policy makers. The full slide deck and recording of the meeting can be found [here](#) or at www.lstmed.ac.uk/ccr.

DEVELOPING EXCELLENCE IN LEADERSHIP TRAINING AND SCIENCE (DELTAS AFRICA) FUNDED PROGRAMMES

MALI

DELGEME

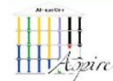
Developing Excellence in Leadership and Genetic training for Malaria Elimination in Sub-Saharan Africa

SENEGAL

MARCAD

Malaria Research Capacity Development in West and Central Africa

COTE D'IVOIRE



Afrique One - African Science Partnership for Intervention Research Excellence (Afrique One - ASPIRE)

GHANA



West African Centre for Cell Biology of Infectious Pathogens

UGANDA



Makerere University VUARI Centre of Excellence for Infection & Immunity Research and Training



Training Health Researchers into Vocational Excellence

KENYA



Consortium for Advanced Research Training in Africa



Initiative to Develop African Research Leaders

ZIMBABWE



African Mental Health Research Initiative

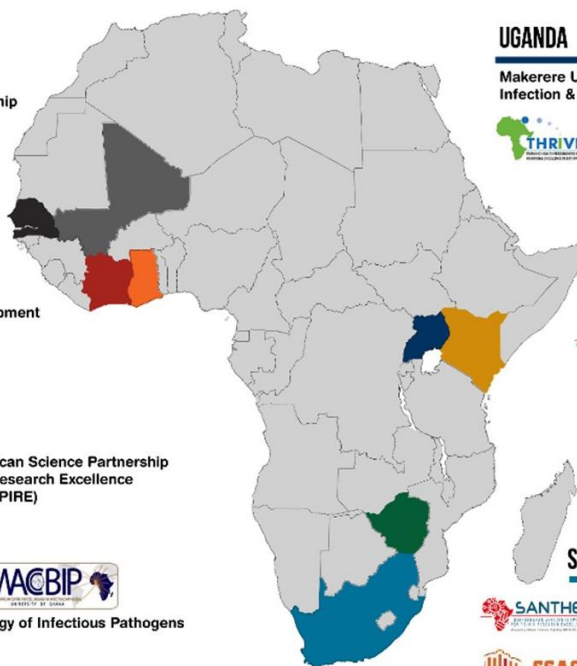
SOUTH AFRICA



Sub-Saharan Africa Network for TB/HIV Research Excellence



Sub-Saharan Africa Consortium for Advanced Biostatistics Training



Presentation 1 - Equitable Career Pathways: Millicent Liani

Exploring the barriers and enablers to intersectional gender equitable scientific career pathways within the DELTAS-funded African research institutions. Providing information about how to improve research career equity for internationally competitive African researchers while acknowledging their multiple social identities.

Objectives

1. To understand how familial and socio-cultural factors shape inequities in scientific career progression, and their disadvantages in relation to their multiple social identities, along the scientific career pathway.
2. To find out how institutional environments, including values, policies, and their implementation shape inequities in scientific career progression, and their disadvantages in relation to their multiple social identities.
3. To identify the strategies that are being used within the selected DELTAS institutions to promote gender equitable career progression.
4. To establish the desired actions for change for enhancing equitable career progression and their disadvantages in relation to their multiple social identities, to progress along the career ladder in future.

Key Messages

- In Africa, a region which has the lowest numbers of women in science careers, little is known about underlying social, cultural, and institutional drivers and processes that produce gender inequities in science careers.
- Study data revealed conflict with normative family obligations and time commitments to research, as well as experiences of prejudice and social/familial pressure expressed by both male and female participants.
- At the institutional level, the study found inequitable access to support systems within institutions, negative practices and culture at the workplace, and funding structures and progression opportunities which were perceived as highly competitive with little sense of job security and financial stability.
- Efforts made by the DELTAS consortia to address gender inequities include mentorship schemes, childcare support, flexible working arrangements, bridge funds for researchers, defying gender norms on early marriage and childbearing, and networking support.

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“In the interest of career progression, you have to make sacrifices” [M14, MCR]

“There is no work-life balance in science, yeah...Relationships went through the roof!” [F31, MCR]

“It’s a steeper hill for women to climb” [M09, PhD]

“Science is never going to be easy especially if you are married woman” [M05, PDF]

“The biggest issue for me being a family man is the uncertainty ...you are totally dependent on grants ... there is always the pressure to default to the usual private practice box” [M26, PDF]

*“Are you normal?...You are not thinking about marriage? You look stupid or have lost your way in life”
[F02, PhD, 30-34 years old]*

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Recommendations

- Enhance leadership trainings at all career levels to help build confidence, agency, and empowerment of fellows.
- Build and nurture a supportive research community through launching gender sensitive decision-making spaces/open dialogues, formal structured mentorship for all, and provision of psycho-social counseling.
- Commit to creating supportive and inclusive gender sensitive enabling work environments through establishing consortia-level standard operating procedures on misconduct and provision of flexi-time and childcare support.
- Better representation of women in scientific leadership has the potential for reshaping organisational cultures.
- Foster and secure the careers of researchers by embracing alternative career pathways.
- Avail gender and diversity budget as part of funding.

Presentation 2 - Researcher Training: Justin Pulford

Ensuring the effective, needs-based and context appropriate professional development support for African researchers, by exploring the factors that enable stronger research capacity strengthening outcomes for both individuals and institutions belonging to DELTAS Africa consortia.

Activities

Three core activities have been completed in this theme:

1. Development of a registry of health-related postgraduate training programmes provided by higher education institutes in sub-Saharan Africa, which is available online and can be accessed [here](#).
2. An online survey of sub-Saharan African researchers' professional development opportunities, needs, and barriers.
3. A qualitative case study exploring the extent, and process by which, researcher training in sub-Saharan Africa may be enhanced through DELTAS consortia membership.

Key Messages

Selected finding from the online survey:

- Of the 520 respondents, 47% were members of the DELTAS Africa network and 76% (399/520) reported attending at least one training event in the 12 months prior to the survey. Collectively, these individuals reported attending a total of 716 training events over this period.
- A high frequency of reported training events and training priorities were categorised as 'knowledge and intellectual abilities and techniques to do research'. Training and priority needs in the other domains (personal effectiveness, research governance and organisation, engagement influence and impact) were reported at a much lower frequency. This led to question whether available training is correctly balanced across the four domains.
- Lack of financial support to attend training was the most frequently reported barrier, followed by lack of suitable training opportunities, time to attend training, and lack of information about available opportunities. Regression analysis was conducted to explore if demographic variables were predictors of training uptake or barriers to training, but surprisingly found no supporting statistical evidence.

Selected findings from the qualitative case study:

- Regarding the interface theme, when the leadership and management of the consortia and the leadership and management of the partner institutions is closely aligned, the ease in which research capacity strengthening activities can be achieved are magnified.

Funding

"... in my own field from lab techniques there is a big gap between us and [non-DELTAS] fellows at the university. Here [within the consortium] we have the opportunity to collect data easily, on time. We have the opportunity and the material to conduct our research in a lab at any moment, but at the university this is not the case. Some of our colleagues there can spend three to four years without nothing. They just register every year, but there is no fund and material in the lab to work."

PhD Fellow, Consortia C

Leadership

"I really liked the presence of [name of consortium director]. I understand that he is close to young people. He doesn't only give the subject, he is there. I really felt that. The fact that he came really touched me. I tell myself that [consortium name] is a bit like senior, adult and youth. I liked that, this link between him and the beneficiaries."

PhD Fellow, Consortia B

Interaction

"That's why I'm talking about exchanges. As Montaigne said: "You must rub your brain against that of others." It's always good to know what others are doing, to see improvement, to have a better perception of what you're doing and what you need to do."

Support Staff, Consortia B

Interface

"So there's a lot of lobbying that has to take place [between the consortia secretariat and member institutions], a lot of negotiations, a lot of diplomacy in your communication. You don't just say, I want this report at this time. No. You might not get it."

Support Staff, Consortia A

Recommendations

- Address the lack of, and access to, funding for training noting that survey participants expressed a strong desire for in person training by renowned experts.
- Improve access to training through better networking and communication of training opportunities.
- Enhance the benefits of formal training through increased researcher interaction within the consortia context.

Presentation 3 - Knowledge Translation: Violet Murunga

Generating evidence to inform knowledge translation capacity development efforts targeting African researchers and their institutions in Africa and low- and middle-income country settings.

Objectives

1. To explore the knowledge translation capacity and practice of African researchers' belonging to the DELTAS Africa programme.
2. To identify sources of support DELTAS researchers have drawn on within and outside of the DELTAS Africa programme and supportive policies and structures in their home institutions.
3. To provide recommendations for improving African researchers' knowledge translation capacity and practice at the individual, institutional, and macro levels.

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Knowledge translation is the synthesis, exchange and application of knowledge by relevant stakeholders to accelerate the benefits of global and local innovation in strengthening health systems and improving people's health

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Key Messages

- Gaps in knowledge translation are magnified in the African context due to resource constraints. While there have been accelerated efforts to address the know-do-gap there is a lack of understanding of the role of the researchers' context i.e. where the research takes place.
- Knowledge translation capacity development “*may not be nuanced for a diverse group of researchers*” with regards to the researchers' discipline, career stage, and interest in it, resulting in researchers having a narrow understanding.
- Knowledge translation was better understood as it related to applied research. Among basic researchers, knowledge translation was perceived to begin when a product is developed, leading to basic researchers believing they did not have an immediate role in knowledge translation beyond linkages with industry.
- Institutions shape researchers' knowledge translation capacity and practice through mandates, their processes, and technical and financial support. Looking at high level policies and vision statements, the study found that most institutions held aspirations for knowledge translation; but when delving into the institutions knowledge translation policies and practices they were lacking, resulting in institutes struggling to achieve their vision.
- At the macro level, funders can shape researchers' knowledge translation capacity and practice by mandating it but the study found that most donors do not mandate knowledge translation. There is an emergence of funding for knowledge translation projects but only researchers with an interest in knowledge translation would seek and apply.
- The study identified several challenges relating to mandated knowledge translation under the DELTAS programme. For example, during the grant application process there was no specific guidance on what type of knowledge translation activities could be undertaken within the grant, resulting in a wide interpretation of this component and groups with low knowledge translation exposure presenting vague communication plans.

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“I was talking to someone who is a lab person and he said to me but how can I do public engagement when I am in the lab all the time” [Applied, senior researcher, P21]

“If you are doing basic research...you would be engaging...the public and other stakeholders much less. But it doesn't make your research much less important. So it's quite a grey area” [Senior basic research, P02]

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Recommendations

- Research funders should mandate knowledge translation and support for a comprehensive range of knowledge translation activities.
- Knowledge translation champions should generate good practices tailored for different types of researchers i.e., considering researcher discipline, career stage, and interest in knowledge translation.
- Institutions and funders should nuance their knowledge translation policy and guidelines by different types of researchers.

Presentation 4 - Consortia Management: Nadia Tagoe

Critically examining how the management processes and practices of health research capacity strengthening consortia influence capacity outcomes.

Research Questions

1. What consortium management processes are adopted and what factors influence them?
2. To what extent do management processes and practices align with capacity development principles?
3. How does consortium management feature in research capacity strengthening goals and mechanisms?

Key Messages

- There has been huge investment in research capacity development over the last three decades through consortia, thus making it important to know if these investments are producing the desired results, as well as increasing understanding on where investment should be targeted.
- The management structures and processes are similar across consortia. The differences lay in the strategies used by the consortia in executing management processes.
- Decision making on which strategy to use is complex due to tensions between the different strategy options - between efficiency versus effectiveness, for example, consortia leaders had to decide whether the capacity component would focus on the individual (e.g., training which was seen as efficient), or on the institution (e.g., addressing systemic challenges which were viewed as effective but may not be feasible within the time period of the programme and would be harder to measure); and tension around excellence versus equity, for example, consortia leaders had to consider whether they used a merit- or quota-based training resource allocation.
- The consortia's perception of what research capacity strengthening actually entails and what activities are valued were a key driver in decision making, noting how their perception of research capacity strengthening was influenced by evaluation indicators set by DELTAS among other factors.
- Certain strategies deployed by consortia did not align with principles of research capacity strengthening undermining the long-term and complex capacity development processes needed. For example, establishing parallel management systems which only served the consortium.
- Strategic and managerial dimensions of capacity provide grounding for relevant use of technical skills and infrastructure. The COVID pandemic demonstrated the need for local institutes to self-manage and membership in consortia developed the required capabilities for this.

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To achieve more relevant and sustainable capacity outcomes and to optimize returns on health research capacity strengthening investments, consortium management processes and practices need to prioritize holistic capacity strengthening aims

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Recommendations

- Base programme requirements and management decisions on a holistic perception of research capacity.
- Recognise the reality and capacity implications of tensions and trade-offs in consortium management.
- Embrace risks associated with research capacity strengthening and its management and back commitments with clear guidelines.
- Apply research capacity strengthening-specific definitions of performance and a range of evaluation outcomes and indicators to promote prioritisation of capacity strengthening principles.
- Recognise that consortium management is a capacity strengthening mechanism and needs to be deliberately planned for, resourced, and tracked.
- Appreciate that there is a science to capacity strengthening which should inform programme design and implementation.

Panel Discussion Forum: Key lessons for funding, implementing and evaluating research capacity strengthening consortia

How can we practically address the challenges identified?

Attendees discussed **allyship with male colleagues**, highlighting that men in leadership and management positions have a major role to play in terms of being **gender champions** and pushing for **structural and cultural change**. Attendees agreed that coaching for both men and women leaders would be a valuable tool to promote equitable practices and **address un/conscious gender biases in the workplace** and noted existing **training courses** that could be utilised. Panellists used this as an opportunity to elicit examples of gender transformative leadership within institutions or consortia from attendees. Examples provided centred around the provision of **tailored leadership training**, ensuring an **equal gender balance** among staff and research fellows, and providing financial and technical support to research fellows that had taken **maternity leave**. In addition, attendees discussed **sharing parental duties at home**, and an example was provided within the consortium context of when women attended residential training there were instances where the father of the child came to be the childminder.

Attendees discussed the quality of supervision as the online survey highlighted a low frequency of training events in personal effectiveness and communication. Panellists expressed a need for **increased availability of leadership or supervision training**, consequences for poor supervision and **equal opportunity** for institutional supervisors within a consortium context. Panellists expanded on this with a brief discussion on **how to measure the quality of supervision**, advising on the use of base indicators around time spent with students, satisfaction surveys, and outcome of the PhD process. However, panellists noted that these are crude measures and quality of supervision may not be the cause, therefore further exploration is needed.

Attendees considered how **knowledge translation champions** can be given a platform to promote and celebrate achievements. The panel expressed a need for knowledge translation champions to **organise their own platforms** e.g., symposiums and establish a knowledge translation community of practice within their own institutions.

Attendees discussed how **consortium leaders can best be supported** in selecting management strategies. Panellists highlighted a framework which had been developed as part of this research which takes stakeholders though **considerations when choosing management strategies**, including key questions divided into the tangible and intangible. Attendees discussed the possibility of using this framework as part of **additional training** for consortium leaders. Further to this were discussions on the need to take a **holistic approach to research capacity strengthening** through consortia management. Panellists argued there was a need to shift the balance of focus from the technical to the **strategic, cultural, and behavioural norms in research**, with institutes setting and driving their own research agenda to the benefit of their country/vision.

What role should funders play in addressing the challenges identified?

Panellists argued that a lot can be done at the institutional level without waiting for funding - for example, by **encouraging women to apply for fellowships** through communicating available support e.g., childcare. Panellists recommended **gender and diversity budgets** to support the **implementation of gender transformative actions**. They also advised funders work closely with gender experts and develop **implementation plans with appropriate indicators**.

Funders should **allow for a range of knowledge translation activities** and not privilege some aspects of knowledge translation over others. Funding should be **open to any relevant activity** and **donors more flexible** about how knowledge translation money is spent. The ideal situation would be for funders to have multiple grant schemes including **research grants that mandate knowledge translation**, those that are for research that has no projected application, and those for knowledge translation projects (with a focus on promoting uptake of research). Funders, however, may need to **prioritise where they put more resources** and should **consider a holistic perspective** when designing, reviewing and funding research capacity strengthening programmes.

Attendees discussed the possibility of **funders facilitating training in consortium management** as part of upcoming inception meetings. However, attendees believed that there was benefit in awardees embedding and designing the training, as opposed to the funder.

How do findings compare across different geographies?

Panellists believed that **most of the findings resonate** with the global discourse. A possible nuance in the African context was on how **familial norms also impede men's scientific careers**. As the main earner or family head they feel their responsibilities **impedes their work in relation to mobility and conflicts with a research career**. In addition to this they appear to suffer in silence and are not open about these challenges with their superiors.

Attendees questioned whether there was any difference between institutions in different geographies in terms of power imbalances and it was stated that **power imbalance is not limited to north-south collaborations**; it is also based on **structural factors** e.g., resources of one partner versus the other, and/or capacity of one partner versus the other. Partners expressed feelings of **inadequacy in working with partners** in a field that they have extensive experience/capacity in.

What is the potential impact of the COVID pandemic on knowledge translation?

Attendees discussed whether basic researchers' understanding and attitudes towards knowledge translation had shifted in response to the COVID pandemic and the increased relevance of communicating basic science to the general public. Panellists believed the **COVID pandemic had been beneficial by bringing basic research to the forefront**, however, they recognised this as a complex challenge. Within the knowledge translation space, it is well acknowledged that one-off interactions with non-researchers does not necessarily address the challenge, it must be an ongoing process.

About the Centre for Capacity Research

The Centre for Capacity Research specialises in the science of research capacity strengthening – a process of individual and institutional development leading to higher levels of skills and greater ability to perform useful research. The centre is a global leader in advancing evidence-informed capacity strengthening practice in low- and middle-income countries, through:

- Conducting high quality, implementation focused capacity strengthening research
- Fostering a global community of capacity strengthening scientists with equitable low- and middle-income country participation
- Sharing learning and advocating for evidence-informed capacity strengthening practice

The Centre for Capacity Research retains a broad interest in capacity strengthening initiatives of all types within a low- and middle-income country contexts, including a sub-speciality in laboratory strengthening.

Our research themes have been developed to span the range of capacity strengthening activities we undertake:

Theory - to advance theoretical and conceptual understanding of capacity strengthening

Process - to support capacity strengthening implementation through embedded 'learning' research, enhancing programme success and highlighting 'good practice' for current and future capacity strengthening initiatives

Measurement and Impact - to develop and apply frameworks and tools appropriate for tracking progress and measuring the outcome and impact of capacity strengthening interventions

To access related publications and other research capacity strengthening resources please visit:

Web: www.lstmed.ac.uk/ccr | Email: ccr@lstmed.ac.uk | Twitter: @lstm_ccr

