

ZENEX FOUNDATION 2023 STAKEHOLDER REVIEW

1. INTRODUCTION

The Zenex Foundation works with a variety of stakeholders in the field of education, playing a significant role as a convenor, grant-maker, and programmes coordinator. Owing to the role that we play, we conduct regular stakeholder reviews with our stakeholders within the education sector. These reviews are an opportunity for stakeholders and partners to share feedback on their experiences engaging and working with us. The reviews provide useful learnings for enhancing Zenex practices and strategy.

We commissioned a stakeholder review in 2023 which included an online survey and telephonic interviews. We asked our stakeholders and partners to review our Grant-making approach, Programme management processes, Strategy 2025, and Stakeholder engagement. The findings and recommendations from this process were deepened in focus group discussions with respondents representing NGOs, government, donors and researchers.

The Zenex Board and Staff have found the feedback from stakeholders most useful, and it has given us much to consider in the final phase of Strategy 2025 (spanning the period 2019-2025) and planning for our next strategy cycle.

We thank all of those who have taken part in the review and shared their views frankly. The feedback was largely positive. We are really grateful for the honest feedback on how our work and role are perceived and how our strategies and investments are impacting the sector.

Please see attached summary of [consolidated findings](#) and the Zenex Foundation response.

With thanks

The Zenex Foundation Team

Summary of key findings

Thought leadership

The findings highlight the important role Zenex plays as a thought leader in the sector and how to enhance this role, specifically concerning influencing the government. The Zenex Board is pleased that stakeholders recognise the thought leadership role played by the Foundation. Stakeholders caution though that Zenex findings are not easily accessible.

We recognise that not enough knowledge sharing and building on lessons learned is taking place. As recommended by some stakeholders, the use of social media and a well-structured website could assist to make more explicit some of our key research and knowledge products. Zenex will share widely and regularly across various social media platforms to increase our visibility. We will create more targeted opportunities for engagement with specific stakeholders around relevant research.

Recruitment processes are underway to set up of a dedicated Thought Leadership unit in the organisation. The unit will amplify this area of work, and ensure that information is more easily available and that the content is better curated.

We note with concern perceptions that our programme management approach is inconsistent, and that the programme managers lack in depth education expertise.

As a grant-maker, the programme team's knowledge and experience covers the education sector, programme design, philanthropy, and Monitoring and Evaluation. We recognise that Programme Managers are not subject matter experts. We will continue to build our expertise across all areas pertinent to the work of the Foundation.

Strategy: Systems approach

Stakeholders acknowledged the significant role Zenex plays in making a systemic contribution to the improvement of education outcomes. They recommended strengthening the Zenex Foundation Theory of Change to reflect the Foundation's systemic impact, and to be bolder in sharing lessons with government and agitating for government adoption of proven programmes.

We are both humbled and challenged by the recommendations and continue to engage government at various levels to seeks ways to embed programmes and approaches that have been tested and proven to work.

Strategy: Evidence-based approach

Being an advocate for evidence-based work is perceived as one of Zenex's greatest strengths. However, stakeholders were unaware of the Foundation's efforts to build Monitoring and Evaluation capacity of NGOs in particular.

We are mindful that much of our work is done in partnership with the NGO sector. During the current strategy period we have invested in strengthening the capacity of the NGOs we work with. Specifically, we are working with the National Association of Social Change Entities in Education (NASCEE) and the South African Monitoring and Evaluation Association (SAMEA) to strengthen Monitoring and Evaluation in the education sector at an organisational and individual level.

Grant-making approach

The review suggests that Zenex should be more open to receive unsolicited proposals to stimulate innovation. There were also suggestions that Zenex should consider smaller grants within a lighter grant-making framework to encourage innovation in the sector.

Zenex is a multi-year funder, and its strategic focus remains to support a few big projects rather than to fund small programmes. However, innovation is one of our core pillars and we will seek opportunities and provide resources for innovation within the multi-year projects. We

will also ring-fence a small portion of the budget for open calls for innovation within the Foundation's strategic focus areas.

Concluding remarks

Over the past 20 years, Zenex has disbursed nearly R1billion in the South African education sector. This grant-making relies on the Foundation working alongside and in partnership with NGOs, researchers, academics, consultants and those at the coalface of the education system – school management, teachers, governing bodies and learners.

We will continue to consult with partners both informally and through stakeholder surveys to ensure that we remain a learning organisation with open working relationships with our partners and stakeholders.