

Strengthening Education Evaluation and Research Capacity

Introduction

South Africa's education evaluation and research sector faces a persistent shortage of Black (African, Coloured, Indian) senior evaluators and researchers. To address this, Zenex Foundation is investing in the LEAD Programme (Learn. Elevate. Advance. Develop), a ten-year flagship initiative within its Research and Thought Leadership focus area. LEAD works in partnership with a range of organisations to build the capability of individuals, organisations and institutions to undertake education evaluations and research, backed by an indicative budget of R10 million a year over the life of the Programme.

The Education Evaluation and Research Capacity Building Programme is the vehicle through which LEAD's current activities are delivered.

Project Overview

Six mid-career evaluation mentees have been placed within established monitoring and evaluation (M&E) agencies – Southern Hemisphere, Kelello Consulting, Social Impact Insights Africa, JET Education Services and the Nelson Mandela Institute – for a three-year period (2025–2027). Through hands-on evaluation and research work, mentees develop technical skills such as framework development, data collection and analysis, and report writing, alongside professional skills such as project management and ethical practice. Each placement is supported by an experienced mentor and co-funded by the host agency.

In addition, three research associates are based within the Department of Basic Education's Research Coordination, Monitoring and Evaluation Unit from 2024–2027, gaining experience directly within a government department while contributing to evidence-based policy and planning for basic education.

A third stream, run through the Centre for Research on Evaluation, Science and Technology (CREST), supports two postdoctoral fellows undertaking education evaluation research from 2024–2026, as well as the development of accredited short courses to build education M&E skills more broadly among researchers, evaluators and funders across the country and continent.

All participants and their mentors receive a package of wraparound support, including practice-based mentoring and coaching, executive coaching, further study opportunities, and participation in an annual Zenex conference where mentees can present their work. This support is funded by Zenex and tailored to individual needs through an annual professional development plan agreed between each mentor and mentee.

Objectives

The overarching goal of the Programme is to grow a pipeline of Black evaluation and research leaders equipped to lead education scholarship, evaluation and policy discourse in South Africa. By combining structured mentorship, further study and applied project experience, mentees are supported to move from contributing to small tasks toward independently leading medium- and large-scale evaluations and research projects.

Outcomes

The Programme is working towards the following outcomes:

- an increased number of Black evaluators leading evaluations in the education sector;
- an increased number of Black scholars engaged in education research, publishing and teaching;
- a growing body of evidence to inform education policy and practice;
- strengthened education institutions and evaluation agencies undertaking education research and evaluation; and
- a community of peers that creates a long-term network of support.

Programme Evaluation

Zenex has commissioned an independent evaluation of the LEAD Programme, led by Benita Williams Evaluation (BWE) in partnership with Birguid, to run over two years (2026–2027). The evaluation will assess whether the Programme is being implemented as intended, surface insights on what is working well and what could be improved, and assess the quality and effectiveness of the capacity building against the Programme's objectives. Findings will be used to adjust current activities, extract lessons, and guide Zenex's future investment in research and evaluation capacity building in the sector.

The evaluation blends four complementary components. A rapid literature review will situate the Programme within existing evidence on capacity building models; a process evaluation will assess the fidelity, quality and efficiency of implementation; a developmental evaluation will capture real-time learning as the Programme design evolves; and an outcome assessment will track early evidence of individual-level skills development and progress. An external panel review provides an additional layer of quality assurance throughout the evaluation.

Beyond assessing this Programme specifically, the evaluation will explore broader questions that are relevant to the sector as a whole: which models of capacity building are most effective for developing evaluation and research leaders in South African education; which factors enable or constrain this work, particularly within government

departments; and which indicators and tools are best suited to measuring capacity building of this kind.

Conclusion

The Education Evaluation and Research Capacity Building Programme reflects Zenex's transformation agenda and its commitment to evidence-based practice in education. By growing a critical mass of skilled Black evaluators and researchers, and by learning systematically from its own implementation through the LEAD evaluation, the Programme aims to strengthen the sector's overall capacity to conduct rigorous, locally-relevant education research – with benefits for Zenex and the sector more widely.