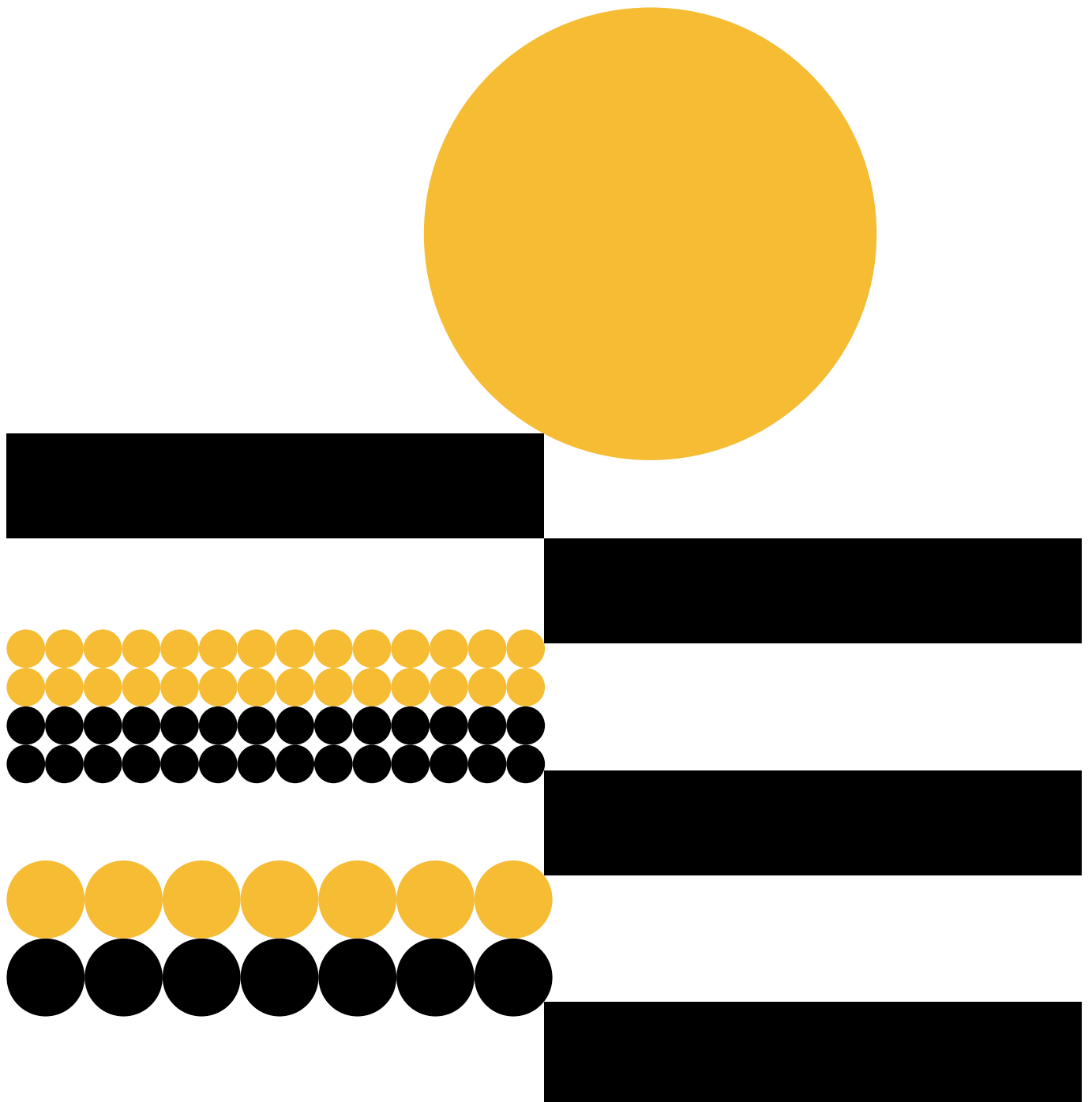


Supporting the next generation of transport scholars in Sub-Saharan Africa: insights, challenges, and opportunities

G. Jennings, I. Forson Abdul-Azeez, N. Cheure, F. Edward, M. Wanyua Mwangi, J. Ayumbah Akallah, R. Olawale Azeez, P. Basil, W. Ewa, P. Guma, C. Adongo Okidi, G. Ukam, E. Kanini Wamuchiru



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PREFACE

Young scholars in Africa are crucial to the future of research and development on the continent, yet they often face multifaceted challenges that constrain their professional growth and research potential. In order to make systematic interventions to strengthen the work and careers of young African scholars, it is important to understand the conditions under which they are trained and work.

This paper focuses on professional conditions, experiences, and coping mechanisms of Next Generation (NextGen) scholars in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) who work specifically within the area of urban transport, mobility and access. This area is broad in scope, encompassing work within e.g. urban planning, engineering, geography, economics, sociology, anthropology, political science, development studies, history, human geography and industrial relations.

This study is a synthesis of four knowledge-based, reflective “think pieces” written by teams of NextGen scholars from various parts of SSA. The four think pieces used different theoretical frameworks, methodological approaches and sources of data; together they reflect the professional lived experiences and views of approximately 120 participating young scholars. The work is complemented by additional findings from the literature and invited contributions.

The study describes the multifaceted and often interlinked challenges – in the form of limited funding, weak mentorship structures, inadequate research environments, and gendered inequalities – that currently face many NextGen scholars in SSA. The author also discusses the strategies that scholars use to cope with these challenges, concluding the study by recommending concrete ways in which academic institutions can strengthen their institutional support to these scholars.

This paper, as well as the four think pieces, were commissioned by the Volvo Research and Educational Foundations (VREF) within their “Mobility & Access in African Cities” (MAC) program. An important ambition of this program is to support and strengthen the work of Next Generation scholars in SSA, specifically in areas that are important for understanding issues related to urban transport, mobility and access broadly defined.

We hope that this paper will be a resource and “call for action” for university departments, university administrators, and policymakers – as well as senior scholars and other colleagues of young scholars – in their efforts to support the work and careers of all young scholars in SSA.

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November 2025
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Overview of this paper

Providing climate-resilient, sustainable, affordable, and equitable transport to people in Africa is a challenge for authorities and treasuries. The effect of the continent's existing mobility landscape is one of stifled economic growth and considerable social exclusion, health disparities, gender and education inequality, and poverty in its multiple forms. New knowledge is essential to address Africa's transport and mobility issues; solutions require not only physical infrastructure, policy frameworks and community engagement but also knowledge and insight. However, research and practitioner capacity regarding transport and mobility in Africa is limited – particularly in social sciences or interdisciplinary methods. This new research needs to be conducted primarily within the Global South (or in Africa) itself, as while many of the mobility challenges identified are global, their impacts are very different.

Research and scholarship in Africa experienced a significant decline in the late 1990s and early 2000s, largely due to pressure on African economies and global responses to the crises; one consequence was that universities lost both funding and expertise. While research prospects in Africa are improving, research funding remains scarce, and academic career paths remain uneven and insecure.

Young researchers from Africa are crucial to improving both the research fortunes and the transport landscape of the continent. It is therefore essential to understand the conditions under which these scholars are being trained and the challenges they currently face, so that proper and timely interventions can be made to secure the future of research and development in Africa.

To this end, this paper examines the professional conditions, experiences, and coping mechanisms of Next Generation (NextGen) scholars in Sub-Saharan Africa who work in the transport and mobility arena. It recommends ways in which academic institutions can support such scholars in their work and careers. As the paper highlights, the path of these NextGen scholars “is one of both opportunity and constraint, with invaluable learning opportunities but also substantial hurdles” (Abdul-Azeez, Azeez and Basil, 2025).

Four “think pieces” are the foundation of this paper; written by NextGen transport and mobility scholars in SSA, they offer reflective, thoughtful, exploratory analysis based on their own expertise, experiences and perspectives. These texts are complemented by findings from the literature and invited contributions. This is not a comparative study, so it does not compare the challenges of NextGen scholars with those of more entrenched or senior scholars, or with those outside of Africa or the transport and mobility sector.

Challenges and constraints as a NextGen scholar in SSA

NextGen scholars face complex and layered challenges, including resource shortages and social biases related to gender and ethnicity. These challenges manifest differently across regions, influenced by institutional policies and ingrained cultural expectations that collectively stifle academic and professional growth.

Female NextGen scholars encounter challenges even before reaching post-graduate studies: the cultural expectations and gender stereotypes see to it that female representation in transport-related higher education and leadership roles is alarmingly low.

Once undertaking postgraduate research, scholars find that the journey to thesis completion can be far from easy. Supervision delays and ineffective guidance are challenges – particularly in cases with multiple supervisors. Academic institutions in Africa struggle with shortages of personnel and supervisors with the requisite expertise, especially in emerging focus areas of research. Senior scholars and institutional gatekeepers can determine which research agendas are pursued, who receives funding, and who has access to career advancement opportunities. Younger scholars struggle to accept and challenge their position in their hierarchy of academic ranking.

International scholarships, especially under structured PhD programmes, ensure a faster completion and set the scholars on an upward trajectory in their career paths, but scholars embrace these opportunities with the mixed feelings that are inevitable with leaving one's home country.

Funding – to undertake postgraduate study as well as other post-doctoral research – is rarely adequate, with the few grants available mostly being awarded to those already established in their fields. Financial constraints disproportionately affect women scholars, with gender biases extending to research funding and publication opportunities.

High fees limit SSA's academic presence in global publications, preventing scholars from sharing their findings with the broader academic community. Scholars can fall prey to predatory journals promising simpler publication.

NextGen scholars also describe significant research infrastructural challenges, such as outdated facilities, unreliable power supply, and limited access to laboratory equipment, research software, and journals. The process of obtaining research permissions is often prolonged by reliance on manual systems within government agencies.

Scholars seek mentors to help them navigate academic challenges, maintain work-life balance, develop their professional path, and advance their careers through joint research projects, collaborative writing, referrals, and paid consulting opportunities. Although many have benefited from unstructured mentorship, there remains a gap in sustained, targeted mentorship for early-career researchers.

NextGen scholars cope by means of various strategies. They leverage peer networks and community collaboration, and adopt creative funding approaches to sustain their research. Many female scholars actively challenge gender stereotypes by taking on traditionally male-dominated roles. Scholars facing ethnic biases work to counter exclusionary practices by prioritising inclusivity within their networks. In the absence of structured mentorship and professional development programmes, SSA scholars are increasingly taking a proactive approach to their own skills development. Online courses, workshops, and self-directed learning have become essential tools for acquiring technical and research skills. By leveraging accessible, often free resources, scholars compensate for the lack of institutional support and develop competencies that enhance their research capabilities. Academic networks and professional associations play a pivotal role in supporting collaboration, knowledge-sharing and peer support among NextGen scholars.

Opportunities to strengthen institutional support for NextGen scholars

Next Generation scholars across Sub-Saharan Africa face systemic and interconnected barriers – including limited funding, weak mentorship structures, inadequate research environments, and gendered inequities – that constrain their professional growth and research potential. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated and sustained efforts from universities, governments, and international partners. The following recommendations are for ways forward for institutions to build a more equitable, inclusive, and enabling academic ecosystem.

Secure and expand research funding

One of the most significant barriers to academic progress in SSA is the shortage of research funding, not only for NextGen scholars. The following are recommendations to secure and expand research funding:

- Prioritise long-term, collaborative funding models through partnerships with global research bodies, and ensure that resources are distributed equitably.
- Create dedicated starter grants for early-career researchers can help overcome persistent funding gaps.
- Democratise knowledge by supporting open-access publishing and working with publishers to reduce fees and biases.
- Strengthen ties with conference organisers to subsidise travel and visas, or to create virtual participation options, to broaden scholarly engagement.
- Work with journal publishers to revise the existing open access model. Current Open Access models increase the readership and citation rate of those who can afford to pay the open access fee, thus perpetuating North-South asymmetry.

Institutionalise structured and sustainable mentorship

Mentorship is crucial for academic and professional development, yet it remains informal and unevenly distributed among young scholars. The following are recommendations to institutionalise mentorship:

- Embed structured mentorship programmes, pairing early-career scholars with experienced mentors both locally and internationally.
- Leverage alumni networks and virtual mentorship platforms to widen access and consistency, and develop targeted mentorship for women scholars to help address gender disparities.
- Set up dedicated offices for international research partnerships to further facilitate collaboration and knowledge exchange.

Strengthen skills training and professional development

Skills development opportunities are critical. The following are recommendations to strengthen professional development:

- Provide easy access to workshops, online courses, and specialised training programmes to allow NextGen scholars to build competencies essential for high-quality research.
- Invest in skills-building programmes that go beyond technical training to include research methods, data analysis, writing, project management, and digital literacy (including AI tools). Universities can act as innovation hubs, fostering entrepreneurial thinking and linking scholars to incubators, funding opportunities, and alumni networks.
- Develop partnerships with industry to create internship and job-shadowing opportunities, offering scholars exposure to practical, non-academic pathways. Access to these opportunities should always be gender-responsive and equitable.

Improve access to research infrastructure

Limited access to academic resources, such as libraries, office space, lab equipment, digital infrastructure and online databases, is a significant challenge for researchers in SSA. The following are recommendations to improve access to research infrastructure:

- Digitalise libraries and data repositories, subsidise internet access, and establish well-equipped study spaces.
- Develop regional research hubs will promote collaboration across borders and disciplines.
- Accelerate bureaucratic processes through electronic systems. E-governance systems can streamline research administration – reducing bureaucratic delays in funding approvals, permits, and data access.

Advance institutional inclusivity and accountability

Equity and inclusion are essential for the sustainability of SSA's academic landscape. The lack of consistent equity policies leads to anxiety, uncertainty, and missed opportunities for scholars from underrepresented backgrounds or groups. The following are recommendations to address these challenges:

- Adopt clear diversity and inclusion policies, implement flexible work arrangements for caregivers.
- Support women's leadership through targeted grants and visibility initiatives.
- Institutionalise transparent supervision and hiring practices, alongside consistent communication of policies, to help ensure fairness and trust within academic communities.

Build institutional capacity and foster South-South collaboration

To rebalance global academic asymmetries, SSA institutions must invest in local capacity-building while strengthening South-South and North-South partnerships. The following are recommendations to address the North-South asymmetry:

- Reinvest institutional fees into local publication infrastructure to improve the visibility and credibility of African scholarship.
- Set clear standards for in-country research by international scholars, including country-specific research board approval, the inclusion of local PIs and clear authorship guidelines, and formal skills-transfer programmes (rather than extractive research processes).
- Develop, support, and invest in lower-cost regional or continent-wide scholarly conferences, with peer-reviewed publications and outputs indexed with appropriate digital libraries.
- Develop structured support to encourage international doctoral graduates to return to their home countries or universities.

Conclusion

Supporting NextGen scholars is an investment not only in individual potential but in the future of African research and innovation. Through coordinated action – expanding funding, embedding mentorship, enhancing infrastructure, and advancing inclusion – institutions can create a thriving, resilient academic ecosystem that empowers emerging scholars and elevates the global profile of research from Sub-Saharan Africa.

Introduction

The scholarly and scientific research landscape in Africa has been described as one suffering a legacy of neglect (Mouton, 2018). In their foundational work on the next generation of scientists in Africa, Beaudry *et al* describe how research and scholarship in Africa experienced a significant decline in the late 1990s and early 2000s, largely because of pressure on African economies and global responses to the crises. During this time, international agencies, notably the World Bank, supported basic education ahead of higher education, and many universities suffered losses of funding and expertise as one outcome. Research and scholarship were “one of the main losers” (Mouton, 2018, p. 4).

Academic institutions, particularly in science, became increasingly dependent on international funding for research and development, and were further at the mercy of political tides and priorities. Individual research rather than institution-building became the norm, alongside a decline in doctoral programmes and in the number of doctoral students. While universities’ science programmes certainly benefited from international aid agencies, research agendas were more likely to align with international priorities than with those of institutions or countries.

Beaudry *et al* posit, however, that research prospects in Africa are improving. A new narrative began to emerge around 2000, driven by investments in research, particularly in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), as well as other previously neglected disciplines such as the social sciences (Mouton, 2018, p. 8). The World Bank has now invested substantially, for example, in university-based centres of excellence in STEM-related disciplines. This is reflected in the increase in research output. The number of African-authored papers in the Web of Science grew from 15,285 in 2005 to 54,069 in 2016, doubling the share of Africa’s contribution to the world publication output from 1.5% to 3.2% within the same period (Mouton, 2018).

Research funding is not yet plentiful, however, and academic career paths are not yet smooth, but young researchers from Africa are crucial to sustaining and improving the research fortunes of the continent (Kumwenda *et al.*, 2017). It is therefore wise to understand the conditions under which these scholars are being trained and the challenges they currently face, so that necessary interventions can be made to secure the future of research and development in Africa.

The more than 250 scholars who participated in Beaudry *et al*’s four-year study of young scientists in Africa (2014–2017) shared experiences of heavy teaching, supervision, and administrative loads; a lack of funding; not enough mentoring, support, and training opportunities to develop professional skills; and frustration with a dependence on donor funding and the constant temptation to leave the country for better working conditions and career prospects.

In 2022, when global research expenditure accounted for 1.77% of global gross domestic product, Kenya spent 0.81% of its GDP, and South Africa spent 0.85%. The average for African countries was around 0.45% (Statista, 2024). Not only this, but employment after postgraduate research

education is not a guarantee. A 2014 British Council study, for example, showed that nearly a quarter of Nigerian graduates are unemployed. In Kenya, it takes graduates, on average, five years to find their first employment. In South Africa, 11% of graduates are unemployed. Graduates often “piece together livelihoods ... from various sources rather than walk the straight road of a career” (Juan and Cooper, 2025).

This paper considers the experiences of young or Next Generation (NextGen)¹ scholars specifically in the area of transport and mobility studies in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), including fields such as road engineering, urban planning, logistics, development studies, gender studies, history, political science, human geography, and industrial relations.

In 2024, the Volvo Research and Educational Foundations (VREF) issued a call for proposals directed at NextGen scholars in transport and mobility studies based at SSA universities. The invitation was to write reflective think pieces² on the theme: “Being a NextGen scholar in transport and mobility studies in SSA: conditions, opportunities, challenges, and ways forward.” VREF commissioned four such think pieces as proposed by teams of NextGen scholars. Two of the think pieces focus on the broad topic itself (Abdul-Azeez, Azeez and Basil, 2025; Cheure, Ukam and Ewa, 2025), one addresses perspectives from women scholars (Wanyua and Okidi, 2025), and one examines the experiences of scholars who were educated in Europe and then returned to the continent (Edward *et al.*, 2025).

This paper thus aims to provide an opening for such exploration, understanding, and further debate (Cheure, Ukam and Ewa, 2025). It is a synthesis of the four think pieces, complemented by additional findings from the literature and invited contributions. The original think pieces are referenced as working papers.

Scope, method, and data sources

This paper examines the professional conditions, experiences, and coping mechanisms of NextGen scholars in SSA, and recommends ways in which academic institutions can support such scholars in their work and careers. As the paper highlights, the path of NextGen scholars in transport and mobility in SSA “is one of both opportunity and constraint, with invaluable learning opportunities but also substantial hurdles” (Abdul-Azeez, Azeez and Basil, 2025).

¹ Young or emerging scholars/early career researchers are usually defined as those actively pursuing a research career and who received their PhD within the previous five to ten years; they are usually between the ages of 30 and 40. Beaudry *et al* (Beaudry, Mouton and Prozesky, 2018b), however, found that in Africa, 45 years is a more appropriate ‘cut-off’ age, given the challenging scholarship circumstances on the continent. They found that more than half of those who graduated with PhDs within the last ten years were older than 40 (Beaudry, Mouton and Prozesky, 2018b, p. 46).

² A “think piece” is a work in which a scholar not only presents a topic based on state-of-the-art knowledge, but also reflects on the patterns and meaning of the work’s findings, based on her/his own expertise, experiences and perspectives. As such, a think piece is designed to provide more space for reflective, thoughtful, exploratory analysis than is usually the case with “traditional” scientific texts.

Each individual think piece draws on a different theoretical framework and methodological approach, using different data sources. These are outlined here, and a map of sources is provided in Appendix 1. Data collection instruments are provided in further appendices.

The think piece by Ibraheem Forson Abdul-Azeez³, Rasheed Olawale Azeez⁴ and Paschal Basil⁵, titled “Being a Next-Generation scholar in Mobility and Access in SSA: conditions, opportunities, challenges, and ways forward”, reflects on the multifaceted professional conditions and challenges that shape the experiences of NextGen scholars in the field of mobility and access across Sub-Saharan Africa. The authors collected data through focus groups and survey interviews across SSA. The lived experiences of scholar respondents were analysed using an inductive approach.

Twelve individuals were invited to respond to survey questions (online), and two online focus groups were held with 23 participants in all (six women and 17 men); participants were drawn from Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, and Cameroon. Focus groups were guided by semi-structured questions that were closely aligned with the research questions, providing depth while allowing flexibility for participants to explore topics organically. Each participant has a postgraduate degree (master’s and PhD).

The focus group questions can be found in Appendix 2.

The purpose of the work by Frank Edward⁶, Prince Guma⁷, Elizabeth Kanini Wamuchiru⁸, and Jethron Ayumbah Akallah⁹, “Refining career journeys and experiences for NextGen scholars in Mobility and Access in SSA”, is to explore and understand the intricacies of the lived experiences of NextGen scholars in SSA, particularly those who sought academic career opportunities in Western countries. Each of the authors is an East African scholar (from Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania) who received a research grant that funded their doctoral studies in Germany. They take an autoethnographic approach in their think piece and reflect on their own experiences.

To develop research questions to guide their personal reflections, the authors interviewed other East African NextGen scholars who had also studied outside the continent; they recruited these scholars through their personal and professional networks. They interviewed nine in total (seven men, two women): seven had received scholarships in Germany, one in Belgium, and one in the UK. Respondents undertook their PhD programmes between 2013 and 2022. All returned home shortly after completing their studies and resumed their roles at universities or found jobs in organisations such as the Institute of British East Africa.

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⁹ Maseno University, Kisumu, Kenya

The formative questionnaire and the research questions can be found in Appendix 3 and 4.

"A think piece on being a Next-Generation Scholar in Mobility & Access in Sub-Saharan Africa", by **Namatirai Cheure¹⁰, George Ukam¹¹, and Wofai Ewa¹²** examines the realities confronting advanced master's students, PhD candidates, and early career researchers in SSA, regardless of age and cutting across several disciplines including engineering and social sciences. The author team collected both qualitative and quantitative data. They recruited focus group participants from within their network of NextGen scholars (including master's and PhD scholars). They emailed the 10 selected participants (five men, five women) – from Nigeria, Ghana, Togo, South Africa, Namibia, Uganda, Kenya, and Ethiopia – the questions in advance (see Appendix 5). The focus groups were held online, facilitated by Ewa.

Findings from the focus group were then used to develop a survey, which was shared with a further cohort of scholars from Ghana, Kenya, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda, and Zambia (each of the 10 focus group participants shared it with their networks, so the response rate is not known). Fifty-seven individuals completed responses. A second survey was then carried out interested respondents from the first survey, to prioritise recommendations and approaches to mitigate challenges experienced by NextGen scholars.

The focus group and survey questions can be found in Appendix 5 and 6.

In "Insights into the experiences of emerging female scholars in East Africa's mobility field", **Mary Wanyua Mwangi¹³ and Clare Adongo Okidi¹⁴** focus on the professional experiences of female scholars in the mobility sector in East Africa. They derive their insights from a combination of eight in-depth interviews, literature, and policy analysis. The in-depth key informant interviews were conducted online, with both authors present at each session. Interviewees were from Uganda (3), Kenya (3), Rwanda (1), and Tanzania (1). All interviewees were women and NextGen scholars (none of them already participating in VREF's NextGen programme). The interview protocol is in Appendix 7.

Limitations

This is not a comparative study, so the think pieces do not compare the challenges of NextGen scholars with those of more entrenched or senior scholars; nor do they compare these challenges and experiences with those of NextGen scholars from other disciplines (ie, other than disciplines within the broad area of transport or mobility), or from other global contexts. These are the personal views and lived experiences of 119 scholars (authors and respondents) within transport and mobility studies in SSA.

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Context: Why transport and mobility?

Providing climate-resilient, sustainable, and equitable mobility and access to people in Africa can appear to be an intractable and overwhelming challenge for transport authorities and treasuries. The colonial legacy of transport infrastructure has left SSA with a fragmented transport network that still lacks cohesion and accessibility (Porter, 2014).

To those who live with the daily grind of the existing transport reality, the idea of affordable, high-quality, safe, and responsive transport services can seem like a pipe dream. The scholarly and practitioner literature describes a transport landscape across the continent of poor air quality and aged fleets, high traffic congestion, dangerous driver behaviour untrammelled by enforcement of regulations, rapid and unplanned (or poorly planned) urbanisation, inadequately resourced and fragmented transport authorities and institutions, a paucity of data to guide decisions, misdirected resources, and ill-advised and costly mitigation interventions. Existing mobility infrastructures are often inadequate, particularly for people who walk and cycle, with limited public transport options, poorly maintained road networks lacking climate resilience, and barriers to regional integration and trade (Venter *et al.*, 2020; Behrens *et al.*, 2021; Jennings and Summerton, 2021).

Constrained government budgets, limited private-sector investment, and inconsistent policy support have hampered efforts to develop and improve regional infrastructure (Abdul-Azeez, Azeez and Basil, 2025). A mix of historical, economic, and policy factors worsens these challenges. The effect of this mobility landscape is one of stifled economic growth and considerable social exclusion, health disparities, gender and education inequality, and poverty in its multiple forms.

The status of transport and mobility research in Africa

Research and practitioner capacity regarding transport and mobility in Africa remains limited – especially in social sciences or interdisciplinary methods that can help understand vulnerability, transport poverty, and accessibility needs, along with user engagement approaches and user behaviour (Porter and Lucas, 2020). Moreover, research often focuses on urban rather than rural mobility.

The most prominent African funders of scientific study in Africa are South Africa's National Research Foundation and the Tunisian Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (Kozma, Medina and Costas, 2018, p. 26). Where transport and mobility research is produced in SSA, the universities of Cape Town, Dar es Salaam, Ibadan, Johannesburg, Nairobi, Pretoria and Stellenbosch have traditionally dominated (Behrens *et al.*, 2016).

In their bibliometric study, Cheure *et al.* found that South Africa still dominates the broad transport research output, with Ghana and Nigeria ranking second and third in terms of most prolific.

They also found that from within Africa, almost 90% of the top 10 citation counts are from South African universities. The US, Australia, and the UK produce much of the highly cited work about transport and mobility in Africa (Cheure, Ukam and Ewa, 2025).

Among the challenges to undertaking transport and mobility research – whether by NextGen scholars or by more senior scholars – is that it is, by its nature, interdisciplinary. It requires working across political science, economics, and other areas in the social sciences, engineering, infrastructure, finance, transport, geography, public administration, and other disciplines (Cirolia, Harber and Croese, 2020). However, researchers and practitioners are often scattered across different institutions and departments – a phenomenon especially prevalent in African universities, where disciplinary boundaries are often sharp and interdisciplinary centres are scarce.

Why transport and mobility research matters for Africa

Research is inextricably linked to the development of any nation (Martinez-Sanchez, Vicente-Olva and Perez-Perez, 2020). A legacy of the research neglect is the underdevelopment and poverty prevalent in many African countries (Cheure, Ukam and Ewa, 2025). Addressing the transport and mobility issues outlined above requires not only physical infrastructure, policy frameworks and community engagement (Abdul-Azeez, Azeez and Basil, 2025), but also knowledge of and insight into the nuances of the challenges on the continent.

Gaps in context-specific knowledge to address these multiple transportation challenges are significant, particularly with respect to knowledge about user diversity and mobility practices in SSA cities, paratransit, and digital and electric technologies (Porter and Lucas, 2020; Schalekamp and Saddier, 2020; Behrens *et al.*, 2021). The recent informal public transport literature is dominated by authors affiliated with universities in Europe, Eastern Asia, and North America at the regional scale, and in China and the United States at the national scale (Behrens *et al.*, 2021).

Walking is the dominant mode of transportation in many areas in Sub-Saharan Africa, yet data collection and evaluation approaches specific to African contexts are lacking (Tight, 2022). Much of the work focuses on building infrastructure, but interrogating the reluctant attitudes of policymakers and approaches to vehicle reduction is equally important but less understood (Benton, Jennings and Walker, 2021; Tight, 2022). Not enough is understood about intersectionality, policy development, data collection, and evaluation in both walking and cycling, and research capacity to support such understanding is lacking (Allen, 2021).

For many years, there has been limited study of the important area of urban governance in Africa (Cirolia, Harber and Croese, 2020, p. 11). There are gaps in understanding how people access what they need or desire, and little work has been undertaken on how to create change in the institutional systems that support mobility systems (Cirolia, Harber and Croese, 2020, p. 4). Other research and knowledge gaps have been identified around transport planning and political processes, development of professional capacity in public transport, and many more (Venter *et al.*, 2020).

Scholars are increasingly exploring other relevant themes such as gendered mobility patterns in Africa, the role of women in informal transport economies, the emergence and impact of e-mobility, and the impact of sexual harassment on public transport use (Porter, 2020). The gap between policy and reality concerning gender-responsive transport interventions is wide, and further research is needed to bridge this divide (Jennings, 2023). With these new and evolving areas of study, there is an urgent need to ensure that female researchers on the continent are adequately supported to contribute meaningfully to the discourse (Uteng and Cresswell, 2021).

Why transport and mobility research from Africa matters

It matters that new research is conducted within the Global South (or in Africa) itself, as while many of the mobility challenges identified are global, their impacts are very different: as Sagaris *et al* note, “most societies in the Global South are much less equal, economically, socially and politically. While car-choked roads may look similar everywhere, very few families actually have access to cars, making transport justice a cutting issue” (Sagaris *et al.*, 2021, p. 8). In another example, in the Global North, only some 20% of people walk; in Africa, most people already walk or cycle, but in extreme, high-risk conditions that lead to exclusion from education, culture, policy and decision-making. Sagaris *et al* found that the more people walk in the country, the less walking is studied (Sagaris *et al.*, 2021, p. 45). Likewise, the roles of institutions and planning differ in countries with strong democratic traditions and those without (Sagaris *et al.*, 2021).

As important as context-specific findings are context-specific types of knowledge production: this includes more traditional scholarship, as well as practitioners’ knowledge from public officials, NGOs, the private sector, and communities. “Co-production for mobility research is particularly powerful as it allows different registers of knowledge to be joined together and resists the tendency to import and impose best practices or theoretical frameworks that might not be fit-for-purpose in the African context” (Cirolia, Harber and Croese, 2020, p. 31).

Being a NextGen scholar in SSA: Challenges and constraints

NextGen scholars face complex and layered challenges, including resource shortages and social biases related to gender and ethnicity. These challenges manifest differently across regions, influenced by institutional policies and ingrained cultural expectations that collectively stifle academic and professional growth. For many scholars, “passing through these obstacles is an exhausting balancing act, highlighting the need for systemic reform across academia” (Abdul-Azeez, Azeez and Basil, 2025). Edward *et al* (Edward *et al.*, 2025) describe their journeys as shaped by “the institutional reprisals, positionalities, and geopolitics of academia ... [which] necessitate redress [with respect to] inequality of knowledge production ... It is important to go beyond knowledge decolonisation by paying attention to the knowledge producers, particularly the early career scholars.”

This section describes key challenges and constraints experienced by NextGen scholars, presented thematically as analysed by the individual think pieces: gender biases when selecting courses of study; research autonomy and supervision; access to funding, research infrastructure, and mentorship; the pull of international mobility, publishing and collaboration; and navigating both work and “life”.

Moving into mobility research as a woman scholar

Female NextGen scholars in particular face challenges even before reaching post-graduate work: the cultural expectations and gender stereotypes see to it that female representation in transport-related higher education and leadership roles is “alarmingly low” (Wanyua and Okidi, 2025).

Entrenched historical and cultural frameworks have traditionally marginalised women, particularly in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) and transport-related disciplines. The barrier to simply entering the mobility sector is shaped by structural, institutional, and sociocultural factors, which intersect with gender dynamics, including caregiving responsibilities, financial constraints, and limited mentorship opportunities (Wanyua and Okidi, 2025). According to the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (2022), only 30% of STEM professionals in Kenya are women, and in Uganda, participation in STEM programmes stands at 37%. For the wider SSA region, only 7.9% of higher education scholars in any sector are women, compared to a global average of 41.6% (Mulwa, 2021).

Despite structural barriers, many female scholars in mobility research are motivated by personal and professional experiences; some transition into academia from industry roles, seeking intellectual fulfilment and opportunities to contribute to sustainable urban mobility (Wanyua and Okidi, 2025).

Personal reflection: Demonstrating that women can excel

"I began my doctoral journey at a very early age when I was a young girl and admired [those] being called a Professor. That is when I knew I had to excel in my academics."

"A scholarship was the only way I had to ever obtain a doctorate. I did not have the necessary resources to attain this in my individual capacity."

"My motivation to pursue a doctorate degree came from the low statistics of women who had PhDs, especially professionals from the built environment."

"I [also] wanted to demonstrate that women can equally pursue the highest academic qualifications other than resorting to 'softer' career paths – and still excel at an early age to defy cultural norms of getting married after the first degree, which was the commonest practice at the time."

NextGen scholar, Kenya, who completed her PhD at the Technical University of Darmstadt, Germany, in 2017

Selecting a research topic and completing a thesis

Completing a thesis marks a critical phase of academic and professional development: for master's students, it represents an introduction to rigorous research and independent inquiry, while for PhD candidates, it signifies a deeper exploration of specialised fields.

Cheure *et al* found that the journey to thesis completion can be far from easy. Supervision delays and ineffective guidance are frequently noted by interviewees as challenges – particularly in cases with multiple supervisors,. Scholars describe unclear university guidelines and poor communication as barriers to academic progress. One scholar reported months-long delays in receiving supervisor comments, which demotivated students and hindered progress (Cheure, Ukam and Ewa, 2025)¹⁵.

Competing commitments, such as teaching and family responsibilities, further make time management and workload balance key obstacles. Personal factors like stress, loneliness, and lack of motivation also lead to delays.

This long "turnaround time" is one reason scholars apply to study outside Africa: academic institutions in Africa struggle with shortages of personnel and supervisors with the requisite expertise, especially in emerging focus areas of research. This means that either students

¹⁵ Supervisors are often not able to allocate adequate time and resources to their candidates as they themselves are juggling so many other responsibilities other than their university roles (Wanyua and Okidi, 2025).

are unable to choose these areas of study, or, if an expert is available at their university, the expert is likely to be overburdened with teaching or administrative responsibilities and unable to support their students. International scholarships, especially under structured PhD programmes, ensure a faster completion and set the scholars on an upward trajectory in their career paths (Edward *et al.*, 2025).

Further, decisions about what research to undertake, what thesis topic to select, and how resources are allocated to this research, are shaped by power dynamics within a university or institution – not only at postgraduate level, but also as junior staff. Senior scholars and institutional gatekeepers can determine which research agendas are pursued, who receives funding, and who has access to career advancement opportunities (Fongwa, 2018). These power structures frequently favour the work of established researchers, creating a hierarchy that limits the flexibility young scholars need to explore innovative ideas or establish independent research identities; young scholars can feel pressured to conform to the dominant themes to secure funding or gain recognition (Abdul-Azeez, Azeez and Basil, 2025). NextGen scholars report feeling powerless to change these structures, and because they lack experience, that they are not trusted to make decisions about research direction and practice. It can be a struggle to accept and challenge their position in their hierarchy of academic ranking (Edward *et al.*, 2025).

Funding research and other opportunities

Young scholars rely on diverse resources, including study grants, training programmes and mentorship, academic networks and other community initiatives (Abdul-Azeez, Azeez and Basil, 2025). While these provide essential support, there are often more gaps than not. Although a small majority of scholars surveyed by Cheure *et al* received funding to study¹⁶, and an overwhelming majority said that this funding (both local and international) was “adequate” or “very adequate”, there are still gaps in meeting the financial needs of scholars. Respondents frequently cited insufficient funding for research activities, including data collection, publication, software purchases, and travel expenses.

One of the main resources available to scholars from SSA is grant funding, usually provided by government agencies, international organisations, or academic institutions. These grants are essential for supporting activities such as data collection, fieldwork, and conference attendance. Without this funding, many scholars would find it nearly impossible to carry out the hands-on research needed to influence policy and practice in the region. However, the availability and accessibility of these grants vary widely – with some regions receiving more support than others – and funding tends to favour established scholars and senior academics over early-career researchers (Abdul-Azeez, Azeez and Basil, 2025). *“The few grants available are mostly*

¹⁶ 45% of respondents in Cheure *et al*'s study reported receiving no funding for their studies or research. Of those who did receive funding (51%), 10% said their international funding was inadequate and 12% said their national funding was inadequate.

given to those already established in their fields, leaving limited options for new researchers to secure funding”, according to one East African study participant.

Financial constraints disproportionately affect women scholars; several female interviewees noted that their studies were self-funded, and institutional financial support was either partial or unavailable (Wanyua and Okidi, 2025). While there are a growing number of programmes targeting female researchers that aim to address historical gender imbalances in academia and research, access alone is not enough to guarantee success. Many female scholars struggle with navigating these opportunities due to limited mentorship, lack of clear guidance on how to apply for grants, and the difficulty of balancing multiple roles, including academic work, professional responsibilities, and family life.

Personal reflection: balancing studies, work and family responsibilities

"In 2014, there was a significant public outcry in Kenya due to widespread sexual harassment in the matatu industry, which is an important part of public transportation in the country... This was the beginning of my passion for addressing mobility and transport issues, especially those related to gender."

"As I became more involved in the transportation industry, my interest in transport research grew. Discussions with colleagues in academia encouraged me to pursue a master's degree at the Institute for Development Studies, University of Nairobi, in 2019. Although I was thrilled to be admitted, I quickly realised it was going to be a challenge. The programme required me to be at the university full time every day, which was difficult as I was also working to finance my studies."

"Being a mother and a wife meant balancing studies, work, and family responsibilities, which was tough. I initially reduced my workdays to two days per week and accepted a pay cut. However, the challenge became overwhelming. I made the decision to resign from my full-time job to find more flexible work arrangements. Although it was a difficult decision, it was necessary."

"Commuting daily from outside the Nairobi metropolitan area to the university was another considerable challenge. The two-hour journey each way was not only time-consuming but also financially draining. The experience highlighted the challenges faced by young women from rural areas who pursue higher education in urban centres, where female representation is already low."

"I remained determined. By persevering and carefully managing my time and resources, I completed my master's degree within the stipulated two years and achieved exemplary results. This journey not only strengthened my commitment to advancing gender equity in

the transport sector but also deepened my understanding of the unique challenges women face in academia, especially in male-dominated fields like transport.

"My experience has reinforced my determination to contribute to creating more inclusive and supportive environments for women in the mobility and transport sectors."

NextGen scholar, Kenya

Gender biases extend to research funding and publication opportunities. Studies have found that women in the transport and engineering fields are less likely to receive high-impact grants or be invited to lead large-scale projects (particularly those tied to large-scale infrastructure or policy projects). 'Gender-blind' funding mechanisms tend to overlook the unique challenges female researchers face, such as maternity leave, caregiving responsibilities, and limited institutional support. These biases further limit their career progression and visibility in academic circles (Wanyua and Okidi, 2025).

Further, age restrictions play a significant role in limiting access to scholarships, research grants, and leadership positions. Female scholars who take breaks due to family responsibilities often face barriers when attempting to re-enter academia (Mason, Wolfinger and Goulden, 2013). Many funding bodies set age limits for doctoral and postdoctoral grants, assuming a linear career trajectory that does not account for caregiving interruptions (Husu, 2001). This constraint disproportionately affects women who may have delayed their studies due to family responsibilities or cultural expectations (Morley, 2013; Wanyua and Okidi, 2025).

Personal reflection: Challenging cultural expectations

"My journey towards obtaining a master's degree in transportation engineering was not easy. Due to the unavailability of master's degree programmes in transportation studies at universities in my country, I had to seek admission abroad, with South Africa being the closest option. Unable to secure a scholarship for my studies there, I had to pay for my tuition fees, transport, accommodation, and data collection myself. I used the salary from my teaching assistant position at a university in my home country, as my mother still needed to pay for my younger sister's education and could not afford both."

"Unfortunately, after my first year of studies, I lost my job when the university decided to cancel all teaching assistant positions. After five months of unemployment, I secured a job outside academia, working in the structural engineering field, so that I could afford to pay my fees. The disconnect between my postgraduate studies and my job was difficult, as I had to balance two different disciplines, which meant working twice as hard as expected."

"This challenge was compounded by cultural and societal expectations that, as a young woman, I should prioritise preparing for marriage rather than focusing on postgraduate studies. The pressure was real."

"Eventually, I managed to complete my master's degree and secure a funded PhD opportunity, which enabled me to conduct my research while assisting with transportation consulting projects. This positioned me firmly within the research space and provided the resources I needed to excel in my career."

"I would like to encourage NextGen scholars to persevere and strive towards achieving their goals, no matter the obstacles they may face."

NextGen scholar, Zimbabwe, who has almost completed PhD studies at the University of Pretoria, South Africa

Dealing with inadequate research infrastructure

NextGen scholars describe significant research infrastructural challenges, such as outdated facilities, unreliable power supply, and limited access to laboratory equipment, research software, and journals.

In terms of facilities for research, computer laboratory and library facilities, the South African universities are mostly world-class, and computer laboratory and library facilities in the Kenyan and Ghanaian universities are of sufficient standard for research at the level of postgraduate studies (Venter *et al.*, 2020).

In contrast, scholars particularly in East and West Africa – not necessarily only NextGen scholars – work with data scarcity and institutional inefficiency. For example, the scarcity of readily available data is a significant barrier. Government bodies often fail to provide sufficient or timely information, and this limitation creates gaps that severely hinder comprehensive research. These gaps leave scholars reliant on outdated or incomplete data, undermining the rigour and relevance of their research.

The process of obtaining research permissions is often prolonged by reliance on manual systems within government agencies. A Kenyan scholar lamented, *"We have limited data because getting permissions from government bodies is a long and manual process"* (Abdul-Azeez, Azeez and Basil, 2025).

The situation becomes more complicated for researchers within Africa when they cross borders into other countries for research. They face greater obstacles in obtaining research clearance than researchers outside Africa do. This partly explains why many African researchers do not undertake comparative studies of mobility within Africa.

Working with and learning from senior scholars: mentors and mentorship

Scholars seek mentors to help them navigate academic challenges, maintain work-life balance, develop their professional path, and advance their careers through joint research projects, collaborative writing, referrals, and paid consulting opportunities. Although many have benefited from unstructured mentorship, there remains a gap in sustained, targeted mentorship for early-career researchers. Closely linked to mentorship is the need for training and skills development in both professional and research areas. While some opportunities are available, they are unevenly distributed across the continent, and access is often limited by financial and logistical barriers.

In Cheure *et al*'s surveys (refer to Appendix 6), the majority of respondents (between 60-70%) did have access to mentorship, and most reported no challenges in their relationships with mentors. However, those who did experience challenges noted the limited availability of mentors, with some mentors being too busy or unwilling to provide meaningful guidance. Further, where scholars have niche interests, they struggled to find mentors with expertise in their specific research areas, leaving gaps in guidance.

Scholars have also noted the challenge of finding women mentors (Wanyua and Okidi, 2025), as there are fewer women than men in mobility research in Africa, and even fewer women in leadership positions. Without structured mentorship and networking opportunities, many talented female researchers therefore struggle to make significant strides in their fields (Morley, 2019).

Women scholars note that they wish for mentorship and guidance not only about professional trajectories but also in how to cope with what tends to be a persistent and gender-biased struggle of balancing academic and caregiving responsibilities. Many female scholars interviewed during the development of these think pieces reported experiencing gender bias, both in academic and professional settings. Women scholars recounted facing scepticism from their families about pursuing a career in geospatial sciences, while others face biases as Muslim women, and their leadership roles are questioned. Some of these biases include being overlooked for physically demanding roles and having to prove their capabilities repeatedly.

Like with funding, access to mentorship and professional networks is inconsistent across universities. The inconsistency stems from individual circumstances, institutional frameworks, and systemic inequities. While some supervisors facilitate connections, the absence of structured mentoring programmes limits the reach and consistency of such opportunities. Scholars expressed frustration with this uneven access, often noting that the availability of mentors depends on personal relationships and informal networks (Cheure, Ukam and Ewa, 2025).

NextGen scholars feel that with structured mentorship programmes, they will be more able to engage and contribute to their fields. A Nigerian scholar summarised this challenge, noting, *"Our institutions lack the framework to guide and support upcoming scholars, which limits our growth and creates a disconnect between academia and practice"*. Without institutional support to bridge

the gap between academia and practical application, there is a risk that valuable research being conducted by SSA scholars fails to reach the policymakers or industry leaders who could benefit from it most (Abdul-Azeez, Azeez and Basil, 2025).

Studies suggest that men tend to benefit from stronger informal professional networks, which provide career advancement opportunities that are not always accessible to women (Morley, 2019). Structured programmes would go some way to overcoming the limitations of relying on informal or personal contacts, where introversion or shyness can also limit scholars' ability to build networks effectively. Structured mentorship programmes would also mitigate geographic isolation and logistical and financial constraints, which prevent scholars from attending conferences or networking events.

Personal reflection: thwarted by local limitations

NextGen scholars share the joys of international networking and the “crash” of facing reality back home:

“Our motivation and enthusiasm after attending the first African Transport Research Conference (ATRC) in Cape Town in March 2024 soon faded as we encountered obstacles back at our home institutions.

“Implementing the insights and strategies learnt proved to be difficult. We were met with familiar systemic issues impeding research advancement in SSA, including rigid institutional structures, limited access to mentorship, and insufficient funding for emerging scholars.

“The disconnect between the theoretical guidance offered in international settings and the practical limitations locally is one of the most frustrating aspects of young scholars' research journeys. In many SSA institutions, administrative processes are highly centralised, meaning that a small group of senior administrators controls approvals, funding allocations, and research permissions. These structures often lack responsiveness to the needs of young researchers, making it difficult for us to secure timely approvals or adapt our projects as needed. As a result, the strategies advised by many senior scholars to adopt are frequently delayed or blocked by institutional bureaucracy.”

Navigating work, life, and intersectional challenges

Several scholars described the difficulty of juggling multiple intersecting roles: managing research, consulting, engaging in policy, teaching, administrative roles, and family responsibilities. The structural rigidity of academia, which often requires long hours of research, fieldwork, and publishing, disproportionately affects women who have caregiving responsibilities. Unlike

many of their male colleagues, female scholars may struggle to travel for field research, attend conferences, or participate in international mobility research networks due to family obligations. The absence of gender-sensitive policies – such as flexible working hours, childcare support, and family leave – entrench these difficulties (Wanyua and Okidi, 2025).

Academic isolation is a well-documented issue in higher education, particularly among women in male-dominated fields; many female scholars emphasise the emotional toll that comes with being in the academic field and the isolation, particularly for those who study abroad. Lack of social support networks and institutional mental health resources exacerbate these challenges (Wanyua and Okidi, 2025).

Mentorship would not only fill the gap young scholars experience in their ability to attend conferences and collaborate on international projects due to their high workloads and teaching responsibilities, but also guide them in how to balance their time and energy (Abdul-Azeez, Azeez and Basil, 2025). For example, while as post-graduate students NextGen scholars frequently expressed frustration with slow supervision, once they are supervisors themselves, they are on the “other side” of the table. A newly minted PhD degree holder, for example, shared how his immediate appointment to graduate supervision responsibilities, without relief from undergraduate teaching duties, created an unsustainable workload (Cheure, Ukam and Ewa, 2025). Their own supervisory overload is a challenge, with many NextGen scholars juggling teaching, administrative duties, and graduate supervision without adequate institutional support.

Personal reflection: the importance of family support



Many women scholars credit their success to strong family support. Having a supportive spouse or relatives, or the ability to hire domestic help, has allowed them to balance academic and professional responsibilities effectively. One NextGen scholar, for example, highlighted how her husband's support enabled her to navigate the challenges of academic life while raising a family, by providing financial support as well as a supportive environment to pursue her studies. Another noted that her parents' and siblings' support and drive motivated her to pursue her interest without worrying about the finances or about seeking a qualification in the male-dominated world of transport engineering (Wanyua and Okidi, 2025).

Living with existential compromises

For many students, global institutions offer opportunities that cannot be turned down, but these also bring about contested benefits and personal disquiet.

For example, where funding is provided by the global north, the research topics, themes, and methodological approaches are likewise often aligned with global north research needs, scien-

tific traditions, and perspectives. This perpetuates the uneven relationship between South and North scholarship. These opportunities, while clearly essential, to some extent compromise the scholars, as it “forces young scholars to align to north-centric academic traditions, theorisations and philosophies” (Edward et al., 2025). As one scholar put it:

“I applied for as many scholarships as possible to increase my chances of securing an opportunity. This was an uphill task since it meant applying for different styles of doctorate programmes as well as coming up with different research proposals to fit into the different funding programmes, besides reaching out to willing supervisors. It also meant shielding my personal research interests in favour of the funding programmes to maximise chances of being selected for a scholarship.”

This internal dissonance is particularly evident when scholars pursue PhD research in order to “tell the African stories and experiences ... and seek to decolonise South scholarship and research in general” but have to do so with funding or onsite study in the Global North (Edward et al., 2025). They live with the internal conflict of fearing marginalisation in international scholarship but also contesting the supremacy of Western countries. Many young SSA scholars consider universities and funding opportunities from Europe and the USA because they believe the North has a stronger academic and research culture, and that they will benefit from international exposure and access to state-of-the-art facilities. Where they can, however, they prefer to conduct their actual research in Africa within their communities. For example, as one international NextGen scholar puts it:

“I preferred to pursue a PhD abroad to deepen my understanding of the theoretical aspects of heritage, which are highly developed internationally. However, I also intended to conduct data collection in my home country as part of my thesis. I believe that this approach will significantly contribute to informing stakeholders about our country’s heritage potential, particularly those who are already engaged with it.”

While some NextGen scholars find that transitions to international PhD programmes are seamless – with universities going out of their way to ensure that incoming students settle and experience administrative and social support – their return home is anything but that (Edward et al., 2025). For the “zealous fresh doctoral scholars”, switching from the high-level research infrastructure in the north to the challenges of the south, with its slow internet connectivity, heavy workload and lack of institutional support, tests their ideological resilience.

Personal reflections: Living and studying in Europe brings “mixed feelings”

NextGen scholars are immensely grateful for the opportunities that international study brings, but these opportunities are not without hardship and struggle. Scholarship students find that the support from their colleagues and the universities makes all the difference. Here, two students share their experiences:

"Moving to Europe as winter was properly kicking in was also not easy for someone who had lived in the tropics the whole of their life. However, having a supportive professor and great hospitality from the university administration helped my colleagues and I to settle in fast. Being in a graduate school with several international students helped too because of the language barrier not being a major issue."

"The transition to live and study in Europe was one that brought mixed feelings. On one hand I was very excited for the new journey, yet I had several anxieties. The anxieties emanated from the idea that I had only three years of funding to complete my studies and so it meant that I had to work hard to achieve this without failure. I also knew I had to do really well and argue my ideas at globally competitive forums as well as prove that Africans are bright. The fact that I had no command of the German Language made life lonely as I was not able to communicate as much as I would love to."

Publishing and collaboration challenges

While publishing in top journals is a formidable challenge for African researchers, sometimes publishing at all in international journals is out of reach. Southern scholarship from peripheral countries is rarely published, let alone cited by scholars (Edward *et al.*, 2025).

Funded researchers produce more publications than those without financial support, with their output being 22 times higher, according to findings at South Africa's Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) (Mathipa-Mdakane and Nxumalo, 2025).

High fees limit SSA's academic presence in global publications, preventing scholars from sharing their findings with the broader academic community. Scholars can fall prey to predatory journals promising simpler publication. Open access publication models can have the effect of making it easier for SSA scholars to access (and cite) international work, but the scholars cannot afford to pay the fees for their own work to be published open access. This lack of visibility translates to missed opportunities for collaboration, recognition, and advancement (Abdul-Azeez, Azeez and Basil, 2025). "Promotion depends on citations," notes one West African scholar; while an East African scholar shares that "publication costs are unattainable without external help."

Being a NextGen scholar in SSA: Coping strategies and overcoming limits

How do NextGen scholars on various levels cope? They juggle, adopt various strategies, run side businesses, and focus on 'stepping stones' rather than career paths (Abdul-Azeez, Azeez and Basil, 2025; Juan and Cooper, 2025). They invest in their futures, sharpen their skills, improvise, build networks, and continuously reinvent themselves (Abdul-Azeez, Azeez and Basil, 2025; Juan and Cooper, 2025).

Leveraging peer networks and community collaboration

Where mentorship and funding are scarce, NextGen scholars turn to peer collaboration as a means of sharing resources, knowledge, and encouragement. These networks serve as informal mentorship platforms where scholars can receive guidance on both research methodologies and professional development from peers at various career stages. One West African scholar highlighted the significance of such networks, saying that *"working closely with colleagues from other institutions, we can pool resources and tackle shared challenges, from data access to grant applications"* (Abdul-Azeez, Azeez and Basil, 2025).

In East Africa, community-based support structures play a similar role, with scholars creating connections that enable the sharing of both insights and practical resources. As one scholar shared, *"engaging with colleagues at various stages of their careers has provided essential insights and even access to data that would have otherwise been out of reach"*.

In some cases, peer networks extend beyond academic circles to include industry professionals and community organisations, further enriching the collaborative landscape. Scholars have reported that these expanded networks often offer practical, context-specific advice that traditional academic mentors may not provide, particularly for research that intersects with policy or local governance. Through these connections, scholars gain a deeper understanding of how their work can directly benefit communities, thereby making their research more impactful and grounded in local realities.

Personal reflection: Balancing privilege and reality

"When I look back on my journey as a NextGen scholar in transport and mobility, two aspects stand out that mirror the lived experiences of other NextGen scholars reported in our think pieces."

"The first deals with my training at master's and PhD levels. I consider myself privileged because I got scholarships to study at centres of excellence, and this shielded me from the challenges encountered by my colleagues who were self-funded. Through the opportunities and exposure that I got in my PhD studies, I made valuable contacts that yielded very important relationships and collaborations – including this think piece project."

"The second part of my journey is that as a lecturer at the university. This part I would describe as *"facing up to reality"*. Having enjoyed the privileges I had in the course of my training, my natural expectation was to carry on building on the opportunities and exposure I got... However, I am now faced with some of the challenges and limitations that other African scholars in the universities have reported. The workload I currently shoulder, teaching undergraduate and postgraduate students, including project supervision and other administrative functions, is too much as to allow me reasonable time for research and other scholarly exploration. Infrastructural and technological limitations are major drawbacks to the level of progression I desire, and have been highlighted by other scholars in the piece. I have had to scope down research projects because of limitations in access to literature, laboratories, and requisite software."

"While I and other scholars in Africa continue to forge world class reputations in our fields, we hope that the recommendations of this piece receive the attention of policy makers in our nations and universities, so that much-needed relief can come for us and the coming generation of African scholars to flourish."

NextGen scholar, Nigeria

Being resourceful and adapting in the face of funding constraints

Confronted with persistent funding limitations, young SSA scholars adopt creative financial strategies to sustain their research. Self-funding, though challenging, has become a common approach, especially for many early-career researchers who lack access to large grants or critical institutional support. This resourcefulness is often characterised by meticulous budgeting and a willingness to adapt project scopes to fit within limited financial means. As one West African scholar put it:

"We prioritise essential expenses and seek affordable alternatives for things like data collection tools" (Abdul-Azeez, Azeez and Basil, 2025).

Others turn to innovative funding sources, such as crowdsourcing and small community grants. These alternatives reflect a broader shift toward community involvement in academic work, as scholars seek financial support from local groups that recognise the societal value of their research. One scholar explained:

“Turning to our communities for small donations has allowed us to cover critical expenses, such as travel for fieldwork”.

This approach provides the necessary funds and promotes a sense of communal investment in academic research, with communities becoming stakeholders in projects that directly benefit them (Abdul-Azeez, Azeez and Basil, 2025). One scholar explains how *“community-like grants from organisations like VREF have helped me cover fieldwork travel costs, which would have been unattainable through larger and competitive grants”*. These funding sources emphasise the involvement of communities in academic work, promoting a sense of shared purpose and societal investment in research. However, community grants are limited in scope (Abdul-Azeez, Azeez and Basil, 2025).

Challenging gender and ethnic biases

Social biases, including gender and ethnic discrimination, pose obstacles for many scholars across SSA. Female scholars encounter challenges related to gendered expectations, which often limit their roles in research or discourage them from participating in fieldwork. In both West and East Africa, women report a persistent bias that suggests fieldwork and technical roles are unsuitable for them, and that *“they belong in the office and not out in the field”*. However, many female scholars actively challenge these stereotypes by taking on traditionally male-dominated roles. One woman from East Africa shared that *“by proving my capability in the field, I’m slowly challenging the stereotype that fieldwork isn’t suitable for women”*. This determination advances their careers and sets a precedent for other women, helping to shift the cultural norms that restrict gender inclusivity in academic research (Abdul-Azeez, Azeez and Basil, 2025).

Ethnic favouritism is another challenge that complicates the professional landscape for scholars – whether NextGen or more senior – with significant implications for hiring and promotion practices. This bias impacts the equitable distribution of opportunities, as qualified scholars from different regions or ethnic backgrounds are frequently overlooked. A Ghanaian scholar expressed frustration over these practices, stating that *“ethnic-based favouritism limits our opportunities, with institutions favouring local affiliations over qualifications”* (Abdul-Azeez, Azeez and Basil, 2025). These biases create a research culture where the merit and expertise of scholars are overshadowed by ethnic affiliations, limiting collaboration and stifling the innovation that could emerge from a more diverse pool of perspectives.

Scholars facing these biases are working to counter exclusionary practices by prioritising inclusivity within their networks. In West and Central Africa, scholars form diverse research teams

representing various backgrounds. This approach strengthens their work and highlights the value of diverse perspectives. A scholar from Central Africa noted, *“Working with colleagues from different ethnic backgrounds has not only strengthened our work but also shown that diversity brings a richness to our findings.”* Through this embrace of diversity, scholars are building a research culture that values inclusivity and counters the biases they face within institutional structures (Abdul-Azeez, Azeez and Basil, 2025).

Developing skills and self-learning

In the absence of structured mentorship and professional development programmes, SSA scholars are increasingly taking a proactive approach to their own skills development. Online courses, workshops, and self-directed learning have become essential tools for acquiring technical and research skills. By leveraging accessible, often free resources, scholars compensate for the lack of institutional support and develop competencies that enhance their research capabilities. A West African scholar shared how *“with limited access to mentors, I’ve turned to online resources, from free courses to research guides, to build my expertise”*. This self-driven approach not only allows young SSA scholars to keep up with global academic standards but also empowers them to become more independent in their research pursuits (Abdul-Azeez, Azeez and Basil, 2025).

Personal reflection: expanding skill sets through workshops



The Volvo Research and Educational Foundations (VREF) offer workshops on topics relevant to mobility and access, which scholars find highly beneficial. One West African scholar commented, *“Attending VREF workshops and courses has expanded my skill set, especially in research methodologies that I wouldn’t have seen in my institution”*. Such programmes not only strengthen individual research capabilities but also contribute to the overall quality and impact of SSA scholarship.

Using academic networks and professional associations

Academic networks and professional associations play a pivotal role in supporting collaboration, knowledge-sharing and peer support among NextGen scholars. Organisations such as the Environmental Institute of Kenya (EIK), Kenya Institute of Planners (KIP), and the Chartered Institute of Transport Administration (CIOTA) facilitate connections among scholars, offering forums where they can discuss challenges, share insights and collaborate on projects. These networks provide an invaluable sense of community, reducing the isolation many SSA scholars experience, particularly in regions with limited mentorship and institutional support. A scholar from Nigeria shared how *“being part of a professional association has connected me with colleagues facing similar challenges, and their insights have been instrumental in shaping my work”*. Despite their benefits, these networks face limitations in accessibility and inclusivity. Many professional asso-

ciations are concentrated in urban centres or specific countries, making it difficult for scholars in remote or under-resourced regions to participate fully (Abdul-Azeez, Azeez and Basil, 2025).

Being part of community initiatives and local support structures

Beyond formal academic and professional resources, community initiatives and local support structures are integral to supporting NextGen scholars, particularly in regions with limited institutional support. For example, in East Africa, local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) focused on sustainable development have been instrumental in supporting mobility research. One scholar explained, *“NGOs in our area have been instrumental, providing funding and valuable insights on local mobility challenges”*. These community-driven initiatives offer scholars practical support grounded in local realities, promoting collaborations that directly address relevant regional issues (Abdul-Azeez, Azeez and Basil, 2025).

Personal reflection: NextGen scholars develop their own mentorship platforms

Ejiro Ikoko, a Commonwealth Scholar since 2019, initiated a mentorship project to support aspiring scholarship applicants across Africa and the diaspora. What began as a WhatsApp group has grown into a multi-platform initiative spanning Zoom, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, and Facebook. Over the past seven years, the project has supported applicants from countries including Nigeria, Cameroon, Namibia, Ghana, India, and Malaysia. Many have gone on to win scholarships, such as the Commonwealth, Erasmus Mundus, Chevening, China Scholarship, and DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) scholarships, or secured university admissions and internal funding for master's and PhD programmes in the UK, Europe, North America, and Asia. The mentorship model is built on peer support, with past awardees returning as mentors to guide new applicants.

Activities include hosting live webinars, Q&A sessions, essay reviews, and daily engagement on WhatsApp and Telegram groups, currently with over 700 and 200 members, respectively. The team shares scholarship opportunities and academic resources, leveraging its network to support applicants with referrals and guidance. Webinars have included accessibility features such as sign language interpreters, and sessions have covered not only application strategies but also topics such as dealing with rejection, approaching mentors, emotional intelligence, and well-being. The mentorship spans the entire journey, from pre-application document preparation to post-award support, including visa guidance, accommodation tips, and transitioning to life as a scholar. This initiative demonstrates how individual scholars and informal networks can play a transformative role in expanding access to global education for NextGen African scholars.

Opportunities for institutions to support NextGen scholars: Recommendations and ways forward

NextGen scholars have described career and work environments that are experienced as unsupportive or at times deliberately designed to test their resolve – not dissimilar to the situations of new recruits or ‘juniors’ in other sport, work, or career contexts. By and large, the scholars meet these challenges with resilience, by developing their own personal and professional networks, and by navigating financial obstacles through taking on extra work, using lower-cost research methods, or pursuing “stepping stone” careers. Some of these approaches diminish their visibility in the global networking arena, with the veracity of their research methods or epistemology doubted, coupled with the high costs of publication, visas, and travel (Edward *et al.*, 2025). Women tend to live with additional challenges as they face sexist academic environments without policy frameworks to guide inclusion, or deal with home circumstances that expect them to take on traditional gender roles, such as primary care for children or elders.

Essentially, the challenges faced by NextGen scholars in SSA are systemic and interconnected, requiring coordinated efforts from universities, policymakers, and global research partners to effectively respond to them. By addressing funding constraints, mentorship gaps, infrastructural deficits, and gender-specific barriers, a supportive academic ecosystem can be created. Such solutions not only benefit individual scholars but also contribute to the region's academic and societal advancement, paving the way for a more equitable and innovative future in research and education (Cheure, Ukam and Ewa, 2025).

This section summarises the challenges shared by NextGen scholars, drawing on the four think pieces to propose solutions to the challenges. These recommendations are directed particularly toward institutions and at times to policy and decision-makers at government level.

Funding for research, study, and publication

One of the most significant barriers to academic progress in SSA is the shortage of research funding, not only for NextGen scholars. Many scholars find it difficult to conduct high-quality research due to limited access to resources, including research equipment, materials, publishing platforms, and financial support for collaboration. This financial constraint not only affects scholars' ability to conduct their studies but also impedes their capacity to form essential partnerships with international institutions (Cheure, Ukam and Ewa, 2025).

Recommendations to institutions

- **Focus on securing long-term funding through collaborative grant proposals and partnerships with global research institutions.** Collaborative funding mechanisms and partnerships with international organisations can unlock resources, foster knowledge sharing, and drive impactful research (Cheure, Ukam and Ewa, 2025).
- **Invest directly in the needs of NextGen researchers** through, for example, creating dedicated funding pools for early-career researchers: institutions can break this cycle of persistent funding gaps by establishing specific starter grants that help young scholars cover essential costs like data collection, training, or initial fieldwork (Abdul-Azeez, Azeez and Basil, 2025).
- **Support publication in open-access journals.** High publication fees prevent many researchers from sharing their work widely.
- **Work with journal publishers to revise the existing open access model.** Current Open Access models increase the readership and citation rate of those who can afford to pay the open access fee, thus perpetuating North-South asymmetry. Work with publishers to revise open-access models to reduce bias against under-resourced researchers.
- **Develop relationships and partnerships with conference organisers** to establish virtual forums and/or subsidise travel, visas, and participation costs. Ensure that these opportunities are gender-responsive and equitable.
- **Develop partnerships between academic institutions and community organisations** to enable scholars to conduct research that aligns with both local priorities and broader academic objectives, ultimately strengthening the region's research capacity in mobility and access (Abdul-Azeez, Azeez and Basil, 2025). Ensure that these opportunities are gender-responsive and equitable.

Structured and sustainable mentorship

A critical issue faced by Next-Gen scholars in SSA is the lack of adequate mentorship. Without experienced mentors, scholars struggle to navigate the complexities of academic research, professional development, and the challenges of higher education. In many cases, scholars are left without the guidance necessary to excel in their fields, leading to a loss of potential talent and delayed academic progress (Cheure, Ukam and Ewa, 2025). Beaudry *et al* identify lack of mentoring and support as a crucial factor influencing scientific careers; amid the accumulation of advantages and disadvantages that either support or derail an academic career, mentorship is central (Beaudry, Mouton and Prozesky, 2018a). Importantly, in the end, publication or research success has less impact on emerging scholar's capacity to thrive as does support and mentorship (Van Balen *et al.*, 2012). This is even more so in Africa (Beaudry, Mouton and Prozesky, 2018a)

Scholars mention finding unstructured mentorship through networks such as the VREF Next-Gen platform, professional organisations, and industry mentors, but these are often sporadic and depend on personal initiative rather than systematic institutional support. Women scholars particularly noted the need for structured mentorship (Wanyua and Okidi, 2025).

Recommendations to institutions

- **Draw on alumni networks, which are a powerful but underused asset** (Ngure, 2018). While ideally senior scholars should actively engage in mentorship, leading by example and offering their experience and guidance through mentorship initiatives (Abdul-Azeez, Azeez and Basil, 2025), mentorships often are derailed because of work overload among academics and a shortage of staff members who could become mentors (Mbogo, 2021). Here, universities ignore a rich and invaluable resource – their alumni. In African universities (with significant exceptions in South Africa), the picture of alumni tracking is “gloomy”, yet these could form an excellent network system.
- **Embed structured mentorship in academic and training institutions** that connect or pair early-career researchers with experienced professionals, both within academia and industry. Ensure that these programmes are gender responsive.
- **Establish structured, virtual mentorship programmes, which can be delivered through digital platforms**, allowing scholars to receive consistent and personalised support regardless of geographic constraints. Digital mentoring has proven effective in enhancing entrepreneurial and academic capabilities (Lall, Chen and Mason, 2023; Seyed Ali Tabar and Zadhasn, 2023). These platforms provide scholars with the opportunity to access tailored, interactive guidance that can help them overcome academic challenges and succeed in their research endeavours (Cheure, Ukam and Ewa, 2025). The tech industry’s model of virtual mentorship offers a way forward. Platforms such as MentorNet and MicroMentor have shown how remote mentorship can break geographical barriers and create continuous support networks (Abdul-Azeez, Azeez and Basil, 2025).
- **Identify mentors who are able to specifically offer research support**, helping early-career scholars improve manuscript quality for publication and successfully negotiate the peer review process.
- **Streamline the process of forming international partnerships**. Offices or teams dedicated to promoting global research networks could guide scholars in identifying potential collaborators and managing the logistics of joint research (Abdul-Azeez, Azeez and Basil, 2025).

Skills training and professional development

Skills development opportunities are critical. Access to workshops, online courses, and specialised training programmes allows NextGen scholars to build competencies essential for high-quality research. One West African scholar shared, for example, how *“participating in online courses has allowed me to refine my technical skills, especially in data analysis, which has strengthened my research output”* (Abdul-Azeez, Azeez and Basil, 2025).

NextGen scholars note that the skills they particularly need include advanced research methodologies, data analysis, project management, academic writing, and the integration of AI and other research tools.

Recommendations to institutions

- **Teach not only technical skills but also “resilience, adaptability, and entrepreneurial thinking”** through incubators, access to finance and mentorship, short courses and micro-credentials. Universities should act as hubs, linking students and graduates to programmes, finders, and alumni networks (Juan and Cooper, 2025).
- **Develop structured guidance to NextGen scholars on selecting relevant external programmes**, where institutions themselves are not able to provide skills training.
- **Negotiate scholarships** or fee waivers with online course providers or developers.
- **Partner with industry to provide internships or job-shadowing opportunities.** Such opportunities will give emerging researchers practical exposure to non-academic careers and enable them to apply their skills within real-world settings. With such structures in place, NextGen scholars could advance with more purpose and confidence, driving research that resonates beyond academia (Abdul-Azeez, Azeez and Basil, 2025). Ensure that these opportunities are gender-responsive and equitable.

Personal reflection: “Conferences inspire a sense of possibility and purpose”

“One of my notable experiences was participating in the first African Transport Research Conference (ATRC) held in Cape Town in March 2024. This event was a high point in the careers of many young SSA scholars, providing us with an invaluable opportunity to engage with established transport scholars from around the world.

“At the conference, we were exposed to cutting-edge research, innovative methodologies and practical strategies that have proven effective in other regions. These interactions promoted a sense of possibility and purpose for us. The ATRC conference also provided many young SSA scholars with a rare platform for networking and connecting with scholars who are passionate about mobility and access issues in SSA.

“Engaging in discussions with experienced researchers allowed us to gain perspectives on how they have managed similar challenges in their regions, from funding constraints to infrastructural limitations. Most young scholars who attended the conference left feeling motivated and equipped with practical knowledge to take back to their institutions.

“These experiences highlighted the importance of cross-border collaborations and the value of shared knowledge in tackling global issues, especially in mobility and access (Abdul-Azeez, Azeez and Basil, 2025).

Access to environments conducive to research

Limited access to academic resources, such as libraries, office space, lab equipment, digital infrastructure and online databases, is a significant challenge for researchers in SSA, not only among NextGen scholars. Many institutions lack the necessary infrastructure to provide comprehensive access to academic tools, hindering scholars' ability to conduct in-depth research and stay up to date with the latest developments in their fields. The absence of dedicated spaces for study, research, and work is another challenge that young scholars face. Without access to quiet, well-equipped spaces, scholars are forced to work in less-than-ideal conditions.

These challenges directly affect the region's ability to support research that addresses global challenges. The rise in international student mobility, driven by the search for better opportunities and research facilities, is a clear indication of the gap in research infrastructure on the continent (Cheure, Ukam and Ewa, 2025).

Recommendations to institutions

- **Develop study spaces within academic institutions** and promote equitable access to these resources.
- **Digitalise libraries and data repositories and provide subsidised access to reliable internet connections.** This will ensure resources are accessible across regions. In fields such as health research, digital data-sharing platforms have proven effective at securely centralising large datasets, enabling researchers to access what they need quickly. For SSA scholars in the transport sector, a similar model could overcome current data-access challenges, especially for those in remote areas, and transform how scholars access information, reducing approval delays and allowing researchers to concentrate on their work rather than logistics (Abdul-Azeez, Azeez and Basil, 2025).
- **Accelerate bureaucratic processes through electronic systems:** the delays many scholars face – such as waiting for permits, funding approvals, or data access – hinder their research and cause unnecessary frustration. E-governance systems have proven to be effective in streamlining administrative tasks, making it easier for researchers to access

government services online. This could serve as a flexible model for governments in SSA to tackle bureaucratic bottlenecks that impede mobility and access to scholarship. A digital portal could handle applications for research permits, funding requests, and data access, with progress tracked in real-time. Such an e-governance system would reduce the time currently spent navigating bureaucracy and increase transparency over applications (Abdul-Azeez, Azeez and Basil, 2025).

- **Establish regional hubs for international collaboration** with scholars and with access to both in-person and virtual professional development workshops. Decentralised, collaborative research hubs can build community. For those working in remote or underserved areas, research can feel isolating, with limited access to resources or collaborative opportunities. Modelled on successful innovation hubs in Southeast Asia, these hubs could serve as regional collaboration centres where mobility and access scholars can gather, share resources and work on joint projects (Abdul-Azeez, Azeez and Basil, 2025).

Institutional inclusivity and accountability

The lack of consistent policies – regarding gender equity, diversity and inclusion, supervision, and access to resources, among other areas – hampers the ability of NextGen scholars to succeed. These issues lead to anxiety, uncertainty, and missed opportunities for scholars from underrepresented backgrounds or groups. Addressing these systemic problems requires cohesive strategies, including policy reforms (Abdul-Azeez, Azeez and Basil, 2025; Cheure, Ukam and Ewa, 2025).

Recommendations for institutions and policymakers

- **Develop clear, goal-oriented diversity and inclusion policies** that incentivise equitable treatment and promote diversity within academic communities. These policies should be designed to create an inclusive environment where all scholars have the opportunity to succeed, regardless of their background or circumstances.
- **Develop flexible work policies to support working mothers or pregnant scholars** in academia. This could include flexible timelines for tenure, dissertation submissions and funding applications, as well as parental leave, reduced teaching loads for new mothers, and access to on-campus childcare facilities (Wanyua and Okidi, 2025).
- **Actively encourage women to apply for Principal Investigator positions** by offering targeted training, proposal-writing workshops, and leadership development initiatives. Creating women-led research grants can further bridge the gender gap in leadership roles (Wanyua and Okidi, 2025).

- **Increase the visibility of women scholars on university platforms**, including panel discussions, media features, and publication spotlights. Showcasing the work of women in transport research will encourage more young women to pursue careers in the field (Wanyua and Okidi, 2025).
- **Support inclusive hiring and career advancement by**, among other things, prioritising merit-based support systems and including people from underrepresented regions and backgrounds, to build trust and inclusivity within institutions. Such policies would make academia a space where diverse voices and perspectives thrive (Abdul-Azeez, Azeez and Basil, 2025).
- **Standardise policies with respect to academic programmes, supervision, and research activities**, in order to reduce delays and inefficiencies. Put in place transparent supervision policies to ensure that expectations are clear and that students receive the support they need to succeed. A more structured approach to supervision, which includes clear expectations and support for balancing thesis work with publication demands, is essential.
- **Communicate policy decisions and institutional reform** to avoid misunderstandings and ensure fairness through awareness campaigns, seminars, and discussions.

Build SSA institutional capacity and foster South-South connections

SSA is positioned at the periphery of the global academic system, thus many young researchers who wish to advance their careers look for enabling environments and funding support from elsewhere, mostly in Europe, the US, and Asia. This throws the young scholar into an international academic setting, where they find themselves “in-between” North and South (Edward *et al.*, 2025). Further, the scientific reputation of a doctoral student’s country and university of origin shapes their experience of international mobility in terms of admission, supervision and funding (Gerhards, Hans and Drewski, 2018; Edward *et al.*, 2025).

Academia must grapple with fundamental questions about how to counter asymmetric relations, foster equitable collaboration, and address systemic inequalities, hierarchies, and differentiation. This means building individual and institutional capacities, fostering South-South connections alongside North-South engagements, and “revitalising the local institutions and knowledge-production sites” (Edward *et al.*, 2025).

Recommendations to institutions

- **Develop structured support to encourage international doctoral graduates to return to their home countries or universities.** This could include measures such as retaining ties with students while outside the country through remote lecturing and webinar opportunities, offering mentoring from other “returnees”, developing structured career paths, and creating formalised opportunities for returning scholars to transfer skills and experience the evident fruit of their own international learning.
- **Show leadership in setting and maintaining standards that enhance the credibility and impact of the work conducted in the field.** Senior scholars have a responsibility to champion ethical practices and uphold transparency, which reinforces SSA’s reputation on the global stage. By doing so, they not only strengthen the community but also amplify its voice in global discussions regarding mobility and access (Abdul-Azeez, Azeez and Basil, 2025). Examples of measures to consider include setting clear standards for in-country research by international scholars, including country-specific research board approval, the inclusion of local PIs and clear authorship guidelines, and formal skills-transfer programmes (rather than extractive research processes).
- **Develop, support, and invest in lower-cost regional or continent-wide scholarly conferences, with peer-reviewed publications and outputs indexed with appropriate digital libraries.** This type of initiative could reduce the risk that young scholars and institutions are tempted to share their work by attending highly visible, costly conferences which are not research-focused and do not lead to scientific publication.
- **Reinvest institutional fees in publication infrastructure.** Most universities in SSA charge institutional fees to donor-funded projects and consultancies. Institutions must reinvest these collected fees to improve the quality of local publication infrastructure and capabilities, thereby increasing the standard, quality, visibility, and access of SSA research at the global level. This will help reduce asymmetry between the Global North and South by increasing NextGen scholars’ confidence in publishing nationally and by increasing the Global North’s access to and citation of research by NextGen scholars from the SSA (Edward *et al.*, 2025).

Concluding thoughts

NextGen scholars face systemic barriers rooted in competition for limited resources – such as time, funding, and opportunities – and in hierarchical and gender dynamics. They also experience personal conflicts between the prestigious, well-funded academic opportunities of the Global North and their commitments to applied, sometimes activist research relevant to their countries of origin. They must navigate relationships with senior scholars as sought-after mentors while asserting their own agency regarding research priorities and capabilities. Additionally, they operate within academic landscapes where funding is scarce, yet the solution to many of their challenges is often straightforward: increased funding.

Besides gaining stable funding, challenges include difficulties in accessing data due to bureaucratic delays, funding shortages that limit research productivity, and institutional barriers that create unfavourable academic environments. Gender and ethnic biases further restrict career progression, with female scholars often excluded from fieldwork and technical research roles, while ethnic favouritism can influence hiring and funding decisions. Additionally, financial constraints prevent many scholars from attending international conferences and publishing in reputable journals, thereby limiting their professional visibility and opportunities for collaboration (Abdul-Azeez, Azeez and Basil, 2025).

Despite these challenges, NextGen scholars have adopted various coping strategies, including forming peer networks to share resources and mentorship, using alternative funding sources such as self-financing and community grants, and leveraging digital learning platforms for skill development. However, while these self-initiated solutions provide some relief, they remain insufficient without broader institutional and policy support (Abdul-Azeez, Azeez and Basil, 2025).

Resilience is essential for pursuing meaningful research within SSA. The challenges faced by NextGen scholars highlight the need for systemic reforms within some SSA institutions and research ecosystems. Creating an academic environment that supports NextGen scholars in SSA requires more than just access to conferences and workshops – it also demands institutional commitment to funding, policy reform, mentorship, and structural flexibility. Without these fundamental elements, young researchers will remain limited by the barriers that shape their academic environments (Abdul-Azeez, Azeez and Basil, 2025). Nonetheless, NextGen scholars remain optimistic that a future exists for them, believing that through sustained investment, SSA can develop a more inclusive, innovative, and impactful research ecosystem that drives sustainable regional development.

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Appendices: Data sources and data-collection instruments

Appendix 1: Map of sources

Think Piece / Authors	Purpose / Focus	Data Collected & Methods	Participants (Gender / Countries)	Analytical Approach	Distinctive Contribution / Theme
Abdul-Azeez, Azeez & Basil	Experiences and challenges shaping NextGen scholars in mobility and access across SSA	Focus groups (2) and online surveys	23 participants (6 women, 17 men) from Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, and Cameroon; all postgraduate degree holders	Inductive qualitative analysis	Professional and institutional conditions shaping scholarship
Edward, Guma, Wamuchiru & Akallah	Lived experiences of East African NextGen scholars pursuing academic careers abroad	Autoethnographic reflection + interviews with 9 peers	9 interviewees (7 men, 2 women) from Germany, Belgium, and the UK; all returned home after PhD	Autoethnographic narrative analysis	Transnational mobility, return migration, and reintegration challenges
Cheure, Ukam & Ewa	Realities confronting advanced master's, PhD, and early-career researchers in SSA	Focus groups (n=10) → Survey (n=57) → Follow-up prioritisation survey	10 focus group participants (5 men, 5 women); 57 survey respondents from 8 SSA countries	Mixed methods (qualitative + quantitative)	Broad mapping of constraints and policy recommendations
Wanyua & Okidi	Experiences of female scholars in the mobility sector in East Africa	8 in-depth interviews + literature and policy analysis	8 women; Uganda (3), Kenya (3), Rwanda (1), Tanzania (1)	Qualitative thematic analysis	Gendered experiences and representation in mobility research

Appendix 2: Survey Questions (Abdul-Azeez, Azeez and Basil, 2025)

1. How would you describe your current work situation as a scholar in mobility and access in SSA?
2. What are the biggest challenges you face in your professional life?
3. Have you encountered any gender or ethnic biases in your work?
4. Can you give examples?
5. What strategies have you used to handle the challenges in your work?
6. Which approaches have worked best for you?
7. What growth opportunities do you see in your field?
8. What resources are available to help you develop professionally?
9. What advice would you give to academic institutions or policymakers to support scholars like you?

Appendix 3: Questionnaire used to develop research questions (Edward et al., 2025)

1. When and where did you begin your doctorate journey?
2. Was your doctorate self-funded or sponsored? Please explain your answer.
3. What motivated or inspired you to pursue a doctorate?
4. Did you always wish to conduct your doctoral studies from within your country or elsewhere? (Please explain your choice)
5. How can you describe your transition period from your country to a foreign country?
6. Are there any extra requirements that you were supposed to meet for you to be fully admissible in the foreign country? If yes, please explain the experience of meeting any of the requirements.
7. How can you describe the initial months of beginning your doctorate studies at the new university?
8. After completing your PhD abroad, did you return to your home country? Explain your answer.
9. Were there any extra opportunities that you enjoyed during your study period? Please explain your answer.
10. Was it your wish to return to your country after completion of the doctoral studies?
11. As an early-career scholar, what challenges did you face after the completion of your PhD, nationally and internationally, as you attempted to grow academically?
12. What would you recommend to upcoming scholars who would like to pursue studies abroad, especially in the Global North countries?

Appendix 4: Research questions (Edward et al., 2025)

1. How does the career development journey for a NextGen scholar in SSA evolve?
2. What are the intrinsic and extrinsic issues that confront NextGen scholars in SSA as they make entry and engage in global academia contexts?
3. How do NextGen scholars in SSA catalyse the transformation of hegemonic narratives on knowledge production and reshape ideologies and practices in academia?
4. What practical interventions and recommendations could assist in creating an enabling environment for NextGen scholars in SSA to thrive?

Appendix 5: Focus group questions (Cheure, Ukam and Ewa, 2025)

Thesis Completion and Academic Capacities

- What are the primary challenges you have faced in completing your thesis work at the master's or PhD level?
- How has the availability or lack of academic resources affected your ability to complete your thesis?
- In what ways have you been able to strengthen your academic skills during your thesis work?
- What kind of support (e.g., academic advising, workshops) do you believe is most crucial for successful thesis completion?
- How do you balance academic expectations with the development of broader academic capacities, such as research skills and critical thinking?

Professional Networks and Mentoring

- Are NextGen scholars in mobility and access in your experiences receiving sufficient mentoring and support for their careers?
- What challenges have you or others you know encountered in building and maintaining professional networks within your field?
- How accessible are mentoring and professional networking opportunities for you and other Next Gen scholars in mobility and access?
- What could be the possible reasons for the perceived low level of mentoring and dearth of professional networking for NextGen scholars?
- What specific actions could be taken to improve NextGen scholars' access to mentoring and professional networking opportunities?

Hierarchical Power Structures and Gender-Related Challenges

- How have hierarchical power structures within your academic institution affected your academic and professional experiences?
- Can you share any experiences where gender-related challenges influenced your academic journey, career prospects, or those of other NextGen scholars?
- What strategies have you used to navigate power dynamics in your academic or professional environment?

- How do you perceive the impact of gender on access to resources, opportunities, or mentoring within your field?
- What changes would you recommend to address hierarchical or gender-related barriers in academic settings?

Institutional and Infrastructural Issues

- How do institutional policies or practices impact your ability to complete your academic work or pursue your career goals? (Supervision styles, publications, etc.)
- What infrastructural challenges (e.g., access to research facilities, laboratories, equipment, technology) have you encountered during your studies?
- How have these institutional or infrastructural issues affected your academic performance or career development?
- What improvements in institutional support or infrastructure would most benefit NextGen scholars like yourself?
- In your view, how can academic institutions in SSA better address infrastructural deficits to support students' academic and professional achievements?

Ways Forward

- Based on your experiences, what are the most critical changes needed to improve the academic and professional environment for NextGen scholars?
- What specific initiatives could help NextGen scholars overcome the challenges related to thesis completion and career development?
- How can academic institutions and stakeholders better support the building of professional networks and access to mentoring?
- What are your top recommendations for creating a more supportive and equitable academic environment for future scholars in SSA?

Appendix 6: Survey questions (follow-up to focus groups)(Cheure, Ukam and Ewa, 2025)

Questions	Drop down options
Education	
Within the last Five (5) years, have you actively studied or researched in Transport in a Sub-Saharan African University?	Yes
	No
What level of education or career are you currently at?	Within 5yrs post-PhD
	PhD
	Post-Masters
	Masters
In which country did you complete your highest degree?	
Which discipline or field of study are you pursuing/researching?	
How satisfied are you with the quality of education you received during your highest degree programme?	Lowest
	Low
	Medium
	High
	Highest
Employment	
Are you currently employed in a position related to your field of study or area of research?	Yes
	No
How satisfied are you with your current employment situation?	Lowest
	Low
	Medium
	High
	Highest

How does your job or job situation impact your ability to focus on your research work?	Lowest
	Low
	Medium
	High
	Highest
Funding	
Did you receive funding for your studies or research?	Yes
	No
If yes, please indicate the source(s)	National
	International
How adequate was the funding you received for completing your research or studies?	Lowest
	Low
	Medium
	High
	Highest
What challenges did you face in applying for, or obtaining funding for your academic pursuits?	
Working Conditions	
How would you describe your current conditions at your educational institution or workplace (e.g., work environment, resources available)?	Lowest
	Low
	Medium
	High
	Highest
Do you have access to adequate research facilities and resources in your current position?	Yes
	No

How would you rate the quality of your research infrastructure and facilities?	Lowest
	Low
	Medium
	High
	Highest

What are the major challenges you face in your educational or working environment?

What improvements would you suggest for enhancing the working conditions of scholars in your field?

Support and Mentoring

Do you currently have a mentor or access to mentoring opportunities?	Yes
	No

Have you encountered any barriers in accessing mentoring support?	Yes
	No

What challenges do you face in building strong professional networks and finding mentors?

How can universities and research institutions facilitate networking and mentorship opportunities for NextGen scholars?

Career Development and Prospects

How satisfied are you with your current career progress?	Lowest
	Low
	Medium
	High
	Highest

How confident are you in achieving your career goals?	Lowest
	Low
	Medium
	High
	Highest

What challenges do you face in advancing your career in your field?	
How could career development support for NextGen scholars be improved in SSA?	
Analysis and Reflection of Conditions and Challenges Related to Successfully Completing Thesis Work on Master or Ph.D. Levels in SSA	
What specific challenges did you or have you encountered while completing your thesis or dissertation?	
How have these challenges impacted your ability to complete your academic work on time?	Lowest
	Low
	Medium
	High
	Highest
What support mechanisms do you think would alleviate these challenges?	
Strengthening Academic Capacities and Skills	
Have you attended any training or workshops to strengthen your academic skills?	Yes
	No
How can universities and research institutions better support NextGen scholars in developing these skills?	
What resources or training programmes would you find helpful in enhancing your academic capacities? (e.g., workshops, training programmes, networking)	
Handling Hierarchical Power Structures and Gender-Related Challenges	
Have you experienced any hierarchical power structures or gender- related challenges within your institution?	Yes
	No
Can you briefly describe the challenges?	
What strategies or support systems do you consider effective for navigating such challenges and advocating for the rights of young scholars?	
How can universities and research institutions promote a more inclusive and equitable academic culture?	

Addressing Institutional or Infrastructural Issues

What are the major institutional or infrastructural challenges you face in your academic environment?

How have these challenges affected your research productivity and career progress?

Lowest

Low

Medium

High

Highest

What solutions or improvements would you suggest to address these issues?

Demographic Background

What is your age?

18-24

25-34

35-44

45-54

55+

What is your gender?

Male

Female

Other

What is your Nationality?

Follow-Up

Would you be willing to participate in a follow-up interview or focus group discussion?

Yes

No

How would you prefer to be contacted for follow-up? (e.g., Email, Phone)

Rank the following challenges from 1 to 5	
Lack of research funding	Lowest
	Low
	Medium
	High
	Highest
Lack of mentoring and support	Lowest
	Low
	Medium
	High
	Highest
Lack of training opportunities to develop professional skills	Lowest
	Low
	Medium
	High
	Highest
Lack of emotional intelligence by supervisors	Lowest
	Low
	Medium
	High
	Highest
Delays and pressures to balance publications and thesis completion	Lowest
	Low
	Medium
	High
	Highest

Lack of dedicated study/research/work spaces (MSc/PhD)	Lowest
	Low
	Medium
	High
	Highest
Lack of consideration for pregnant female scholars	Lowest
	Low
	Medium
	High
	Highest
Ambiguity and lack of policies towards diversity and inclusion	Lowest
	Low
	Medium
	High
	Highest
Limited research lab/equipment or funding for lab/equipment	Lowest
	Low
	Medium
	High
	Highest

Appendix 7: Key informant interview protocol (Wanyua and Okidi, 2025)

Introduction and Consent

- Briefly introduce the purpose of the interview.
- Explain the scope of the think piece and its focus on female next-generation scholars in East Africa.
- Obtain informed consent from the participant to proceed with the interview.

Background Information

- Name, Age, and Nationality.
- Current Position and Affiliation: Title, institution, and role.
- Academic Background: Education history and relevant qualifications.
- Professional Experience: Previous and current roles related to mobility and access.

Experiences as a Female Next-Generation Scholar.

- Motivation: What motivated you to pursue a career in mobility and access?
- Challenges: What specific challenges have you encountered as a female scholar in this field?
- Opportunities/wins: Have there been any significant opportunities that have helped advance your career?
- Support Systems: What kind of support (mentorship, institutional, etc.) have you received?
- Gender Disparities: How have gender dynamics influenced your academic and professional journey?

Collaboration and Networking

- Collaborative Efforts: How have you engaged with other scholars or organisations in your field?
- Networking Opportunities: What platforms or networks have been instrumental in your career development?
- Barriers to Collaboration: What challenges have you faced in establishing collaborative relationships?

Impact of the VREF Nextgen Platform

- Awareness and Participation: Are you aware of the VREF Nextgen platform? Have you participated in any of its activities?
- Perceived Benefits: How has the platform contributed to your professional growth?
- Areas for Improvement: In what ways could the platform better support female scholars?

Mentorship and Leadership

- Mentorship Experience: Have you had mentors? How have they influenced your career?
- Leadership Roles: Have you held any leadership positions? What challenges have you faced in these roles?
- Mentorship Gaps: Are there any gaps in mentorship that need to be addressed for future female scholars?

Structural and Institutional Factors

- **Resource Availability:** How accessible are the resources (funding, research opportunities, etc.) you need for your work?
- **Institutional Support:** How do your institution's policies and culture support or hinder your career development?
- **Gender Policies:** Does your institution have gender-specific policies? How effective are they?

Intersectional Factors

- **Diverse Identities:** How do factors such as age, ethnicity, or socioeconomic background intersect with gender in your experiences?
- **Unique Challenges:** What unique challenges have you faced due to these intersecting identities?

Recommendations and Future Directions

- **Support for Future Scholars:** What recommendations do you have for supporting the next generation of female scholars?
- **Policy Suggestions:** What policies or programmes could help reduce gender disparities in your field?
- **Vision for the Future:** What is your vision for gender equity in mobility and access research and practice in East Africa?