FutureWORKS
COLLECTIVE

Call for Research

Skills formation for an Inclusive and Sustainable Future of Worker(ers) in Eastern and Southern Africa.

Introduction

The Southern Centre for Inequality Studies, the Centre for Researching Education and Labour and the International Labour Organisation are pleased to announce **a *Call for Research: Skills Formation for an Inclusive and Sustainable Future of Worker(ers) in Eastern and Southern Africa*.** This call is part of a global research project supported by the International Development Research Centre, through the FutureWORKS Collective. The FutureWORKS Collective is made up of five regional research hubs across Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Latin America. In Eastern and Southern Africa, our objective is to develop a network of leading research institutions, engaged in cutting-edge and rigorous research, to support labour policies and skills interventions towards a Just Transition.

In this second round of calls, we will offer grants of up to **ZAR 400,000** to conduct original research on skills formation systems. We encourage interdisciplinary proposals that promote gender equity and inclusion, including in the constitution of research teams. Proposals must be submitted in English by **February 15, 2026 at 23:59 SAST** via the online platform. We will hold an information session on **January 28, 2026, at 3pm SAST/4pm EAT**. Please register for the information session here and send any questions to us at #Dept-Info.SCIS@wits.ac.za.

Background and Context

The Eastern and Southern Africa (ESA) region is undergoing a demographic boom characterised by high birth rates and increased life expectancy. There are currently 580 million people living in the ESA region, with those of working-age constituting the bulk of the population. Every day, 35,000 new workers enter the labour force. This number is expected to double by 2050. While most of the working-age population still lives in rural areas, a rapid process of urbanisation is taking place, putting an additional burden on governments to provide adequate infrastructure, services, and jobs (UNICEF, 2023).

Employment creation has not been able to keep pace with demographic change and over three quarters of the region's working-age population currently derive a livelihood primarily from the informal economy. African governments hope that the global shift towards decarbonisation and digitalisation will offer new opportunities for countries to move up the chain of value addition, increase productivity, and promote decent work (African Union, 2020). To this end, governments have invested substantial resources in developing the institutions and instruments for skills anticipation, assessment, and training (ILO, 2019). However, investments in skills training systems have had little impact because they tend to focus exclusively on the 'skills mismatch' and ignore the social and economic factors that shape skill formation systems (Allais, 2022b). This Call for Research aims to advance a conceptual framework for skills formation at three levels of analysis: education and learning system, sectors and occupations, and the firm.

Research themes

The Call for Research invites **interdisciplinary** proposals that examine the relationships between education and training systems, labour restructuring and the possibilities for decent work. We are particularly interested in research that moves beyond a narrow "skills gaps" perspective and instead analyses how skills are socially, institutionally and politically embedded across Eastern and Southern Africa. Proposals may focus on **a single thematic area or combine multiple themes;** and they may examine **one country or undertake a comparative study across countries.** Proposals must be theoretically grounded, methodologically coherent and geared towards producing original empirical research that helps us to understand how existing vectors of power, in particular gender, shape experiences and distributional outcomes.

1. Education and Learning Pathways

This thematic area examines the extent to which education and training systems are structurally aligned with how young people move into work. It is interested in understanding whether education and training systems can support pathways into stable, skilled, and decent employment, or whether they produce credentials that are weakly connected to existing occupational structures and labour market opportunities. The thematic area focuses on the following questions:

- What are **the institutional and governance arrangements** of education and skills training systems? Who determines which programmes exist, what kinds of knowledge are recognised and incorporated into occupational standards and/ or curricula and assessments, and who is responsible for providing training? How are responsibilities distributed between the state, professional bodies, employers and trade unions?
- What are the main **learning and labour market transition pathways that** young people follow after junior or secondary education, and how do these differ across contexts? Here, we are envisaging an analysis of official data systems, to understand flows and also the proportion of learners moving into different parts of the education system and from the education and training system into work, and what kinds of institutions provide which qualifications and learning programmes? To what extent do TVET students access workplace-based learning and what forms does this learning take? What proportion of TVET students receive no workplace experience and what are the implications for labour market transitions and occupational mobility?
- What kinds of **occupational levels and employment outcomes** do vocational and higher education pathways lead to? How are occupational hierarchies structured across sectors (e.g. general workers, operators, artisans)? What kinds of employment conditions do these pathways typically lead to (full-time, part-time, casual or contract work)? How do these outcomes compare between vocational and university graduates?

2. Occupations and Occupational Change

This thematic area examines how occupations are constituted, transformed, and governed within changing regimes of production, accumulation and redistribution. It starts from the premise that occupational training and skills development depend not only on technical requirements, but on social and institutional arrangements that define what counts as an occupation, whose knowledge is recognised, and how expertise is rewarded. Where occupations fragment, lose coherence, or are weakly institutionalised, the links between training, employment, and decent work are often weakened, with important implications for workers' bargaining power, working conditions and inequality. This thematic area focuses on the following questions:

- How are **occupations restructured** across sectors and levels of work? Where are occupations consolidating into protected professions, and where are they fragmenting into task-based, casualised, or precarious forms of labour? How do these processes reshape occupational hierarchies, professional mobility, and workers' bargaining power?

- How do education and training systems, occupational standards, and licensing regimes interact with **workplace organisation,** labour processes and managerial control? Whose knowledge and interests shape what is defined as skill, competence, and expertise? How do these definitions affect wages, authority, and workers' capacity to exercise collective power?

- What **occupational classification systems** are used to define and regulate occupations? What assumptions underpin these systems, and how well do they capture occupational realities in African contexts? How might these occupation classification and skills anticipation systems be reconfigured to better reflect African labour market realities and support more equitable forms of skills development and decent work?

3. Labour Process and Worker Power

This thematic area focuses on the workplace as a central site of class relations, skill formation, and the exercise of managerial and worker power. It approaches training, restructuring, and technological change not as neutral processes, but as contested terrains through which capital seeks to reorganise labour, reduce costs, and increase control, and through which workers and their organisations attempt to defend livelihoods, skills, and collective power. The aim is to understand how skills, transitions, and technology are embedded in labour processes and industrial relations, and how these factors shape inequality, precarity, and the distribution of risks and rewards. This thematic area is interested in the following questions:

- How is **labour restructuring** negotiated in declining and expanding sectors and forms of climate adaptive work? What transition arrangements are included in collective bargaining agreements and whose interests do they serve? Which categories of workers are protected, displaced, or excluded? What are the consequences for class stratification within firms, sectors and in emerging forms of climate adaptive work?

- How is workplace training organised, funded, and controlled? What balance exists between internal and external, formal and informal, accredited and non-accredited training? How do employers define **"skills needs"** and how do these definitions relate to labour control, cost reduction, and flexibility across different sectors, firm sizes, and occupational groups?
- How does the global shift towards decarbonisation and digitalisation reshape labour processes, skill requirements, and employment relations? Which workers are deskilled, reskilled, or displaced, and how does this affect bargaining power, casualisation, and the use of labour brokers? How do these dynamics reconfigure **power relations within and across workplaces**?

4. Entrepreneurship and Self-Employment

This thematic area examines small, micro, and community-based economic activity as a central terrain in which livelihoods are produced under conditions of informality, precarity, and uneven development. Rather than treating SMMEs simply as engines of growth or entrepreneurship, this strand approaches them as sites of labour relations, survival strategies, and local accumulation, shaped by power, access to resources, and institutional support. The focus is on how skills, work, and livelihoods are organised at local scales, and on how state, market and community institutions, structure opportunities and constraints for workers and small producers. This thematic area is interested in the following questions:

- How do skills circulate, develop, and reproduce within **local economies**? What roles do households, community organisations, training institutions, and employers play in shaping access to skills and work? How do local power relations, gender norms, and social hierarchies structure who benefits from skills formation and who is excluded?
- How do colleges, training centres, NGOs, municipalities, and other intermediaries **support or fail to support entrepreneurial livelihoods**? What institutional capacities and forms of coordination are required to strengthen local skills ecosystems and link training to viable forms of work?
- Which interventions aimed at supporting SMMEs and transitions into self-employment have been effective, for whom, and under what conditions? Do such interventions enable sustainable livelihoods, or do they primarily shift risks onto individuals and households? How do these dynamics **reproduce or challenge existing inequalities**?

Methodological considerations

We encourage interdisciplinary proposals that explore both **quantitative and qualitative** aspects of the research questions listed above. Proposals may focus on a single thematic area or combine multiple themes; and they may examine one country or undertake a comparative study across countries. Research methods may include the statical analysis of official data, discourse analysis of archival materials, an (online) survey or questionnaire, individual or group interviews, ethnographic observation, community-based methods such as performance or

photography, data scraping form social media, or any other innovative research method. In the proposal, applicants must outline the rationale for the research methods selected, detail how the research methods will be applied, and explain how the data collected will be analysed.

In the proposal, applicants will be expected to explain how they plan to apply a **gender lens** to their research, from the conceptualisation of the research to its operationalisation and the analysis of the research findings. This research should contribute to improving equity, equality, and inclusion. All research conducted under the FutureWORKS Collective: Eastern and Southern Africa will require **ethics** approval by their respective research institutions. In the proposal, applicants will be expected to reflect on the ethical implications of the research, whether the research will expose participants to harm, what measures will be taken to protect participants, and how researchers can secure the necessary permissions.

To ensure coherence of the research across countries and promote peer-learning, the selected research teams will be expected to **actively participate in the research network**, led by the FutureWORKS Collective: Eastern and Southern Africa. Opportunities for participation will include an inception workshop in early April 2026, to develop a common conceptual framework; regular meetings every two months to refine the country research approach, share emerging research findings, and plan dissemination events; and online seminars to disseminate final research findings to a wider audience, including researchers, policy makers, civil society groups and trade unions, employers' organisations and business groups, and the media.

Eligibility criteria

We welcome proposals from researchers based at or affiliated with **research institutions based in Eastern or Southern Africa**. Eligible research institutions include public or private universities, independent research centres and non-governmental organisations. Where research teams are composed of more than one research institution, one institution must be designated as the lead responsible for implementing the contractual agreement with the University of the Witwatersrand. Multilateral organisations, government departments, consultancy companies, and for-profit organisations are *not* eligible to apply.

Research teams must be led by a researcher with a **demonstrated track record of producing high-quality research** for policy impact, with a focus on labour markets, conditions of work, social reproduction and/or skills formation systems. The research team must have the capacity to work in English as well as the working languages of the country or countries. The research proposals must show how they will make a meaningful contribution to conceptual, empirical, and policy debates in the ESA region. Proposals must explicitly outline how the research teams will integrate the principles of gender equity and inclusion into the research team structure, the research design, and the research process. Furthermore, proposals must meet the ethical standards outlined by the IDRC and by the University of the Witwatersrand.

Expectations and responsibilities

Research teams must integrate the principles of gender equity and inclusion in all aspects of their work, from constructing the research team, to developing the research design, operationalizing the research and disseminating the research finding. This includes:

- A comprehensive approach to gender equity and inclusion, which aims to address inequalities within the research team, along the lines of gender and other relevant vectors of power.
- An inclusive research design, which recognises the diverse approaches, experiences and outcomes, along the lines of gender and other relevant vectors of power.
- An inclusive data analysis strategy, which includes a gender lens, as well as an analysis of other vectors of power.
- An inclusive approach to disseminating findings, which includes organisations of women and other marginalised groups.

Research must meet the ethical standards outlined by the IDRC and by the University of the Witwatersrand.

The grant cycle for this first call will run from April 1, 2026, to March 31, 2027, with the disbursement of funds made on the basis of research outputs (see table 1 below). Each research team will be expected to publish:

- a working paper based on original research, in the open-source platform of the University of the Witwatersrand, Wits WIReDSpace;
- an article based on the working paper, for a special issue convened by the research hub, in a peer-reviewed international journal.
- a summary brief in a prescribed format based on the working paper for dissemination to a wider audience

Research teams will also be expected to participate in online seminars and co-organise public engagements, including policy dialogues, as part of research dissemination.

Table 1: Indicative timeline for the disbursement of funds

Tranche	Deliverable	Deadline
25%	Upon signature of the contract	April 1, 2026
25%	Upon submission and acceptance of the inception report	July 1, 2026
25%	Upon submission and acceptance of the working paper	December 31, 2026
10%	Upon submission of an article for a journal special issue or edited volume and summary report	March 31, 2027

Research teams will be expected to comply with the IDRC's Open Access Policy and the Open Data Principles Statement. Applicants must include a Stage 1 Data Management Plan, in the appendix of their application, outlining their approach to managing the research data collected.

Application and submission procedure

Proposals must be submitted in English by **February 15, 2026 at 23:59 SAST via the online platform.** There are two components to the proposal. PART A requires basic information about the researcher(s), the research institution, and the focus of the proposal, including an abstract of a maximum of 250 words. It must be submitted via the form on the online platform. PART B is the proposal, which must be uploaded to the online platform as a word document. The **proposal should follow the format in Appendix 1 below and must not exceed the word limit allocated**. In addition to the proposal, applicants must upload a compiled list of all the CVs of the members of the research team, the Stage 1 Data Management Plan and proof of legal status of the research institution. Please identify each file using the following format: [Country]. [Surname]. [File Type] (For instance, Mozambique. Dhlamini. Proposal). We will hold an information session on **January 28, 2026, at 3pm SAST/4pm EAT**. Please register for the information session here and send any questions to us at #Dept-Info.SCIS@wits.ac.za.

Evaluation criteria

Complete applications will be evaluated by a committee of reviewers from SCIS, the REAL Centre and the ILO. Applicants will be notified of the outcome by **March 2, 2026.**

The proposals will be evaluated based on the following criteria:
- Contribution of the proposed research to theoretical, empirical, and policy debates in Eastern and Southern Africa (35%):
  - Alignment with call
  - Relevance of the topic to the region
  - Original contribution to theoretical, empirical and policy debates
- Coherence of the research design, which provides a clear articulation between the research questions, methodology, research instruments, and sources of data (35%)
  - Clear articulation of the research problem and questions
  - Gender analysis
  - Coherence between the research questions and research design
  - Viability of the research resources and sources of data
  - Ethical considerations
- Public engagement strategy (10%)
  - Effectiveness of public engagement strategy
  - Viability of the strategy given the resources available
  - Evidence of experience engaging stakeholders and policy makers
- Team composition (10%)
  - Demonstrated expertise in the field, with high-quality publications
  - Gender-equitable teams, with a combination of senior and junior researchers
  - Experience in policy making processes and engagement with stakeholders (government officials, civil society, representatives,
- Quality of the writing (10%)

In selecting shortlisted proposals, the review committee may choose to prioritise proposals that allow for greater geographic and thematic diversity. Successful applicants will sign a contractual agreement with the University of the Witwatersrand. The anticipated start date is **September 1st, 2026.**

Appendix 1: Format for the proposal

1. Project background

Title of research proposal	
Name: lead researcher	
Name: leading institution	
Contact: lead researcher	
Research country/ies	
Thematic area(s)	
Amount requested	

2. Problem, objectives and research approach

Abstract (max 200 words)
Introduction: the context and research problem (max 250 words)
Research questions (max 150 words)
Literature review: review of theoretical, empirical and policy debates (max 500 words)
Research methodology: research approach, rationale for case studies, research methods, sources of data, gender equity and inclusion, and ethical considerations (max 500 words)
Approach to incorporating an intersectional lens in the conceptualisation, operationalisation and dissemination of the research (max 150 words)
Research outputs (max 150 words)
Public engagement strategy (max 250 words)

3. **Workplan**, which outlines activities and timeline for the duration of the grant cycle.

4. **Itemised budget,** which clearly defines the costs of:
    a. Remuneration for members of the research team
    b. Equipment required to undertake or disseminate the research
    c. Research costs associated with travel and accommodation.

5. **Attachments:**
    a. compiled list of all the CVs of the members of the research team,
    b. the Stage 1 Data Management Plan
    c. proof of legal status of the research institution.