



UASP IMPACT EVALUATION

Summary of Key Findings

2026



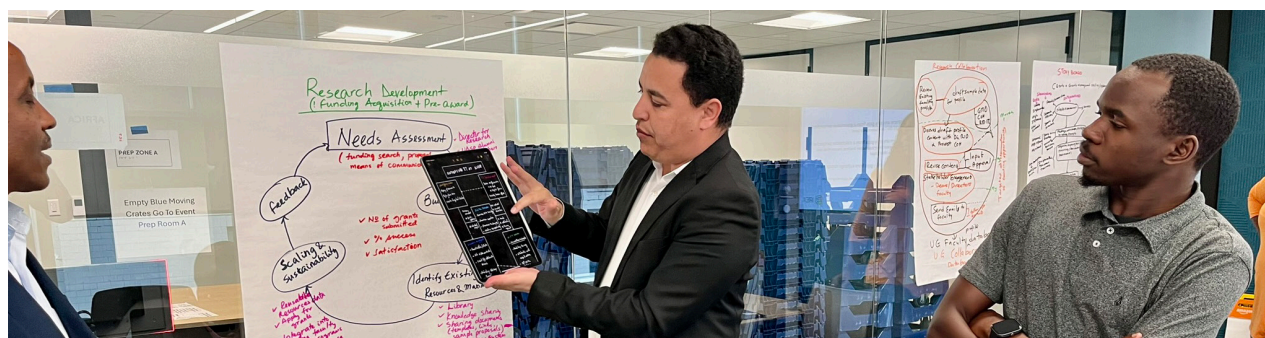
At a Glance

Over ten years, the **University Administration Support Program (UASP)** sought to strengthen and professionalize research management across African universities by investing in the people who enable research and research impact: those who secure and manage funding, ensure ethical and financial oversight, and support the uptake and application of research findings by industry and communities. As universities work to expand the scale, quality, and impact of their research, strong research management systems have become increasingly essential for competing for international funding and meeting complex compliance requirements.

Designed and **implemented by IREX from 2016 to 2026 with funding from the Carnegie Corporation of New York**, UASP focused on strengthening research management ecosystems across institutions of the **African Research Universities Alliance** by supporting mid- and senior-level academic and administrative professionals. The program model combined applied research management and leadership training, peer learning, exposure to international best practices, coaching, and small grants to help participants implement practical, institution-level reform. The delivery mode evolved over time from fully in-person to hybrid and online formats.¹

As UASP concluded, an independent impact evaluation by **Global Insight** examined whether the program’s investment in individual leaders led to lasting changes in **(1) individual participants’ professional practice, career paths, and networks, (2) institutional research management systems, and (3) whether impact increased when multiple alumni worked together within the same institution (“critical mass”).**

Bottom line: Strategic investment in mid- and senior-level university leaders, paired with peer collaboration and implementation support, contributed to **sustained individual and institutional improvements in research management**, with stronger effects where institutions had 10 or more alumni working together.



¹ The program adapted during the COVID-19 pandemic to offer hybrid and fully online modalities, scaling access while maintaining emphasis on applied learning, peer exchange, comparative perspectives, and context-specific institutional problem-solving. Engagement with U.S. universities, including mentoring and observation of diverse research management structures and practices, was a core part of the in-person and hybrid models, but was not part of the fully online modality.

Takeaways

- 1** Alumni widely experienced UASP as a turning point in how they do their work, strengthening core capabilities needed to compete for and manage research funding.
- 2** UASP strengthened alumni professional skills, confidence, and engagement in research management, supporting the project's goal of professionalizing research management practice.
- 3** UASP helped build a durable community of practice that enables ongoing information sharing, problem-solving, and professional engagement.
- 4** UASP appears to strengthen capability and influence consistently, but formal promotions depend on institutional structures and opportunities that vary widely.
- 5** Institutional change depends on reaching a critical mass of engaged alumni working together with an institution. UASP's peer-based design enabled alumni to build relationships and trust through technical exchange; its leadership curriculum then developed alumni's skills to understand perspectives, align interests, and strategically influence key actors and decision-makers, promoting effective, not just active, engagement.²
- 6** Deeper engagement and institutional support strengthen the translation of individual fellowships into systems change. The evaluation indicates that individual fellowships can support change in university contexts, but effects are strongest where participants experience intensive, in-person exposure and engagement, have decision-maker involvement, and can access funding to catalyze ideas.
- 7** Institution-level changes to research management systems and processes are more immediately achievable, while changes in infrastructure, visibility, and knowledge transfer may require longer timelines and additional resources.

² UASP intentionally brought administrative and academic leaders on the fellowship—parties that have not always historically worked together—in order to support effective coalition building from the onset.



Methodology

Global Insight used a **quasi-experimental mixed methods design**—combining survey data and qualitative research to assess **outcomes** and how change happened.

Surveys compared 148 UASP alumni with two comparison groups (357 respondents total), including 90 applicants to the UASP fellowship who were not selected, and 119 respondents from comparable “sister” universities. **Statistical techniques were used to isolate UASP’s effects** from other background factors by accounting for observed differences across countries, individuals, and institutions.

Interviews and focus groups with alumni and senior university leaders provided insight into if and how alumni applied learning and what made change easier or harder.

Key Takeaways from Evaluation Findings

INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL INSIGHTS

Alumni reported major improvements in research management practice and professional growth as a result of UASP.

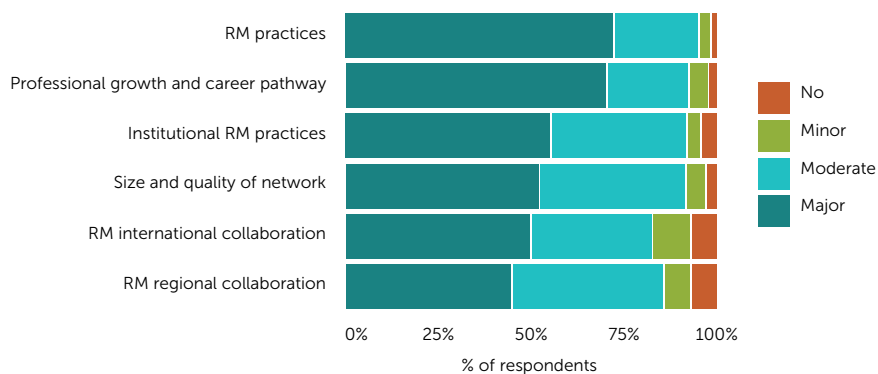
73.5%

said UASP had a **major influence** on their professional growth and career pathway.

71.2%

said UASP had a **major influence** on their research management practices.

Figure 1. Influence of UASP on Alumni Outcomes



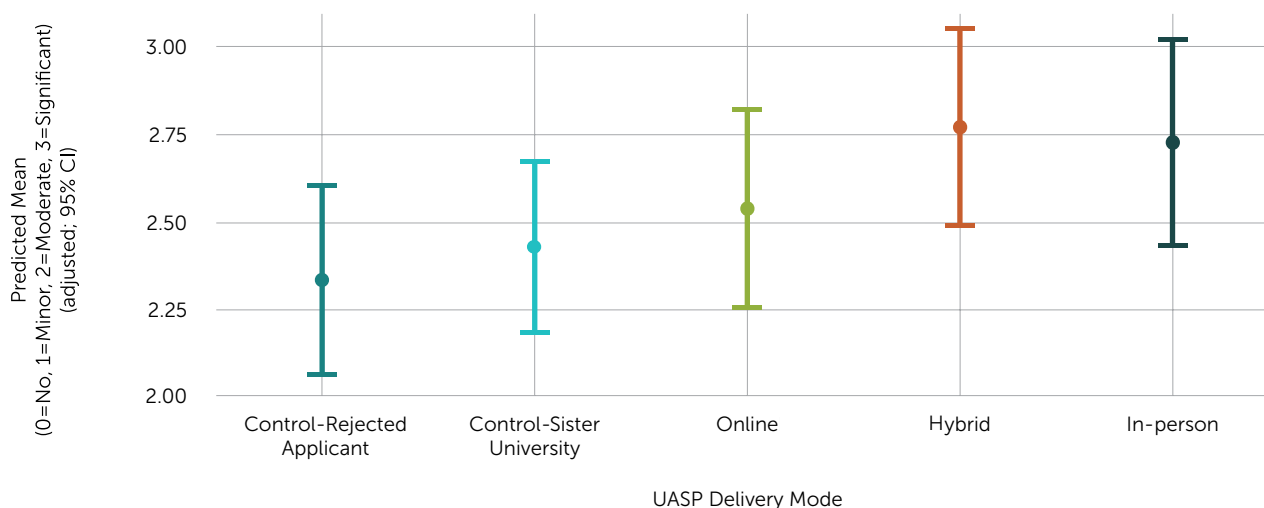
UASP alumni across all delivery modalities reported significantly greater confidence than peers in performing key research management tasks.³

When asked to rate their confidence (on a -1 to 1, less to more scale), alumni scored closer to “more confident,” while comparison groups were between “no change” (0) and “more confident.”

Alumni of UASP in-person and hybrid programs outperform comparison groups in professional development.

When asked to rate how their **personal or professional development** had changed since UASP or over time (on a 0-3 scale, where 3 is “significant improvement”)⁴ UASP alumni of in-person or hybrid formats scored closer to “significant improvement” while comparable groups scored closer to “moderate.”

Figure 2. Improvement in Personal or Professional Development (e.g., career advancement, achieving milestones, overcoming challenges)

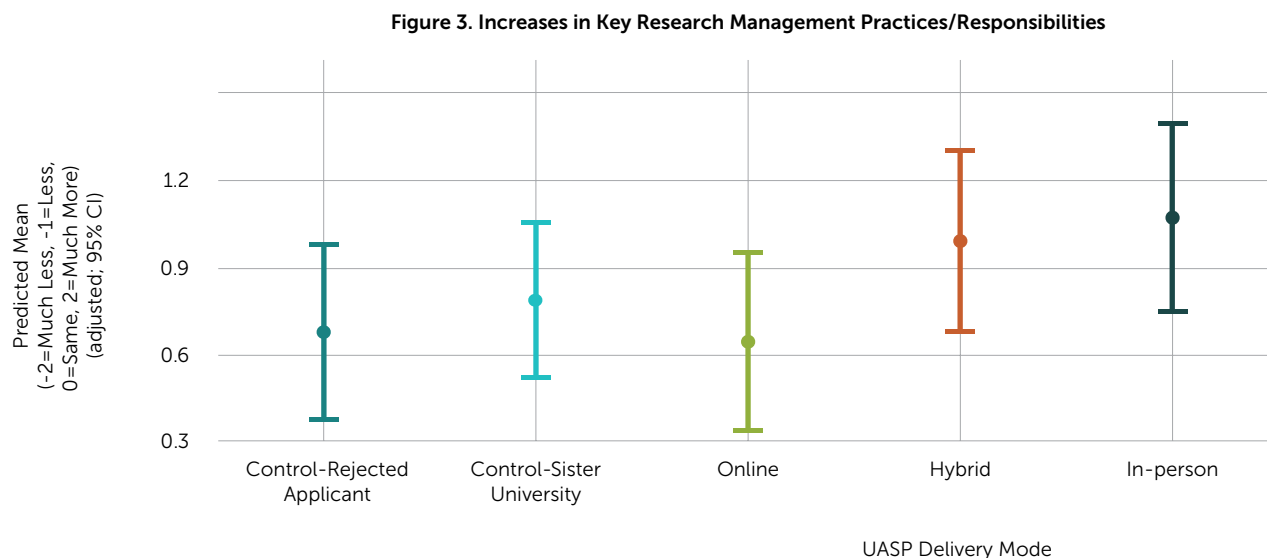


³ Key tasks included designing/managing grant proposals, navigating institutional research management processes, leading/influencing RM organizational change, facilitating collaboration with other universities, etc.

⁴ The survey design generally asked alumni to rate the extent of change that was a result of UASP, while comparison group respondents rated change since 2016 or since they began their research management roles.”

Alumni of UASP in-person and hybrid groups reported greater increases in how often they performed core research management tasks relative to peers,⁵ though effects were not always statistically significant.

When asked to rate **how often (relative to the past) they participated in a series of research management practices and responsibilities** (from -2, much less, to 2, much more) the UASP in-person and hybrid groups scored closer to “more” and the control group and fully online participant responses were, on average, between the “same” and “more.”



Qualitative findings reinforced this pattern. **Alumni described becoming more effective and strategic**, with more structured workflows and approaches to managing responsibilities.

Individual outcomes improved when multiple alumni in an institution collaborated.

More alumni in one university, and higher levels of interaction between those alumni, was associated with higher scores on professional development, confidence, and increased engagement in research management responsibilities.

⁵ In-person participants reported significantly greater engagement than peer groups in advising others, leading/coordinating institutional research management initiatives, participating in professional networks, designing or managing competitive research grant proposals, and contributing to or developing institutional research management policies, guidelines, or digital systems.

Alumni professional networks expanded significantly, and alumni interacted more often with peers.

- **86%** of alumni reported gaining new professional connections through the program.
- **Alumni of in-person and hybrid cohorts reported more frequent interaction with research management peers than comparison groups**, especially within their own countries and within regional networks.

Career advancement occurred, but was not significantly different from comparison groups.

- **52.8%** of alumni reported receiving a promotion since the program.
- **82.3%** reported increased professional responsibilities.
- These outcomes were not statistically higher than comparison groups.



If not for UASP, we wouldn't have identified ourselves... now we reach out whenever we have issues



There wasn't a formal promotion... but I think that there was increased trust in what I could do and what I could handle.

BRIDGE INSIGHT: IMPACT SCALES WITH CRITICAL MASS

Alumni density and collaboration amplified institutional impact.

The likelihood of reporting institutional improvements increased as the number of UASP alumni within an institution grew. Among sister universities (with no alumni), the probability of reporting institutional improvements was around 50%. This rose to **~55% at institutions with 10 alumni, 60% or higher at 20 alumni**, and nearly **70% at institutions with 30 or more alumni**. A similar pattern was observed for **joint alumni action**.⁶

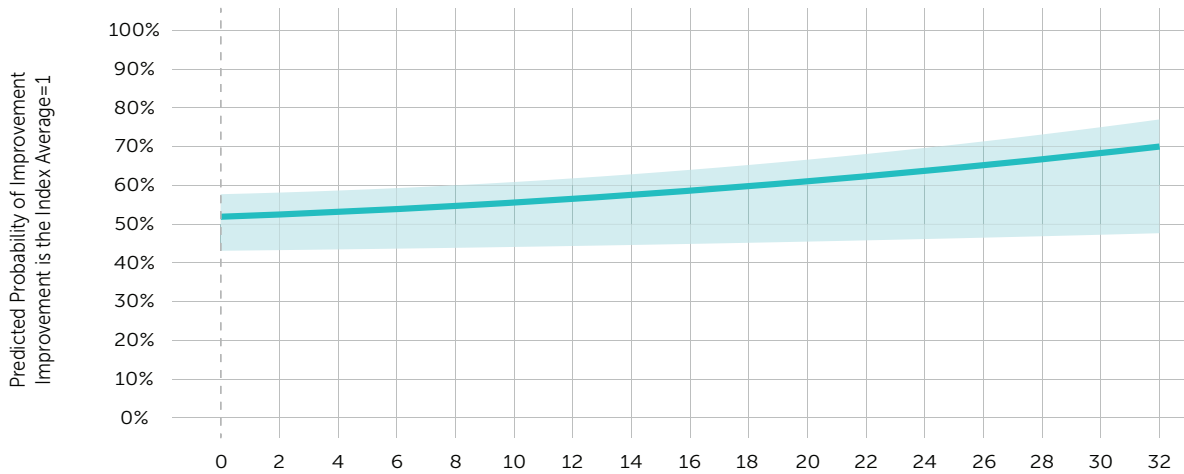


Usually when you talk of research and anything around it, most people believe it is limited to faculty members...even without teaching roles... we engaged faculty and policymakers and shaped the future.



⁶ Where no joint actions occurred, the predicted probability of institutional change was 54%. This increased to 64% where alumni undertook nine joint actions (the average), and to 76% where alumni undertook 17 joint actions (the highest level observed).

Figure 4. Predicted Probability of Institutional Improvement by Alumni Density



(Sister Universities Set to 0; Rejected Applicants Excluded)
 Note: Shaded area shows 95% confidence interval. Dashed line marks 0 (control value)

Qualitative evidence indicates that in low alumni density contexts, impacts were largely personal and difficult to scale institution-wide due to limited collaboration opportunity. In higher-density environments, alumni more frequently advanced coordinated reforms by pooling complementary skills, sharing accountability, mentoring peers, and jointly engaging senior leadership.

INSTITUTION-LEVEL INSIGHTS

UASP contributed to institutional improvements, with strongest effects for the in-person participation model.

UASP alumni reported meaningful improvements in their institutions' research management systems.	89% of alumni reported that UASP had a moderate to major influence on their institution's research management practices.	87% linked moderate or significant improvements to their participation.
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Alumni reported contributing to changes across multiple areas, including:

71%

Policies and standard operating procedures

68%

Research management office or unit establishment or restructuring

57%

Pre- and post-award systems

47%

Grants win rates

45%

Research data systems and analytics

38%

Knowledge transfer and commercialization systems

Compared with sister universities, respondents from UASP participating universities were more likely to report institutional improvements, though this difference was statistically significant only for in-person cohorts. For these alumni, the model estimated an **81.7% probability** of reporting institutional improvements, compared to 56% among control groups.⁷

Institutional change was also more likely where research management leaders had participated in UASP and where alumni had received **UASP small grants**. During interviews, senior leaders at alumni universities similarly reported more institutional change than counterparts at sister universities, reinforcing survey findings.



UASP alumni most consistently influenced research management strategies, policies and procedures, ethics and IRB systems, grant submission processes and win rates, and inter-institutional partnerships through alumni networks.

More resource-intensive changes (for example, establishing or restructuring offices, new technology, large-scale capacity-building efforts) and shifts in research dissemination, visibility, and technology transfer, were less consistently observed.⁸ Change in these areas typically depended on active alumni collaboration alongside access to implementation funding, including **UASP small grants**.

⁷ Contextual note: Fully in-person cohorts participated earlier in the UASP life cycle and have therefore had more time than hybrid or online participants to contribute to institutional changes.

⁸ Over the decade, UASP had more alumni focused on grants competitiveness and research management systems than on research dissemination and knowledge transfer. This may contribute to the more modest effects observed in those areas.

Closing: What This Means

UASP provides evidence that strategic investment in individual leaders can contribute to sustained improvements in professional practice and, under the right conditions, to institution- or organization-wide systems change.

Recommendations: Based on these findings, the evaluation suggests the following design priorities for funders and practitioners to create conditions which position individuals to translate their capabilities into institution level reform:

1. Invest in complementary teams within an institution rather than isolated individuals.

Supporting cohorts of 5-10 fellows per institution per cycle, particularly those with complementary roles/functions and shared problem areas, helps generate collective momentum and accelerate institutional initiatives.

2. Embed peer engagement and skills for collaboration and influence.

Institutional change depends less on the number of alumni alone and more on how effectively they work together. Programs should intentionally build skills in networking, teamwork, stakeholder engagement, and collaborative change leadership. Integrated peer learning and alumni activities can further strengthen networks.

3. Engage institutional leaders early and to the extent possible.

Early involvement of senior leaders strengthens alignment, authorization, and support for alumni's implementation, even when their direct participation in extended fellowships may not be feasible.

4. Pair training with flexible implementation funding to catalyze change.

Small, targeted grants enabled UASP alumni to move from ideas to action—particularly for systems development and technology or infrastructure upgrades, which can be costly.

5. Prioritize delivery models that foster deep engagement.

Where resources allow, hybrid or fully in-person models are more likely than online-only formats to build sustained peer relationships, and applied learning activities are more immersive; participants could also step away from daily duties and truly focus on learning. All these may support more durable institutional outcomes.

About IREX

IREX is an international development organization working to empower people to learn, lead, and thrive in a changing world. For more than 50 years, IREX has worked in over 100 countries to help people solve problems, build trust, and create better opportunities for themselves and their communities. irex.org

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Global Insight transforms complexity into clarity that drives growth, innovation, and measurable impact. Using the latest in data science, advanced research methods, and foresight-guided strategy they engage evidence to deliver insights where there is noise, alignment where there is fragmentation, and momentum where uncertainty stalls progress. g-insight.org/

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