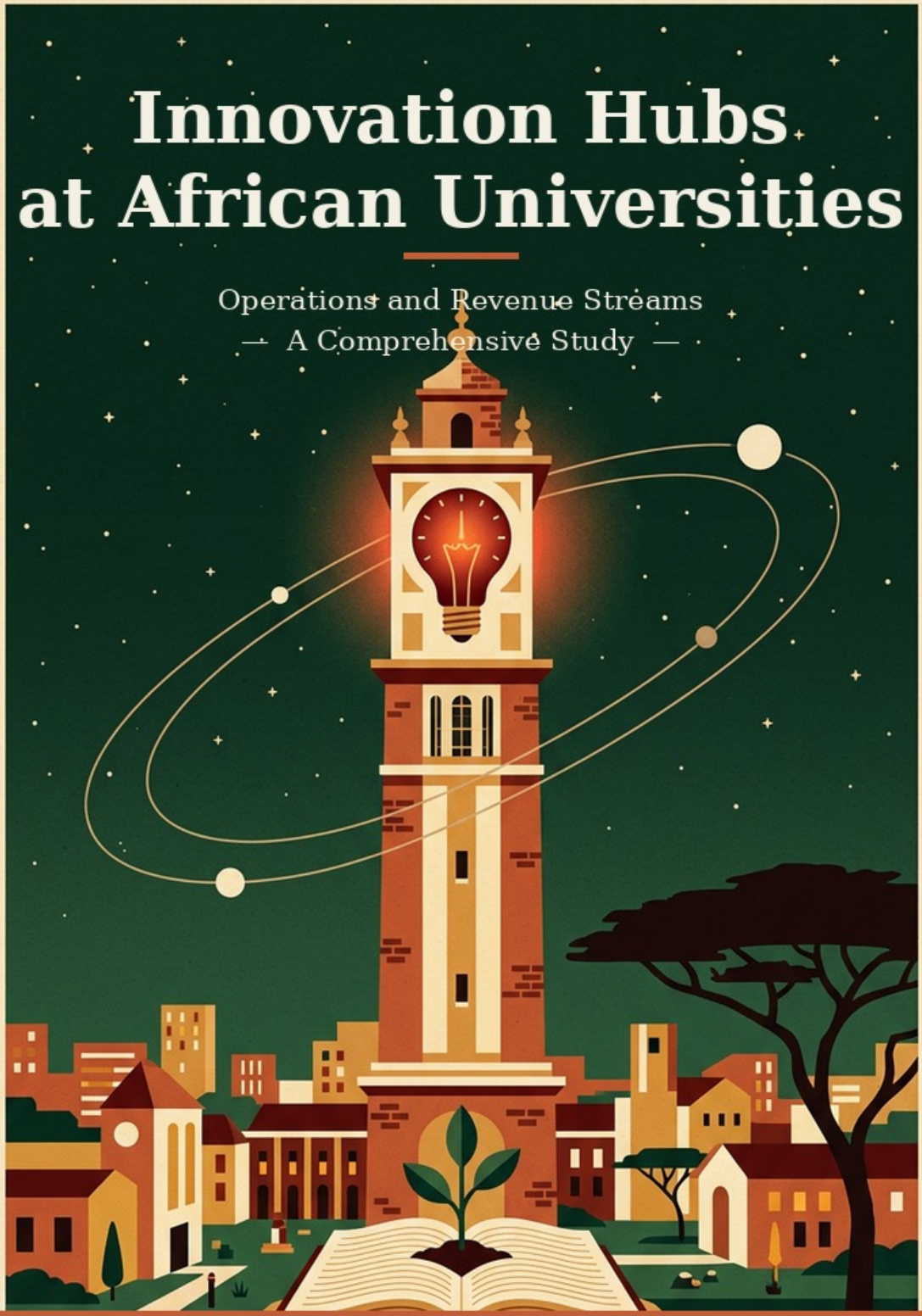
Innovation Hubs at African Universities

Operations and Revenue Streams

— A Comprehensive Study —



COURAGE GARIKAI

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1 · The Idea of the University Hub

Every African university has the same three raw materials in abundance: young people with more energy than capital, researchers with more ideas than funding, and buildings that are full in term time and silent in the holidays. The innovation hub is the institutional machine built to combine those three materials into something the market will pay for — a startup, a licence, a product, a job.

That is the simplest way to say it. The formal definition comes from AfriLabs and Briter Bridges, who mapped the continent's hub economy in 2019:

> An innovation hub is a centre for learning, ideas, co-creation and community, that nurtures innovative ideas and market disruption, and serves as a point where local start-up community, investors, academia, technology companies and the wider private sector interact to drive entrepreneurship activities.

Read that definition slowly and you will notice it describes a meeting point more than it describes a business. A hub is a place where communities that normally do not talk to each other — students and investors, professors and bankers, ministries and startups — are forced into the same room. University hubs take that definition and bolt it onto an academic chassis. They add two things a generic tech hub does not have: a research pipeline, and the obligation to commercialize it.

That combination is what makes the university hub such a strange and interesting animal. It is part classroom, part

laboratory, part landlord, part venture fund, part development project. It answers to a vice-chancellor who thinks in academic years, a donor who thinks in project cycles, a government that thinks in election terms, and startups that think in weeks of runway. Most institutions only have to satisfy one master. The hub has to satisfy all of them at once, and it has to find the money to do so.

This book is about how that actually works in practice — how these hubs operate day to day, and where the money comes from. It is written for the person who has been told to set one up, fund one, fix one, or study one. It draws on the published record — ecosystem mappings by AfriLabs and Briter Bridges, the International Trade Centre's work on African tech hubs, university case studies from Zimbabwe to South Africa to Burundi, and the growing academic literature on university business incubation — and it treats the hub not as a development-sector poster child but as what it really is: a small, strange business that must be run.

Where the idea came from

The university innovation hub has a family tree. Its oldest ancestor is the science park — the idea, perfected at Stanford in the 1950s, that a university could lease land to technology companies and let proximity do the rest. Its second ancestor is the technology transfer office, formalized in the United States after the Bayh-Dole Act of 1980 let universities own and license the inventions their researchers made with public money. Its third and youngest ancestor is the startup accelerator — the Y Combinator model of 2005, which compressed company

formation into a fixed-term, cohort-based programme ending in a pitch day.

The African university hub inherits from all three. From the science park it takes the physical campus and the rental income. From the technology transfer office it takes patents, licences, and spin-off companies. From the accelerator it takes cohorts, demo days, mentorship, and the language of "deal flow". What makes it African is the setting it operates in: thin capital markets, small angel-investor communities, unreliable power, governments that are simultaneously the biggest customer and the biggest regulator, and a development sector that pays for much of the ecosystem's running costs.

What makes it a university hub is the setting inside the gates. The hub does not have to hunt for deal flow; the student intake delivers a fresh cohort of founders every year. It does not have to rent a prestigious address; the campus provides one. It does not have to buy credibility; the university's name supplies it. In exchange, the hub accepts constraints a private accelerator would never tolerate: academic timetables, civil-service procurement rules, treasury rules about internally generated revenue, and a mission that includes education whether or not education pays.

Why governments fell in love with hubs

Across the continent, the spread of university hubs has not been accidental. In Zimbabwe, the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, Innovation, Science and Technology Development directed all state universities in 2018 to establish innovation hubs as part of a deliberate

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