

Towards a JET Theory of Change



JET EDUCATION SERVICES
THINK EDUCATION. THINK JET.

JET and civil society

In his *Democracy in America* published in 1835, the French political theorist, Alexis de Tocqueville, was much taken with the tendency for Americans of all ages and dispositions to come together in order to pursue common interests. In a still much-quoted passage, Tocqueville listed a wide range of purposes of such activity:

...to hold fetes, found seminaries, build inns, construct churches, distribute books, dispatch missionaries to the antipodes. They establish hospitals, prisons, schools by the same method. Finally, if they wish to highlight a truth or develop an opinion by the encouragement of a great example, they form an association.

Tocqueville saw two roles for these ‘civil associations’. First, they provide a means for collective action among citizens who, individually, are generally too weak to achieve larger goals on their own. Second, they serve an indirect role, drawing individuals out of their private concerns and enabling them to be part of a larger enterprise where they learn to work with others holding different viewpoints and interests, thus becoming better collaborators and citizens. The first role is for the delivery of services or the spread of ideas, while the second is about building democracy (Stid, 2018).

These associations constitute the ‘Third Sector’, better known as civil society today, and it continues to serve the same functions as it did two centuries ago. Situated between the market and the state, civil society organisations are driven primarily neither by profit nor power (although no organisation can exist without at least a modicum of each). Rather, civil society organisations serve a multiplicity of functions motivated by goals of a social, cultural, religious or political nature. They are often altruistic in intent but may serve particular interests.

The Joint Education Trust was established in 1992, a momentous time of flux and heightened anticipation in the country’s history. The goals of JET’s architects were the very same as those articulated by Tocqueville. On one hand, 14 of South Africa’s largest businesses provided R500 million directed towards improving the quality of education and the relationship between education and the world of work.

On the other hand, the Board, composed of representatives from contributing companies and an equal number of leaders from recently unbanned political parties, trade unions and black business associations, provided the theatre for cooperation between two sets of actors who had experienced apartheid very differently but who were destined to find common ground in the emerging new society.

These general goals continued to motivate JET once the original investment was exhausted, and the Trust was converted to the non-profit organisation (NPO) JET Education Services in 2001. Given this background, it follows that JET remains a values-driven organisation, championing social justice in education and the systematic search for solutions to the country’s educational problems.

In its early days, as a major donor in the field, JET was soon supporting a large proportion of non-profit service providers in each of the four sectors in which it operated – teacher development, school improvement, early childhood development, and literacy. For example, in 1996, a scan of the field of teacher development revealed that the Trust was providing grants to 97 non-governmental organisations (NGOs) offering in-service programmes to teachers, which constituted an estimated 70% of service providers active in the sector. Two things followed from this situation. One, the Trust started to develop a systemic perspective and began to ask questions about where and how these activities could be applied to best effect: Which models of teacher in-service training are most effective? How much do they cost?

The second consequence of the size and scope of JET’s activities in its chosen fields was the need to ascertain the efficacy of the activities of the Trust’s grantees: answering questions concerning the efficacy of interventions entailed the evaluation of programmes. JET hosted one of the first ever evaluation conferences in South Africa – on in-service teacher training and development evaluation – in 1994. Inevitably, JET was also drawn into the research terrain, with the book *Getting Learning Right* appearing as the first product of this work in 1999 (Taylor & Vinjevold, 1999).

Research, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) and evaluation studies continue to occupy a substantial proportion of JET’s work: this is the work behind one of our key values, being *knowledge driven*.

What does it mean to be knowledge-driven?

In addition to providing services to schools and communities, many of JET's projects can be seen as exercises in research-and-development: an iterative search for more effective ways of building education quality and narrowing inequity. Teacher capacity lies at the heart of this quest, across all JET's current focus areas: Early childhood development; School improvement; Teacher education; Post-school education and training; Interoperability and data ecosystems; and Innovative funding models for education. Understanding teacher quality across these sectors requires a bird's eye view of the education system, a systemic perspective.

A systemic perspective

An example of the kind of systemic perspective JET strives to achieve is illustrated by our work in the teacher education sector. The diagram below illustrates a distinction between the preparation of teachers (points 3-6) on one hand, and their deployment and management (7-11) on the other, as well as the antecedent influences on their preparation (1-2). In tracing the life-cycle of a teacher, from entering school to retirement, these 11 points at least are available for exerting leverage on teacher quality.

Figure 1 details the relationship between initial teacher education (ITE) and in-service training or continuing professional development (CPD). Understanding how each contributes to teacher capacity entails an appreciation of their specificities and how they may interact to optimise teaching quality, facilitating a search for holistic solutions.

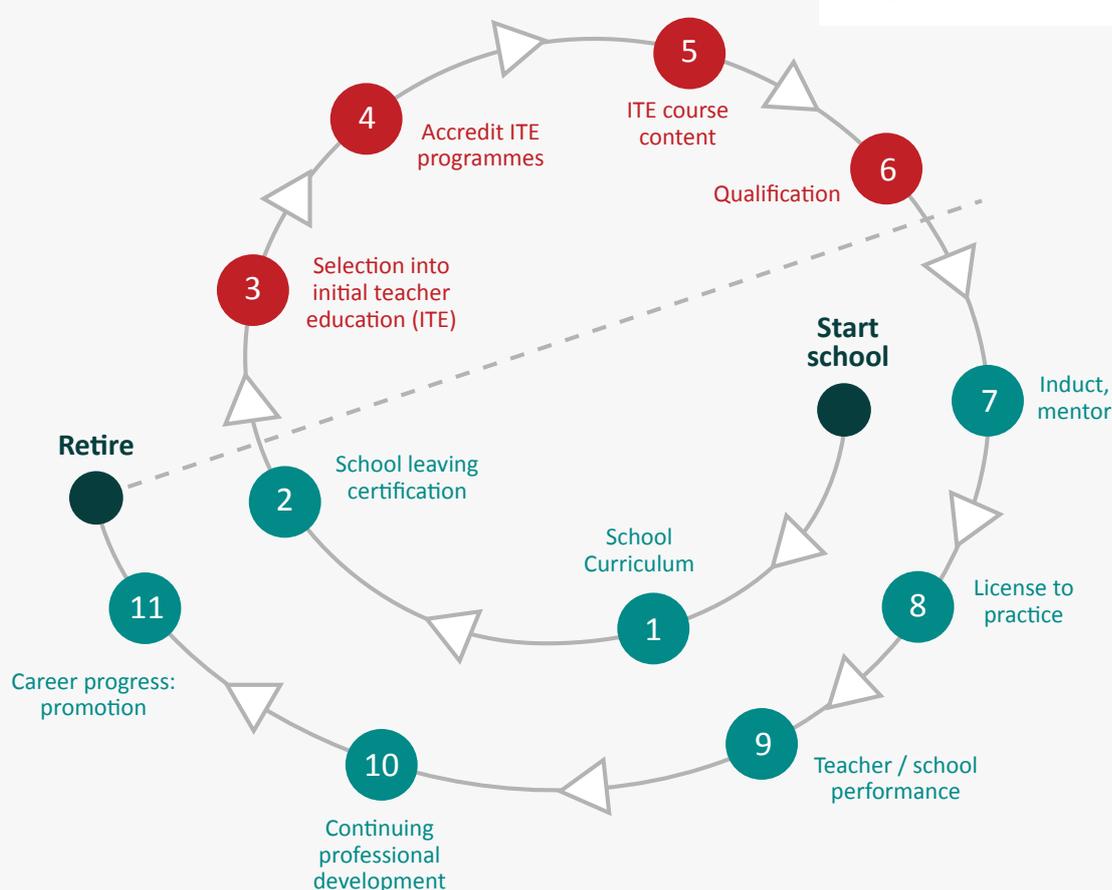


Figure 1: The life-cycle of a teacher

Source: Taylor & Robinson, 2016, 6

Utilisation- focused knowledge development

The synergy between research, implementation and evaluation which JET strives to achieve advances the development of knowledge, which in turn may lead to the modification of existing intervention models and building new ones. In the first instance, models are distilled from the research literature, the experiences of others and lessons learned in the field. The participation of stakeholders and beneficiaries in the processes of design, implementation and M&E provides insights from multiple perspectives. JET undertakes both internal (i.e. of its own projects) and external M&E (i.e. of projects, programmes and policies designed and implemented by others). There is no one-size-fits all approach to M&E – evaluations and M&E frameworks are designed in line with contextual needs – but typically M&E is approached with utilisation, use of best-available evidence and contextual relevance in mind.

Evaluation design is dependent on the intended purpose, the intervention design and resources available, amongst other things. M&E of the design and rollout of a programme presents opportunities to assess feasibility and plausibility, detect blockages and apply early remediation, and collect baseline data which could be used for evaluation purposes (Hutchinson, 2019). Measuring impact is a long-term project which typically requires the intervention and its expected/intended changes to be defined and a baseline to be established before implementation commences. Tracking the effects of an intervention includes understanding not only what happened but also investigating ‘why’ and ‘how’ changes occurred (or did not).

One of the greatest factors undermining the advancement of knowledge is when, for one or other reason, evaluation results are not released. Even negative results provide important learning experiences about both programme design and implementation and evaluation design and method; most importantly, they allow others to avoid replicating unsuccessful intervention models and evaluation designs (Besharati, Fleisch & Tsotsotso, 2021). Transparency of research and evaluation methods and results and the public availability of the data underlying these results are key to advancing knowledge development.



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Internal and external validity

Internal vs external validity is a key distinction in knowledge-building. Interventions may work under ‘laboratory’ conditions (donor funding, management by an efficient NGO, expert service providers, additional resources, intense research gaze) but are not usually tested under ‘natural’ conditions (over-stretched district support, mediocre school management, paucity of resources) (Bruns, Filmer & Patrinos, 2011).

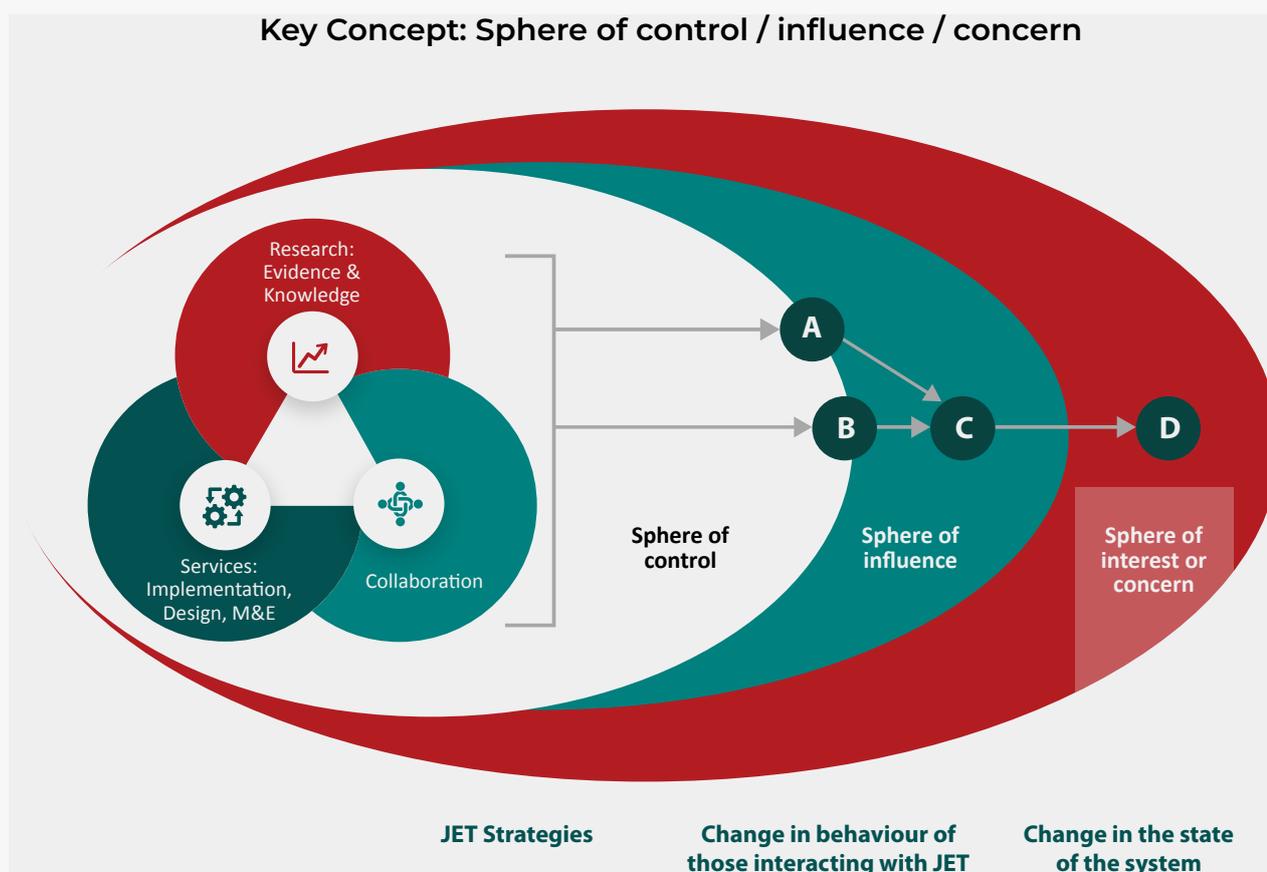
Demonstrating that an intervention is effective under ideal conditions proves that the model can work under a particular set of circumstances in one context (internal validity) but does not go nearly far enough in demonstrating its systemic effectiveness (external validity) or understanding the contextual factors contributing to its success. Outspoken educational economist Lant Pritchett (2015) is dismissive of what he calls the ‘fad’ of developing ‘evidence-based’ policy recommendations on the strength of a pilot study performed under ideal conditions.

Engagement

In a publication by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) on policy influence and advocacy, Josephine Tsui and her colleagues (2014) note that policy influence and advocacy are increasingly regarded as a means of creating sustainable policy change in international development. JET's engagement with others in the social enterprise of education operates over different spheres of influence. Achievement of ultimate goals, or systemic change, is difficult to measure, and it is even more difficult to assess the contribution of a particular programme to this.

Once an intervention has been shown to be effective and the policy implications formulated, persuading key actors to adopt the recommendations is a complex task. A key concept in understanding how this task is pursued is the distinction between our sphere of control (what we do), our sphere of influence (how JET's work changes how other actors behave), and the sphere of concern (the education system in South Africa) (Figure 2).

Figure 2: JET's engagement with others in the education terrain



Source: Williams & Botha, 2020, 2

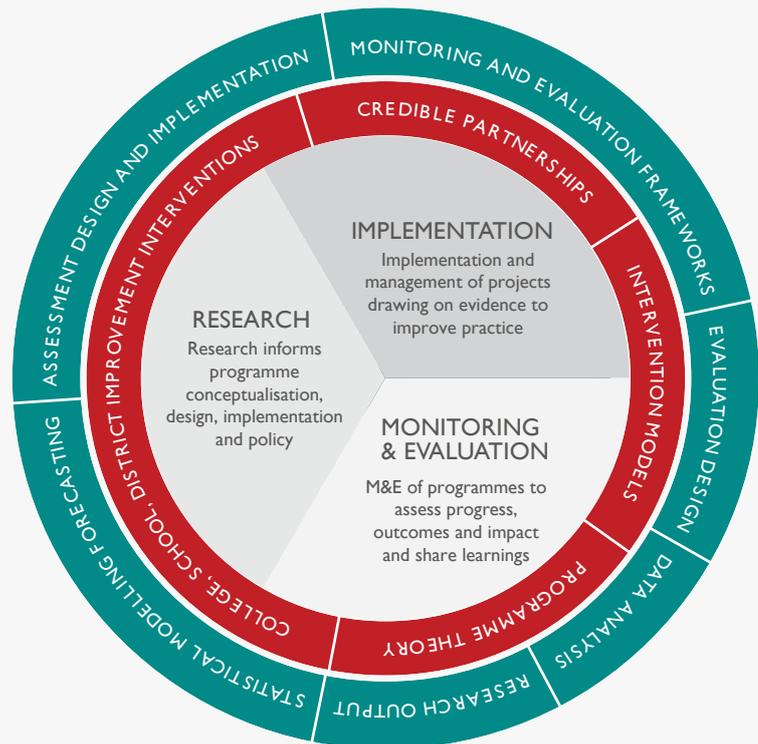
Conclusion

JET offers an integrated suite of services consisting of various combinations of three elements: research, implementation, and M&E. When any two or more elements are involved in an intervention, they complement each other in contributing to our understanding of effective interventions (Figure 3).

Knowledge-building is always in a conditional state, awaiting refutation of theories, the building of an evidence base regarding what works (and doesn't) in which contexts and circumstances and why, and finding and filling in knowledge gaps. One of the most difficult tendencies to resist is to search for endorsement of models launched with significant funds and public fanfare but which fail to meet standards of research rigour or the test of external validity, a test which very few, if any, educational interventions in South Africa have met so far.

Policy advocacy is too often embarked on prematurely, due to one or other of the pitfalls mentioned here: lack of external validity, suppression of unfavourable results, weak methodologies. The inadequate but best available antidote to these tendencies is the public availability, not only of technical research and evaluation reports but also of the data on which the conclusions are drawn. These practices are central to research accountability and learning.

Figure 3: Services offered by JET



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The Joint Education Trust, the forebear of JET Education Services, was set up in 1992 by a remarkable partnership of leaders from South Africa's corporate world, from the country's major political parties, the trade unions and representative organisations of black business.

Over three decades, JET has worked with government and the public sector, civil society organisations, local and international development agencies and educational institutions to improve the quality of education and the overall relationship between education, skills development and the world of work.

In response to the constantly changing ecosystem, JET has evolved into an "(dis)intermediary organisation", able to manage the implementation and evaluation of education interventions, both locally and internationally, particularly on the African continent.



Vision

Africa's leading educational think-do tank.

Mission

To positively impact education policy and implementation in South Africa and Africa through rethinking current education systems and engaging in evidence-based research.

Value Proposition

JET is able to optimise innovation and evidence-based solutions towards quality education through independent and credible research, implementation and M&E.

Values

- Championing social justice in education
- People-centred
- Knowledge-driven
- Innovative

Thematic Areas



Early childhood development (ECD), specifically Gr R teacher development



School improvement



Teacher education



Post-school education and training (PSET)



Interoperability and data ecosystems



Innovative funding models for education

Initiatives we support

The National Education CollaboratiOn Trust

The South African Democratic Teachers Unions Curtis Nkondo Professional Development Institute

National Association of Social Change Entities in Education (NASCEE)

Alliances

JET's social ambition is at the core of what we do – we are purpose-driven – and we understand that to realise long-term sustainability, strategic alliances and an investment in our people is necessary. We have strategic partnerships with

Reos Partners Africa, an international social enterprise that helps people move forward together on their most important and intractable issues.

<https://www.inonafrika.com/voices-unite/>

The Independent Philanthropy Association South Africa (IPASA), a locally established, voluntary association of independent philanthropists, private foundations and other organisations associated with philanthropy in South Africa. <http://ipa-sa.org.za/>

UNESCO International Centre for Vocational and Technical Education (UNEVOC), which appointed JET as a UNEVOC Centre in 2013 in recognition of our research work in the field of TVET and youth development.

<https://www.inonafrika.com/voices-unite/>

Investors in People (IiP), an international organisation that offers assessments and accreditation to organisations that choose to apply the IiP framework and standards for people management to their business operations. In 2020, JET achieved Silver level.

<https://www.investorsinpeople.com/>

JET is an institutional member of the **Southern African Monitoring and Evaluation Association (SAMEA)** that aims to strengthen the development of monitoring and evaluation as an important discipline, profession and instrument for empowerment and accountability in South Africa.

<https://www.samea.org.za/>

JET works with **PrivySeal**, a company that specialises in real-time digital credentials.

<https://www.privyseal.com/>

JET is the lead research partner of **Voices Unite**, a ground-breaking digital research platform that will house South Africa's largest youth-focused research study. The platform aims to unify the voices of youth in the country to inform real change and empower tomorrow's leaders.

<https://www.inonafrika.com/voices-unite/>



How does JET work?

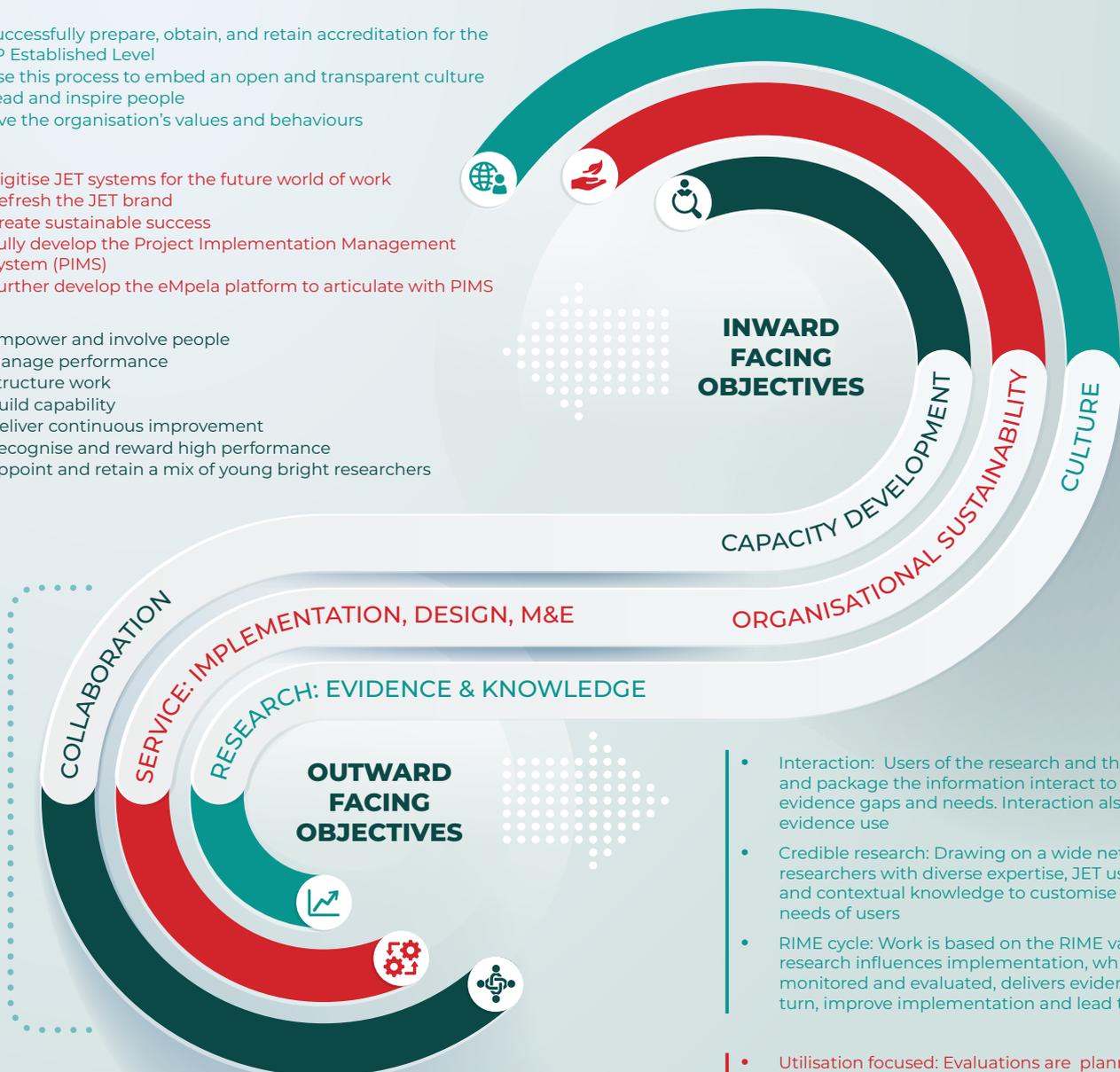
JET draws on a variety of theoretical frameworks, with a common pro-poor focus, to inform how the organisation collaborates, delivers its services and conducts its research.

Through evidence-based knowledge interventions, collaboration with the public and private sectors, and the use of technological infrastructure, JET aims to turn challenges into solutions, resulting in improved education quality, particularly for disadvantaged school communities.

- Successfully prepare, obtain, and retain accreditation for the liP Established Level
- Use this process to embed an open and transparent culture
- Lead and inspire people
- Live the organisation's values and behaviours

- Digitise JET systems for the future world of work
- Refresh the JET brand
- Create sustainable success
- Fully develop the Project Implementation Management System (PIMS)
- Further develop the eMpela platform to articulate with PIMS

- Empower and involve people
- Manage performance
- Structure work
- Build capability
- Deliver continuous improvement
- Recognise and reward high performance
- Appoint and retain a mix of young bright researchers



- Interaction: Users of the research and those who produce and package the information interact to determine evidence gaps and needs. Interaction also facilitates evidence use
- Credible research: Drawing on a wide network of researchers with diverse expertise, JET uses best evidence and contextual knowledge to customise evidence to the needs of users
- RIME cycle: Work is based on the RIME value chain - where research influences implementation, which, when monitored and evaluated, delivers evidence which can, in turn, improve implementation and lead to new research

- Utilisation focused: Evaluations are planned, conducted and judged based on their usefulness to primary intended users
- Evidence informed: The best available evidence is used to inform decisions about intervention design and implementation
- Contextually relevant: Implementations are evaluated for fit with context and adapted if necessary

- Deep collaboration to drive deep change: Shared visions are co-created and recognise the needs of the various user levels. Where alignment is not achieved, communicate clearly and with trust

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