Research4Life Institutional Leaders Study

Institutional Access, Participation and Collaboration Study

EXECUTIVE COUNCIL REPORT

STRATEGIC SYNTHESIS OF PHASE 1 FOCUS GROUPS AND PHASE 2 SENIOR LEADERSHIP INTERVIEWS

Research4Life Program Review 2025–2026

Prepared for the Research4Life Executive Council

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents the consolidated findings from the Research4Life (R4L) Program Review 2025–2026 Institutional Access, Participation and Collaboration Study. The study engaged 101 institutional leaders and stakeholders from more than 35 countries across Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) through two complementary phases.

Phase 1 consisted of seven regional focus groups involving 80 participants representing universities, research institutes, ministries, national research councils, health institutions, agricultural research organizations, and library consortia. Phase 2 comprised 21 in-depth interviews with senior institutional leaders, including rectors, vice-chancellors, deans, heads of departments, research directors, librarians, and senior researchers.

Together, the findings provide the most comprehensive leadership-level assessment of Research4Life undertaken since inception of the initiative. The study sought to understand how institutions access, participate in, and collaborate through research; identify the structural barriers affecting research access and production; and explore the future role and sustainability of Research4Life.

The central conclusion is clear: **Research4Life has evolved far beyond its original role as a content access programme.** Institutions increasingly regard R4L as *a critical component of research infrastructure.* It now functions simultaneously as a scholarly access platform, publishing support mechanism, quality assurance resource, research capacity development tool, collaboration enabler, and in some contexts the only remaining gateway to international scholarship.

Nine strategic findings emerged from the study:

1. Research4Life has become critical research infrastructure.
2. The programme's value proposition has expanded beyond content access.
3. Institutional research ambitions continue to outpace available resources.
4. Awareness and engagement barriers are now more significant than access barriers.
5. The traditional library-only engagement model has reached its limits.
6. Institutions increasingly expect Research4Life to support knowledge production.
7. Artificial Intelligence represents the next major capacity development challenge.
8. Sustainability requires differentiated approaches rather than a single global model.
9. National coordination and institutional champions provide the most scalable pathway for future growth.
10. Discoverability, authentication, and mobile access are emerging determinants of research participation.
11. Research4Life plays a critical humanitarian and research recovery role in conflict-affected contexts.

These findings suggest that Research4Life stands at an important strategic inflection point. Future decisions regarding sustainability, eligibility, engagement models, partnerships, and programme

design should be guided not by the programme's historical role as a content-access initiative, but by the broader research ecosystem functions it now performs.

1. INTRODUCTION

Research4Life enters its twenty-fifth year operating within a scholarly communication environment that differs fundamentally from the one in which the programme was established.

Open access publishing has expanded significantly. Artificial intelligence is reshaping research workflows. Research evaluation systems increasingly emphasise publication outputs and global visibility. At the same time, institutions across the Global South continue to face substantial financial, infrastructural, linguistic, and policy barriers that constrain their ability to participate fully in global research ecosystems.

Against this backdrop, Research4Life commissioned this study to understand how institutional leaders perceive the programme's current and future role.

The study explored three overarching questions:

- How do institutions access, participate in, and collaborate through research?
- What barriers constrain institutional engagement and research productivity?
- What strategic opportunities exist for strengthening Research4Life's impact and sustainability?

2. RESEARCH DESIGN

PHASE 1: REGIONAL FOCUS GROUPS

Seven focus groups were conducted across six regions.

Participants represented:

- Public universities
- Private universities
- Research organizations
- Health institutions
- Government agencies
- National library consortia
- Research councils

A total of 80 participants from more than 35 countries contributed to this phase.

PHASE 2: SENIOR LEADERSHIP INTERVIEWS

Twenty-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with institutional leaders across six regions.

Participants included:

- Rectors and Vice-Chancellors
- Deputy Vice-Chancellors
- Research Directors
- Deans
- Heads of Departments
- Library Directors
- Senior Researchers

The interviews provided deeper insights into institutional strategy, sustainability, governance, and research priorities.



Executive message: *The largest leadership-level consultation undertaken in Research4Life to date* — 101 voices *across 35+ countries and six world regions.*

3. STRATEGIC FINDING 1:

RESEARCH4LIFE HAS BECOME CRITICAL RESEARCH INFRASTRUCTURE

Perhaps the most significant finding from the study is that Research4Life is no longer viewed as a library service.

Across all regions, participants described R4L as infrastructure that underpins institutional research systems.

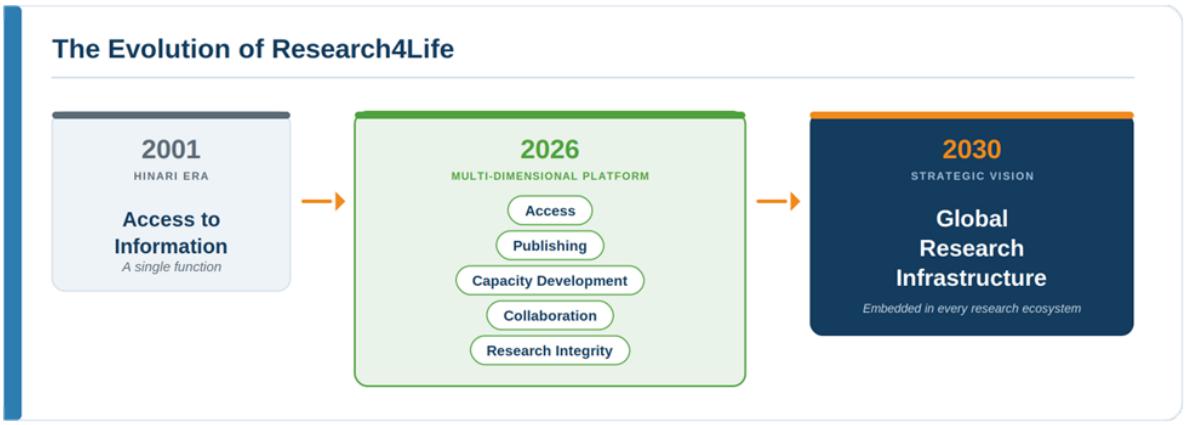
Institutions increasingly depend on Research4Life for:

- Research planning
- Literature discovery
- Postgraduate education
- Publication support
- Accreditation
- International collaboration

For many institutions, particularly in low-resource environments, Research4Life remains the principal route to scholarly literature.

For conflict-affected institutions in Sudan and Syria, participants described Research4Life as the only remaining international research gateway.

The programme therefore performs an infrastructure function that extends beyond access.



Executive message: *The programme has evolved beyond content access into a multi-dimensional research infrastructure platform.*

4. STRATEGIC FINDING 2:

THE VALUE PROPOSITION HAS EXPANDED BEYOND ACCESS

Participants consistently described Research4Life as providing three interconnected benefits:

ACCESS

Access to trusted scholarly content remains the programme's core function.

PUBLISHING SUPPORT

APC waivers and publishing support emerged as among the most highly valued programme benefits.

Several institutions reported that APC waivers enabled publication that would otherwise be unaffordable.

TRUST AND QUALITY

Research4Life increasingly serves as a quality filter in an environment characterised by:

- Predatory publishing
- Questionable journals
- AI-generated misinformation
- Proliferation of low-quality content

Institutions increasingly trust R4L-curated resources as a marker of legitimacy.



Executive message: *Institutions no longer experience Research4Life as a single service, but as a bundle of strategic benefits.*

5. STRATEGIC FINDING 3:

INSTITUTIONAL AMBITION CONTINUES TO OUTPACE RESOURCES

The study revealed a widespread mismatch between institutional research ambitions and available resources.

Examples include:

- Expansion of doctoral programmes
- Increased publication requirements
- Research-intensive university strategies
- National research agendas

Yet many institutions lack the financial capacity to support these ambitions through commercial subscriptions.

Research4Life increasingly functions as the bridge between aspiration and capability.

6. STRATEGIC FINDING 4:

AWARENESS IS NOW A GREATER BARRIER THAN ACCESS

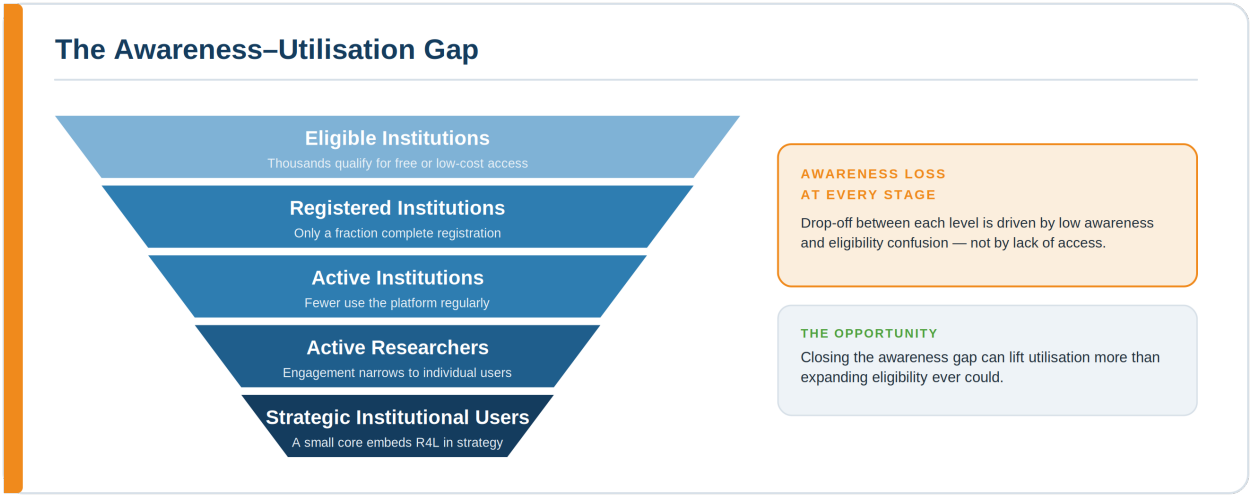
A recurring finding was that many institutions either:

- Do not know they are eligible.

- Do not understand the full benefits available.
- Have low institutional awareness.
- Lack leadership visibility.

Several institutions investing millions of dollars annually in research had never registered for Research4Life because they assumed it was exclusively focused on health.

The study suggests that increasing awareness may yield greater impact than increasing content availability alone.



Executive message: *The greatest opportunity for growth lies in improving awareness and engagement, rather than expanding eligibility.*

7. STRATEGIC FINDING 5:

THE LIBRARY-CENTRIC ENGAGEMENT MODEL HAS REACHED ITS LIMITS

Libraries remain essential institutional partners.

However, Research4Life is often invisible beyond the library.

Senior leaders frequently lack:

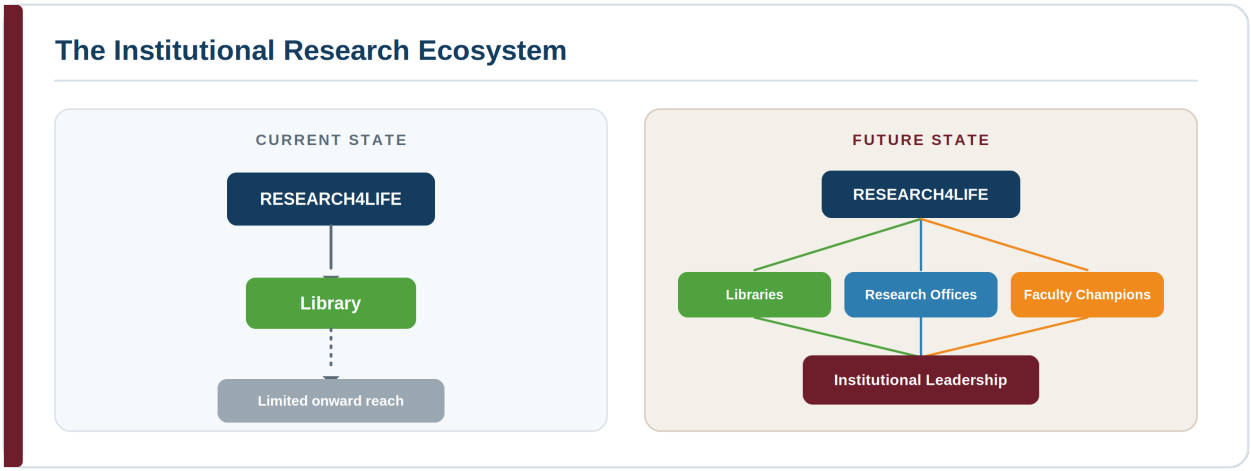
- Usage information
- Awareness of programme benefits
- Understanding of cost avoidance
- Visibility of APC savings

The strongest institutions invariably demonstrated partnerships between:

- Librarians

- Faculty champions
- Research offices
- Institutional leadership

Future engagement models should reflect this broader ecosystem.



Executive message: *The traditional library-centric engagement model needs to be supplemented.*

8. STRATEGIC FINDING 6:

RESEARCH4LIFE MUST SUPPORT KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

Institutions increasingly expect support that extends beyond access.

Participants consistently requested:

- Publishing support
- APC assistance
- Research visibility programmes
- Systematic review training
- Research integrity training
- Evidence synthesis capacity development

The shift from knowledge consumption to knowledge production was one of the strongest findings across all regions.

9. STRATEGIC FINDING 7:

AI IS EMERGING AS A STRATEGIC PRIORITY

Artificial Intelligence was discussed in virtually every interview.

Institutions are grappling with:

- AI policy development
- Responsible use
- Research integrity
- Academic misconduct
- AI-assisted scholarship

Participants consistently viewed Research4Life as a trusted platform capable of leading AI literacy initiatives for the Global South.

10. STRATEGIC FINDING 8:

SUSTAINABILITY CANNOT BE BASED ON A SINGLE GLOBAL MODEL

The study identified three distinct institutional categories.

CATEGORY 1

Institutions able to contribute financially.

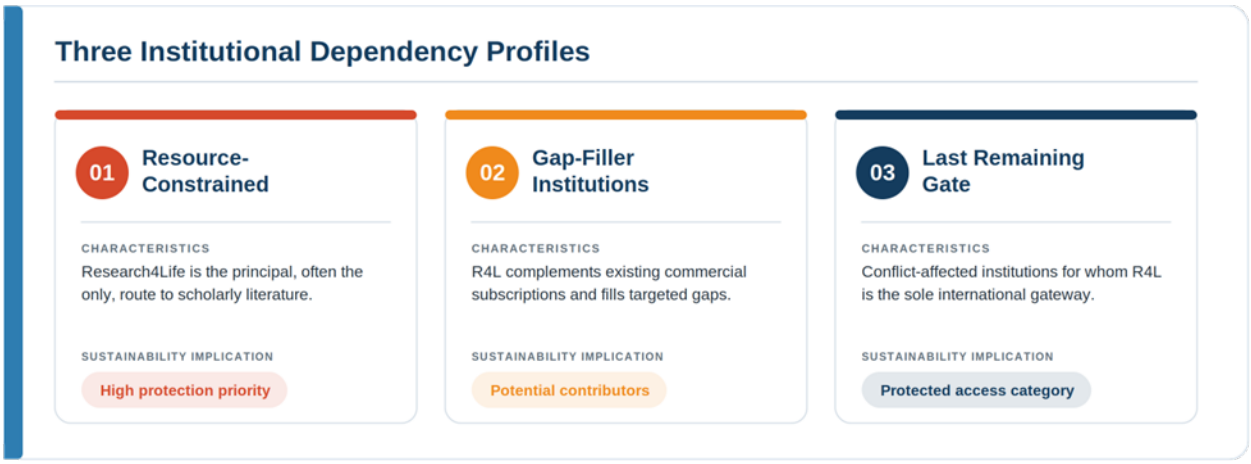
CATEGORY 2

Institutions willing but constrained by procurement systems, foreign currency restrictions, and public-sector finance regulations.

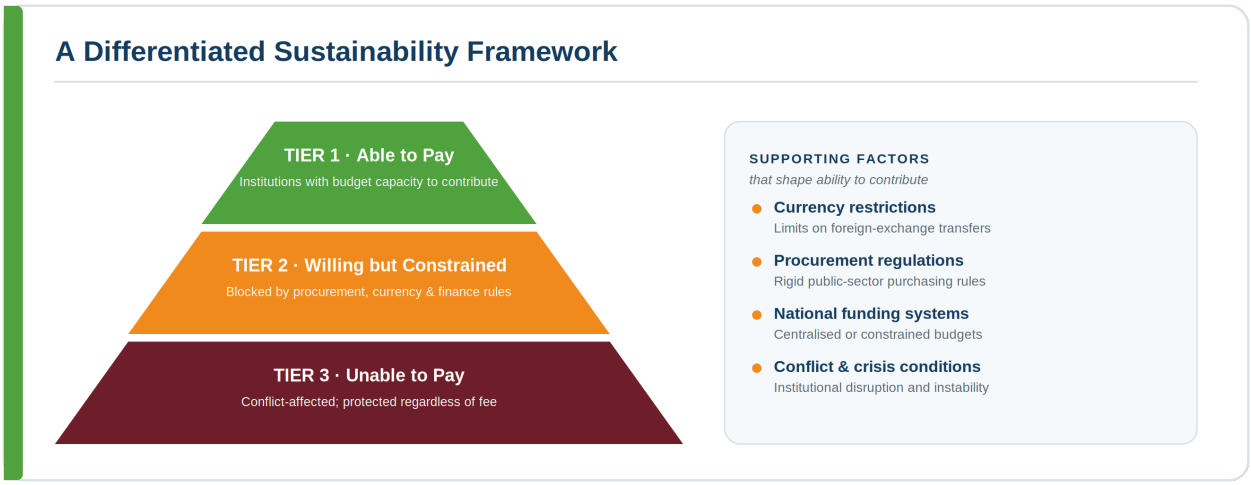
CATEGORY 3

Conflict-affected institutions unable to contribute regardless of fee level.

A differentiated sustainability framework is therefore required.



Executive message: *A single sustainability model cannot accommodate all institutional realities.*



Executive message: *Sustainability should be differentiated according to institutional context.*

11. STRATEGIC FINDING 9:

NATIONAL COORDINATION PROVIDES THE GREATEST LEVERAGE

Country Connectors, Ambassadors, and national consortia emerged as the most successful engagement mechanisms.

They address simultaneously:

- Awareness
- Training
- Advocacy
- Institutional engagement
- Sustainability

Evidence from Bhutan, Tanzania, Morocco, and Bangladesh suggests these models deliver measurable impact.

12. STRATEGIC FINDING 10:

DISCOVERABILITY, AUTHENTICATION AND MOBILE ACCESS ARE EMERGING AS DERTEMINANTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPATION

The study revealed that access to content alone is no longer sufficient to ensure meaningful institutional participation. Researchers and students increasingly depend on mobile devices, off-campus access, and seamless discovery tools to access scholarly information.

Participants identified barriers including:

- Weak discoverability
- Off-campus access challenges
- Credential management problems
- Authentication failures
- Limited integration with institutional discovery systems

The growing use of smartphones and mobile devices presents a major opportunity for Research4Life to increase usage and reach, particularly in institutions where desktop access and infrastructure remain constrained.

Future investment should focus on simplified authentication, improved discoverability, integration with institutional systems, and mobile-first access solutions, including the potential development of a dedicated Research4Life mobile application.

Executive message: Ease of access is increasingly as important as access itself.

12. STRATEGIC FINDING 11:

RESEARCH4LIFE PLAYS A CRITICAL HUMANITARIAN AND RESEARCH RECOVERY ROLE IN CONFLICT-AFFECTED CONTEXTS

The study identified a distinct category of institutions operating in conflict-affected and humanitarian settings where Research4Life functions as an essential lifeline for research continuity. Participants from Sudan, Syria, and Palestine described contexts marked by:

- Destroyed physical infrastructure
- Damaged research stations

- Collapsed digital systems
- Loss of commercial subscriptions
- Disrupted publishing and collaboration pathways

In these contexts, Research4Life is often the only remaining gateway to international scholarly knowledge. Continued access is therefore not simply a subscription issue, but a research recovery and humanitarian support priority. Targeted support is needed through protected access, dedicated onboarding, training, multilingual communication, APC waiver guidance, and post-conflict recovery support.

Executive message: *Conflict-affected institutions require a protected Research4Life support pathway to remain connected to the global research community.*

13. EMERGING STRATEGIC RISKS

The study identified several emerging risks that have the potential to significantly affect the future impact, relevance, and sustainability of Research4Life if not proactively addressed. These risks vary in both likelihood and potential consequences, but collectively they highlight areas requiring strategic attention from the Executive Council.

The highest-priority risks are those assessed as both high-impact and high-probability. These include **publisher attrition**, which threatens the comprehensiveness and value of content available through Research4Life; **sustainability transition risks**, particularly as the programme explores new funding and contribution models; **AI disruption**, which is rapidly transforming scholarly communication, research integrity, and information access; and the persistent **awareness deficit**, where many eligible institutions, researchers, and decision-makers remain unaware of the full benefits and opportunities offered by Research4Life.

A second tier of risks includes **authentication barriers**, **brand confusion**, and **infrastructure constraints**. While these risks are generally more manageable, they continue to affect user experience, programme visibility, and institutional engagement. Challenges such as complex access mechanisms, confusion between Research4Life and its legacy programme brands (Hinari, AGORA, OARE, ARDI, and GOALI), and ongoing connectivity and device limitations can reduce utilisation even where access is available.

These findings underscore the need for a proactive risk management approach. Addressing these challenges will be essential to maintaining Research4Life's value proposition, strengthening institutional engagement, and ensuring the programme remains responsive to the rapidly evolving research and scholarly communication landscape.



Executive message: *Several strategic risks have the potential to constrain Research4Life's future impact and sustainability. Early intervention and targeted mitigation measures will be critical to ensuring the programme remains relevant, resilient, and responsive to institutional needs over the coming decade.*

14. IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH4LIFE 2030

Research4Life 2030 Strategic Framework

The Research4Life 2030 Strategic Framework presents a future-facing vision for the programme built around five integrated pillars that reflect the evolving needs of institutions across the Global South. While access to scholarly information remains foundational, the study findings demonstrate that institutions increasingly expect Research4Life to support the entire research lifecycle from discovery and knowledge production to capacity strengthening, research integrity, and long-term sustainability.

The framework positions **Access**, **Knowledge Production**, **Capacity Development**, **Research Integrity & Artificial Intelligence**, and **Institutional Sustainability** as the core pillars that will guide Research4Life's future development and impact. Together, these pillars respond directly to the priorities identified by institutional leaders and reflect Research4Life's evolution from an access initiative to a broader research infrastructure and capacity development platform.

- **Access:** Research4Life should continue to ensure equitable access to high-quality, trusted scholarly information for institutions in low- and middle-income countries. The programme should focus on improving discoverability, authentication, usability, and

mobile-first access to ensure that researchers can seamlessly access the resources they need, regardless of location or infrastructure constraints.

- **Knowledge Production:** Research4Life should expand its role beyond knowledge consumption to actively support knowledge production. This includes strengthening support for scholarly publishing, APC waivers, research visibility, open science, evidence synthesis, and other mechanisms that enable researchers and institutions to contribute more effectively to global scholarship.

- **Capacity Development**: Research4Life should strengthen institutional and individual research capacity through targeted training, professional development, and skills-building initiatives. Particular emphasis should be placed on supporting researchers, librarians, faculty members, and institutional leaders to maximise the use and impact of research resources and services. **Capacity Development should evolve from a training function to a strategic institutional strengthening function.** Future investments should prioritize developing the skills, systems, and leadership capabilities that enable institutions not only to access knowledge, but also to produce, manage, evaluate, and apply knowledge effectively within rapidly changing research ecosystems.

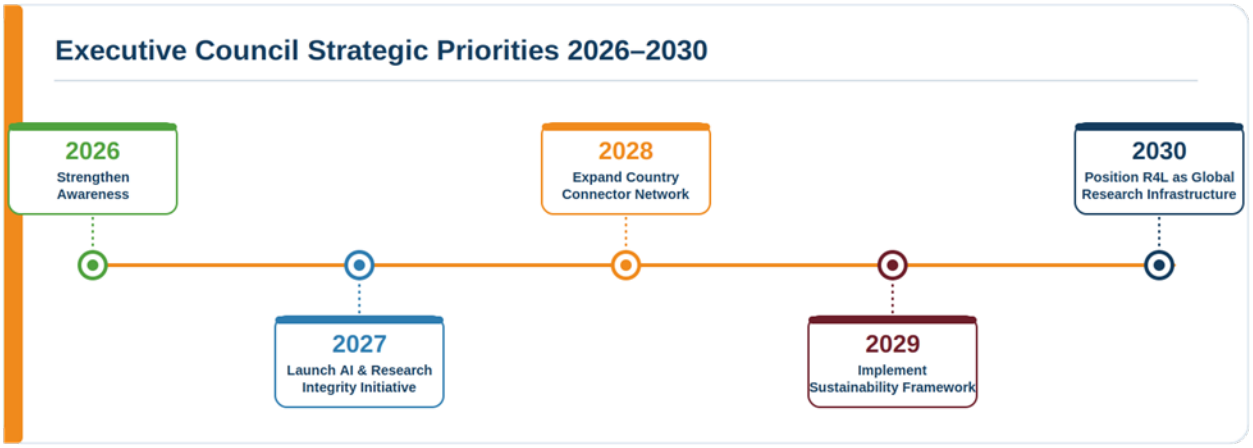
- **Research Integrity & Artificial Intelligence:** Research4Life should support institutions in navigating the rapidly evolving landscape of research integrity, scholarly quality assurance, and responsible AI use. The programme should promote ethical research practices, combat predatory publishing, strengthen information literacy, and provide guidance on the effective and responsible use of AI in research and education.

- **Institutional Sustainability:** Research4Life should foster sustainable institutional participation through differentiated engagement and funding models that reflect diverse institutional realities. The programme should strengthen partnerships, national coordination mechanisms, and long-term capacity to ensure continued access to knowledge and research infrastructure while maintaining support for vulnerable and conflict-affected institutions.

Supporting these pillars are a set of strategic enablers, including **Country Connectors**, **Institutional Champions**, **National Consortia**, **Strategic Partnerships**, and **Digital Platforms**, which provide the mechanisms through which Research4Life can scale its reach, strengthen engagement, and deliver sustainable impact at national, institutional, and individual levels.



Executive message: *A future-facing Research4Life strategy should be built around five integrated pillars that collectively strengthen access, participation, knowledge production, research quality, and institutional resilience across the global research ecosystem.*



Executive message: *The next phase of Research4Life should focus on engagement, sustainability and knowledge production.*

14. STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: Reposition Research4Life as global research infrastructure.

Recommendation 2: Expand from access to knowledge production and strengthen APC communication and publishing support.

Recommendation 3: Develop a multi-stakeholder engagement model.

Recommendation 4: Scale Country Connector and Ambassador networks.

Recommendation 5: Launch an AI Literacy and Research Integrity Initiative.

Recommendation 6: Refine sustainability approaches based on institutional context and review Group A/B classification criteria.

Recommendation 7: Strengthen engagement with national consortia and ministries.

Recommendation 8: Invest in discoverability, authentication, and mobile-first access.

Recommendation 9: Strengthen the Humanitarian Response Framework.

Alignment of Strategic Findings and Strategic Recommendations

Strategic Findings	R1 Research Infrastructure	R2 Knowledge Production & APCs	R3 Multi-Stakeholder Engagement	R4 Country Connectors & Ambassadors	R5 AI & Research Integrity	R6 Sustainability Framework	R7 National Consortia & Ministries	R8 Discoverability & Mobile Access	R9 Humanitarian Response
SF1. Research4Life has become critical research infrastructure	✓	✓							
SF2. Value proposition has expanded beyond access	✓	✓							
SF3. Institutional ambition outpaces resources	✓	✓				✓			
SF4. Awareness is a greater barrier than access			✓	✓			✓		
SF5. Library-centric engagement model has reached its limits			✓	✓			✓		
SF6. Research4Life must support knowledge production		✓							
SF7. AI is emerging as a strategic priority					✓				
SF8. Sustainability cannot be based on a single global model						✓			✓
SF9. National coordination provides the greatest leverage			✓	✓			✓		
SF10. Discoverability, authentication and mobile access are emerging determinants of participation								✓	
SF11. Research4Life plays a critical humanitarian and research recovery role in conflict-affected contexts						✓			✓

Executive Message: *The recommendations are directly grounded in the eleven strategic findings emerging from consultations with 101 institutional leaders across 35+ countries. Several recommendations address multiple findings, reflecting the interconnected nature of Research4Life's future challenges and opportunities. Collectively, the recommendations provide a coherent roadmap for strengthening Research4Life's role as global research infrastructure while improving sustainability, participation, knowledge production, and institutional resilience.*

15. CONCLUSION

The study demonstrates that Research4Life is no longer simply an access initiative.

It has become embedded within institutional research ecosystems as a mechanism for research participation, knowledge production, international collaboration, and scholarly quality assurance.

For many institutions, Research4Life is now part of the infrastructure that makes research possible.

The challenge facing the Executive Council is therefore not simply how to sustain access, but how to sustain an increasingly indispensable component of the global research ecosystem.

As Research4Life enters its second quarter century, its future success will depend on its ability to evolve from a programme that provides access to one that actively enables participation, production, and collaboration in global knowledge systems.