

# FIFTH ATU AFRICA INNOVATION CHALLENGE



For a pool prize of USD 60,000

Academic Innovation Ecosystems are  
invited to this Edition



A continental opportunity for academic institutions to present AI-based software innovations, demonstrate the ecosystems supporting them and connect those ecosystems to continental recognition, technical development and voluntary ATU academia membership.

## INFORMATION BOOKLET

## At A Glance

**Who may participate:**

Academic innovation ecosystems hosted within, or formally connected to, academic or training institutions in ATU Member States.

**What applicants will present:**

Artificial Intelligence-based Software solutions and evidence of the institutional support helping those solutions develop, undergo testing and progress towards deployment.

**Application period:**

15th September – 31st October 2026.

**Assessment and pitching:**

1st November - 10th November 2026

**Continental final:**

7th December 2026 in Zimbabwe

**Winner announcement:**

8th December 2026

## The Opportunity

The fifth edition of the ATU Africa Innovation Challenge offers universities, technical and vocational institutions, research institutions and other academic platforms the opportunity to present their AI-based software innovations and demonstrate how their institutional structures help innovators develop, test and improve those solutions over time.



## What the Fifth Edition Will Advance



### **Strong academic ecosystems**

Recognition will focus on the institutional environment supporting innovation, and not just on one promising product alone



### **Relevant AI-based software solutions**

The Challenge will promote innovations responding to Africa's digital development priorities



### **Technical development**

Partner support will help reduce barriers to technical learning and product readiness



### **Continental connections**

Participating institutions will gain access to ATU programmes that provide opportunities for policy dialogue, engagement with industry networks and academic collaboration.

## What Counts as an Academic Innovation Ecosystem

An academic innovation ecosystem is a structured platform hosted within, or formally connected to, an academic or training institution and actively supporting innovators as they develop AI-based software solutions.

**Institutional base:**

A recognised university, technical and vocational institution, research institution or other academic or training institution in an ATU Member State.

**Active innovators:**

A continuing pool of learners, researchers, developers or innovation teams.

**Structured support:**

A coordination mechanism providing technical guidance, research assistance, supervision, mentorship or peer learning.

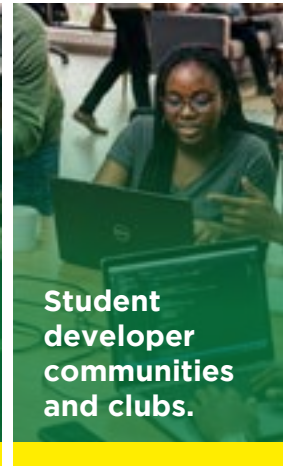
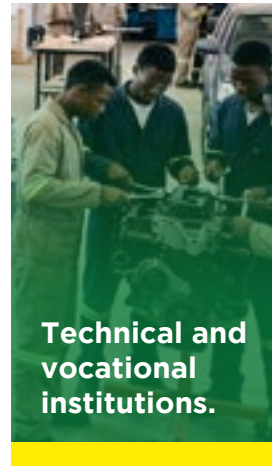
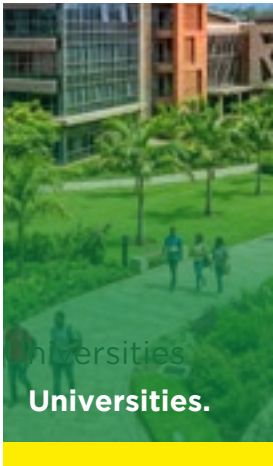
**Development pathway:**

A process through which solutions can be developed, tested, improved and prepared for use or deployment.



## Who May Participate

Eligible ecosystems may operate through one of the following academic or structured innovation platforms.



## Eligibility Requirements

Each applicant ecosystem must meet all five requirements below.

**Institutional connection.** The ecosystem must be hosted within, or formally connected to, an academic or training institution in an ATU Member State

**Software focus.** The ecosystem must support innovators working on AI-based software solutions with public, commercial, social or institutional value

**Named coordination.** The ecosystem must have a mentor network, academic supervisor, innovation lead, coordination structure or institutional focal point

**Evidence of support.** The ecosystem must demonstrate how it provides technical, research, product-development or mentorship assistance to innovators

**Learner nomination capacity.** The ecosystem must be able to nominate learners or teams who meet the requirements of any confirmed partner-supported training or certification pathway

**Membership is not an entry requirement.** An institution does not need to be an ATU member to participate. Any application for ATU academia membership will be voluntary and will not affect eligibility or assessment.

## What Applicants Will Present

Each application will provide an account of both the innovation and the ecosystem supporting it.



**Host institution.** The name, country and institutional status of the academic or training institution connected to the ecosystem.



**Ecosystem profile.** The platform's purpose, structure, active innovators, focal point and support mechanisms.



**AI-based software innovation.** The problem addressed, intended users, principal functions and relevance to an African digital priority.



**Stage of development.** Evidence of development, testing, use, technical readiness or preparation for deployment.



**Institutional support.** Evidence of mentorship, supervision, research assistance, laboratory access, incubation, peer learning or product-development support.



**Learner pathway.** Confirmation that the ecosystem can nominate eligible learners or teams if it receives a partner-supported training or certification package.

## How Applications Will Be Assessed

Applications will be considered against five assessment areas.



### **Relevance.**

The importance of the problem and its connection to an African digital development priority.



### **Innovation quality.**

The usefulness, distinctiveness and suitability of the proposed AI-based software solution.



### **Technical readiness.**

The extent to which the solution has been developed, tested and prepared for further improvement or deployment.



### **Ecosystem strength.**

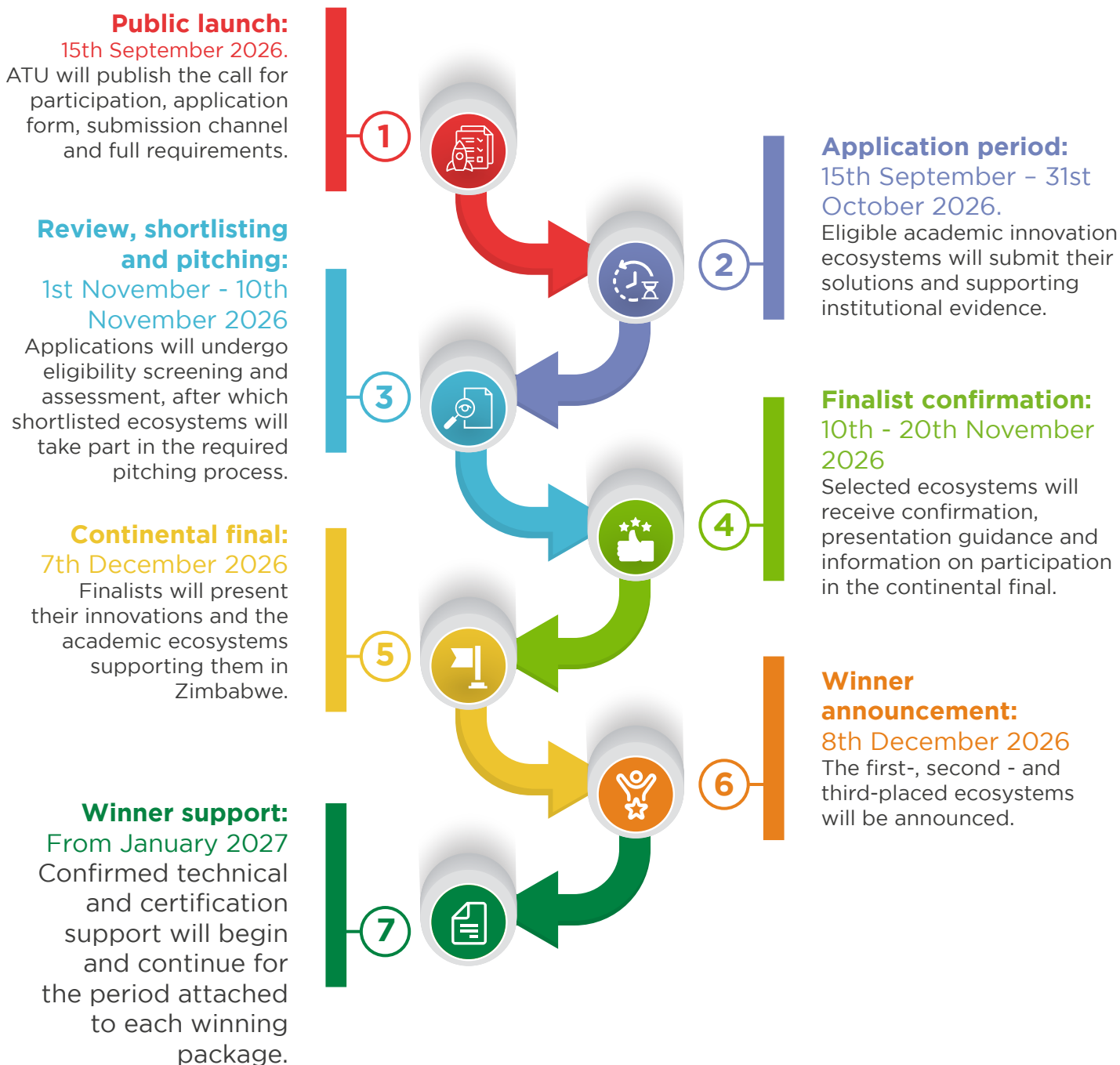
The depth, continuity and credibility of the institutional support available to innovators.



### **Deployment potential.**

The feasibility of moving the solution towards wider use, adoption or scale.

# Programme Journey



## Continental Final

The continental final will take place in Zimbabwe on 7th - 8th December 2026. The presentations will be made before policymakers, regulators, industry partners, academic institutions and innovation stakeholders.

## Winner Packages



**First Place**

**USD 30,000**

To be absorbed  
over a period of  
one(1) year.



**Second Place**

**USD 20,000**

To be absorbed  
over a period of  
six (6)months.



**Third Place**

**USD 10,000**

To be absorbed  
immediately  
upon approval of  
proposed use.



### What Each Package May Cover

- Training and professional certification for eligible innovators in the ecosystem.
- Technical mentorship, cybersecurity guidance and product-development support.
- Software, cloud services, developer platforms and testing resources required to advance the submitted innovation.
- Equipment required to develop, test or deploy the innovation.
- A cash facilitation equivalent to 30% of the prize money, which will be disbursed to the innovator whose innovation was fronted by the ecosystem.

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## How the Support Will Be Provided

Each winning ecosystem will submit a costed support plan explaining how it proposes to use its package during the applicable period. ATU will review the plan with the ecosystem and approve the activities, services, resources and equipment that directly support the submitted innovation.

Approved support will be provided in stages against agreed milestones. Where equipment is required, the ecosystem will defend the need, cost and intended use in its proposal.

## Voluntary ATU Academia Membership

The host academic or training institution behind each participating ecosystem may apply voluntarily for ATU academia membership. Membership is separate from the competition and will not affect eligibility, assessment or final placement.

Institutions admitted after completing the applicable membership formalities will receive a fee waiver for up to three years. The duration applicable to each admitted institution will be confirmed during the membership process. After the waiver ends, an institution may continue under the membership terms then in force.

## CONCEPT NOTE

### Fifth ATU Africa Innovation Challenge

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