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## QUALITY EDUCATION: MEETING CAREER GOALS, ECONOMIC ADVANCEMENT AND EQUIPPING FOR LEADERSHIP

This brief summarises findings from the first three years of *The Imprint of Education*, a five-year longitudinal cohort study of Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni of African descent (from selected countries and cohorts) conducted by the Human Sciences Research Council. The findings presented here should be interpreted as indicative of what has been found so far and are a work in progress. It is important to interpret these findings not as representative of the whole Mastercard Foundation Scholar population but rather of the study population. The study population and methodology are described at the end of this brief.

The Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program is a global initiative designed to develop the next generation of transformative leaders by enabling highly talented, service-oriented young people, primarily young Africans, to pursue their higher education and cultivate their leadership potential. The Program works with educational institutions, ecosystem actors, and Mastercard Foundation Scholars to create the conditions that will enable young people to attain inclusive and relevant education, transition smoothly into dignified and fulfilling work, and lead transformative lives. The Program places a particular emphasis on reaching young women, forcibly displaced youth, and young people living with disabilities who face the highest

social and economic barriers to opportunity.

This Spotlight brief presents an overview of how Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni in the study feel their education has prepared them in relation to their chosen careers; their transition into the world of work and/or further studies; their capacity to adopt leadership roles in their social and work contexts; and their other aspirations. The findings are based on qualitative interviews with tertiary Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni and a quantitative survey of secondary school Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni and tertiary Alumni, called the Alumni Tracer Study (ATS).

## KEY STATISTICS

Only **4 percent of secondary school Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni and 2 percent of tertiary Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni** did not believe they had received quality education.

In 2022, almost **two-thirds of tertiary Alumni strongly agreed** that their education had contributed to improving their economic circumstances, compared with just under half in 2020.

In 2022, **66 percent of the secondary school Alumni** surveyed said they were engaged in further studies; while **36 percent of the tertiary Alumni** were still pursuing further studies.

**93 percent of secondary school Alumni** reported participating in leadership training **compared with 75 percent of tertiary Alumni**.

**73 percent of tertiary Alumni** saw themselves as financially better off than their peers who had not received a Mastercard Foundation scholarship.

## QUALITY EDUCATION

"Quality" is a priority in education because, as the Mastercard Foundation has asserted, only high-quality education can ensure that young people have the skills and competencies required to succeed in work and life. However, "quality" is a contested concept. Quality education may be defined and measured from a systemic perspective; based on

outcomes; or according to stakeholder perspectives. In 2022, *The Imprint of Education* study mainly considered the concept from the perspective of key stakeholders, including that of implementing partner institutions, as well as with reference to how the Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni themselves felt their education had prepared them for the future.

## HIGH-QUALITY TEACHING AND LEARNING

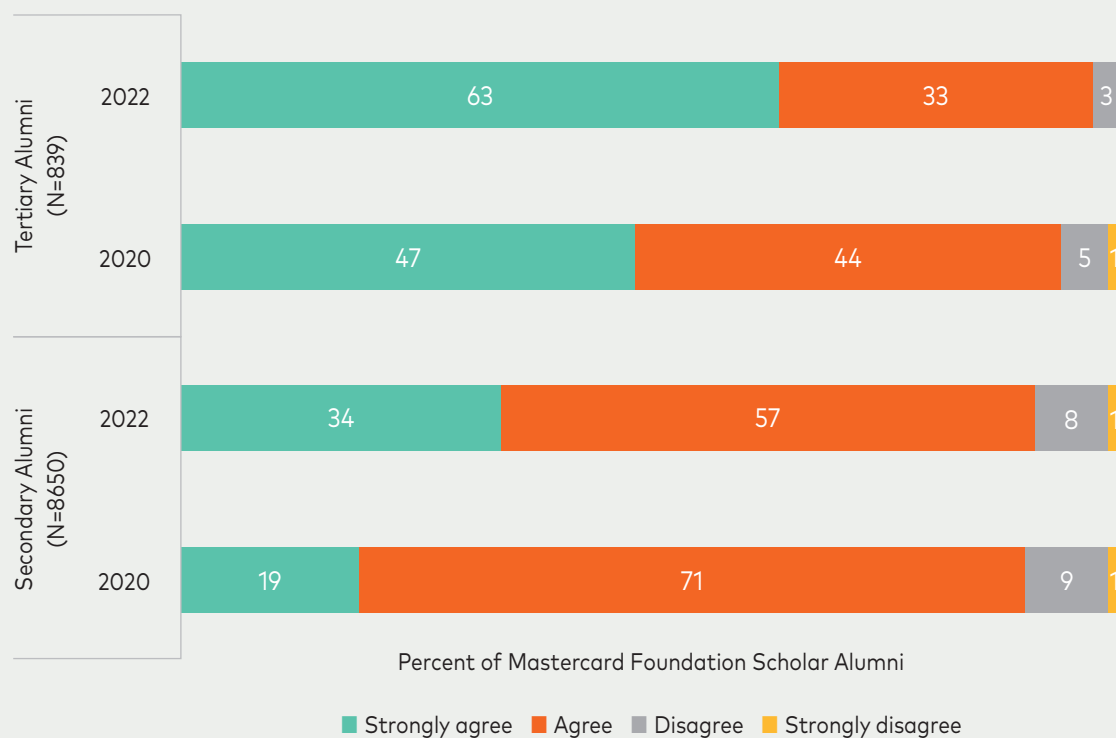
In 2020 and 2022, Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni were overwhelmingly positive about the quality of the education they had received. Across the years, only 4 percent of secondary school Mastercard

Foundation Scholar Alumni and between 1 percent and 2 percent of tertiary Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni, said they did not believe they had received quality education.

## RETURNS TO EDUCATION

The interviews with tertiary Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni in 2021 and 2022 indicated that the quality of education was mediated by the extent to which they had been able to meet, or were in the process of meeting, their career aspirations and/or shift their economic situations. In the survey, almost two-thirds of tertiary Alumni strongly agreed that

their education had contributed to improving their economic circumstances in 2022, compared with just under half in 2020. For secondary Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni in 2022, more than a third strongly agreed that their economic circumstances had improved as a result of their education.



**Figure 1: Level of agreement with the statement: "The education I received played a role in improving my economic circumstances". (percent Alumni) (secondary school Alumni N= 8650; tertiary Alumni N=839)**

Source: 2020 and 2022 data from the Alumni Tracer Study (ATS)

There were some links between being in paid employment or having studied off-continent and views of economic returns linked to education. In 2020 and 2022, graduates in paid employment were more likely than others to agree strongly that education had improved their economic

circumstances, and their views were found to be increasingly positive over this period. In 2020 and 2022, those who had studied off-continent were more positive about the economic returns they had derived from their education than their on-continent peers.

## GRADUATE IDENTITIES

In general, interviewed Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni said that having received a quality education, they were equipped and obliged to adopt a larger social role, including as leaders, agents of development and exemplars of success in their communities and in Africa. They noted how their education had emboldened them and made them more capable, changing how

they thought and the ways in which they analysed and solved problems. Mwara in Kenya said:

**"It opened my eyes to and my mind to being able to sometimes 'think outside the box' like when confronted with a challenge."**

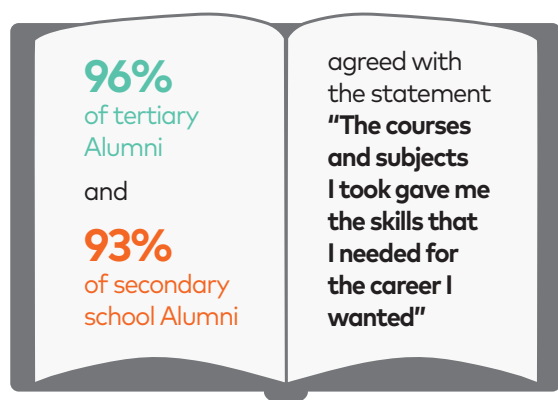
In this respect, quality education may be seen as liberating, enabling the individual to aspire further, acquire capabilities and act on their aspirations.

## THE CHALLENGE OF CONTEXT

Labour-market realities, which differ from country to country, can have a significant impact on job prospects and, thus, on the value that Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni place on education. In this regard, they faced several challenges, such as

an oversupply of graduates; a lack of networks or connections to important brokers in the employment process; and limited relevant work experience. Partners helping to implement the Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program noted the importance of providing context-specific preparation for work and further studies to be undertaken after graduation.

## SEEKING SKILLS THROUGH FURTHER STUDIES



Source: 2022 data from the ATS

Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni pursuing postgraduate qualifications noted that such studies offered opportunities for specialisation and greater experience, as well as the possibility of financial and career benefits, which would compensate for the time spent studying rather than working.

Tertiary Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni in employment were engaging in a wider range of

educational qualifications than their unemployed and studying-only peers. These included short courses, postgraduate diplomas and certificates, as well as degrees. It was found that the tertiary Alumni could diagnose their own developmental and professional needs and identify relevant sources of further education and training for their field of expertise.

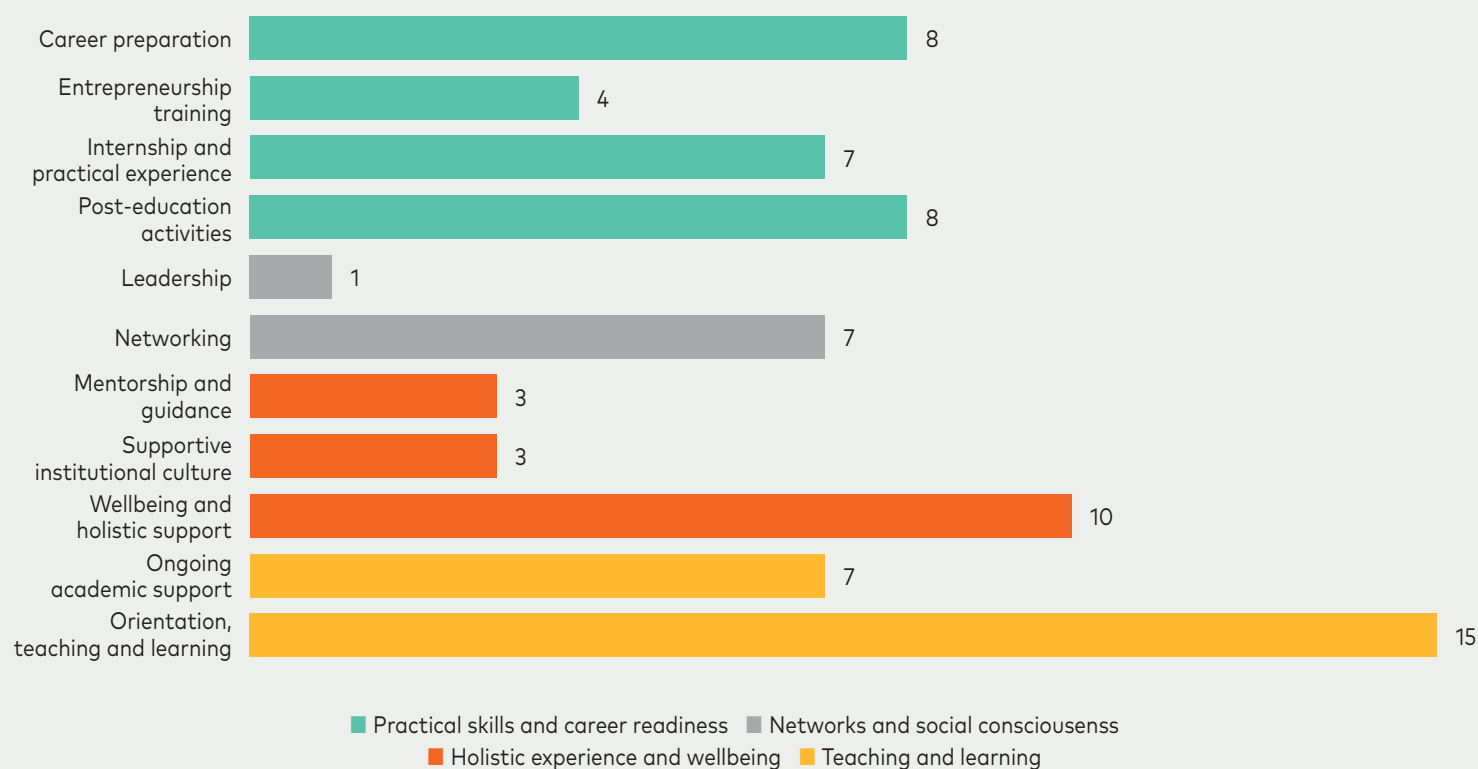
In this context, several of those interviewed in 2022 criticised the traditional university mode of education, noting an overemphasis on theory and research for an academic career pathway. Thato in South Africa said: "I think there wasn't necessarily enough preparation for one to be a professional. I think ... [my department] ... focused more on training an academic rather than a professional in the corporate world".

One solution to the concerns raised may be to introduce more practically oriented, career-focused, and professional degrees in African higher education.

## TRANSITION SUPPORT

The provision of support is particularly critical for first-generation students from disadvantaged backgrounds, such as those targeted by the Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program. These students require support services at different stages to have a fair chance of succeeding in their journeys through education and into the world of work. Partner institutions placed significant emphasis

on providing wrap-around services, including wellness; psycho-social support; academic support; mentorship and an international campus culture (Figure 2). Implementing partners also emphasised the role of the “out-duction” (preparing students to leave university) support services on offer, attaching much value to career preparation and other post-education activities.



**Figure 2: Number of implementing partners that mentioned each characteristic of what comprises high-quality education**  
Source: Key informant interviews conducted in 2020

The partner institutions noted how the wrap-around and transition support they offered helped remove non-financial barriers to entry and success that Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni might encounter at educational institutions. Figure 2 shows the list of characteristics used to define a high-quality education and how many implementing Partners identified their importance/inclusion as part of a Scholar’s overall experience.

Meanwhile, the Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni noted the importance and richness of the wrap-around support available. Pearl, who was studying in “the Diaspora”, said:

**“I received immense support without judgement ... it was the purest form of care and support.”**

Secondary school Alumni were more likely to access support services (such as career guidance,

mentorship and counselling) than tertiary Alumni. For example, 93 percent of secondary school Alumni reported participating in leadership training compared with 75 percent of tertiary Alumni.

In the context of these contributions and the programmatic intentions that informed their provision, the tertiary Alumni who were interviewed described the Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program as "a whole package."



Source: 2022 data from the ATS

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni perspectives on what comprises quality education developed over time, and were linked to their individual and personal aspirations. In particular, their perceptions of quality were related to the economic returns that they expected to derive from their education; the enhanced benefits that were anticipated because of additional studies; and the ways in which their education had equipped and obliged them to adopt a larger social role as leaders and agents of development.
2. It was found that those who had studied in their home countries placed a lower value on the quality of the education that they had received than those who had studied abroad, in respect to teaching and learning; career-relevant skills; and prospects for economic advancement.
3. Although almost all appreciated the quality of the education they had received, some criticised the traditional university mode of education, noting an over-emphasis on theory and research and insufficient emphasis on work-oriented skills. Great value was attached by both Alumni and partner institutions to the wrap-around support provided by the Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program.
4. In general, Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni viewed quality education as allowing them to aspire to futures, roles, and possibilities they had not imagined previously – and enabling them to realise these aspirations.

## DIGGING DEEPER FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Further research is needed to:

1. Explore how institutional provisions and interventions offering wrap-around support have evolved and whether the Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program has influenced support provision by educational institutions.
2. Explore how institutional provisions and interventions offering wrap-around support may be made more effective and widely accessible;
3. Explore how institutional partners and universities may support students' efforts to transition into the world of work through closer labour-market relationships; and
4. Investigate why Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni who had the opportunity of studying abroad say they had experienced higher-quality education than those who studied in their home countries.

## NOTES ON THE STUDY

*The Imprint of Education* longitudinal cohort study has multiple goals – one of which is to understand how Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni transition from secondary school and tertiary educational institutions to develop fulfilling lives and livelihoods. The study used data from three sources. The first is a quantitative survey of Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni of both the secondary school and tertiary institution program who had completed their program in 2017, 2018 or 2019 (called the Alumni Tracer Survey [ATS]). For secondary school Alumni, a cohort was recruited from Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Rwanda and Uganda based on *where participants had studied*. The tertiary Alumni cohort was recruited from Ethiopia, Ghana, Rwanda, South Africa, Uganda and what we call “the Diaspora” (African Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni that had studied in institutions outside Africa) based on countries in *which they had studied*. Data from the survey conducted in 2020 and 2022 (with

administrative data collected in 2021) was weighted to the secondary school Alumni population (8,650) and the tertiary institution Alumni population (839). The second source of data comprises qualitative in-depth interviews conducted in 2020, 2021, 2022 with tertiary institution Mastercard Foundation Scholars (122, 117 and 106, participants respectively) who had graduated between 2014 and 2020 with undergraduate or graduate degrees and who were recipients of Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program scholarships. Based on where they were *residing* in 2019, these participants were drawn from Ethiopia, Ghana, Rwanda, South Africa, Uganda and Kenya, and “the Diaspora”). The third source of data was obtained through qualitative interviews conducted in 2020 and 2022 with partners from institutions and organisations that implement the Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program. All names of research participants referred to in this brief are pseudonyms.

## THIS SPOTLIGHT PUBLICATION IS BASED ON THE FOLLOWING REPORT:

Swartz, S., Juan, A., Mahali, A., and The Imprint of Education Research Team. (2023). *The Imprint of Education Study: A longitudinal cohort study of African Alumni of the Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program – Year 3 Research Report*. Cape Town, South Africa: Human Sciences Research Council.



This brief was produced in the context of *The Imprint of Education* study that is conducted by the Human Sciences Research Council, South Africa, in partnership with the Mastercard Foundation. The views expressed do not necessarily represent those of the Foundation, its staff, or its Board of Directors.