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## ALUMNI PRACTICES AND PERSPECTIVES ON GIVE BACK AND TRANSFORMATIVE 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 the study participants practice and perceive give back and transformative leadership as forms of social consciousness. 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

**89 percent of secondary school Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni and 92 percent of tertiary Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni** said they judged themselves by how they help those around them.

**No secondary school Alumni and only 3 percent of tertiary Alumni** named social justice as a motivation for giving back.

**Nearly two thirds** of those who had attempted systemic change said that they had experienced negative consequences as a result.

About two thirds of Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni said that they had experienced pressure to support their families; **while 59 percent of secondary school Alumni and 53 percent of tertiary Alumni** described pressure to support their communities.

Only **11 percent of tertiary Alumni** aimed their efforts at systemic change, with those living in “the Diaspora” expressing greater interest in such change than their peers in Africa.

In 2022, **more male tertiary Alumni (28 percent) than female tertiary Alumni (20 percent)** said they had the skills to use government policies to solve problems in their community. More than 70 percent of the Alumni said that they wanted to acquire such skills.

## SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS

“Social consciousness” refers to the extent to which individuals and groups are aware of and concerned about social issues and the impacts these have on society. Individuals who are socially conscious are typically aware of issues such as poverty, inequality, and discrimination, and are committed to working towards social justice. The Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program selects its participants based on academic talent, financial need, and applicants’ experience of, and potential for, changing the world

in which they live. The overarching concept of “social consciousness” encompasses the concepts of “give back” and “transformative leadership” – two key objectives of the Mastercard Foundation, which it defines as “the act of engaging others, in an ethical manner, to generate positive and lasting change” and which entails “a desire to give back.” Accordingly, the Foundation seeks to promote an ethos of social consciousness among Scholars.

## GIVING BACK

An overwhelming number of Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni said that they judged themselves according to the extent to which they were able to help others, which is in line with the values placed on solidarity, reciprocity and relationship building in many African cultures. It was also found that both giving back, and leadership were seen as a continuum: starting small within one's own circle before acquiring further skills and collaborating more widely so that greater impacts may be achieved.

Most Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni were involved in "informal" giving back, which may be characterised as small, responsive, single-outcome-driven actions from which the immediate community benefits. Fewer were involved in "formal" giving back, which entails material support; a documented plan; collaboration; and sustained action. It is noteworthy that more Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni (both secondary and tertiary) reported that they were under greater pressure to support their families, compared to supporting their communities. At the same time, it was found that, over time, many had expanded their giving back beyond the family to include community networks due in part to improved

### Most common ways Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni help their families

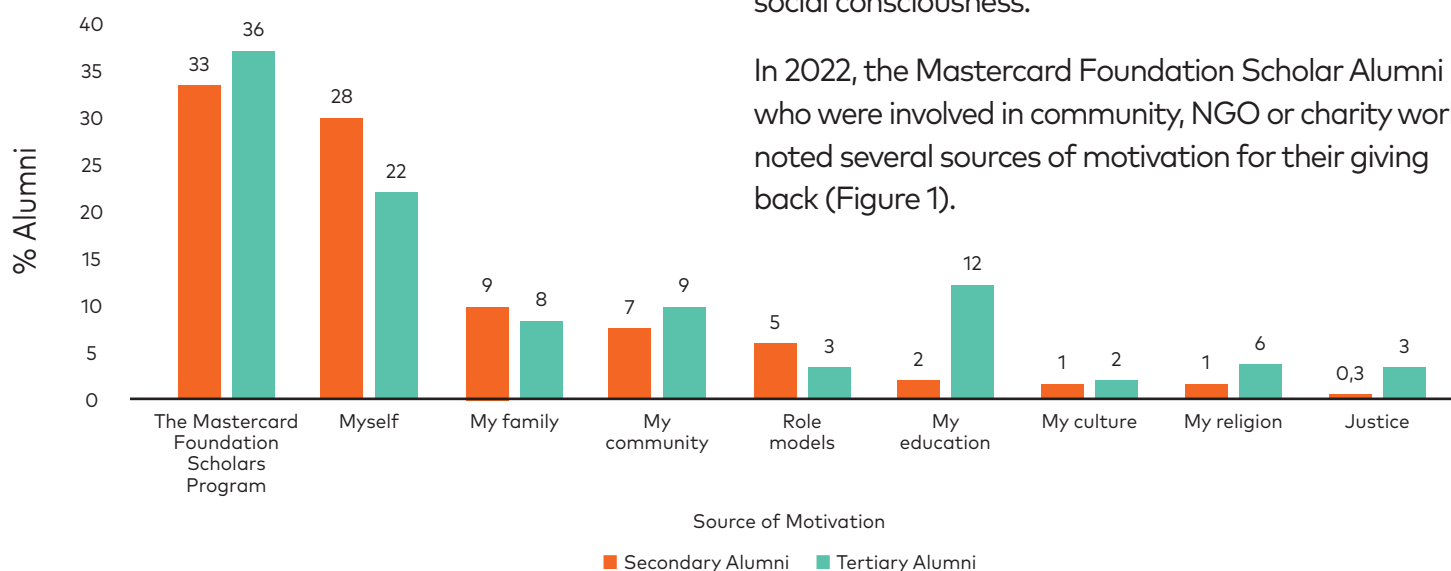
**65 percent**  
of secondary school Alumni do household chores.

**91 percent**  
of tertiary Alumni provide financial support.

financial positions, extended networks, collaborative efforts and maturity or growing social consciousness.

The main form of informal giving back to communities was found to be mentorship followed by acts of career guidance; information sharing; tutoring; skills sharing; and support for those entering university. Meanwhile, tertiary Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni noted that their giving back activities had increasingly included volunteering, charity work and campaigning for a cause. In this regard, in 2022, 64 percent of tertiary Alumni said they were involved in some form of work for charity or for a non-governmental organisation (NGO). Overall, roughly half the tertiary Alumni who were interviewed reported some form of sustained giving back since the study's inception; and the rest said they were planning to give back in the future, emphasising Alumni's strong sense of social consciousness.

In 2022, the Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni who were involved in community, NGO or charity work noted several sources of motivation for their giving back (Figure 1).



**Figure 1: Source of motivation to help the family and/or community (percent Alumni) (secondary school Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni n=4983; tertiary Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni n=540)**  
Source: 2022 data from the Alumni Tracer Study (ATS)

Many said that their commitment to giving back was driven by their participation in the Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program (33 percent) and/or by their own social conscience (28 percent). The other main factor cited was their sense of obligation to their families and broader communities. It is noteworthy that almost none of the secondary school Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni and only 3 percent of tertiary Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni named the pursuit of justice as a motivation.

The study found that tertiary Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni articulated an adaptive and maturing understanding of giving back developed through trial and error; working with others; and their own experiences in organisations. In this regard, secondary school and tertiary Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni rated themselves highly in relation to their ability to collaborate to make the world a better place. Most tertiary Alumni's give back initiatives were established in partnership with peers and colleagues and seldom alone.



**Figure 2: Extent to which Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni have been able to work with others to make the world a better place in the past year ( percent Alumni) (secondary school Alumni N= 8650; tertiary Alumni N=839)**

Source: 2022 data from the ATS

An increasing number of tertiary Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni did not distinguish between their engagement in work, business and/or education and their efforts to give back – choosing instead to view their livelihoods, entrepreneurship or studies as their main contribution in the world. For tertiary Alumni, most of the impact indicators for giving back come from work- or study-related projects, or formal give back engagements.

A majority of both secondary school Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni (64 percent) and tertiary Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni (57 percent) said that their giveback was aimed at changing their communities, while 32 percent for both groups said that the target recipients were individuals. A significant marker of social consciousness is utilising a social

justice lens to bring about systemic change. Only 11 percent of tertiary Alumni and 3 percent of secondary school Alumni said that their focus was on producing systemic change. The few examples of Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni successfully changing institutions/systems were work-related. For example, Sahar, an HR Specialist in Uganda managed to use her expertise to advocate for gender sensitive policies at her workplace. The tertiary Alumni living in "the Diaspora" expressed greater interest in such change than their peers in Africa.

In 2020 and 2022, both groups of Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni cited time and opportunity as significant barriers to giving back, although both groups noted that money had become less of a challenge over this period. Emerging barriers included losing one's team to international opportunities; ageism; restrictive community gatekeeping; and red tape. Beyond the limitations of addressing systemic change, they continue to face challenges that constrain their capacities to give back.

# TRANSFORMATIVE LEADERSHIP

## Definitions of leadership<sup>1</sup>

**Transactional leadership:** the dispositions, traits, styles and values of leaders and with the transactional interactions between leaders and followers

**Transformational leadership:** creating change among groups of people, institutions and organisations.

**Transformative leadership:** change in the political, social and economic spheres in order to bring about social justice.

Only about one quarter of interviewed participants spoke of transformative leadership with the clear goal of bringing about social justice. Meanwhile, many Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni conflated the idea of transformative leadership with giving back and transactional leadership practices. For example, Theodora in “the Diaspora” said:

**“The best kind of leadership is transformative ... how can you leave things better than you found them ... I think it also is really about how you can use the people that you have in place and all their skills and abilities and pull those together to sort of effect change.”**

Although most Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni identified themselves as leaders, the tertiary Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni who were interviewed predominantly spoke of leadership in transactional terms – that is, as a largely individual undertaking, with the outcome being to achieve one’s ends by influencing other individuals.<sup>1</sup> In this context, the concrete outcomes sought were mainly to promote a better understanding of one’s community; to give back; to help others; and to “bring solutions.”

Delving deeper into the meaning of transformative leadership, Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni were asked to rate their own capacity to lead change in the ATS survey. Presented with a range of characteristics of leadership (see Figure 2), the proportions of those who said they possessed the skills to “transform good ideas into action” and were able “to recognise people’s strengths and put them into an effective team to solve problems” increased over time.



**Figure 2: Percentage of Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni who report having Transformative Leadership skills (percent Alumni) (secondary school Alumni N= 8650; tertiary Alumni N=839)**

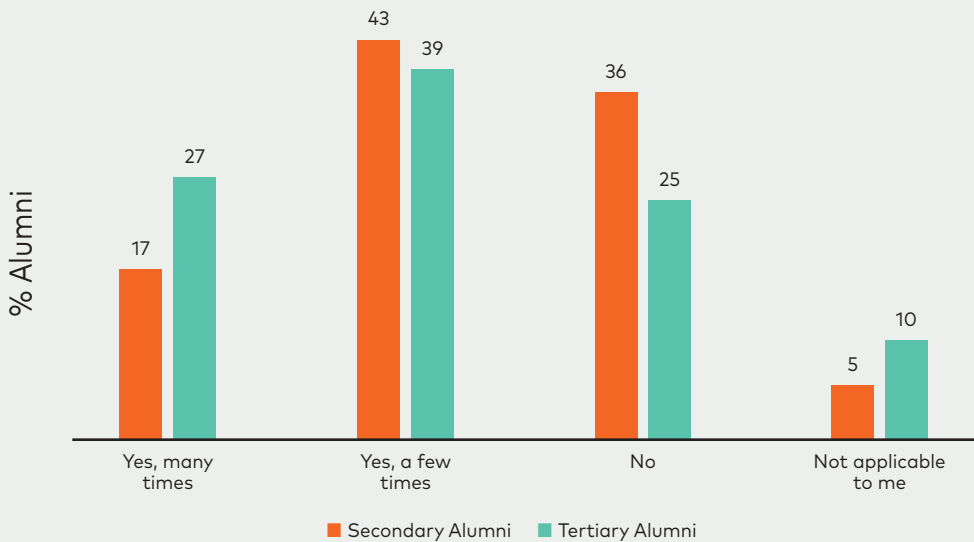
Source: 2022 data from the ATS

<sup>1</sup> Carolyn Shields provides a comprehensive survey of types of leadership and defines transformative leadership as used in this brief. See Shields, C. (2011). Transformative Leadership: An Introduction. *Counterpoints*, 409, 1-17.

**98 percent**  
of secondary and tertiary  
Mastercard Foundation Scholar  
Alumni saw themselves as leaders.

Source: 2022 data from the ATS

However, although the proportion of those in the ATS survey with policy-making and systemic-justice skills had risen by 2022, only about one fifth said they knew how to use policies to bring about change. These Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni tended to



**Figure 4: Proportion of Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni who have experienced negative consequences through trying to change unjust systems (percent Alumni) (secondary school Alumni N= 8650; tertiary Alumni N=839)**  
Source: 2022 data from the ATS

Nearly two thirds of Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni in the ATS survey said that they had experienced negative consequences as a result of attempting to change unjust systems (Figure 3). Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni activists who were interviewed said that they had experienced political interference and threats, and their efforts had jeopardised their personal safety; their mental health; their jobs; and their reputations. The consequences of pursuing social justice or trying to shift unjust systems may be constraining Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni's enaction of transformative leadership.

While a framework of transformative leadership has been circulated among the institutions implementing the Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program, this has not yet been supported by an agreed and shared

be male; recent graduates of African universities; and/or in paid employment. Meanwhile, only about one third of tertiary Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni said they could explain how inequalities are related. These respondents tended to be recent graduates of universities outside Africa. While there was diversity in the knowledge and utilisation of frameworks to bring about systemic change, more than 70 percent of Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni wanted to learn policy-making skills and more than 60 percent wanted to increase their ability to address issues of inequality.

curriculum to achieve its goals, or more clearly define its aims and modus operandi. Many institutional partners said they needed more direction from the Mastercard Foundation on the content of the leadership programming, a significant amount of which is outsourced. Such a shared curriculum also has the potential to prepare young leaders to face the challenges that often come with seeking social justice as an avenue for systemic change.

Although 13 of the 19 partner institutions which were engaged by the study said they encouraged systemic justice and sought to foster transformative leadership among the Mastercard Foundation Scholars, a number of the partners conflated the concept of social justice with ideas of inclusivity and tolerance, and avoided engaging with its political dimension.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

Efforts to promote giving back and transformative leadership should focus on practical ways of making a difference by developing agency; mentoring others; raising awareness; and collaborating to foster community development programmes. The give back, transformative leadership and entrepreneurship parts of the Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program should be linked and framed as aspects of a broader effort to foster social consciousness.

Furthermore, transformative leadership must ultimately be concerned with bringing about just change and must seek to transform policies, structures and systems that keep many people on the African continent from thriving. However, effort to produce such change can exact a heavy toll and young people should not be expected to shoulder such a burden without preparation and proper training. In addition, it should be acknowledged that transformative leadership can be seen as existing on a spectrum, with actions at a community level informing subsequent efforts to address issues at a societal level.

## DIGGING DEEPER FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Further research is needed to:

1. Explore African cultural concepts relating to reciprocity, such as that of Ubuntu, in order to forge an ethical approach that may readily be deployed by Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni to enhance their understanding of the practice of giving back; and
2. Support the production of stories about the ways in which Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni are collaborating to produce change.

## NOTES ON THE STUDY

*The Imprint of Education* longitudinal cohort study has a number of 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 using data gathered from three sources. The first data source 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 Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni, a cohort was recruited from Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Rwanda and Uganda based on *where participants had studied*. The tertiary Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni cohort was recruited from Ethiopia, Ghana, Rwanda, South Africa, Uganda and what we call “the Diaspora” (African 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 Alumni population (839). The second source of data comprises qualitative in-depth interviews conducted in 2020, 2021, 2022 with tertiary Mastercard Foundation Scholars (122, 117 and 106, participants respectively) who had graduated between 2014 and 2020 with undergraduate or graduate degrees and who were part of the Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program. 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.