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June 2024

## MULTIDIMENSIONAL LIVELIHOOD PATHWAYS: COMPLEX, NON-LINEAR, JOURNEYS

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 provides an overview of the individual, structural, and contextual characteristics that influence the length, direction, and nature of Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni journeys. These factors are used to understand the multi-dimensional, non-linear pathways and obstacles that they navigate after graduation. 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 institution Alumni, called the Alumni Tracer Study (ATS).

## KEY STATISTICS

**Most secondary school Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni were pursuing further studies (60 percent in 2020 and 66 percent in 2022) respectively**, while most tertiary Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni were in employment (60 percent in 2020 and 74 percent in 2022).

There was significant growth in the proportion of **secondary school Alumni who were employed, from 9 percent in 2020 to 19 percent in 2022, and in the proportion of tertiary Alumni** who had started studying again, from 26 percent in 2020 to 36 percent in 2022.

**36 percent of tertiary Alumni and 18 percent of secondary school Alumni** were running their own businesses in 2022.

In 2022, **77 percent of tertiary Alumni and 73 percent of secondary school Alumni** classified their business ventures as social enterprises.

Of the tertiary Alumni who had moved to another country in 2022, 63 percent cited education **opportunities and 21 percent cited job opportunities as the reasons for relocating.**

## MULTIDIMENSIONAL LIVELIHOOD PATHWAYS

Concepts of “transitions” and “pathways” tend to assume that the course of a life broadly entails moving from education into the world of work, ignoring how this course may be shaped by other factors, such as mobility and space – that is, where an individual is living and learning – and the opportunities offered by particular socio-economic contexts.

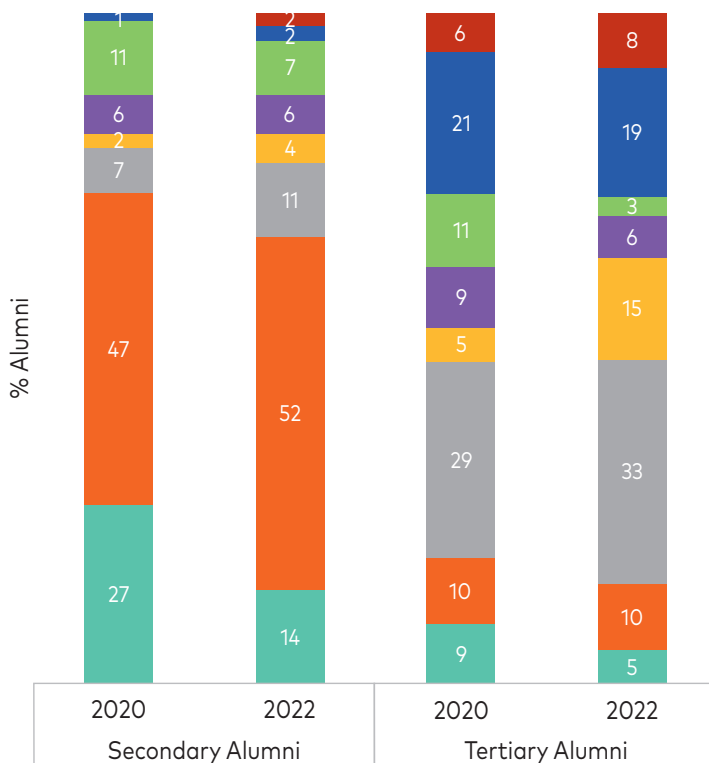
Although the study tracks the paths taken by Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni according

to four main “labour-market positions” – employment, unemployment, studying and entrepreneurship – it found that Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni livelihoods were more complex than such categorisation would imply. It therefore sought to describe the pathways they took in a more nuanced way, paying particular attention to their capacity to act alone and as members of a community in acquiring and deploying economic, social and cultural capital.

## LABOUR-MARKET POSITIONS AND PATHWAYS

Across 2020-2022, it was found that most secondary school Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni were pursuing further studies. By contrast, most tertiary Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni were in

employment. At the same time, the proportion of secondary school Alumni who were employed almost doubled, while the number of tertiary Alumni who had started studying again also increased.



**Legend**

- Work, study and entrepreneurship
- Work and entrepreneurship
- Entrepreneurship and study
- Entrepreneurship only
- Working and studying
- Working only
- Studying only
- Unemployed

**Figure 1: Labour-market positions of Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni (secondary school Alumni N=8650; tertiary Alumni N=839)** Source: 2020 and 2022 data from the Alumni Tracer Study (ATS)

Across the years, most Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni occupied a single labour-market position (working only, studying only; or unemployed). However, a significant number were simultaneously studying and/or working and/or engaging in entrepreneurial activities (Figure 1). For example, a fifth of tertiary Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni supplemented their employment with a business venture in each of the years under study. This indicates a capacity or necessity to grasp multiple opportunities for livelihood generation.

**Alumni in employment**

There was significant growth in the proportion of secondary school Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni who were employed, from 9 percent in 2020 to 19 percent in 2022<sup>1</sup>. The tertiary Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni in employment also grew from 60 percent in 2020 to 74 percent in 2022. More tertiary than secondary school Alumni were employed full-time or under a permanent or fixed term written contract. Tertiary Alumni were also consistently more positive about their employment than secondary school Alumni, particularly in relation to whether they found their jobs relevant to their career paths. Eighty-three percent of tertiary Alumni who were working believed that their jobs were in line with their intended careers, compared to 42 percent of secondary school Alumni in employment.

Tertiary Alumni were also more positive about their employment than secondary school Alumni. In 2022, 95 percent of employed tertiary Alumni vs 77 percent of secondary school Alumni found their jobs dignified. In addition, 82 percent of employed tertiary Alumni vs 54 percent of secondary school Alumni indicated their jobs were fulfilling. In 2021, Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni were asked to define "dignified and fulfilling work." Ezekiel from Ghana captured the sentiment of many, saying:

**"I think dignified and fulfilling work must allow a person to express their talent and potential to the fullest ... make use of their skills ... from school ... [and] pay well enough to allow a person to live a basic life, have shelter, food, be able to afford a car."**

**Alumni who were studying**

Most secondary school Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni were pursuing further studies in 2020 (60 percent) and 2022 (66 percent), although not all of these were studying full-time. Of those who were studying, most (72 percent) were pursuing Bachelor's degrees in 2022. Fewer tertiary Mastercard

<sup>1</sup> There were no significant differences in employment based on whether tertiary Alumni studied on or off the African continent or by gender. For secondary school Alumni, 72 percent of those in employment were female.

Foundation Scholar Alumni were pursuing Bachelor's degrees (26 percent in 2020 which rose to 36 percent in 2022); 75 percent were pursuing graduate degrees.

#### Level of qualification pursued by Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni who were studying

- 72 percent of secondary school Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni pursuing Bachelor's degree
- 75 percent of tertiary Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni pursuing Master's/PhD

Source: 2022 data from the ATS

### Entrepreneurship activities

A greater proportion of tertiary Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni than secondary school Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni had their own businesses across the three years. Both groups utilised opportunities provided by the Mastercard Foundation to support their entrepreneurial endeavours, as more than a fifth of both secondary and tertiary Alumni accessed the Mastercard Foundation's Scholar Entrepreneurship Fund, or other avenues to start their businesses. Although tertiary Alumni businesses were found to be longer-lasting, secondary school Alumni were more likely to be making a profit from their businesses in 2020 and 2022. However, a significant number from both groups were unaware whether their business was making a profit or not. This might reflect an opportunity to strengthen the entrepreneurial skills of Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni to assess viability of their ventures or businesses. Among the tertiary Alumni who had started their own business, a majority said that their main reason included making money while helping people.

#### Top 3 reasons for secondary school Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni starting a business

1. More income (55 percent)
2. Make money and help people (23 percent)
3. Independence (18 percent)

#### Top 3 reasons for tertiary Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni starting a business

1. Inspired by the Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program (55 percent)
2. Make money and help people (53 percent)
3. Opportunity or space in the market (38 percent)

Source: 2022 data from the ATS

The businesses established by Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni generally employed family members and, at times, other people<sup>2</sup>. This created income streams that produced collective benefits, as Pedro in Ghana emphasized:

**"I wanted to set up the yoghurt manufacturing company, aside from its potential to sell, [was] its potential to employ most of the young people in my locality, in my community."**

### Unemployed Alumni

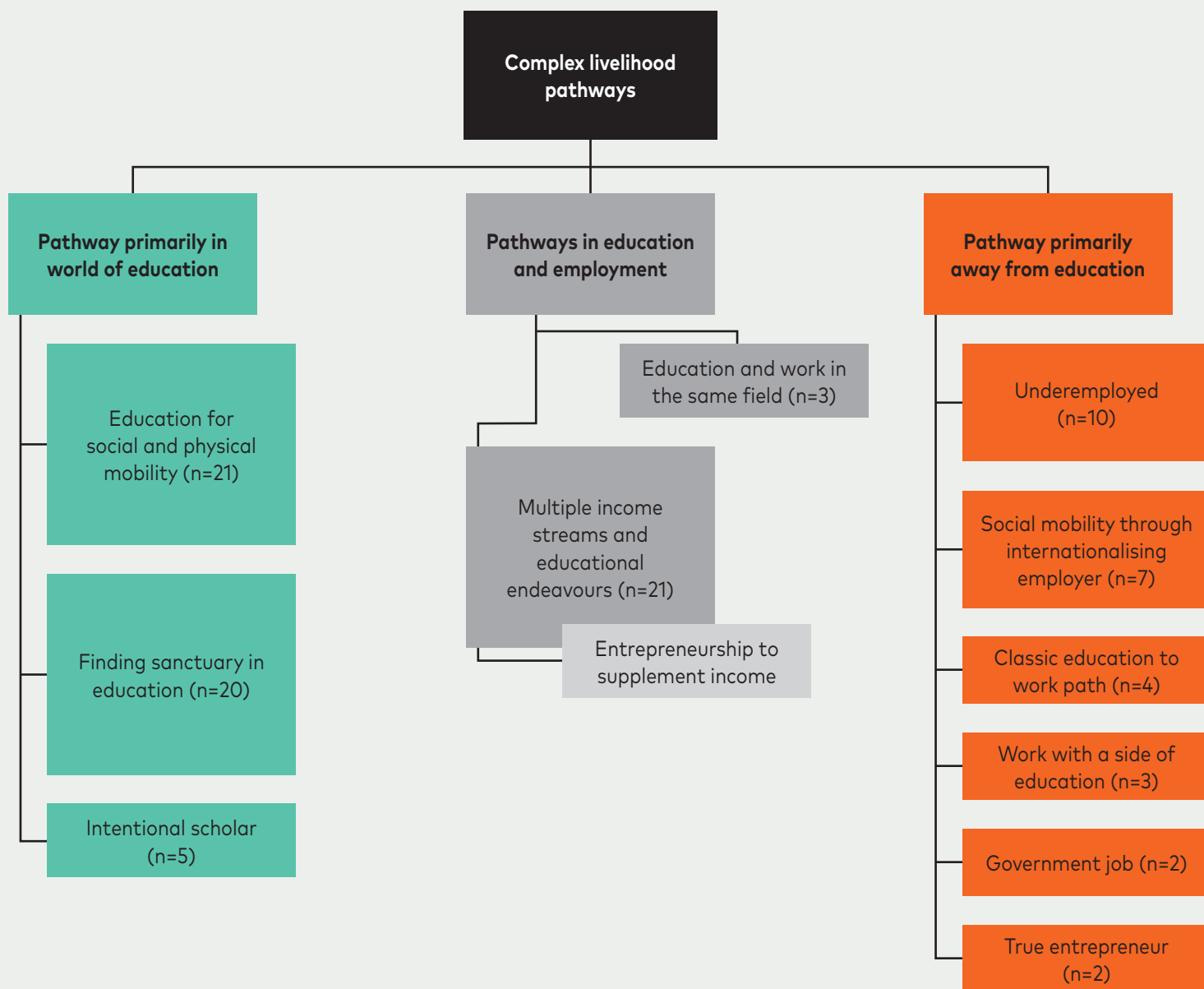
Although employment decreased from 2020 to 2022, more secondary Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni compared to tertiary Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni reported being unemployed and not in education. The proportion of unemployed secondary school Alumni decreased from 27 percent in 2020 to 14 percent in 2022 and for tertiary Alumni from 9 percent in 2020 to 5 percent in 2022. Unemployed secondary school Alumni cited a lack of qualifications (26 percent) and a lack of local jobs (12 percent) as the main causes of their unemployment. For almost a fifth of unemployed tertiary Alumni, a lack of work experience was cited as the main cause of their unemployment, while 19 percent cited a lack of job opportunities.

2 In 2022, 13 percent of secondary school Alumni who had businesses, employed family members, 10 percent had paid employees and 23 percent were helped by unpaid family or friends. Twenty-three percent of tertiary Alumni who had businesses employed family members, 38 percent had paid employees and 31 percent were helped by unpaid family or friends.

# THE INTERACTION BETWEEN EDUCATION AND WORK

Most tertiary Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni in the tracer study had transitioned from education to work by the second year of this study. However, Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni who were interviewed showed that these livelihood

pathways are complex and that "employment," for example, can take on various forms. The pathways of the tertiary Alumni in the qualitative sample were analysed to describe these complex pathways (Figure 2).



**Figure 2: Complex livelihood transition categories**

Source: Biographies of interviewed tertiary Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni (2022, n=106)

Notes: Sanctuary in education: Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni who have pursued multiple Master's degrees to access income, or a PhD because of material benefits. Also included are Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni who have accessed income through educational institutions.  
 Intentional scholar: planning to work in education as a career.

Among the Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni who worked in salaried positions, many were simultaneously studying and/or engaging in side-businesses. Side-businesses include farming, trading, or working for an NGO/social enterprise, to buttress their finances; support kin; and bolster their social security. At the same time, scholarship funds represented another important source of income, particularly for tertiary Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni, who were less dependent on family money than their secondary peers.

About a fifth of Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni who were working in 2022 were found to

be employed in the education sector. Many viewed education not only as a resource to facilitate entry into the world of work in general but as a field of work in itself – a phenomenon that has been described as “finding sanctuary in education”.

Other Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni were underemployed – undertaking only part-time work or internships; being employed on short-term and verbal contracts; or not fully using their skills. In general, it was found that most were continuously upskilling, studying, learning and undertaking training in order to address the challenge of underemployment.

## THE COMPLEX NATURE OF NON-LINEAR, DISRUPTED, FRAGMENTARY PORTFOLIO JOURNEYS

To explore the nature of the pathways for Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni, the study mapped how they moved (or did not move) from one distinct labour market position to another using transition matrix analysis (see Figures 3 and 4). Each graph represents the movements of all study respondents. Figure 3 is for secondary school Alumni and Figure 4 for tertiary education. Each Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumnus is represented by a thread and the thickness of the bars shows the actual proportion of those who followed a particular pathway. So, for example, 52 percent of secondary school Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni studied in 2020, and although 54 percent were studying in 2022, these were not all the same individuals as those in 2020. Some secondary school Alumni moved from studying only in 2020 into other discrete categories taking on

entrepreneur activities or employment. Other Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni who were unemployed or working in 2020, were studying in 2022. While the pathways of secondary school Alumni were diverse, those of the tertiary Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni were even more complex.

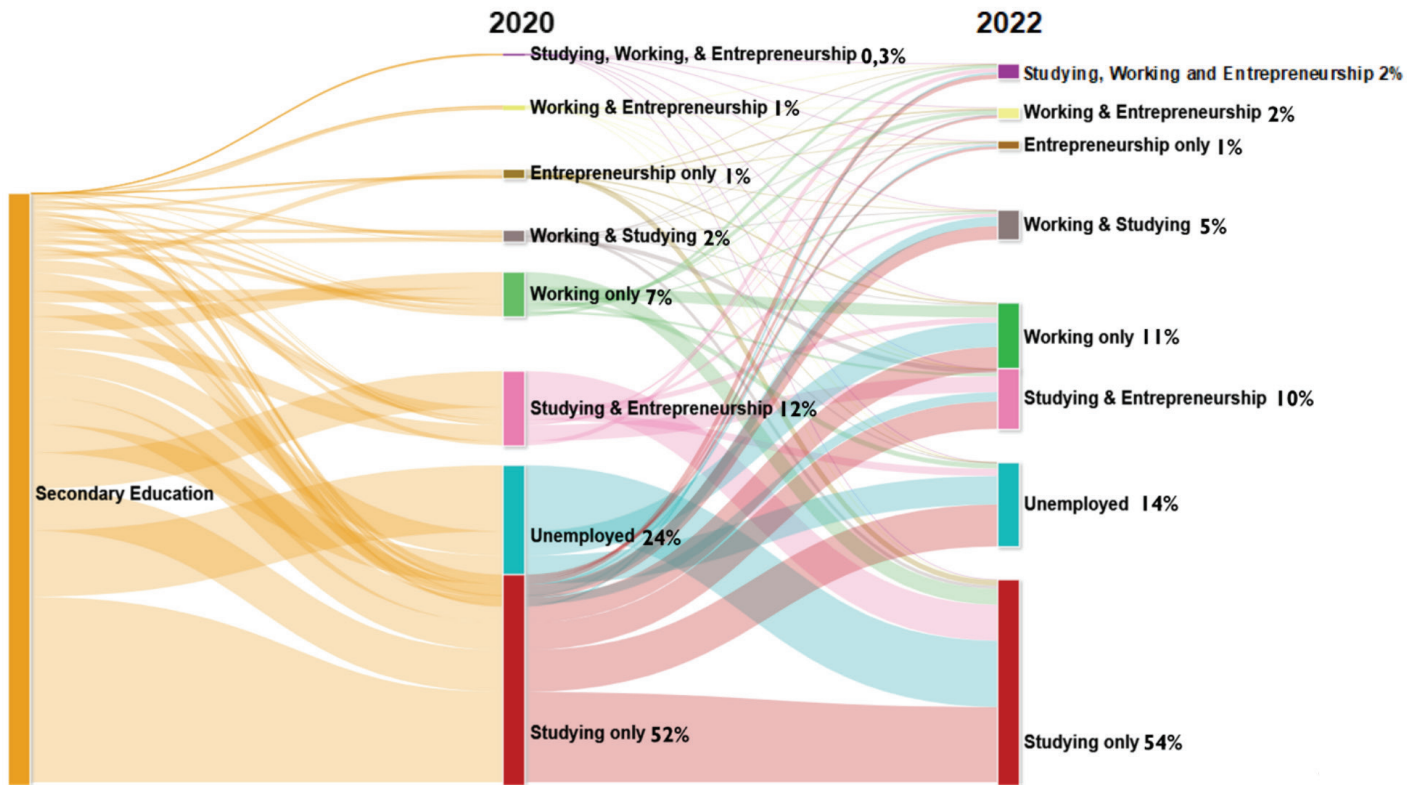
These figures show the complexity and non-linearity of the pathways of Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni and illustrate why many academics who study young people's transitions prefer to use terms such as “wayfaring”, “threads”, “genealogies”<sup>3,4</sup>, “desire lines”<sup>5</sup> and “navigational capacities”<sup>6</sup> to offer a more nuanced and accurate description and understanding of the pathways taken by young people post-school or post university.

3 Ingold, T. (2016). *Lines: A brief history*. Routledge.

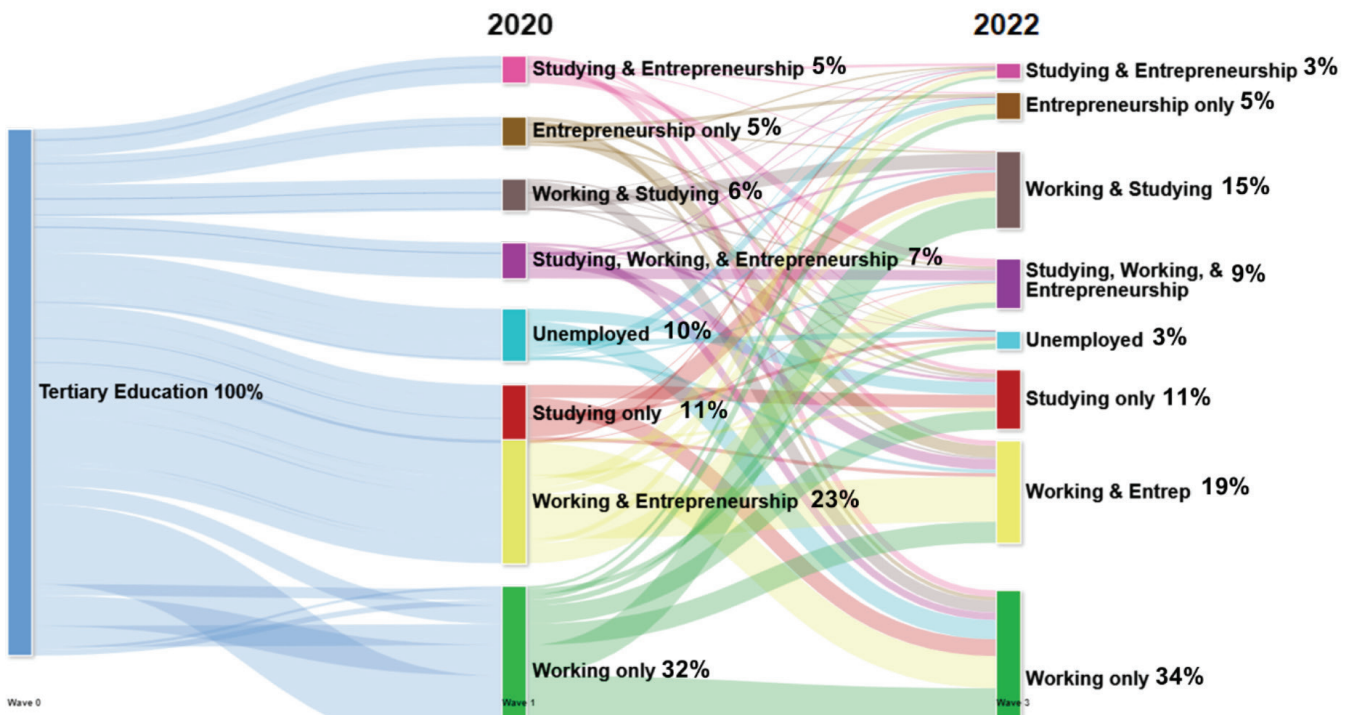
4 Wood, B. E. (2017). Youth studies, citizenship, and transitions: Towards a new research agenda. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 20(9), 1176–1190.

5 Nichols, L. (2014). Social desire paths: A new theoretical concept to increase the usability of social science research in society. *Theory and Society*, 43(6), 647–665.

6 Swartz, S. (2021). Navigational capacities for Southern youth in adverse contexts. In S. Swartz, A. Cooper, C. M. Batan & L. Kropff Causa (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of Global South youth studies* (pp. 399–418). Oxford University Press.



**Figure 3: Flow of discrete labour market transitions of secondary school Alumni (n=825)**  
 Source: 2020 and 2022 data from the ATS

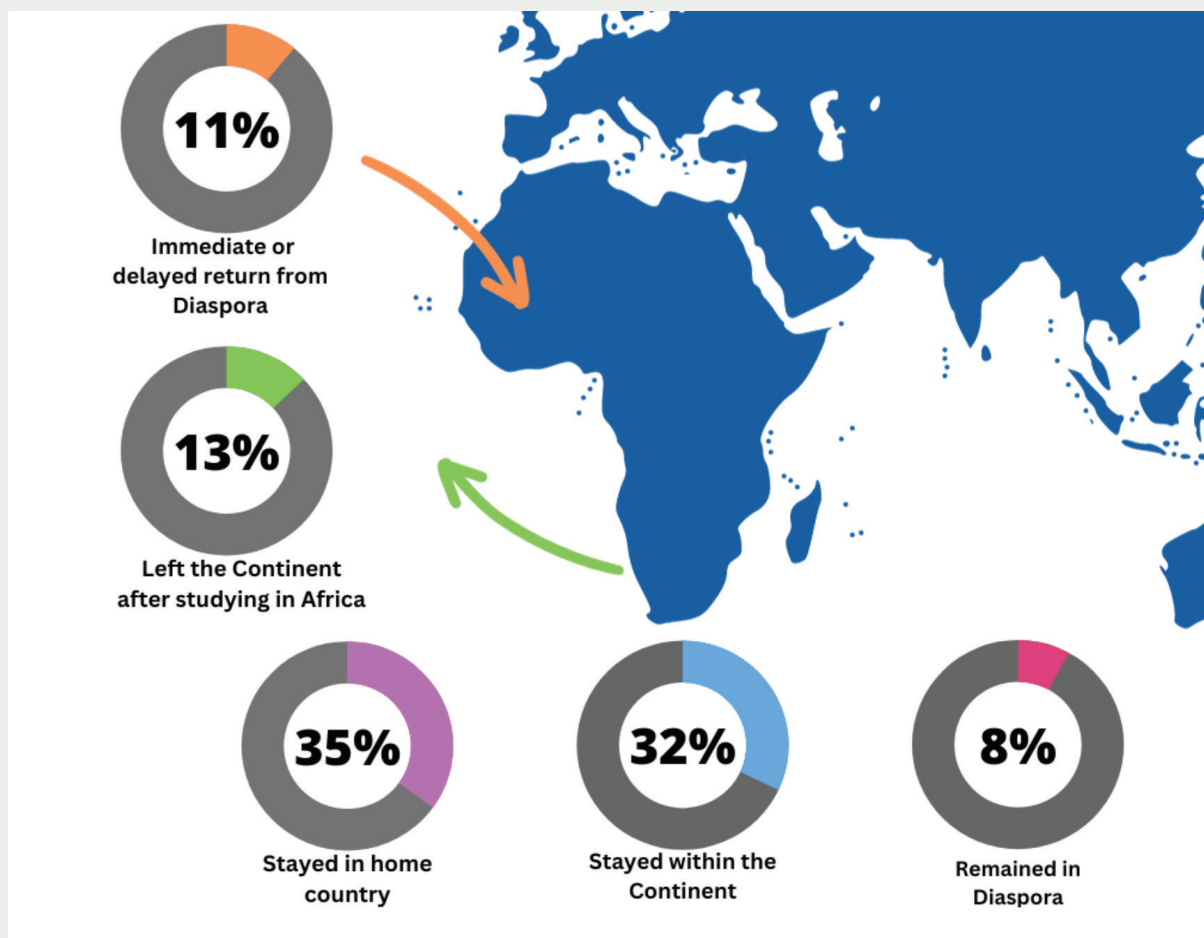


**Figure 4: Flow of discrete labour market transitions of tertiary Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni (unweighted, n=544)**  
 Source: 2020 and 2022 data from the ATS

## GEOGRAPHY AND MOBILITY

Geography and mobility factor into how Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni navigate their labour-market positions and pathways. Although many generally returned to, or remained in, Africa (Figure 5), about a fifth of tertiary Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni were living outside Africa in 2022.

The tertiary Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni living in a country other than the country of their birth cited education opportunities (57 percent in 2020 and 63 percent in 2022) and job opportunities (30 percent in 2020 and 21 percent in 2022) as the main reasons for relocating.



**Figure 5: Movements of tertiary Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni (unweighted, n=544)**

Source: 2020 and 2022 data from the ATS

Against this background, one of the interviewed key informants from an African partner institution noted that the high prevalence of underemployment among graduates was prompting academic staff to encourage Mastercard Foundation Scholars to gain work experience in “the Diaspora”. By contrast, several Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni adopted the view that future educational and

employment opportunities were best accessed in their home countries. They were not only influenced by the kind of educational and employment opportunities on offer when coming to a decision about where to study and work. In some cases, returning to Africa and one’s home country was also seen as an opportunity to contribute to development.



## ALUMNI REFLECTIONS ON PATHWAYS

Although almost all the Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni said that the Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program had changed how they saw future opportunities, many of them had quite set ideas about the timelines for their progress through education and into the world of work. The markers of transitions to adulthood that they reported related to education, finances and employment, and were often experienced as highly constraining. At the same time, some were able to detach themselves from normative understandings of personal development and the rigid expectations about pathways that these entailed. They instead came to view pathways as something that may be forged in the world beyond

the bounds of their own initial plans. Realising that deviating from the "script" or not conforming to their self-imposed schedules could be liberating, such Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni gained the insight that pathways may not be

**"linear, [but] full of zigzags, full of squares, full of circles that you have to navigate as you move along," said Selamawit from Ethiopia."**

As another Alumnus noted:

**"It's OK not to know where you want to go... - the most important thing that you need to do is to try new things," said Joseph in the Diaspora."**

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

It was found that most Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni's lived experiences of transitions were non-linear; were regularly disrupted; and were quite fragmentary in nature as education, work, and multiple other socio-economic and cultural determinants (including family and other responsibilities) intersected in a variety of ways. In this regard, analysis that proposes a straightforward transition from education to the world of work fails to address the complexity of learning and being "employed" as reported by the Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni, including the many forms of, often simultaneous engagement in education, work and livelihood production undertaken by them. In this context, the Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program and educational institutions should emphasise the value of continuous learning, including through mentoring that promotes the view that education constitutes part of a larger journey rather than merely a means of transition from one point to another in one's life.

## DIGGING DEEPER FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Further research is needed to:

1. Continuously evaluate the career progression of Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni; educational achievements; and the nature and success of their entrepreneurial ventures, including the entry points into entrepreneurship taken by them.
2. Explore the purpose and outcomes of internships.
3. Identify regional and country-specific livelihood patterns.
4. Explore the trends and patterns for unemployed Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni.
5. Explore how factors such as gender, the urban and rural, nationality, place of study and socio-economic status can influence the relationship between education and work and affect the opportunities available to, and challenges faced by young graduates.

## 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 using data gathered from three sources. The first data source is a quantitative survey of Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni from both the secondary school and tertiary institution program who had completed their studies 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 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 Mastercard Foundation Scholar 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”). Pseudonyms are used when quoting these participants. 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.*