

Case Study: Education in Support of Social Transformation—The Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program

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16.1 OVERVIEW OF THE SCHOLARS PROGRAM

The Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program is the largest private scholarship program ever implemented for African youth. The goal of the Program is to develop a cohort of next-generation leaders, who will support social transformation and economic growth, particularly in Africa. The Program targets academically bright youth with leadership potential from socioeconomically disadvantaged communities. Key Program elements include quality secondary or university education; holistic financial, social, and academic supports; training and mentorship that reinforces the core values of transformative leadership and a commitment to improving the lives of others; and participation in a network of like-minded young leaders committed to giving back to society. Over the next 10 years, the Program will reach more than 30,000 talented young people.

This case study will review the Mastercard Foundation’s experience in the first years of the Program, focusing on our approach, early results, and

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learning to date in the areas of recruitment, leadership development, and post-graduation transitions. We will also situate the international components of the Program within the broader context of the Scholars Program, which is primarily of, in, and for Africa.

16.1.1 Program Origins

The Scholars Program was launched in September 2012 and was initially conceived as a 10-year USD 500 million commitment that would reach 15,000 youth. This enrolment target was exceeded early in the Program (2015) as additional implementing partners were brought on board and the Foundation has since decided to continue the Program indefinitely.

A key motivation for the Program was the desire to identify and develop value-driven leaders, capable of driving change in their communities, countries, the continent, and even globally. Early higher education partnerships with Ashesi University in Ghana and EARTH University in Costa Rica—institutions defined by a strong focus on value-based leadership and commitment to service—helped shape this approach. It was also informed by the Foundation’s belief that all young people, no matter their circumstances, are deserving of a high-quality education, as well as the Foundation’s belief in the transformative power of individuals as catalysts for broader change.

Participating organizations have worked together in the first years of the Program to develop and articulate a distinctive understanding of leadership—“transformative leadership”—which the Foundation defines as “the act of engaging others, in an ethical manner, to generate positive and lasting change”. Transformative leaders are creative visionaries who exhibit courage, empathy, resilience, and a desire to contribute to society. Leadership is thus a bridge to social transformation. While the original Program design was intended to direct students to fields of study connected to growth sectors in Africa, in practice, we found Scholars have a diverse range of interests, passions, and life plans. As a result, the Program is agnostic with respect to the field of study and the employment sector that Scholars enter. Within the broad framework of transformative leadership, we challenge Scholars to identify their passion and develop their own vision of and journey toward social change.

The Scholars Program recognizes and draws attention to the need for increased access to quality, relevant secondary and university education in sub-Saharan Africa, where less than half of youth access upper secondary school and far fewer complete this level of education (UNESCO, 2016).

Likewise, at undergraduate levels of education, average enrolment stands at 8% (UNESCO, 2016), far less than other regions globally. Despite its size relative to most other scholarship programs, the Program is clearly not a scalable response to systemic issues of access. However, by recruiting and supporting promising youth from socioeconomically disadvantaged communities, the Scholars Program intends not just to provide opportunities to the scholarship recipients but to change education trajectories within their families and communities.

The Program and its accompanying evaluation and research agenda aim to contribute evidence around good policies and practices to the broader field and to support engagement with institutional and education systems leaders with a view to propagating these policies and practices in other contexts.

16.1.2 *Program Design*

The Program is implemented in four, interlinked components:

- **Recruit** talented young people from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, who share a deep personal commitment to improving the lives of others (the “Scholars”).
- **Educate** Scholars, supporting them through high-quality academic and transformative leadership training that equips them to succeed in their future endeavors and to give back to their families, economies, and societies.
- **Prepare** Scholars for the next phase of their lives by connecting them with networks, resources, and opportunities, including industry mentorship, career counseling, internships, and community service.
- **Transition** Scholars to further education, entrepreneurship, and/or employment as they become transformative leaders.

The Foundation decided to implement the Program through a network of partner organizations rather than a single implementing organization. This allows the Program to leverage the unique strengths of each partner and gives partners autonomy to innovate and adapt within the framework of the Program while contributing their experience to the broader partnership. The partner network currently comprises 28 partners¹, including North American, European, and African universities, as well as NGO partners. Partners are responsible for recruiting Scholars and supporting them through

the Program. University partners host Scholars from across Africa (plus Latin America and the Middle East, in the case of two partners) as traditional degree students, who enroll in mainstream courses of study and who receive additional services (e.g., leadership development and mentorship) through the university and through centralized, Scholars Program-wide platforms and events. At the secondary education level, NGO partners work with networks of local secondary schools in a specific country, and these schools deliver most services directly to Scholars. The NGO partners assist in administering the Program and in delivering select components, such as annual leadership development events. Partners at both the tertiary and secondary education levels convene regularly through working groups on key Program-related themes (e.g., recruitment, Scholar well-being, internships, and school-to-work transitions) and through annual meetings. The robust partner network has become a distinctive feature of the Program.

16.1.3 Cohort Overview

Of the roughly 19,000 Scholars enrolled in the Program as of mid-2016, 10% were undertaking university studies (9% undergraduate and 1% graduate), with the remaining Scholars studying at the secondary education level. Since the Program's inception in 2012, the yearly intake of first-year university Scholars has grown from under 100 to more than 750 (for the 2015–2016 cohort), with graduate students comprising a growing share of first-year Scholars (from 3% in 2012 to 18% in 2015). The gender distribution of Scholars (depicted in Figure 16.1) reflects the Program's special focus on providing girls and young women access to high-quality educational opportunities (The Mastercard Foundation, 2016).

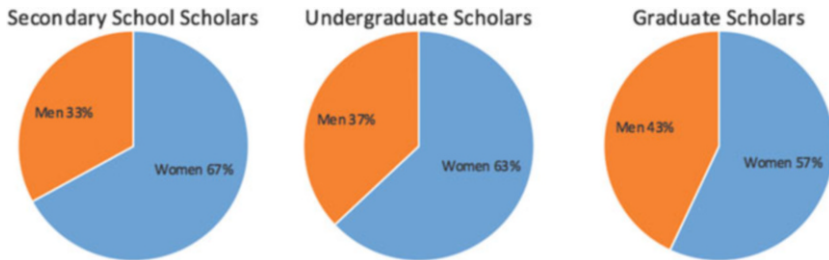


Fig. 16.1 Gender of Mastercard Foundation Scholars (mid-2016)

In 2016, roughly 57% of university Scholars were studying outside of Africa, and 15% had enrolled at an African university outside their country of origin.

By the end of 2016, a total of 5000 Scholars will have graduated, and at projected enrolment levels, we anticipate that 10,600 Scholars will have completed university by 2025. About 80% of these will have earned undergraduate degrees, and 20% will have graduated from master's programs. The proportion of Scholars studying overseas (i.e., in North America, Europe, and Latin America) will drop substantially over time, as African host universities—many of which have joined the Program recently—ramp up enrolment of cohorts that, in some cases, are much larger than those of their overseas counterparts. Scholarships outside of Africa now represent just 5% of the total number of scholarships currently committed under the Program. As the Scholars Program evolves, the composition of the overseas cohort is also likely to change, with a greater proportion of master's level Scholars studying abroad. This reflects a conscious shift in the Program's strategy, resulting from four factors: (a) the addition of African partner institutions that can provide high-quality, locally contextualized undergraduate education to large numbers of Scholars; (b) retaining talent and give back efforts in Africa; (c) a desire to improve the cost efficiency of the Program as a whole; and (d) evidence outside the Program—including from the Foundation-supported African Alumni Project (Marsh et al. 2016)—suggesting that African students who undertake graduate studies abroad are more likely to return to the continent than those who study at the undergraduate level.

However, not all international education takes place outside of Africa. We anticipate that the number of Scholars studying in African countries other than their home country will increase in the coming years, as partner institutions develop relationships that facilitate “upward” recruitment from the pipeline of youth who have completed secondary or undergraduate studies under the Scholars Program. We have also begun to add partnerships between North American and African universities to the Program. These will provide Africa-based undergraduate Scholars with brief study-abroad opportunities, exposure to visiting experts and peers, and satellite campus experiences.

16.1.4 Learning

When the Scholars Program was launched in 2012, the Mastercard Foundation had begun to integrate evaluation and learning within its programs through “learning partnerships”, which are intentionally designed structures and processes that accompany a program throughout its lifecycle to help the Foundation and its partners leverage learning opportunities. Learning partnerships are intended to promote program quality improvement, to optimize strategic learning within and beyond the program partnership, and to amplify program impact through dissemination and stakeholder engagement.

The Foundation commissioned Mathematica Policy Research to facilitate the Scholars Program learning partnership. Mathematica helped create a monitoring, evaluation, and learning framework for the Program that includes a theory of change and a set of learning questions developed with input from Scholars Program partner organizations. These questions focused on how the Program was being implemented; its impact on Scholars’ education, employment, and social “give-back” outcomes; and the extent to which the Program catalyzed broader change in the policies and practices of implementing partners. Since 2012, Mathematica has launched a rigorous impact evaluation of the Program; created learning briefs on recruitment, transformative leadership, and post-Program transitions; and studied the post-graduation pathways of the first two cohorts of graduates. Foundation-led activities under the learning partnership umbrella have included an annual convening of the presidents of our partner organizations and implementing staff to reflect on Program results and learning; working groups of partners that gather around core themes such as transformative leadership, transitions, and Scholar well-being; third-party research commissioned on various topics to inform programming such as Women’s Transformative Leadership in Africa (The Mastercard Foundation, 2014); partner-led research on areas of particular importance, including collaborative research on past African alumni of several university partners (Marsh et al. 2016); and commissioning mid-term evaluations of the Program at several partners, which have informed planning for second-phase grants.

16.2 CHALLENGES AND RESPONSES

16.2.1 *Recruitment*

The Scholars Program focus on serving a specific population—academically talented but socioeconomically disadvantaged youth with leadership potential and a commitment to giving back to society—poses challenges for partners (many of whom have not previously targeted this population) and for would-be Scholars (most of whom face daunting obstacles to accessing higher education). These challenges are particularly acute in the context of the elite North American and European Program partners, whose recruitment efforts have historically not been designed to meet the needs of youth from rural and poor communities in Africa. That said, early data indicate that the Program is successfully recruiting from the target demographic. Specifically, most university Scholars had scored in the top 10% of their secondary school class (78% and 66% in the 2013–2014 and 2014–2015 cohorts, respectively). Most Scholars also reported not having had an electric or gas stove at home—a strong indicator of poverty. At least two-thirds of Scholars had held a leadership position in an organized secondary school activity, and nearly all Scholars had participated in a community service or volunteer activity in secondary school. Once at university, Scholars as a group have been performing well academically and socially, and partners report very high levels of satisfaction with the quality of their cohorts.

Getting to this point required flexibility and adaptive management on the part of the Foundation and its university partners. At the Program's inception, partners outside of Africa were accustomed to recruiting from international schools and from other high-ranking schools in large urban centers. Reaching out to identify less advantaged students—and to verify their eligibility for the Program—required innovation and investment. Early in the Program, the Foundation had asked partners to define economic disadvantage in terms of household income falling within the bottom two quintiles of income distribution in a given country. This definition proved too rigid, difficult to measure, and impractical for partners to operationalize across countries. The Program later adopted a flexible and multifaceted definition of disadvantage, identified by a variety of markers in addition to household income, such as dwelling type and location, parental mortality, parental education level, family size, disability, and whether a student lives in

a conflict-affected area or is a migrant or refugee due to conflict or natural disaster.

In addition, many university partners have expanded their recruitment efforts to better meet the goals of the Program. In 2015, North American partners reported visiting more than 25 African countries to recruit for the Program, highlighting their commitment to creating pan-African cohorts. In contrast, African partners are split in their efforts to recruit outside of their home nations. While several partners do not tend to recruit outside of their countries (because most of their Program slots are explicitly reserved for country nationals), other partners report having expanded their recruiting efforts to additional African countries. The Scholars Program has facilitated these efforts by introducing university partners to headmasters at high-quality secondary schools outside of capital city regions and by encouraging university partners to recruit secondary-level Scholar alumni.

The Program has also grappled with a central tension between the core recruitment criteria, in that high levels of socioeconomic disadvantage can be associated with low levels of access to high-quality education, lower academic achievement, and fewer opportunities to express leadership and “give back” traits through “traditional” means (e.g., starting ventures, assuming leadership positions, and undertaking structured philanthropy). While conducting outreach in poor, rural regions and adopting a flexible selection rubric have helped to identify candidates who satisfy all Program criteria, the Program does not address systemic issues of access at scale, nor does it address the needs of those whose lack of access to quality primary education leaves them unable to access further education.

During recruitment and selection, the question of whether a candidate applying to a school overseas intends to return to Africa is usually approached not in isolation but through the broader question of how the would-be Scholar intends to contribute to society (“give-back”, in the Program’s parlance). In the words of one partner: “They need to want to make a difference in the world, and want to return home . . . once they pass the academic and socioeconomic hurdles, we’re looking for a change they hope to create back home, or that they’re already creating”.

16.2.2 Post-graduation Transitions

Transitions are lifelong. The vision of the Scholars Program—leaders contributing to social and economic change—will be realized over time, as students take up careers and begin to give back to their communities and

societies. The Program's focus is on empowering Scholars with the information, skills, and networks they require to complete their schooling and successfully transition to further education, jobs, or entrepreneurship. Our experience during early implementation has pointed to some challenges in this respect, and the Program partnership is developing new strategies in response.

All Scholars receive some level of transition support, delivered primarily by Program partners and implementers within a university or secondary school setting. These services include career guidance and academic advisory services, internships, mentorship, community service projects, and connecting Scholars with networks. Through the Program, North American and African partner universities have expanded resources devoted to helping students find internships and jobs on the continent. In addition, a subset of Scholars receives bespoke internship, job-matching, and placement services through Africa Careers Network (ACN). ACN is implemented by African Leadership Academy (ALA) in South Africa and was initially established to enable return to the continent for Scholars studying outside of Africa (both Mastercard Foundation Scholars and ALA graduates studying at North American universities). Over time, demand from within the partner network for ACN support has grown. The Foundation is exploring ways to modify ACN's approach to matching Scholars with employment opportunities to an approach which is less resource-intensive, but has greater reach and potential for scale on the continent.

The Foundation has also recently supported the development of an online community for tertiary Scholars and secondary education graduates, called Baobab. The platform, developed in partnership with Arizona State University, provides robust resources for Scholars to enhance their peer and professional networks and to learn about opportunities for employment, scholarships, internships, fellowships, and a variety of other resources to enable Scholar transitions. Networking is critical in helping to prepare Scholars for internships and employment and fosters opportunities for volunteering, career advancement, and lifelong learning. All Scholars require more intentional opportunities to interact with role models and mentors in their prospective fields and to practice career networking. The Baobab platform is beginning to meet this need, and the Foundation is in the process of developing additional programming to complement partner efforts in this respect.

While the Scholars Program is in the early stages, survey results from the first cohorts of alumni (2014 and 2015) are showing promising results in terms of successful onward transitions. Data from the first cohort of secondary school alumni, for instance, show that 85% are pursuing higher education: a figure that far exceeds national averages in the countries where the majority of Scholars are concentrated. Most secondary school alumni are pursuing further studies in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields. This is occurring at equal rates by men and women, suggesting that the Program is helping young women to overcome barriers in the sciences, mathematics, and computing.

Of current tertiary graduates surveyed, 56% are employed and 56% are continuing their education (this includes a small percentage that are both working and studying). Eighty-one percent found employment within two months or less after completing their studies. Just over half of these alumni are satisfied with their current jobs. Alumni report feeling empowered by their participation in the Program and are using their skills and knowledge to solve urgent problems in their home countries. Nearly all say that the Program prepared them to reach their educational (94%) and professional (89%) goals and 84% say it helped them to become effective leaders.

The way that the Foundation and its partners understand and express the theme of the Scholar's post-graduation return to Africa has undergone a subtle but important shift over the first few years of the Program. Initially, the concepts of "go-back and give-back" were tightly bound, with the former understood as a necessary precondition for the latter. Feedback from Scholars and partners, as well as external consultations and evidence, has led the Program to adopt a more nuanced approach. The Program focuses on motivating and equipping Scholars to return by widening and guiding their career paths, maintaining and strengthening their connections to Africa, and nurturing their desire and commitment to give back. This evolution recognizes that most Scholars want to return to the continent to live and work. It also reflects the substantial contributions to the continent of Africans living abroad, both professionally and in a personal capacity. Research with African alumni of North American higher education has further shown that many are globally mobile, moving back and forth between Africa and other regions, suggesting that a binary concept of returning or staying abroad is often no longer universally applicable (Marsh et al. 2016).

To date, a majority of tertiary Scholar alumni have returned, or intend to return, to Africa: almost half (47%) of tertiary Scholars from the first two

cohorts studying abroad returned home soon after graduation. The majority of those remaining abroad expect to return to Africa within 5 years. While these data are based on a small sample and further research is required to understand future trends, it appears that the Program's flexible definition and timeline for return to Africa, its focus on Scholar choice, and support to Scholars applying for internships and jobs on the continent are correlated with high intent-to-return rates.

Though most Scholars are transitioning successfully, many report gaps in school-to-work transition support. Lacking familiarity with the local job market was a recurring theme in alumni remarks about their transition experience. Tertiary Scholars require more country-specific information about the job market, including growth sectors and information about small, medium, and large enterprises. This is particularly true for Scholars studying outside of Africa, whose personal and professional networks may be less developed and for whom knowledge of the job market is less readily available. These Scholars could also benefit from expanded, personalized, Africa-focused career counseling and mentoring. Although most university partners provide Scholars with some form of entrepreneurship skill building, the content and quality vary significantly across the partner network. Scholars pursuing entrepreneurship pathways would benefit from improved quality and consistency in the delivery of entrepreneurial skills and linkages to financing and early-stage capital sources. Other Scholars are concerned about employment prospects in their home countries or face pressure from families to take up work opportunities in North America. Finally, some Scholars originate from conflict-affected countries or refugee communities and are concerned about returning home.

16.3 CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMMING AND RESEARCH

During the first 5 years of the Program, the focus has been on building its foundations: creating appropriate criteria and processes for recruiting and selecting Scholars and partners, strengthening the partner network, and establishing a suite of support services for Scholars as they make extraordinary transitions at the academic, social, cultural, and professional levels. Program development efforts will now take on new challenges, some of which are outlined below.

The Foundation and its partners will recruit more Scholars from among groups still not represented in large numbers in the Program, including students with disabilities and students from underrepresented countries (including those in Francophone West Africa). More generally, the Foundation will develop further partnerships with leading African universities to strengthen the partner network in Africa and offer more opportunities for Scholars to study at quality institutions on the continent. A broader involvement of African universities will support more Scholars to study at the undergraduate level in Africa and allow international scholarships to be focused largely at the graduate level. In addition to recruiting additional African partners, the Program will seek new partnerships between North American, European, and African institutions through faculty and Scholar exchanges, joint programming, online courses, and conferences. The Program's international partnerships will also provide technical support to strengthen institutional capacity at African universities.

We also aim to develop additional transformative leadership content, resources, and curricula. Additional leadership courses with an explicit gender focus will be developed on the Baobab platform. Scholars will be provided with more opportunities to model transformative leadership (through group mentoring via the Baobab platform and with the support of teacher-mentors at secondary schools) and additional possibilities for practicing transformative leadership through service learning projects, leadership positions in school activities, and other efforts. We will connect our work on transformative leaders with the efforts of other individuals and organizations within and beyond Africa to advance transformative leadership across the continent.

To do more to help Scholars position themselves for success after the Program, the Foundation will continue to work with partners and Scholars to expand and enhance the Scholars' community. We will continue to evolve and grow the Baobab platform and will scale up existing efforts to bring university Scholars together in person. An alumni strategy will be developed that capitalizes on partner efforts to keep Scholars engaged post-graduation. We will work to expand internship opportunities for Scholars in Africa. To further support the large numbers of Scholars who will be graduating in coming years, the Foundation will focus on assisting secondary education Scholars in their pursuit of university and/or vocational studies and will provide short-term post-graduation bridge programming, focused on soft-skills development, digital literacy, and entrepreneurship training. For university Scholars, the Foundation will connect Scholars to

industry mentors and networks of employers and businesses in top fields of interest such as engineering, ICT, health, business, agriculture, and creative industries. We will strengthen demand for Scholars by building “talent pipelines” between Scholars and employers interested in attracting ethical young leaders. The Foundation will also explore opportunities to pilot and scale up education finance products and services that help students meet the costs of higher education.

Finally, the Foundation will continue to invest in its learning partnership, integrating further research and evaluation aimed at improving the Program, assessing its impact, and identifying and leveraging the strengths of its partners. Increasingly, these efforts will engage Scholars and implementing partners as active participants at key points in the learning cycle. As Scholars begin to graduate in large numbers, the focus of our impact evaluation efforts will shift from showing the effect of the Program on Scholars’ short-term outcomes (e.g., enrolment, graduation, and employment) toward revealing the impact that the Scholars are having on their world. We are developing a rich agenda of longitudinal research that will track Scholars with a view to understanding their journeys as drivers of social change and economic growth. This research will benefit both from our prospective approach, including a rich set of baseline data, and from the considerable size of the overall Scholar cohort and sub-cohorts concentrated in specific countries and fields of work. The early planning and embedding of these measures should enable us to draw more robust conclusions than can usually be derived from tracking studies, particularly when combined with the triangulation of our findings with national data on employment and economic activity.

Analyzing the experiences and outcomes of female Scholars—and of Scholars who are active in key economic and social sectors (e.g., agriculture and STEM fields)—will be central to this research effort. Understanding the employment pathways, challenges, and success strategies of highly qualified and motivated secondary and university graduates in Africa will provide evidence that will be of great interest to policymakers in Africa’s growing economies.

As our Scholars grow and change on their way to becoming leaders, so does the Program itself. The Scholars Program case study demonstrates how a donor and its partners have engaged in real time with many of the issues discussed in this volume. The Program continues to adapt and grow in response to evidence (including feedback from Scholars), debate, and reflection at the level of strategy (e.g., the role of international education in

the context of an Africa-focused initiative), the level of implementation (e.g., the ways in which services such as recruitment and leadership training are delivered), and the meta-level (e.g., how we learn about the Program and weave learning back into the Program). We look forward to continuing to share this story—and the stories of our Scholars—in the years to come.

NOTE

1. Current partners include **North American universities:** Arizona State University, Duke University, McGill University, Michigan State University, Queen's University, Stanford University, the University of British Columbia, the University of California (Berkeley), the University of Toronto, and Wellesley College; **European universities:** Sciences Po and the University of Edinburgh; **African universities:** the African Institute for Mathematical Sciences, African Leadership Academy, Ashesi University, Carnegie Mellon University (Rwanda), Gondar University, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Makerere University, the University of Abomey-Calavi, the University of Cape Town, and the University of Pretoria; **Other universities:** American University of Beirut, EARTH University; and **NGO partners:** Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee, Campaign for Female Education, Equity Group Foundation, and Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE).

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