



In partnership with



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SCHOLAR ALUMNI IDENTITIES AND AFRICAN REALITIES

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 Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni demographics, identities and self-descriptions, in relation to the broader socio-political realities of the African context. The findings are based on qualitative interviews of 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

Educational attainment rates were far higher among tertiary Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni in *The Imprint of Education* study cohort than those in Africa in general.

18 percent of secondary school Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni had post-secondary school qualifications.

57 percent of tertiary Alumni had post-graduate qualifications.

57 percent of tertiary Alumni reported "being African" as their most important identity compared with **29 percent of secondary school Alumni**.

Gender was considered a more important marker of identity by **secondary school Alumni (23 percent)** than **tertiary Alumni (11 percent)**.

Most of the **secondary school and tertiary Alumni (77 percent and 83 percent respectively)** indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic had negatively affected their mental health.

In 2022, **27 percent of those interviewed** said they were "game changers", which was the most popular self-description among the respondents and which rose from 2020 to 2022.

ALUMNI IDENTITIES AND AFRICAN REALITIES

The data produced by *The Imprint of Education (TIE)* study can only be adequately understood if they are placed in the context of Africa's broader socio-political realities, including in relation to poverty levels; gender inequalities; youth unemployment; educational attainment rates and the prevalence of conflicts

and migration across the African continent. Such framing can provide a clearer view of the nuanced challenges faced by the young graduates and school leavers who participated in this study and address the obstacles they face to develop agency and reach their goals.

THE AFRICAN CONTEXT

The poverty levels (the percentage of the population living below the national poverty line) in the six African countries where most of the Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni in *The Imprint of Education* were recruited varied from 20 percent in Uganda to 56 percent in South Africa.¹ Conflicts along national and ethnic lines influence political and socio-economic life in many parts of Africa, including in the countries from which the respondents to the TIE study were drawn. In addition, marginalisation due to gender, sexuality and disability represents a key challenge to peace and development in Africa. Meanwhile, migration and displacement are increasingly common on the continent.

Young people aged 15-35 comprise close to two-thirds of the working-age population in Africa², compared with under a quarter of the working-age population globally, which has led the Continent to have what is known as a “youth bulge.” This bulge has increased competition for limited job opportunities in the labour market³ but offers the potential for a demographic dividend⁴ should skilled young people secure work and realise their full potential.

Although access to education has significantly increased across the continent in recent years, completion rates in the secondary and tertiary sectors have remained low.

DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE STUDY'S PARTICIPANTS

All participants in the study are secondary school or tertiary Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni.

1000

secondary school Alumni participated in the ATS and were recruited from Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Rwanda and Uganda

544

tertiary Alumni participated and were recruited for the ATS based on whether they studied in Ethiopia, Ghana, Rwanda, South Africa, Uganda and “the Diaspora” (off the African Continent)

117

tertiary Alumni were recruited for qualitative interviews from Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Rwanda, South Africa, Uganda and “the Diaspora”

In keeping with the Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program aim of focusing on the trajectories of women and girls, 69 percent of the secondary school Alumni participating in the study were female; 52 percent of the tertiary Alumni in the ATS and 55 percent of tertiary Alumni in the qualitative sample were female.

Although 21 percent of Africans have been identified as refugees or asylum seekers⁵, only 2 percent of secondary school Alumni and 3 percent of tertiary Alumni in the ATS study identified as such. Similarly, the proportion of Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni with disabilities across all the samples is

1 World Bank (2020). World Development Indicators. Retrieved from: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.NAHC> . Most recent figures for each country.

2 World Data Lab (2024) Africa Youth Employment Clock. Retrieved from <https://africayouthjobs.io/>

3 International Labour Organization. (2020). Global employment trends for youth 2020: Technology and the future of jobs. https://www.ilo.org/global/publications/books/WCMS_737648/lang--en/index.htm

4 The growth in an economy that is the result of a change in the age structure of a country's population

5 Adepoju, A. (n.d.). Migration dynamics, refugees and internally displaced persons in Africa. United Nations. <https://www.un.org/en/academic-impact/migration-dynamics-refugees-and-internally-displaced-persons-africa>

lower than the national averages of countries in this study and the continental average. In both cases, this may be because of the structural barriers that refugees and people with disabilities face in accessing education, especially at the tertiary level. In 2019 the Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program set intentional recruitment targets for refugees (25%) and youth with disabilities (10%).

A number of indicators were used to explore the socio-economic status of respondents to the ATS.

One was the size of the households in which they were living, given that larger households require more resources to be maintained. Only 5 percent of the secondary school Alumni were living on their own, compared with 20 percent of the tertiary Alumni. Their responsibilities in terms of how many people they were supporting increased between 2020 and 2022. In relation to experiences of hunger, more secondary school Alumni than tertiary Alumni reported meals being missed in their households (Figure 1).

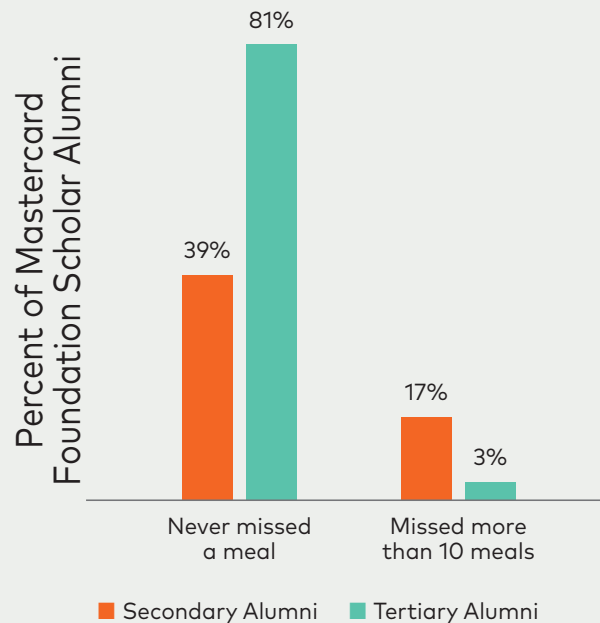


Figure 1: Number of times people in the household missed a meal in the previous year (secondary school Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni N = 8650; tertiary Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni N = 839)

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

Understandably, tertiary Alumni were more likely to earn an income than secondary school Alumni. Likewise, relatively few tertiary Alumni were unemployed (5-6 percent), compared with 14 percent of secondary school Alumni.

In 2022, 82 percent of secondary school Mastercard Foundation Alumni said their high-school graduation certificate was their main qualification. Meanwhile, 57 percent of tertiary Alumni reported having completed their post-graduate education, with

48 percent of them reporting they had obtained a Master's degree. These rates are far higher than statistics for Africa as a whole, where no country can boast a tertiary completion rate higher than 10 percent⁶. Almost all secondary school and tertiary Alumni saw themselves as academically talented. The tertiary Alumni noted the importance of having increased social status as graduates. As Godfrey from Uganda said:

“Without the degree I’m having, I wouldn’t be the person I am, let alone the impact that you are able to provide, the kind of leadership that you provide others.”

⁶ Barro, R & Lee, J. (2015). Barro-Lee Estimates of Educational Attainment for the Population Aged 15-64 from 1950 to 2015. Retrieved from: <http://www.barrolee.com/>

ALUMNI IDENTITIES AND CHALLENGES

In 2022, a total of 57 percent of tertiary Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni reported “being African” as their main identity compared with 29 percent of secondary school Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni (Figure 2).

Gender was considered a more important marker of identity by secondary school Alumni (23 percent) than tertiary Alumni (11 percent). With regard to

discrimination based on sex, all the female tertiary Alumni who were interviewed said they had encountered sexual harassment in their education spaces, workplaces or communities.

In considering the range of identities, race was mainly raised as an issue by tertiary Alumni living in “the Diaspora” or South Africa. Stories of violence against Black people had led to some being fearful of attacks. In addition, in 2022, a few tertiary Alumni in Kenya and Ethiopia said that the issue of ethnicity had affected their lives.

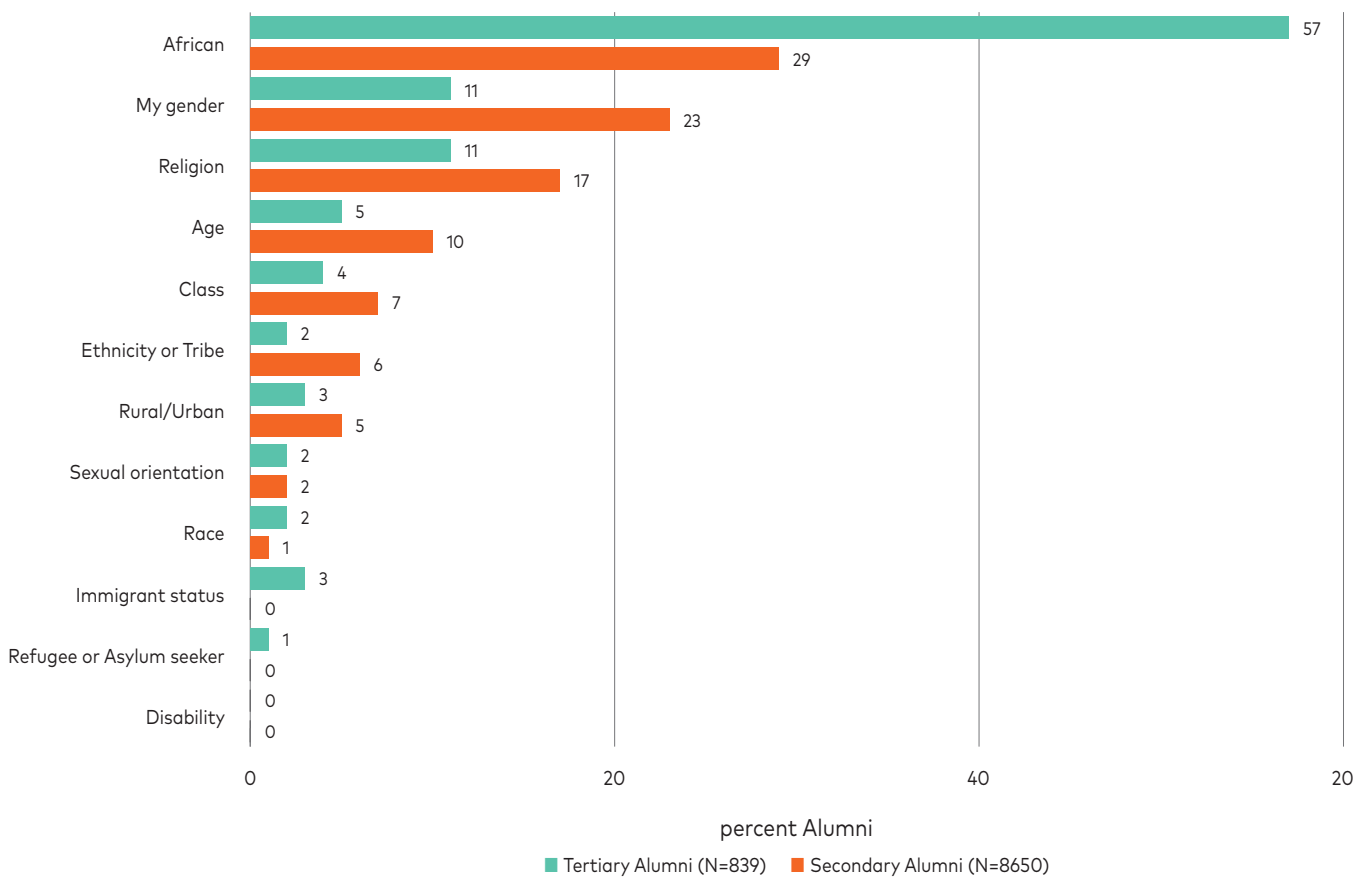


Figure 2: Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni views of their most important identity descriptor (percent Alumni)
Source: 2022 data from the ATS

During the three years of the study so far, Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni have reported navigating a variety of notable life events, including the death of loved ones; health problems; marriages; divorces and separation; having children; new employment; incidents of abuse; and experiences of conflict and migration. In particular, the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdown measures had a major negative

impact in 2020. Most of the secondary school and tertiary Alumni (77 percent and 83 percent, respectively) indicated that the outbreak had negatively affected their mental health. A number said that their Christian faith had provided a resource during the pandemic, even when it was impossible for them to attend physical meetings of their faith communities.

AGENCY AND ASPIRATION – HOW THE MASTERCARD FOUNDATION SCHOLAR ALUMNI SAW THEMSELVES

TYPOLOGIES OF ACTION AND AMBITION



Over the first three years of the study, the tertiary Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni who were

interviewed were asked to choose from among eight ways of describing themselves (Figure 3).

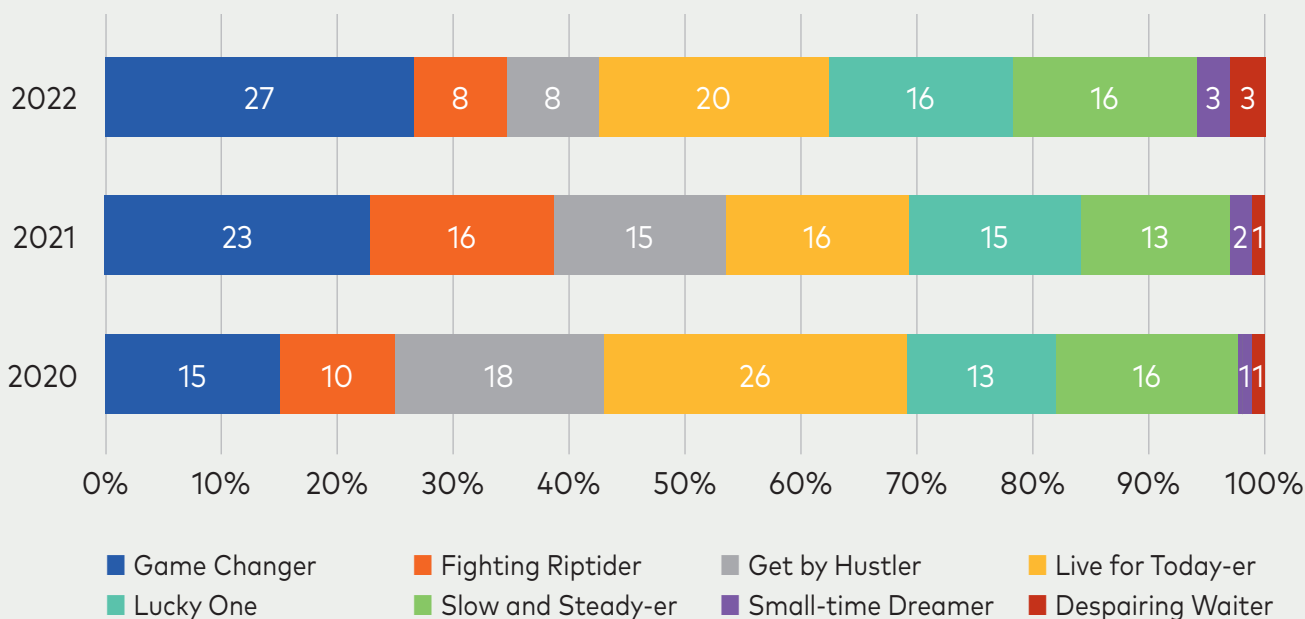


Figure 3: Self-identified typologies of Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni's present selves (2020 n = 97; 2021 n = 94; 2022 n = 84) Source: Alumni Bios, 2020-2022

In 2020, 26 percent of these tertiary Alumni identified themselves as "live for today-ers". In 2021, 23 percent of Alumni called themselves "game changers". In 2022, 27 percent of them described themselves as "game changers", which was the most popular self-description over the three years. In general, it was

found that many female tertiary Alumni saw themselves as having significant agency and high aspirations, identifying themselves as "game changers".

The wide range of labels they chose indicates a range of views about their own levels of action

and ambition. It is also noteworthy that the self-identification in relation to action and ambition was not static and changed over the years. As one respondent from Kenya said:

[In] 2020, I was a game changer and get-by hustler... I would say I am still a game changer, but then I am facing a lot of obstacles – so, game changer plus fighting riptider.

Regardless of their employment status, some of the tertiary Alumni identified themselves as “living for today”, indicating a shared perspective of the need to live in the moment – which may, in part, represent a response to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, employed tertiary Alumni were more likely than their peers who were not in paid work to identify with high-agency typologies such as “game changer” and “get-by hustler”.

Understandably, this suggests that employment provides additional resources for individuals, enabling

them to navigate their environments more actively and confidently.

A total of 31 percent of tertiary Alumni who had finished their degrees more than five years previously described themselves as “game changers” in 2022. Meanwhile, only 22 percent of those who were less than five years out of their undergraduate degree saw themselves in this way.

The “live for today” typology that many identified is indicative of relatively low aspirations – the prioritisation of immediate concerns over future planning. Such an approach may be seen as a pragmatic response to the challenges many young people face in the Global South and the limited resources at their disposal.

Only a small number identified themselves as “despairing waiters” and those who are “slow and steady”. However small this number may be, it does show the need to prepare young graduates for such a state of being and to offer help to address and overcome it.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

In relation to demographics, the Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni participating in the study differed from the general demographics of the African continent, mainly in terms of their greater educational access and higher levels of educational attainment. This, in turn, led to higher socio-economic status and higher employment rates among them.

Over the first three years of the study, they faced a combination of structural barriers and personal challenges, including problems exacerbated by COVID-19 related restrictions.

When invited to consider their own identities in greater depth in 2022, those participating in the ATS ranked “being African” as their primary identity while viewing their identities as being shaped by gender, religion and age.

The number of both male and female tertiary Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni who identified themselves as “game changers” grew significantly from 2020 to 2022. In this regard, those employed, in particular, tended to identify themselves as having high levels of agency and aspiration.

DIGGING DEEPER FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Further research is needed to:

1. Explore how factors such as cultural norms, societal expectations and economic conditions interact with structural barriers to shape the strategies adopted by African youth and the resources available to them as they seek to navigate their environments.
2. Understand the differential impacts of policies and interventions on particular groups, such as women, people with disabilities and ethnic minorities, so that the needs and challenges faced by marginalised and vulnerable youth populations may be addressed more effectively.
3. Continuously update the typologies deployed by the study based on iterative feedback from the tertiary Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni and extend the investigation to those in the ATS so that these typologies remain relevant and become a useful tool for helping Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni navigate post-transition pathways.

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. The study used data 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. 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.