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DETERMINATION, DISTRACTION, FRIENDS, FAMILY AND FAITH BUT NOT ENOUGH HELP-SEEKING

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 summarises the findings on the networks that Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni use to cultivate their wellbeing. 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

In 2022, **39 percent of interviewed tertiary Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni** said that their own "vision/determination/mindset" was the primary factor contributing to their ability to improve their lives.

More tertiary (41 percent) than secondary school (23 percent) Alumni emphasised the importance of connections in shaping their prospects of improving their economic circumstances.

More than **90 percent of the secondary school Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni and over 60 percent of tertiary Alumni** made use of the career guidance, mentorship, leadership training and counselling services offered as part of the Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program.

In 2020, **tertiary Alumni expressed their greatest appreciation for four elements of their experience:** leadership training, internship opportunities, give-back activities, and their sense of belonging to the community of Mastercard Foundation Scholars.

In 2020, **18 percent of tertiary Alumni and 23 percent of secondary school Alumni** asked for mental health support/counselling.

NETWORKS FOR WELLBEING

The Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program aims to recruit economically disadvantaged and academically talented young Africans. They are likely to have faced structural and personal challenges, sometimes even traumas in their lives, which can have significant implications for their material and psychosocial well-being. Many also face the stress of being first-generation students transitioning into unfamiliar higher education settings. These

contextual factors were compounded in 2020, due to the global COVID-19 pandemic and associated national lockdowns. Against this background, their efforts to foster their well-being were largely shaped by their capacity to act alone, self-manage and develop agency. Another influencing factor is their capacity to acquire a range of capitals, (for example social, or financial capitals) especially by leveraging family, friendship and institutional networks.

INDIVIDUAL AGENCY

Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni employed several strategies that indicated their ability/capacity to see themselves as agents rather than victims. For example, Ezekiel from Ghana said:

"It's my persevering and not giving up and always figuring out what alternatives are available and what the best ways are ... to allow myself to learn, to be vulnerable, to be open to the changing environment and changing conditions."

In 2022, Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni were asked what advice they would give future Mastercard Foundation Scholars around well-being. Some emphasised the importance of expressing themselves. Others stressed the importance of self-care. Only a relatively few mentioned seeking professional help when they felt overwhelmed.

In general, Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni described their resilience as an innate quality or a virtue derived from their capacity to learn from the difficulties that they faced in their lives. At the same time, not everyone managed to find such internal strength and perseverance, and a number repeatedly mentioned feeling worried, anxious and depressed, and experiencing pressure and stress.

Strategies for managing stress include finding distractions by watching YouTube and television;

enrolling in courses to learn new skills; taking leave from their jobs; playing games; engaging with pets; exercising; meditation; working; reading; avoiding bad news; and surrounding oneself with positive people. Similarly, when some spoke of prayer and faith as an anchor for their wellbeing, they tended to place emphasis on the personal benefits of such engagement.

The prevalence of individualised strategies may be a sign of the challenges they faced accessing professional psychosocial support, as well as the extent of the isolation experienced under national COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020 and 2021.

It is important to mention that the extent and nature of the access to mental health support enjoyed by those in "the Diaspora" were quite different from those offered to their peers in Africa (Figure 1). Among those tertiary Alumni who were interviewed, those based in "the Diaspora" were the most likely to seek and, in their view, be able to access professional psychosocial support.¹

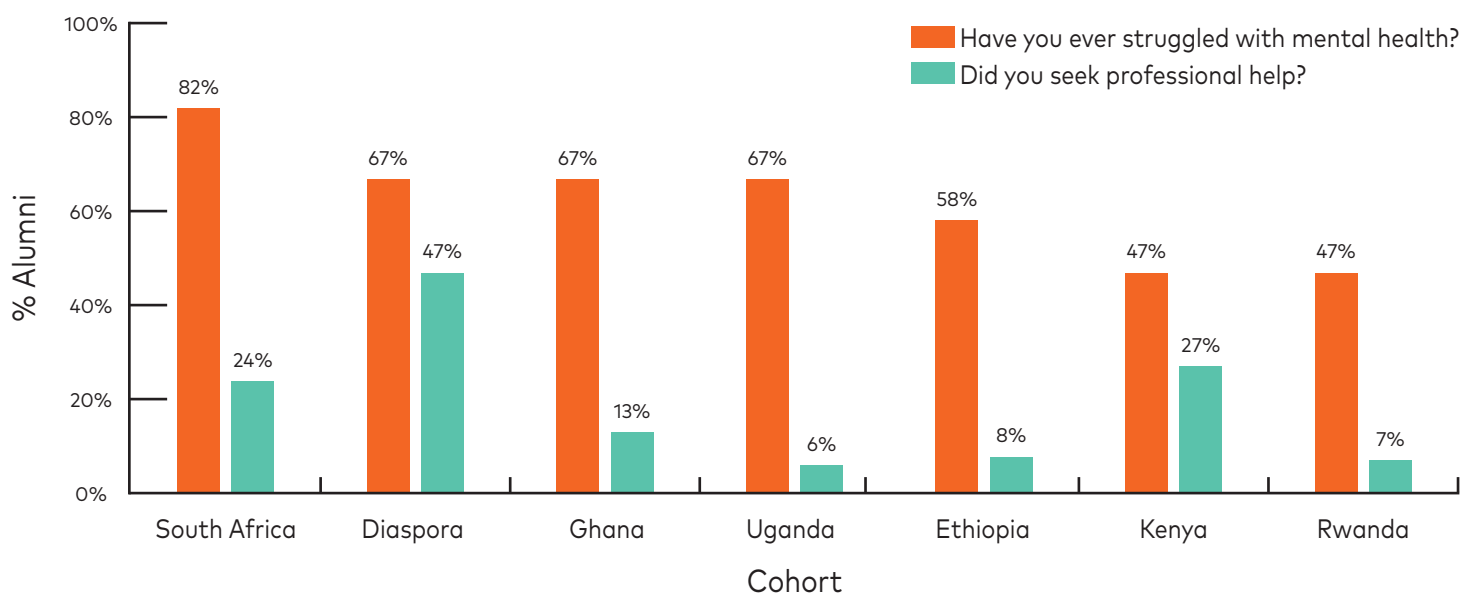


Figure 1: Mentions of mental health challenges and seeking professional help by cohort (percent Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni answered 'yes')

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

¹ The Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni in this study graduated before the introduction of the partnership with Solid Minds to provide Psychosocial Support to Scholars.

FAMILY, FRIENDSHIP AND PEER NETWORKS

Many Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni viewed family networks, including extended ones, as crucial support. At the same time, it was reported that family as a source of care can produce both negative and positive impacts. For example, many felt a keen sense of obligation as breadwinners for their families, which in some cases was experienced as a burden and added to their worries. This may partly explain the overwhelming preference for social networks and friendships as a source of support.

The extensive reliance on friends and peers for psychosocial support may partly be attributed to a lack of access to professional help and/or a broader lack of socio-cultural understanding about the benefits of professional psychosocial support.

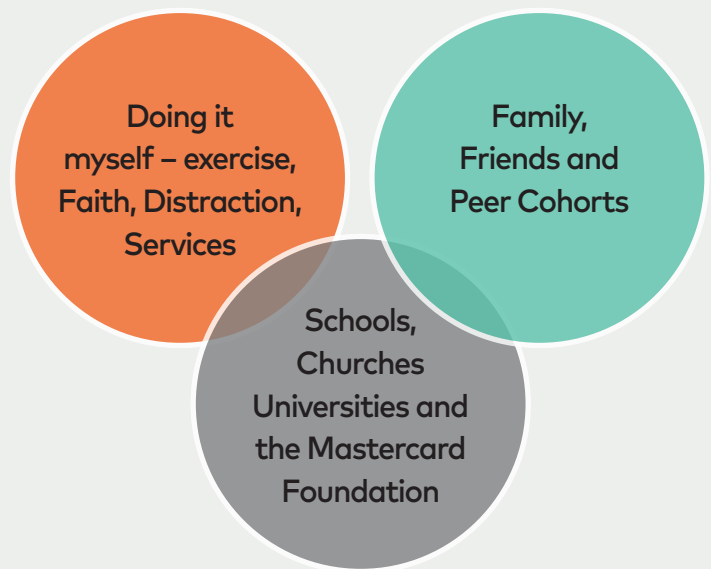


Figure 2: Where Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni go for help

INSTITUTIONAL CARE AND SUPPORT

In 2022, Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni said that the main factor beyond education and money shaping an individual's prospects of improving their economic circumstances was the networks and connections to which they had access. They noted that the institutional support offered by their teachers at primary and secondary schools helped them achieve academic success.

Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni also talked of the support they had received from faith-based institutions, which were described as providing comfort, security, community, and both emotional and material support. In addition, they mentioned accessing care and support through their workplaces.

Referencing the support provided as part of the

Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program, implementing partners interviewed for the study described how they had helped their graduates by providing stipends; medical aid; wellness programmes; counselling; career and personal development planning; mentorship; and academic support. In this regard, such staff noted the importance of asking them the right questions to understand their contexts and offer appropriate support.

A total of at least 90 percent of secondary school Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni and more than 60 percent of tertiary Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni made use of the career guidance, mentorship, leadership training and counselling that was on offer as part of the Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program while they were studying (Table 1).

Table 1: Services and networks used by Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni while studying (green indicates the highest percentage red the lowest) Source: 2020 data from the Alumni Tracer Study (ATS).

Services used by Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni	% Secondary school Alumni (N=8650)	% Tertiary Alumni (N=839)
Career guidance	94	71
Leadership training	94	75
Mentorship	93	70
Counselling	90	60
Give back activities	80	79
Networking opportunities	68	90
Transitions programmes	65	51
Job search skills training (for example preparing a CV)	63	75
Conference travel	59	48
Tutoring	59	51
Being part of a community of Mastercard Foundation Scholars	57	78
Learning Partnership Advisory Group	56	32
Bridging (or on-boarding) programmes	42	38
Using the Baobab Platform	41	66
An internship	35	62
The Scholars' Council	35	33
The Baobab Summit	34	40
Research or project grants	21	46
Africa Careers Network (ACN)	18	56

At some institutions, efforts to provide a safe environment for Mastercard Foundation Scholars included mandatory training for staff and students on racism and sexual harassment and the establishment of systems for reporting unfair treatment. Mentorship was offered to Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni by institutions partnering with the

Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program to help the Mastercard Foundation Scholars adjust to new, unfamiliar university environments and support their professional development. However, some reported failure to receive mentorship despite seeking it, and in some instances, the mentors and mentees were not a good match.

PROFESSIONAL NETWORKS

Support in the form of internships and introductions to career networks was provided to help Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni access employment

opportunities. At the same time, they relied mainly on their own family and friendship networks when looking for work (Figures 3 and 4).

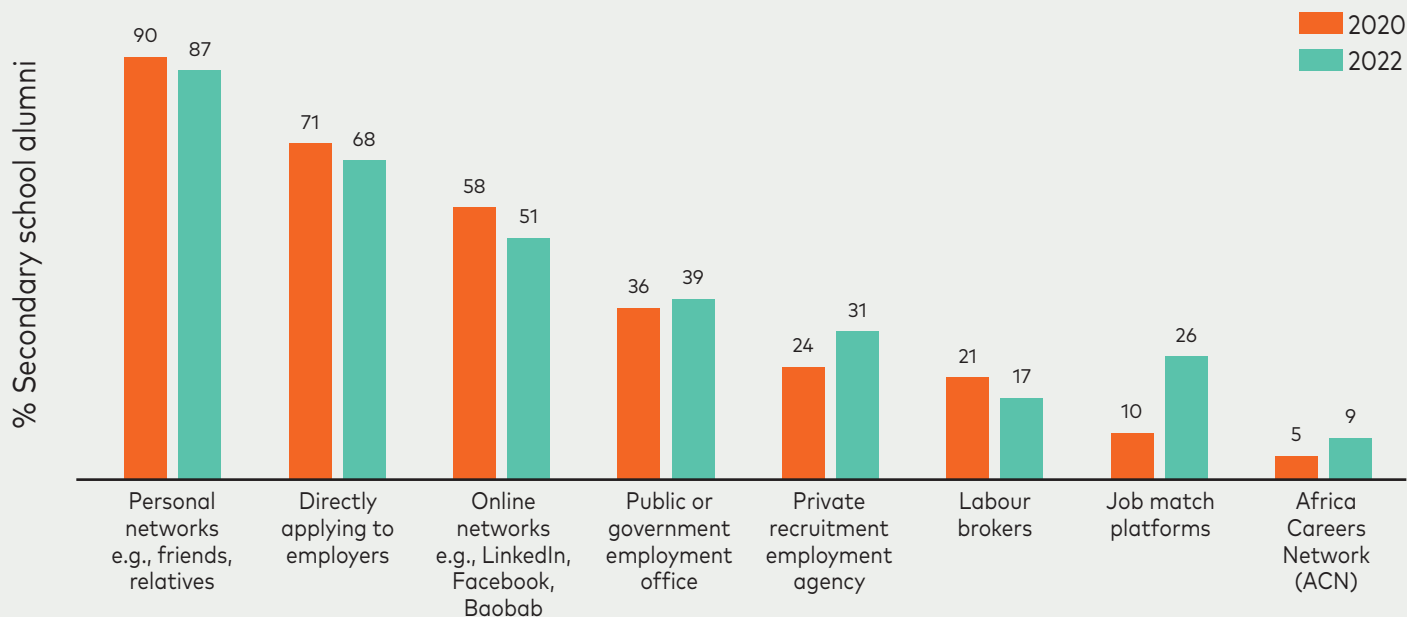


Figure 3: Networks that unemployed secondary school Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni use to look for work (percent Alumni) (2020, n=2362; 2022, n=1552) Source: 2020 and 2022 data from the ATS.

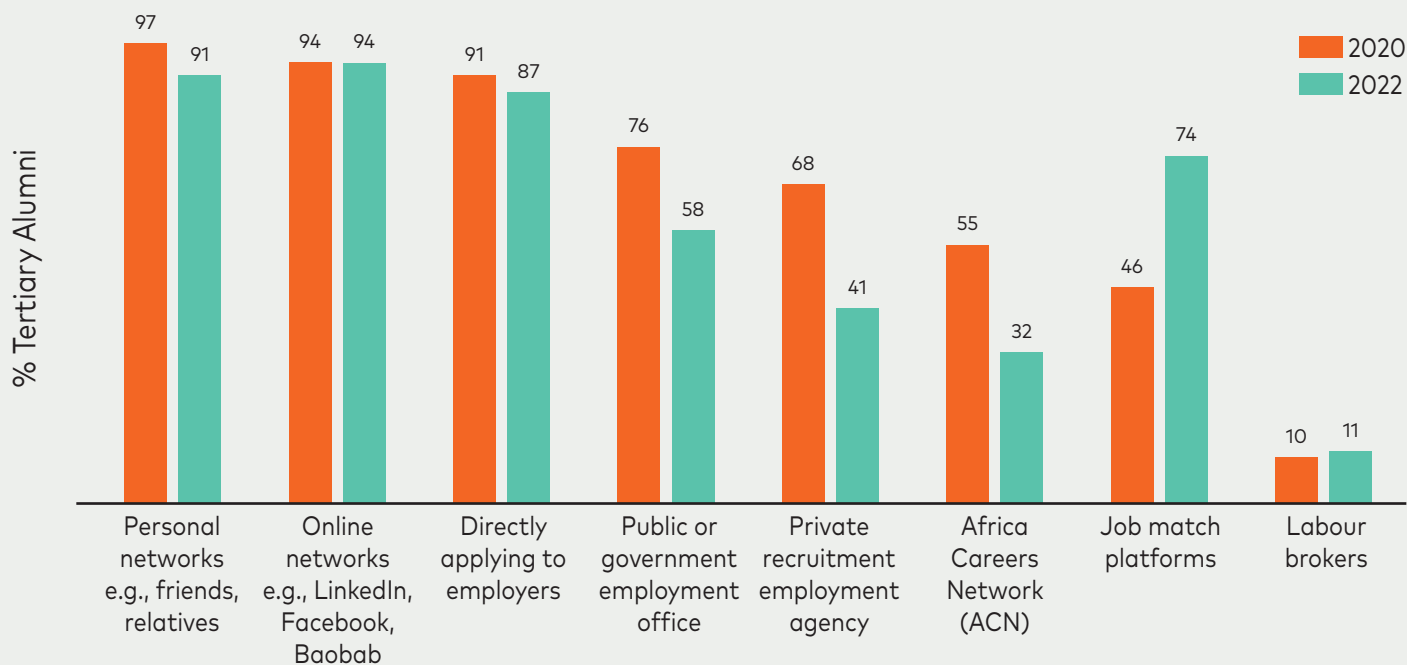


Figure 4: Networks that unemployed tertiary Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni use to look for work (percent Alumni) (2020, n=120; 2022, n=77) Source: 2020 and 2022 data from the ATS.

The support on offer from the Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program was considered to be quite comprehensive by study respondents. However, it was also noted that the provision of support given to help meet the mental, emotional and social needs of their care was not always optimal. Rashad in Uganda described a particularly concerning incident:

“Something happened with the psychosocial [support] that I lost trust in them as a student. A student shared something at school about a relationship that didn’t work out, and then it was communicated and used as an example in one of the sessions for old [Mastercard Foundation] Scholars ... when that happened, I couldn’t really go ahead and disclose stuff.”

Mental health and well-being are critical for Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni to thrive. The importance of normalising the provision of, and access to, mental health care was also emphasised, including in relation to the idea that it is shameful to seek such support, which is quite common among men. More women than men mentioned mental health challenges (37 percent and 20 percent respectively) and sought professional help accordingly (12 percent and 6 percent respectively). The findings suggest that admitting to mental health challenges has been deemed unacceptable, and this is often more pronounced for (young) men. This differentiation by gender may merit exploration in further research.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Individual agency is crucial in determining the benefits Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni may derive from available networks and systems of support. In this regard, extended family networks provided a primary source of support for them. At the same time, friends, especially those made through the Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program, represented a significant source of material, intellectual and psychosocial support. The importance of friendship networks was heightened by the material limits of the support available from family and a lack of access to reliable and trustworthy professional mental health care.

Institutions, including schools, universities and employers, offered mentorship, opportunities for growth, mental health support, and expert advice on well-being. The Mastercard Foundation and Partners provided financial support, soft-skills training, psychosocial support, and spaces for open conversations on discrimination alongside appropriate systems for reporting such discrimination. However, there were indications that the institutional networks could do more to help Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni once they have left the Mastercard Foundation Scholars

Program with transition support from education to the world of work. It was also found that the mentorship programmes and psychosocial support on offer should be better contextualised to meet their needs post graduation.

DIGGING DEEPER FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Further research is needed to:

1. Understand the relationship between gender and efforts to seek mental health support in Africa.
2. Develop programmes that continue these supports for Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni following their graduation.
3. Interrogate the kind of mental health care provision on the continent, so that contextually and culturally appropriate support may be provided.
4. Explore the complex role of the family in supporting young people in Africa so that interventions may be devised enabling them to derive greater benefits from such support.
5. Explore how partnerships may be established among higher education institutions, workplaces and mental health providers to provide Mastercard Foundation Scholar Alumni with more effective support in relation to their psychosocial needs and their efforts to enter the world of work.

NOTES ON THE STUDY

The Imprint of Education longitudinal cohort study has several 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 (called the Alumni Tracer Survey, ATS). For secondary school Alumni, a cohort was recruited from Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Rwanda and Uganda based on *where participants had studied*. The tertiary Alumni cohort was recruited from Ethiopia, Ghana, Rwanda, South Africa, Uganda and what we call "the Diaspora" (African 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.