
Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program at University of Rwanda

CALL FOR IMPACT RESEARCH PROPOSALS

Small Research Grants for priority scientific and applied research 2026 Cycle

1. Background and Rationale

The Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program at the University of Rwanda (UR) aims to develop a new generation of transformative leaders who will drive inclusive and equitable socio-economic transformation across Africa. The Program supports academically talented young people facing barriers to higher education and employment, including women in STEM, refugees and displaced youth, youth with disabilities, and economically disadvantaged learners.

At UR, the Scholars Program introduces innovative approaches such as virtual placements, solution-based internships, digitally enhanced learning, community engagement and give-back initiatives, leadership development, entrepreneurship incubation, and strengthened transition pathways into employment.

To generate evidence from these innovations, inform policy, and strengthen institutional reform, the Program will support a limited number of high-quality research grants for UR academic staff, researchers, and postgraduate students.

These grants are intended to contribute to:

- Producing generalizable knowledge beyond program evaluation
- Documenting best practices in inclusive higher education
- Strengthening employability and innovation ecosystems
- Informing national and regional policy debates
- Enhancing institutional systems and student support services

This call is therefore aligned with the Program's emphasis on learning, measurement, institutional change, and sustainable systems transformation.

2. Purpose of the Research Grants

The research grants aim to support rigorous and policy-relevant studies that advance:

- Inclusive opportunities for disadvantaged youth in higher education
- Evidence based education to employment transition models
- Institutional reforms that strengthen student success and wellbeing
- Digital learning, career services, psychosocial support, and innovation uptake
- Scalable models for inclusive African higher education transformation

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Research outputs are expected to contribute to peer-reviewed publications and institutional or policy influence with the UR at the fore front.

3. Eligibility: Who can apply

Applications are invited from:

- UR academic staff and early-career researchers
- Postgraduate students (with Senior staff supervision)
- Interdisciplinary research teams across UR colleges
- Collaborations with industry or community partners are encouraged

Priority will be given to proposals that include Scholars Program thematic areas and demonstrate strong relevance to Rwanda's development agenda.

4. Research Approach and Methodology

Proposed studies may use:

- Quantitative approaches (surveys, learning analytics, etc)
- Qualitative approaches (case studies, interviews, focus groups, etc)
- Mixed-methods research
- Action research linked to community engagement or internships
- Comparative studies across vulnerable groups

Researchers are encouraged to leverage existing Scholars Program data sources where relevant.

5. Expected Outputs

Successful projects should deliver:

- A final research report
- At least one manuscript submitted to a reputable peer-reviewed journal
- A usable dataset (where applicable)
- Policy brief or institutional learning note
- Presentation at UR or Scholars Program learning events
- Recommendations for institutional or systems change

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6. Priority Research Themes (2026 Grant Cycle)

The following eight themes are priority areas for this funding round:

Theme 1: Inclusive Higher Education Models for Vulnerable Youth

Inclusive higher education is central to Africa's development agenda, yet refugees, youth with disabilities, girls and other disadvantaged learners continue to face systemic barriers.

Key question: *What institutional reforms are required or evidence for UR and Rwanda's universities to serve as benchmarks of inclusive higher education in Africa?*

Research may explore:

- Institutional barriers and enablers for refugees and youth with disabilities
- Effectiveness of inclusive recruitment, support, and retention strategies
- Reasonable accommodation and accessibility in multi-campus universities

Theme 2: Psychosocial Support, Student Wellbeing and Success in African Universities

Student mental health and wellbeing are increasingly critical determinants of retention, success, and leadership development in African universities.

Key question: *What institutional wellbeing models best promote retention, success, and leadership development?*

Possible research topics could assess

- Effectiveness of psychosocial support interventions,
- Risks to student persistence and academic success, support needs of refugees and youth with disabilities,
- Integration of wellbeing services into university systems

Theme 3: Higher Education Governance, Leadership and Implementation Risks in Large Public Universities

Large public universities face coordination challenges, procurement delays, and multi-campus complexity that can undermine the implementation of relevant institutional innovation, change or reforms.

Key question: How can African public universities manage implementation risk while pursuing ambitious institutional transformation?

What the research could address:

- Governance and accountability models
- Operational bottlenecks and coordination challenges

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- Institutional leadership for reform delivery

Theme 4: Digital transformation, blended learning, and learner analytics for resilient education systems

Digital learning is now a continental priority, but equity gaps remain and universities must build resilient systems beyond emergency responses.

Key question: *How can African universities move from emergency online learning to resilient and inclusive digital education ecosystems?*

Research may address:

- Student and staff experiences in digitally enhanced education (Online and blended learning)
- Equity gaps in access to online learning modalities
- use of learner analytics for performance improvement

Theme 5: Education to Employment Systems: Work Placement, Industry Partnerships and Graduate Outcomes

Graduate unemployment remains one of Africa's biggest challenges, requiring stronger university-industry linkages and evidence-based transition models

Key question: What models best connect African university training to labor market demand and decent work? *What factors determine successful labor market integration for Scholars?*

Research may focus on:

- Outcomes of virtual placements and solution-based internships,
- Employer satisfaction with Scholars compared to traditional graduates
- Transition patterns into employment, entrepreneurship, or further study
- Decision theater on employer perceptions, market and tracer studies

Theme 6: Innovation, Entrepreneurship and Structural Constraints in African Youth Ecosystems

Universities are expected to drive innovation, yet market failures and institutional barriers often limit youth-led entrepreneurship and start-up growth.

Key question: *What role can African universities play to overcome market and institutional barriers to youth-led innovation?*

Research may explore:

- Drivers of innovation and entrepreneurship uptake among students
- Effectiveness of incubation and innovation spaces

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- Policy and Market failures affecting or shaping youth entrepreneurship and SME growth

Theme 7: Sustainability, financing, and long-term institutional capacity building for student support systems

Across Africa, donor-supported reforms face sustainability risks, making long-term financing and institutional capacity essential.

Key question: How can African universities sustain inclusive reforms and student support systems beyond external program funding?

What the research could address:

- Sustainability of digital infrastructure investments
- Long-term funding models for support services
- Cost-effectiveness of scholarship-driven reforms

Theme 8: Transformative Leadership Development, Social Impact and University Contribution to Local Development

Universities are increasingly expected to act as development actors through leadership training, civic engagement, and community problem solving.

Key question: *How can universities strengthen community-driven development and social cohesion through student leadership? How does transformative leadership training shape graduate agency and social change?*

Possible research topics:

- Impact of accredited leadership and coaching training
- University graduates and scholar identity, confidence, and civic engagement
- Community perceptions of scholars' leadership initiatives
- Higher education practical integration into national development: models and beyond policy statement

7. Proposal Submission Requirements

- Research title and selected theme
- Problem statement and justification
- Research objectives and key questions
- Methodology and ethical considerations

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- Work plan and timeline (maximum 12 months)
- Expected outputs (report, publication, policy brief)
- Budget summary
- Research team composition and roles

Submission Format:

- Font: Times New Roman, 12pt
- Spacing: 1.5 line spacing
- Margins: 1-inch margins on all sides
- File format: Word document
- Language: English

Submit to:

Submission in word document should be forwarded through email to UR Director of Research Prof Samuel Mutarindwa: s.mutarindwa@ur.ac.rw with a copy to MCF SP @UR Program Director Prof Anne Marie KAGWESAGE a.m.kagwesage@ur.ac.rw

Important Dates

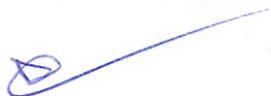
- Call Launch: 13th February 2026
- Submission Deadline: 6th March 2026
- Results Notification: 23rd March 2026
- Signing of research contracts: 30th March 2026
- Research Commencement: 30th March 2026

8. Selection Criteria

Proposals will be assessed based on:

- Alignment with priority themes
- Scientific rigor and feasibility
- Contribution to inclusion and employability outcomes
- Potential for institutional or policy uptake
- Publication and dissemination potential
- Interdisciplinary and stakeholder engagement

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9. Knowledge Mobilization

Research findings will be disseminated through:

- Scholars Program conferences and workshops
- Policy dialogues with government and employers
- UR institutional platforms and digital channels
- Peer-reviewed journals and partner university networks

10. Implementation

- A selected project can be funded up to a maximum of 30,000 USD
- All funded research projects will be implemented together with the Program Lead Team at the University of Rwanda to ensure alignment with institutional learning and program impact priorities.

Done at Kigali, 13 / 02 / 2026



Assoc. Prof. KAYIHURA Muganga Didas
Acting Vice Chancellor