

Beyond Access: Recruiting for Potential, Developing for Change

Authors:

Jean Alfeld, University of Cape Town, South Africa

Ayado Ewinyu, African Leadership Academy, South Africa

Sylvia Kunkyebe, Ashesi University, Ghana

Paper short abstract:

Tertiary Partners in the Scholars Program select individuals for potential and facilitate their development and connection to networks and opportunities. Experiences illustrate the journey of providing access to education and developing change makers.

Paper long abstract:

Grades and financial means should not be considered as the only way youth can access opportunities. Tertiary Partners in the MCF Scholars Program aim to select individuals and facilitate their development and connection to networks and to opportunities. Scholar and Partner experiences illustrate the journey of providing access to education and developing change makers. This paper shares the experiences of three Scholar Program Partner institutions (Ashesi University, African Leadership Academy and University of Cape Town) in four stages of the Scholars Program: recruitment, support and training, preparation for transition into the world of work, and connections and linkages to opportunities. These Partners are attempting to re-imagine the paradigm of access and completion rates in university education and entry-level employment on the African continent. The paper will examine relationships, connections and networks created amongst Partners and aligned organisations, as well as networks that students forge across the world through the Program. It tells stories of innovation and disruption at the individual and institutional level, that are redefining notions of access to education, student success, transition into the world of work and raising change makers. It focuses on the experiences and interventions that Partners provide to students to develop skills necessary to drive change in their communities while tackling difficult problems facing their communities with humility. The paper will also highlight the challenges that are experienced at the institutional, individual and social level while trying to create connections and opportunities for the students to return and give back to their communities.

The Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program (MCFSP) is “a global network of partners committed to ensuring that all young people have an equal chance to obtain a quality education and pursue their aspirations.” This network has a clear mandate: to ensure that academically talented and economically disadvantaged young Africans with the potential to succeed in universities are not excluded from competing for access to university education. This mission is embedded in the Mastercard Foundation's Theory of Change which postulates that “young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in Africa are underserved and constitute a promising pool of talent in nations that face barriers to the levels of educational attainment needed to support social transformation and economic growth. By

addressing the educational barriers faced by these youth, the Foundation seeks to build a new generation of leaders who will be instrumental in transforming Africa.”

The Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program primarily provides scholarships to academically sound students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds who show leadership potential and a commitment to giving back to their communities. There is a focus on reaching marginalised students: females, those with disabilities, and displaced individuals. The MCFSP provides a wide range of student support services to enable the successful transition of Scholars into, through and out of university.

The MCFSP has over twenty Partners who run the programme at tertiary institutions across the globe. Using the experiences of three Partner institutions (Ashesi University in Ghana, University of Cape Town (UCT) and the African Leadership Academy (ALA) in South Africa), this paper examines relationships, connections and networks created amongst Partners and aligned organisations, as well as innovation and disruption at the individual and institutional level, that are redefining notions of access to education, student success, transition into the world of work and raising change makers.

It takes an in-depth look into three stages of the MCFSP cycle through the experiences and challenges of these partner institutions. Firstly, it shares Ashesi University’s experience of developing a rigorous student recruitment program that identifies scholars and recruits for potential. Secondly, it explores elaborate student support services that enable scholars to develop and emerge as connected and employable graduates, through the lens of the University of Cape Town. It concludes with a breakdown of the connections and interventions that the Africa Leadership Academy offers through the Africa Careers Network.

Ashesi University, a private pan-African liberal arts university in Ghana, joined the MCFSP in 2012 to expand its mission of educating ethical entrepreneurial leaders in Africa. Ashesi is currently home to two hundred and forty (240) MasterCard Foundation (MCF) Scholars studying various undergraduate courses. Ashesi’s recruitment process has been crucial in identifying deserving scholars including those from hard-to-reach locations

University admissions processes can be broadly categorised as follows: outreach, application support services, decision making. A typical university recruitment strategy involves reaching out to potential students using advertisements in mainstream print, broadcast and social media channels. Information sessions in selected locations (usually urban), and then guiding potential students through the application process are also frequent recruitment strategies. Applicants to Ashesi University go through an automated application and selection process based on predetermined criteria and are admitted once all the right boxes are checked.

MCF Scholars are typically first-generation students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds in Africa, who are academically strong and actively involved in transforming their communities. This group of young people are mostly located in hard-to-reach, rural communities that commonly lack well-resourced schools and internet connectivity, have poor telecommunication networks and

generally have little connectedness to mainstream media and information. The typical admissions strategy described earlier, alienates potential scholars from opportunities to access tertiary education in various ways.

There are those students who are very unlikely to hear about university information sessions or scholarship opportunities from newspapers or television adverts because they most likely do not own TV's and their families (whether educated or not) would rather spend money on food than newspapers. While the radio is the preferred information source for this group, the reality is that, scholarship advertisements are usually aired on the popular radio stations in the cities, meaning rural youth do not hear them. From Ashesi's experience, school visits have proven to be the best means of reaching this population. However, considering the possibility of zero-yield, the cost-benefit analysis does not favour school visits for deep rural communities. Community-based partnerships, and current Scholars help Ashesi admissions officers reach such communities in addition to school visit efforts.

Another group of disconnected students are the urban and peri-urban dwellers living in low-income areas in big cities. This group has access to information from all media sources, but their biggest obstacle to entry is self-exclusion. They have experienced so many inequalities and injustice in their education and life in general, that they easily believe that certain opportunities are meant for students from wealthier homes. Despite the fact that they have the information, they do not attend information sessions or apply for opportunities. The few who do apply discover standardised test scores for the first time and some give up at that point. Some students simply cannot afford to take the tests. While the fortunate ones who can afford them have no idea how to access study materials to prepare for and take the tests.

For those who can afford the cost of standardised tests, it is a difficult financial choice to make. Is it worth using savings to fund a test that you are unfamiliar with and the results of which do not guarantee you a university admission and scholarship? Have they not seen determined people like themselves from their communities write those tests, pass well, but continue to stay at home because they did not receive full funding? Does it not make sense to use the little savings to apply to local universities and try to hustle it out like they have been doing throughout their education? In all of this, the rural student who miraculously hears about scholarship opportunities and tries to apply may never take the standardised tests because they simply cannot afford to. Some MCFSP partners have waived standardised test scores for potential scholars while others pay for the costs of these tests.

Students who are able to go as far as taking standardised tests are confronted with application requirements such as the application fee which they may not be able to afford. If they do manage to raise the money for it, they have to look for someone who will allow them to use their Visa/Mastercard/Paypal account to make the payment- another barrier to entry. Online applications require internet connectivity and for potential students, this means extra expenditure on data. So, for the rural youth, the major challenges of finding someone with a Visa/Mastercard/Paypal account and then staying connected to the internet long enough to open and complete the application, provide enormous stress and are probably only overcome by relocating to an urban centre to complete the application. Application fee waivers

have almost become the norm among all MCF partner universities so as not to keep economically disadvantaged people out.

Applicants who are able to overcome the challenges described and gain admission to the university, may not be given a scholarship due to a lack of context on the information provided in the application. It is not easy for those reviewing applications to assess things such as: the education system in the home country, extenuating circumstances in which the scholars grew up (such as self-funding their education), cultural notions about relating to adults (such as showing timidity, not keeping eye contact, not speaking about achievements) as well as income and education levels of parents. In an attempt to ensure that country-specific contexts are considered in awarding scholarships, some scholarship schemes plug into existing national scholarship agencies to award scholarships. This, unfortunately, does not work well: the lack of transparency in state agencies has resulted in a phenomenon where almost every African knows a child of a politician or wealthy family studying abroad on scholarships meant for those who cannot afford it.

Having established the fact that traditional student recruitment processes and requirements often exclude academically strong students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, MCFSP partner institutions like Ashesi, have had to adopt innovative strategies. The idea is to use these strategies to break down the barriers, in order to connect young people from Africa who may otherwise not have access to university education, to the scholarship opportunity. To recruit scholars, partner institutions have offered application fee waivers, removed standardised test requirements or paid for standardised tests for potential students. Critical partnerships with community-based organisations, local non-governmental organisations, teachers and other connections on the ground, assist with disseminating information about MCFSP scholarships to rural African youth.

The connections forged by Ashesi University have created an ecosystem of partners who collaborate to facilitate university access, retention and successful completion for brilliant young people who would otherwise not find their way into tertiary studies. These partnerships have been vital in identifying potential MCF Scholars at the community level - using teachers, community and religious leaders, parent forums and community-based programs that focus on youth in education – and have assisted in eliminating the lack of information that keeps potential scholars in the dark about opportunities available to them.

Ashesi University connects potential scholars to partners in their local areas or nearest cities who avail their internet, computer, mobile phones, photocopiers and scanners to facilitate the acquisition, completion and submission of application forms. Where students need to be interviewed, partners have provided space and Skype accounts or mobile phones to enable the interviewers to conduct interviews with students.

Current scholars and alumni are probably the most potent connection that the MCFSP possesses in Africa. Scholars and alumni from all partner institutions are consistently instrumental in informing rural and disadvantaged student populations about the MCFSP, facilitating applications, mentoring scholars in the application

process and supporting their transition into university, as well as out into the working world.

These are some scenarios that Ashesi University has experienced which illustrate the unorthodox manner in which potential scholars have connected to opportunities. A young girl takes her sick mother to the hospital where she ends up donating blood to save another child's life; through this she gets connected by the little girl's mother to an MCFSP local partner who in turn connects her to Ashesi University after she explains that she is struggling to find money for her education despite her good grades. A young man takes up a teaching job in his village to raise money for university; his school hosts some Ashesi University MCF Scholars for a community service project and scholars assist him to apply to Ashesi University and receive MCFSP funding.

Finally, the Liberian student who was one of the top two students in his year, stayed home for more than three years because he was never selected for the myriad of government coordinated scholarships for Liberian students to study abroad. Despite being one of only two people who passed well in the entire country. He attends an Ashesi University information session and subsequently gains admission and an MCF scholarship to study at Ashesi. Each scholar's journey into the Scholars Program is unique and involves a personalised recruitment process that ensures that their location and socio-economic circumstances do not put them at a disadvantage. These connections created by recruitment partners give young people from disadvantaged backgrounds the socio-political capital required.

The recruitment ecosystem has been instrumental in providing context to the information submitted in student applications. Context is what allows partners to recruit for potential and to consider applications on an individual basis. Sometimes, even after an interview, admissions officers are still confused about the applicant's circumstances. In such cases, speaking to a partner about socio-cultural norms, political climate, economic setting and family circumstances among others, helps to clarify misconceptions and allows an admissions committee to say yes to an applicant with potential - one who does not necessarily check all the boxes, but whose admission will create a positive impact for the Scholar, their family and community.

Ashesi University's admission interview aims to assess academic preparedness or potential to succeed, leadership and additional soft skills. It goes further and enquires about the applicant's problem-solving skills and how they have used those skills to directly change their communities. Cognisant of difficult and diverse backgrounds, the interviewer is required to note any areas of concern (such as health issues, written and oral communication levels, weak Math skills), and if a need for mentorship and personal development is identified to enable the student to thrive at Ashesi University. In addition to providing this type of support, Ashesi University offers a 2-week bridge program for students who have been out of secondary school for more than two years as well as those who have weak scores in English and Mathematics.

A major challenge in providing fully-funded access to tertiary education for economically-disadvantaged youth is trust. Yes, applicants may have been praying

for a scholarship, but when the opportunity sounds too good to be true and it is sending you to an institution in a foreign place, some scepticism occurs. Parents and potential scholars are wary about institutions they have never heard of, and when they do not trust the information (or believe it is too good to be true) they do not take up the opportunity. There have been times when, upon receiving offer letters, parents and scholars have had to be convinced of the authenticity of Ashesi University and the MCFSP. In such instances, local partners and current students from the same country, community or religious background, have been instrumental in reassuring parents to allow their children to accept the scholarship.

Over time and with experience, some local partners have become familiar with Ashesi University's admission and scholarship processes and criteria and they are able to facilitate the process to ensure that deserving candidates get interviewed. For Ashesi University, one-on-one interviews with applicants help to raise red flags and in some cases, second interviews are conducted with people outside of the admissions department to give a second opinion. The university relies on its network in the community or country of the applicant to conduct an individual assessment so as to verify the claims made on the application form.

While Ashesi's admission process considers academic merit, other factors such as character, resilience and passion play a major role in admissions decisions. It makes it possible to identify MCF Scholars across Africa and recruit them for potential rather than according to norms.

Ashesi University's recruitment process identifies potential, as well as where support is required:



The University of Cape Town (UCT) partnered with the Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program (MCFSP) in 2014, and currently has 108 Scholars on the programme from 17 African countries, studying at an Undergraduate and Postgraduate level, as well as 51 graduates. Broadly looking at the graduates and

where they have transitioned to: 19 are employed, 15 are studying further, 1 is running her own businesses and 6 are still seeking opportunities.

It is interesting to note that academic completion rates of MCF Scholars across Partner institutions are in the 90th percentile - exceptionally high for first-generation students - and at UCT the completion rate of Scholars is sitting at 94%

*“According to a 2011 report from the Higher Education Research Institute, first-generation students were less likely to complete their college degree in six years than their peers whose parents had at least some college experience (**50% first-generation** versus 64% non-first-generation)” DeAngelo et Al (2011)*

When Scholars arrive at UCT from across the African continent, the primary focus is to connect them with the MCFSP Program team, each other (as a cohort) and the key services at the institution. This is done through a two-day Welcome programme - that helps them to get to know one another, the staff and the values and mission of the Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program - followed by the Orientation programme, in which Scholars gain familiarity with the institution. In addition, every new Scholar is matched with a ‘buddy’ – a Scholar from a previous cohort who is responsible for helping them to settle during this challenging transition time. This phase of transitioning into university could be called a period of personal disruption, as Scholars move from rural to urban, small environments to large, family to anonymity, secondary to tertiary and known to unknown. Many Scholars struggle with the adjustment - especially with culture shock, fear of failure, loneliness and adapting to new food, languages and systems. Support at this time is vital and critical in setting them up for success in their studies and in turn, their futures.

In terms of ongoing support, the MCFSP Mentoring Programme connects each Scholar to a small group with a peer mentor; mentoring continues throughout their time at UCT and helps Scholars with campus life issues and academic support. The Mentorship Programme also focuses on getting Scholars to engage in community-based projects that facilitate learning through service, as this assists in developing change makers who are able to return to their home communities and drive change.

The MCFSP at UCT has a designated Careers Advisor who is responsible for supporting Scholars, ensuring that they make use of their time at university to develop employability skills and are prepared to transition into the world of work. Scholars attend training in Career Management skills so that they become competent in writing CVs and applications, interviewing, networking and branding themselves online. They are also connected to the institution’s Careers Service activities, work opportunities advertised via the online portal, and employer events and expos on campus. UCT works with over 2000 employers, many of whom have large African footprints and are interested in talking to Scholars about opportunities in their home countries. This all serves to prepare Scholars and link them to the world of work.

During their time at UCT, Scholars are required to complete a 6-week internship, ideally in their home country; this is something supported by the Mastercard Foundation and there are funds available to pay for flights and living costs. The thinking behind this internship programme is that Scholars remain connected with

their home countries, become familiar with their work sectors and organisations, and develop a professional network that they can use when transitioning from university into the world of work. Gaining work experience also helps Scholars to develop workplace skills that make them more employable as young graduates. Scholars are prepared for internships through Workplace Readiness training, and are required to complete personal goal setting and reflection exercises. It can be challenging to find internship placements for all Scholars in their home countries; this is facilitated by collaboration with MCFSP Partners, connection to personal networks, the university's employer and alumni contacts, and to organisations directly.

Looking at the soft skills that are required in entry-level positions across the globe, it is clear that graduates are expected to have more than just their degrees and technical expertise. A great deal has been written about critical employability skills for the 4th industrial revolution that are commonly identified as soft skills such as: people management, communication, collaboration, creativity, flexibility, emotional intelligence, problem solving, critical thinking, decision making and negotiation. How are Scholars supported in developing these so that they can transition into the global workplace? While some of these skills are picked up in the academic context, most are developed through extra-curricular involvement and interactions with others. For this reason, Scholars are encouraged to get involved in societies, sports, give-back projects, part-time work, competitions, leadership roles and more; it is through these activities and encounters that valuable employability skills are honed. Scholars are then supported in reflecting on this and how to present these broader, useful skills in their CVs and at job interviews.

Like many tertiary institutions, UCT has developed an employability award, UCTPlus: via an online platform, students can register, track and reflect on skills developed through non-academic endeavours, such as leadership activities, involvement in community projects, mentoring and work experience. Bronze, gold or silver awards are then reflected on the transcript and make it easier for employers to recognise what students have developed beyond the classroom that will be useful in the professional context.

While the MCFSP is a scholarship programme to fund education, its fundamental mission is to develop transformative leaders; Scholars are selected because they are active and engaged citizens who have clear visions for how they plan to be change makers in their communities. The Mastercard Foundation describes its theory of change as follows: "The Program provides these Scholars with holistic financial, academic, and social support, training, and mentorship that reinforce the core values of transformative leadership and a commitment to improving the lives of others, and a connection to a community of like-minded peers. By addressing the barriers Scholars face to access high-quality secondary and tertiary opportunities, the Program intends to build a new generation of leaders who will be instrumental in transforming their countries and regions of origin."

UCT tries to identify this commitment to improving the lives of others through the essay section of the selection process. It is key to then foster this spirit of give-back through Scholar involvement in community service projects back home or in the country of study during their time spent at university. At UCT, the vast majority of Scholars are pro-active about this and voluntarily get involved in a variety of ways;

all Scholars are required to participate in mandatory service events organised through the mentoring programme and by the Scholars Council. These activities are an important part of the Scholars' learning journey and further equip them to be change makers, with the mindsets, skills and networks required.

In line with this, and realising that many Scholars will not enter into formal employment on their return home, the programme places emphasis on developing entrepreneurial skills in all Scholars. At UCT, this is done through training, connection to other entrepreneurs and opportunities to enter start-up competitions and business games. 2018 saw the unveiling of a new two-year pilot programme, the Scholars Entrepreneurship Fund: the Mastercard Foundation has made money available for Scholars to pitch their start-up ideas and give-back projects; those who are successful receive funds to actually launch these. This very exciting initiative is being piloted during 2019 and 2020; at UCT a total of USD 23 000 has so far been awarded to 6 projects.

Another introduction by the Mastercard Foundation that is proving to be very useful in this space, is the Baobab platform. This is an online learning, collaboration and networking space for Scholars and alumni of the programme. Scholars can complete online learning modules in areas such as Professional Skills, and they have access to an opportunities board where they can find work experience, conferences and other networking opportunities. Scholars and alumni are increasingly using Baobab to connect with one another virtually, sharing experiences, ideas, opinions and opportunities.

The aim of the support and development of Mastercard Foundation Scholars while they are at university is to prepare them to enter the working world after graduation. The ideal is that they succeed in their tertiary studies while developing professional skills and networks that will allow them to transition smoothly. One of UCT's 2017 Masters graduates was a good example of this: Paul* grew up in a rural Namibian household headed by a single mother. Fortunately, through her employment in the capital city at a large corporate, he was funded to study an undergraduate degree at the University of Namibia. Paul was determined to study a Master of Laws; he was accepted at UCT and secured a MCFSP scholarship. During his two years at UCT, Paul was actively engaged in university life in voluntary roles and elected positions, attended all MCFSP training offered and developed an excellent CV. He completed his internship at South Africa's Competition Commission as he wanted to get specific experience in this area. Upon graduation Paul had three job offers: a legal role at one of the leading law firms in Africa (he had connected with their head of talent at a UCT expo), a graduate programme and the Bank of Namibia (connected through the Careers Advisor) and the job he accepted at the Namibian Competition Commission (offered to him due to his internship experience and facilitated by contacts made there). Paul's successful transition is testament to the development and preparation he underwent while at university and the connections he made to the world of work.

While the MCFSP team at UCT is committed to providing the support and opportunities that develop Scholars like Paul, the process is not always easy, possible or successful. Although those selected for the programme have a good academic level, the transition to tertiary standards and the academic challenges

experienced by Scholars, means that they need to focus on studies and often don't have time to prioritise involvement in additional developmental activities. Attendance of workshops and MCFSP gatherings is not always optimal, meaning that some Scholars do not engage fully with the broader developmental aspects intended in this transformative leadership programme.

Another challenge is finding internships for Scholars in their home countries; this is usually due to a lack of contacts, shortage of opportunities in relevant sectors, and issues with timing: UCT has its long summer holiday from November to February, and most formal internship programmes run in the June-August period. Securing opportunities for graduates is also not easy, with the home country economy sometimes adding to the challenge. The situation in Zimbabwe exemplifies this: Zimbabwean Scholars graduating from UCT have few prospects of suitable employment when returning home and are not permitted to stay in South Africa due to visa restrictions. It is very disheartening for the programme and, of course, the affected Scholars, when they complete their degrees and have so much to offer, yet are sitting at home unemployed and disheartened by the lack of prospects. Scholars who return home after graduating, commonly experience reverse culture shock and struggle with the demands, expectations and pressures that come from family and friends.

The importance of leadership in helping the economic development of Africa has been a highly discussed topic for over a decade. African Careers Network (ACN) is a programme under the African Leadership Academy (ALA) and in partnership with the Mastercard Foundation. Launched in 2012, it is a part of a broader suite of programmes to develop young African leaders and talent within ALA that currently serves close to 3000 youth from 47 African countries - the majority of whom study outside of their home country and or outside of the African continent. ACN's mission is to equip high-performing young leaders with the job readiness skills and support networks they need to accelerate their transitions from learning to earning. This program was designed to provide a fluid job market that connects students – many of whom grew up in communities with limited social capital – to a wide range of opportunities across countries and sectors that can accelerate the trajectory of their careers and catalyse their impact on the continent.

ACN's approach to preparing students is multi-faceted, as students from diverse and economically-disadvantaged backgrounds require a variety of interventions to preparing them to successfully transition to the world of work.

Coaching and Skills Development: ACN's focus is on pre-employment interventions that accelerate career trajectories for students. Our experience shows that students who come from social-economic disadvantaged backgrounds do not have easy access to people within their immediate environment that can provide career guidance and coaching on pathways that they wish to pursue. Part of ACN's model is coaching and empowering these students to be self advocates. This is done through one on one conversations with students in a coaching set up. This coaching is augmented by a professional development curriculum and coaching programme, whose insights are borrowed and based on the African workplace. ACN works in educating these students on skills and experiences that are valued by employers.

The curriculum focuses on skills development with a focus on work preparedness. Some modules included in this curriculum include CV and cover letter writing, interviewing skills which includes a mock interview component which allows the students to practice the skills that they are taught. Additionally, skills on how to manoeuvre the workplace, networking to mention but a few. Students from higher-income backgrounds see a wide variety of career options and benefit from a variety of interventions and can count on friends and family members to help them explore different careers and answer questions about how to pursue them. For first-generation and low-income students, their exposure is much more limited, ALA's Africa Careers Network (ACN) aims to broaden students' knowledge of chosen career fields through career coaching and guidance. ACN provides one on one coaching to students during their four years at university. Coaching helps students identify a suite of skills that make them successful and employable in the long run, it also helps broaden scholar minds on a variety of potential opportunities and career pathways to pursue.

ACN also facilitates access to internship learning experience and has seen that by giving students a sneak peek into the reality of working, their expectations are calibrated and it is more likely they will secure and stay in a job in the future. Internships form an important basis for educating and creating increased awareness of desirable behaviours and deeper understanding of the career paths that students have chosen. Over the last eight years the data on ACN shows that a large number of ACN members who completed two or more internships were able to secure work within three to six months of graduation.

Employer Partnerships and Networks: ACN currently has a portfolio of approximately 1000 employers, ranging from large pan-African multinationals and global organisations, to a subset of high-performing SMEs and micro-enterprises. ACN aims to influence, disrupt and re-imagine Africa's employment ecosystem and labour markets, so as to focus on talent over social capital, and to change the perception of repatriation of talented Africans to their home countries. ACN operates between the demand and supply sides of the labour market and higher education, having created a new African internship market and culture that presents opportunities for talented young Africans.

Through the use of an online platform to connect young individuals from ALA and MCFSP to high-impact internship and job opportunities across the African continent, ACN has facilitated over 1500 internships and close to 400 jobs for scholars within the community. The reality is that the macro environment and the broader system is set up to support those who know how to navigate it. ACN's rationale is to overcome and disrupt an information inequality: the ACN program team works to publicise opportunities via the portal and students then apply for opportunities based on what is of interest to them; additionally ACN works in persuading and advocating for placement opportunities within certain organisations.

Sometimes organisations have strict requirements and criteria for filling a role which may not be an indication of the skills needed to perform and deliver certain tasks. ACN is able, through persuasion and based on knowledge of the labour market, communicate and advocate for certain students, who have been exposed to

experiences or who have displayed desirable behaviour necessary for the success of the role, to at least get the opportunity to self-advocate through an interview.

Opportunities that are posted on the portal exist within organisations, but more often the ACN programme team work together with the employer partners in trying to create opportunities and learning experiences for this group of highly talented Africans who would not ordinarily have access to these opportunities. Furthermore, ACN works with the employers in designing programming aimed at ensuring the success of these students once attracted and recruited in various organisations. ACN interns are regarded as better than recruits from other sources (according to 80% of the employers surveyed), and 96% of employers think that their career potential is “above average”. Employers who provided internship placements and/or hired graduates are very complimentary about the skills and knowledge of the students and alumni matched with them by ACN. Their experience as an ACN employer led most organizations to place a greater priority on hiring young people whom they think will serve as Africa’s leaders in future. ACN students are seen to have much wider international outlook, are more open and have a better understanding of and experience with multicultural environments. Employers have reported that the skill sets of students and alumni, as well as their exposure to work, were very good and not easy to find at entry level.

Matching: the ACN matching process is both system and people-driven, ACN staff work tirelessly in facilitating internship and job placements by playing an advocacy role with various employers. Every year, members of the ACN community are placed into over 250 internships and jobs. Over the last eight years, students have been placed into over 1700 internships and jobs – with the majority of them in Africa.

ACN has worked with students such as Kilimo* who didn’t immediately meet the minimum GPA requirements to make it past the first screening of a top consulting firm. ACN knew that Kilimo had a great work ethic, possessed grit, persistence and was an analytical thinker based on staff’s interactions with him. After extensive advocacy from the ACN team, Kilimo was eventually able to progress through the interview process and finally secure an internship in his second year of university. He got returning internship offers and eventually secured a full-time job placement before he graduated from university.

Lemo*, another student on the ACN programme, wanted to pursue a career in fashion design and subsequently wished to work in a fashion design company. ACN worked in helping her think strategically about the skills that would ensure long-term success, environments that would provide a platform for her to learn and mentors that would support her passion. Tapping into the breadth and depth of its network, ACN was able to secure an internship in a global advertising firm which allowed Lemo to achieve all three objectives with the foremost being the entrepreneurial and professional skills.

Prior work experience is regarded as a key factor for facilitating the transition from university to employment, and such experience must be relevant for both the students’ career aspirations and their field of study. Two years after this internship, Lemo collaborated with another Scholar in starting a clothing line after which they

were able to showcase their work on a regional catwalk in a top city in Africa. This exemplifies ACN's aim of connecting participants to each other as peers.

There are a number of lessons that have been learnt through the experiences of Ashesi, UCT and the African Leadership Academy which are valuable in developing the programme across all Partners. Ashesi's experiences of recruiting for potential and finding alternative ways of reaching marginalised, African youth speak to the flexibility and creativity required. UCT is continuously trying to ensure all of its Scholars are involved in the development programme, as well as working with Scholars and stakeholders to find suitable internship and work opportunities, so that every Scholar graduates as a transformative leader who is fully prepared to transition into the workplace. ALA has learnt valuable lessons through the implementation of the African Careers Network, about the importance of preparing youth for the workplace, as well as linking Scholars to a growing network of employers, partners and peers across Africa.