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## **Mastercard Foundation, Stellenbosch University and the Institut Pasteur de Dakar unveil African STARS Fellowship Programme to empower the next generation of health leaders in Africa**

- *African STARS Fellowship Programme to capacitate African scientists on epidemic and pandemic response be launched with an award of US\$ 9 million (ZAR 165 million) from the Mastercard Foundation*
- *First phase of the programme will fund 131 fellows over three years,*
- *Media invited to attend the launch of the programme at 13:00 at CERI at SU's Tygerberg Campus on 15 January*

Cape Town, South Africa — In a groundbreaking initiative aimed at transforming the landscape of healthcare innovation in Africa, the Mastercard Foundation, the Centre for Epidemic Response and Innovation (CERI) at Stellenbosch University and the Institut Pasteur de Dakar (IPD) have announced the launch of the African STARS Fellowship Programme.

This programme has been designed with the core aim of nurturing the continent's new healthcare research leaders and creating a skilled workforce in genomics, diagnostics, and vaccine design and production in Africa.

Africa is home to the fastest-growing young population globally, projected to comprise nearly half of the world's youth by 2100. However, the continent is grappling with the challenge of training sufficient scientists while also facing a disproportionate burden of health crises due to frequent outbreaks of infectious diseases such as HIV, Ebola, Marburg, Mpox and Tuberculosis. In 2023 alone, over 150 disease outbreaks were reported across Africa, escalating the need for knowledgeable leaders who can engage effectively in public health efforts and can create companies and research institutes that advance discovery and manufacturing of medical countermeasures in Africa.

The African STARS Fellowship Programme will be launched with a generous initial award of US\$ 9 million from the Mastercard Foundation in an effort to counter these pressing challenges. In addition, this initiative will leverage previous investments in fellowship programmes at CERI in partnership with the Rockefeller Foundation, the World Bank, the European Commission and the GIZ. Together, these programmes have already trained 600 fellows towards strengthening African capacity in critical areas of genomics and bioinformatics.

The African STARS fellowship will now take training in Africa to the next level by creating structured programmes and providing up to 2 years training and fostering partnership

with big industry and biotechnology innovation hubs with the ultimate objective to create jobs that will retain and attract talented scientists to the African continent.

"The African STARS Fellowship Programme is an embodiment of our commitment to empower the next generation of science leaders," said Prof. Tulio de Oliveira, Director of the Centre for Epidemic Response and Innovation. "By focusing on the skills development of young African scientific leaders, we can ensure that they are equipped to lead in addressing emerging health crises. In the last ten years, we have experienced extensive investment in science and technology in Africa, allowing access to some of the best laboratories in the world, which became evident during the COVID-19 pandemic with African scientists leading the world in the discovery of Omicron. Now, we need to invest in the research and development eco-system to create our own diagnostics, vaccines and therapeutics".

The first phase of the programme will fund 131 fellows over three years, with an emphasis on inclusivity and equitable representation across all African regions. The initiative aims to ensure that 60% of trainees are young women, addressing the gender disparities prevalent in the science and technology fields.

"As we embark on this ambitious journey, we are focused on cultivating a new generation of talented scientists, policymakers, and healthcare leaders who can propel Africa towards self-sufficiency in addressing health challenges. The Institut Pasteur de Dakar (IPD) is a leading research institution active in the fields of pandemic preparedness, epidemic investigation and training. Through our Center for Africa's Resilience to Epidemics (CARE) program and its laboratories, we train and support African countries in epidemic preparedness and early detection, to build local capacity and ensure rapid response. We are thrilled and excited to partner with Mastercard Foundation and the University of Stellenbosch to deliver this initiative," added Prof Amadou Sall, CEO of the Institut Pasteur de Dakar.

The programme will include two structured masters programmes of 2 years, including a Master in Business Administration (MBA) on Health Care Leadership and a structured Masters on Pathogen Genomics and Bioinformatics. The programme will also have two short term fellowships, (i) the advanced and translational training (ATT) programme, which is 4-6 months and will focus on intense training on advanced genomics for public health analysis, genomic diagnostic design, and/or aspects around vaccine manufacturing and (ii) the Young Professional Program (YPP), which include 12 months of training focused on biotechnology innovation and entrepreneurship and includes placement at commercial companies, industry or innovation hubs.

In order to provide comprehensive support to the Fellows in the African STARS Programme, CERI will collaborate with the Centre for Collaboration in Africa (CCA) at SU International. Fellows will be fully integrated into various activities and programmes at Stellenbosch University through the Internationalisation services offered at SU International, to ensure that the Fellows make the most of their stay at Stellenbosch University.

The primary objective of the African STARS Programme is not only to develop a high-calibre workforce but also to create an ecosystem that promotes innovation and drives economic growth in the biotechnology sector. By leveraging South-South collaboration and working with private industry, the programme seeks to reduce reliance on the Global North for essential skills and capabilities.

CERI and IPD are respected institutions with a rich history in research and training.

CERI has significantly contributed to the COVID-19 response, identifying two of the five SARS-CoV-2 variants of global concern, including the Omicron variant in addition to

helping to describe the current Mpox strains and leading a programme on climate change and epidemics and building the large genomics facility in Africa.

IPD has over a century of experience in public health research and more than 80 years in vaccine manufacturing. Over the last decade, IPD has supported 40 of the 55 countries in Africa on diagnostic, outbreak investigations, response to epidemics and risk assessments for high consequence pathogens such as Ebola, Marburg, Zika, Covid-19, Rift Valley fever and Mpox.

Together, CERI and IPD will provide comprehensive training across various fellowship opportunities, equipping participants with advanced skills that are otherwise scarce on the continent.

"The aim of this innovative training platform initially between CERI and IPD is to increase the employability potential of the African youth in jobs where these advanced skills would traditionally only be met by foreign trained professionals. It would also equip the individual to generate additional employment opportunities in the field with mastery of resource mobilization skills and creating a multiplication effect in employment opportunities for the youth of the continent." concluded Dr Solomon Zewdu, Senior Executive Resident, Mastercard Foundation.

The Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Research, Innovation and Postgraduate Studies from Stellenbosch University, Prof Sibusiso Moyo, added that we are really excited to be part of this tripartite collaboration between IPD, Mastercard and CERI. The African STARS will contribute to a pipeline of the next generation of African scientific leaders. We are confident that this will attract future partners to help us, together, build the African and the sustainable futures we want for Africa and our World!

- For more information about the African STARS Fellowship Programme and application details, please visit <https://starsfellows.africa>
- Media and external visitors are **invited for the launch of the program at an event that will take place on 15 January 2025** at the Centre for Epidemic Response and Innovation (CERI) headquarters at Stellenbosch University's Tygerberg Campus in Cape Town, starting at 13:00. Join us for this momentous occasion as we come together to celebrate a shared vision for a healthier future for our continent. Event will also be broadcasted live online.

### **About the Centre for Epidemic Response and Innovation (CERI) at Stellenbosch University:**

The Centre for Epidemic Response and Innovation (CERI) is led by Prof Tulio de Oliveira, a leading internationally recognized scientist who is now placed in the Top 1% of highly cited researchers globally. CERI is a specialised genomics facility of the WHO AFRO and the Africa CDC and a training hub for Africa. In the last three years has hosted >600 fellows from 50 African countries for advanced training in epidemic preparedness and response. CERI is based at Stellenbosch University within the School for Data Science and Computational Thinking and works across Faculties of Health and Medical Science and Faculty of Science and other SU entities contributing to research and innovation in South Africa. Connect with us at <https://www.ceri.org.za> and on X: @ceri\_news and LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/ceri-su/>

### **About the Centre for Collaboration in Africa at Stellenbosch University**

The Centre for Collaboration in Africa (CCA) is a Centre in Stellenbosch University International, which aims to create an enabling environment for Stellenbosch University to partner with other institutions in the African Continent.

Resources: SU International: <https://www.sun.ac.za/english/SUinternational>, Centre for Collaboration in Africa: <https://www.sun.ac.za/english/SUInternational/about-us-1/centres/centre-for-collaboration-in-africa>

### **About Institut Pasteur de Dakar**

Created in 1924, Institut Pasteur de Dakar works to accelerate equitable, sustainable and affordable access to health in Africa. As a Senegalese not-for-profit foundation recognized as being of public utility, IPD provides communities with healthcare solutions and laboratory services, engages in cutting-edge biomedical research and innovation, manufactures vaccines and diagnostics essential to African populations, develops human capital, and engages in public health activities such as epidemic intelligence, outbreak response, and surveillance.

### **About Mastercard Foundation**

The Mastercard Foundation is a global organization that aims to advance education and financial inclusion across Africa. Through partnerships and innovative programs, the Foundation envisions a world where everyone has the opportunity to learn, work, and thrive.

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