

African Alumni Project: Study Examines Whether or Not African Students at Western Universities Return to Africa

In 2013, the University of California, Berkeley launched the African Alumni Project (<http://africanalumni.berkeley.edu/>) in an effort to track what happened to more than 300 scholars from Africa south of the Sahara who graduated from the University of California, Berkeley and five other Western universities in the 1966-to-2014 period. The initiative has now released '*Career Choices, Return Paths and Social Contributions: The African Alumni Project*', a report prepared for The MasterCard Foundation of its findings.

The results showed that 45 percent of the graduates of Western universities returned to Africa within 12 months of completing their degrees. Five percent returned to Africa later and 7 percent spent part of their time in Africa and part of their time outside of Africa. A full 43 percent did not return to Africa. And the return rate of Africa has been declining. In the 1970s, 65 percent of the African scholars who earned degrees at Western universities returned to Africa.

Since 2010 the rate is only 40 percent. Graduate students were more likely to return to Africa than undergraduates. African students who majored in health and agricultural disciplines were the most likely to return to Africa. Those that majored in business, law, or engineering were among the least likely to return. Men were more likely to return to Africa than women (women alumni who participated in the study reported daunting institutional and systemic obstacles in Africa such as unemployment, under employment and tensions with organizational leadership. It is crucial that we acknowledge this, and prepare and support young women as they confront these issues).

Overall, the study involves six universities, and has found African university alumni who have studied overseas do continue to contribute to their communities regardless of if they return to Africa. And overwhelmingly, the alumni who participated in the study indicated a deep commitment to Africa and to African development. The report findings and the remarkable diversity of alumni experiences encourages us to move beyond a binary narrative under which alumni either return to Africa or do not. Instead of looking at the diaspora and seeing 'brain drain', we now have rich and compelling insight into how alumni have sought to contribute to Africa from afar, or through 'brain circulation' involving episodic physical presence in Africa. The alumni who participated credit their global networks with helping them to advance their goals, irrespective of where they live.

The study followed the career and life trajectories of almost 300 African alumni who graduated between 1966 and 2014 from six universities in Canada, United States or Costa Rica. Through survey research and in-depth interviews, the Project investigated why these African alumni pursued higher education abroad, their reflections on their international university experience, the paths they pursued after graduation, and how they have contributed to social transformation in Africa.

The resulting work provides several valuable, and in some cases, surprising insights. Including that students who go abroad for graduate study are significantly more likely to return to Africa than those who go abroad for undergraduate study. This supports the Foundation's decision to invest heavily in undergraduate education in Africa, at institutions like Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in Kumasi, Ghana (a public university), Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda (the largest and third-oldest institution of higher learning in Uganda), and Ashesi University (a private non-profit liberal arts college in Ghana).