

AREF's Research Development Fellowship

AREF 10th Anniversary Impact Evaluation

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About the Programme

The Research Development Fellowship (RDF) is AREF's flagship programme and one of its most impactful initiatives, designed to equip early career researchers (ECRs) with the skills, experience, and networks needed to excel in their fields. The prestigious programme provides fellows with transformative placements at world-class research institutes and centres of excellence, offering a unique opportunity to enhance their scientific expertise, build collaborations, and conduct high-impact, small-scale research.

Each award is worth £47,000, providing a fellow with funding to do a 3 to 9-month placement at a centre of research excellence in Africa or Europe and covers travel, accommodation, and research related expenses. Since 2015, a total of 106 RDFs have been awarded to ECRs in Africa who have returned from their placements to transition into independent researchers, establishing their own research teams and leading their own projects as Principal Investigators (PI). Starting with just 7 fellowships in 2015, AREF is now supporting 27 fellowships in 2025, increasingly bridging the gender gap while transcending borders and languages.

Number of RDF fellows per year



In addition to providing vital research funding, AREF's RDF programme offers a unique and comprehensive package of professional development and network building opportunities that nurture and support emerging African health researchers. More than just a training opportunity, the RDF serves as a launchpad, empowering fellows to become independent, innovative researchers who can lead groundbreaking research and drive meaningful change. By strengthening Africa's research capacity, the growth of the RDF, year over year, continues to shape the next generation of scientific leaders dedicated to advancing health and science across the continent.

Impact¹

The AREF RDF has had a profound impact on its participants, with 84% affirming that they **"would not be where they are in their careers without participating in the RDF"**. Participants overwhelmingly agreed that the skills gained through the RDF programme were valuable across the following areas:

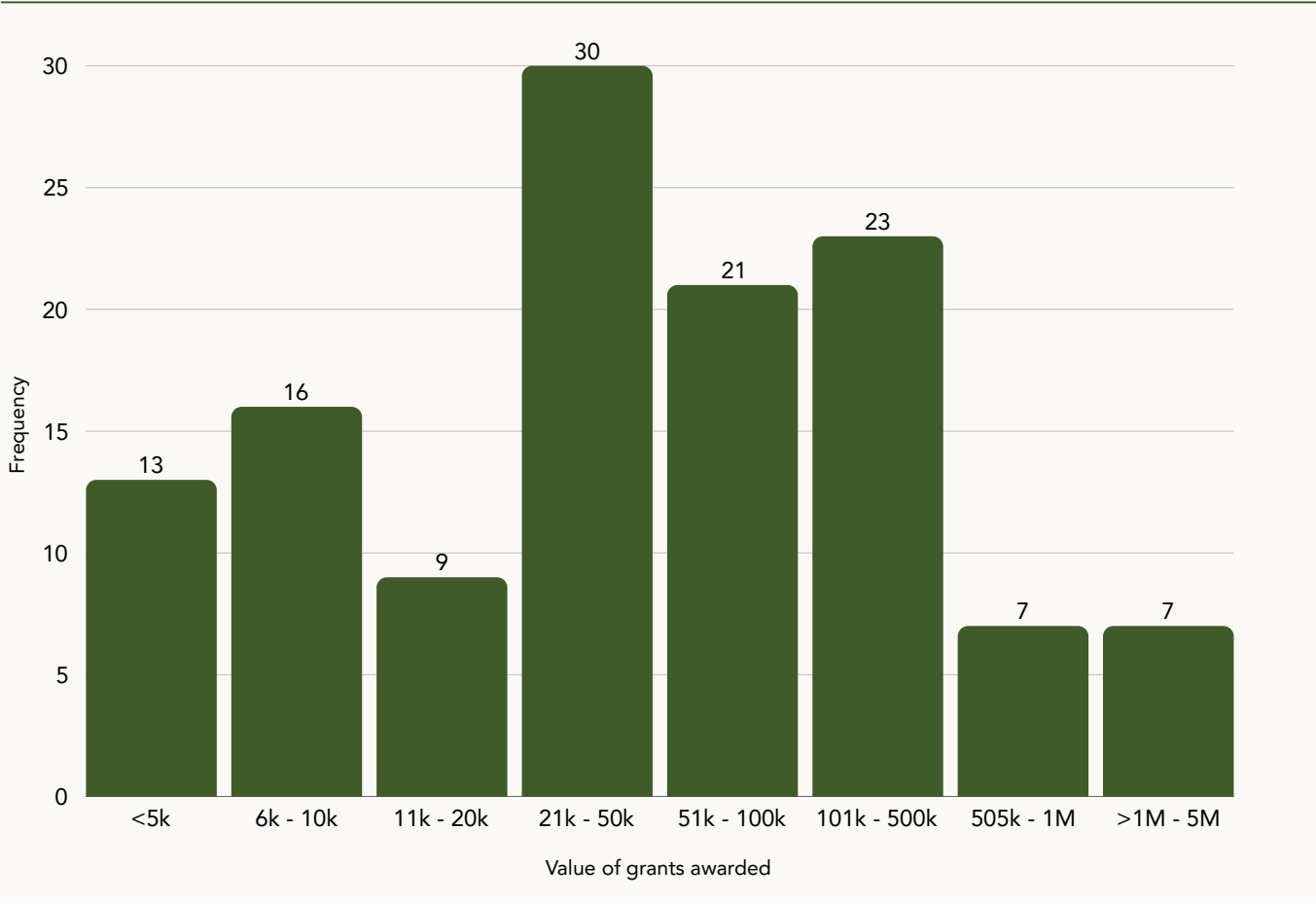


The impact of AREF's RDF programme is reflected in its participants' **career progression, grant success, and publication achievements**. At the start of their RDF journey, 92% of alumni were MSc/PhD students or early career researchers, while 8% were in mid-career role. The impact evaluation survey revealed remarkable career growth, with **50% advancing into mid-career or senior positions**. Notably, **one in four** RDF fellows experienced **upwards career progression** - moving from early to mid, or mid to senior - within **3 years**. **One in three** achieved this progression within **5 years**.

Half of all RDF participants have secured at least one **successful grant**, receiving an average of 3.6 grants each. Collectively, RDF alumni have secured over £50 million total in grant funding, with a median of £42,000 per alumnus. While some participants had prior experience obtaining research funding, both the number and value of awarded grants have significantly increased over time, peaking in 2024. RDF participants alone account for **a third of all grant funding received from all AREF programme participants**.

¹ Estimates were derived from an impact survey which was responded to by 76 RDF Alumni

Grant distribution and frequency for RDF fellows



RDF participants also reported substantial growth in their research output and impact. **All** fellows agreed that the RDF positively influenced their publication success, with **60% describing the impact as substantial and 28% as moderate.**

- 70% of participants published at least one paper following their RDF participation.
- The number of first or senior-author publications more than doubled, increasing from a median of 6 (IQR: 4–11.75) before the RDF to 13.5 (IQR: 9.25–27.5) after.
- A similar trend was seen across all publications, which rose from 13 (IQR: 8–24.5) before the RDF to 34.5 (IQR: 20.25–63) after completing the fellowship.
- The h-index of RDF participants ranged from 1 to 32, with a median of 10.

A researcher's h-index reflects the impact of their publications based on citation counts, calculated by journal metrics. The h-index is an author-level metric that measures both the productivity and citation impact of the publications by an author. For early career researchers (ECRs) in the RDF programme, a median h-index of **10** indicates strong academic influence. As the h-index increases, it signals greater recognition, which can enhance funding and collaboration opportunities.



From Clinician to Global Research Leader: The Journey of Dr. Gibril Ndow

Dr. Gibril Ndow, Assistant Professor and Head of the Hepatitis Research Group at the MRC Unit in The Gambia, took a pivotal step in his career through the AREF Research Development Fellowship. As a skilled clinician with a PhD, he aimed to bridge the gap between clinical practice and basic science, exploring how hepatitis B leads to liver cancer and its implications for patient care. However, without laboratory expertise and pilot data, securing grants and advancing his research ambitions remained a challenge. The RDF provided him with a rare and transformative opportunity to transition into the field of metabolomics, equipping him with the skills and networks needed to realise his vision.

Dr. Ndow's **nine-month placement at Imperial College London and the National Phenome Center in the United Kingdom** immersed him in the world of metabolomics. Despite the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, which restricted hands-on lab work, he made the most of the experience by honing his skills in data analysis and bioinformatics. The fellowship also connected him with AREF's leadership, providing him with invaluable mentorship, support for fellowship and grant applications, and mock interviews. Yet, what Dr. Ndow valued most about the RDF was **protected time for training**—a rare luxury for clinicians balancing demanding responsibilities. This dedicated time allowed him to fully engage with his research, build new skills, and lay the foundation for future success.

Successes Since the Program

The RDF programme has had a transformative impact on Dr. Ndow's career, unlocking opportunities that might have otherwise remained out of reach. With the skills and pilot data gained during his fellowship, he secured a £315,000 Wellcome Trust Postdoctoral Fellowship, which served as a springboard for recognition, leadership, and influence at institutional, national, and global levels.

Institutional Recognition	National Leadership	Continental and Global Influence
Promoted to Head of the Hepatitis Research Group at MRC Gambia. Appointed Assistant Professor at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine	Chair of The Gambia's Hepatitis Technical Working Group, advising the Ministry of Health on national hepatitis control strategies.	Board member of the Society for Liver Disease in Africa. Co-chair of the Africa CDC's Viral Hepatitis Expert Group. Contributor to the WHO's Global Hepatitis B Guidelines. <u>Incoming Director of Center for Operational Research on Hepatitis B (COR-HEPB), USA</u>

Dr. Ndow's groundbreaking research in metabolomics and hepatitis has made him a leading global reference in the field. Beyond research, he is committed to mentoring the next generation of scientists, supporting researchers across Africa, Europe, and Asia.

Future Plans

Driven by a desire to advance African research, Dr. Ndow is tackling one of the biggest barriers in his field: limited access to metabolomics equipment. He is actively working to establish a metabolomics laboratory in The Gambia, securing grants and forging collaborations to make this a reality. As the incoming Director of Research for a dedicated operational hepatitis group, he is partnering with AREF to develop specialised training and grant-writing programmes to build capacity in viral hepatitis research.

Dr. Ndow's journey from clinician to global research leader is a powerful testament to the transformative potential of the RDF programme. With dedication, resilience, and AREF's support, he has advanced his career, shaped the future of hepatitis research, and is mentoring the next generation of African scientists. His story highlights the importance of investing in African researchers, demonstrating the immense potential they hold to drive global health innovation.