



Africa Research Excellence Fund

Research Development Fellowships 2025/26

Scheme Information

Deadline for submission of all application documents

13.00 hours GMT on 27 June 2025

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Purpose of this Guidance

The Africa Research Excellence Fund, AREF, is pleased to launch the call for the **AREF Research Development Fellowship Programme for 2025/26**.

The information in this guide is designed to help potential applicants understand the programme's aims and how it is managed, and to help you decide whether you are likely to meet the programme's requirements.

Guidance notes for filling in the application form are provided in a separate document: **Guidance on Completing the Application Form**.

Programme Overview

Aim. To support researchers in Africa who are emerging leaders and working on important challenges for human health, to develop their skills as a researcher.

What it offers. A three to nine-month placement at a leading research institution in the UK, Europe or Africa, with additional support at your home institution before and after the placement. Up to £47,000 available.

Who is eligible? Early career researchers. These are research active post-doctoral scientists and clinicians with higher qualifications who are nationals of and employed in Africa (see detailed eligibility criteria).

How to apply. Read the guidance documents carefully before developing your proposal and starting your application. Complete the application via the portal at <https://programmes.aref-africa.org.uk/>

Applicants can submit only one application per call.

Deadline for submission of all application documents

13.00 hours GMT on 27 June 2025

Decisions. Applicants will be notified of their outcome by December 2025.

Fellowships. Fellowships can start between June 2026 and December 2026.

Questions. Should you have any questions that are not contained in these guidelines, please email by 20 June 2025 (please see instructions below).

How to contact us. If you have any enquiries, contact AREF via the 'Contact Us' section on the portal which can be found on the lefthand panel on your homepage with your enquiry and you will receive a response within 5 working days.

If your enquiry is related to registering on the portal, please email us at programmes@aref-africa.org.uk with the title "Portal Registration" in your email.

Emails sent to the above mentioned email and any other AREF email related to the application will not receive a timely response.

It is essential that you discuss your plans for an AREF Fellowship in the context of your career development with appropriate leaders within your Employing Organisation and Host Organisation *at an early stage*. You need your sponsors and other senior people to agree and support your plans.

AREF does not reimburse your Employing Organisation for your salary while you are away on placement: we do support reasonable accommodation, travel and training costs.

Our fellowships are only possible as a result of the support received from a foundation that wishes to remain anonymous, the Gates Foundation and the UK Medical Research Council.

About the Africa Research Excellence Fund, AREF

Our Vision. An inspired, committed, and talented community of researchers in Africa leading world-class research and participating equitably in international research endeavours for health and wellbeing.

AREF was founded in 2015 to improve the quality and impact of health research in Africa. Our mission is to nurture, mentor and support a community of health researchers across Africa to become experts and leaders, capable of tackling African and global health challenges.

Through our work, we support researchers at the early stages of their careers, offering training, leadership development and funding. We partner with research institutions in Africa and are building a strong and sustainable African researcher community where researchers are growing their networks and improving research practice, collaboration and output.

Since 2015, AREF has funded 134 Research Development Fellowships. Over 400 emerging health researchers have participated in our skills and leadership development programmes. They are winning research funding, producing world-class research publications, building networks, gaining promotion and finding solutions to prevailing health challenges.

For further information about AREF, please visit our website: [Africa Research Excellence Fund](#)

About the Research Development Fellowship Programme

The aim of the Research Development Fellowship Programme is to provide opportunities for talented health researchers based in Africa, so that they can lead research that is responsive to its African settings and can contribute to reducing the burden of disease. It aims to develop emerging African scientists through developing their skills, experience, confidence and research outputs.

Fellowships offer awardees the opportunity to develop their own research ideas, research skills and capabilities, to grow their research relationships through collaboration and mentorship, and to work towards a substantial research funding proposal.

We receive many updates from AREF Fellows who report how their Fellowship has progressed their career. Many have gone on to win fellowships and grants: this includes funding from institutions including the National Institutes of Health (NIH), Wellcome Trust, African Academy of Sciences (AESAs, FLAIR), the UK Medical Research Council (MRC) and others.

“The AREF Fellowship was a huge stepping stone for me. The most important way it helped was by developing connections to be able to form collaborations. It’s these collaborations that will help me apply for my own grants.”

Dr El Hadji Niang, Senegal, 2017

Programme scope

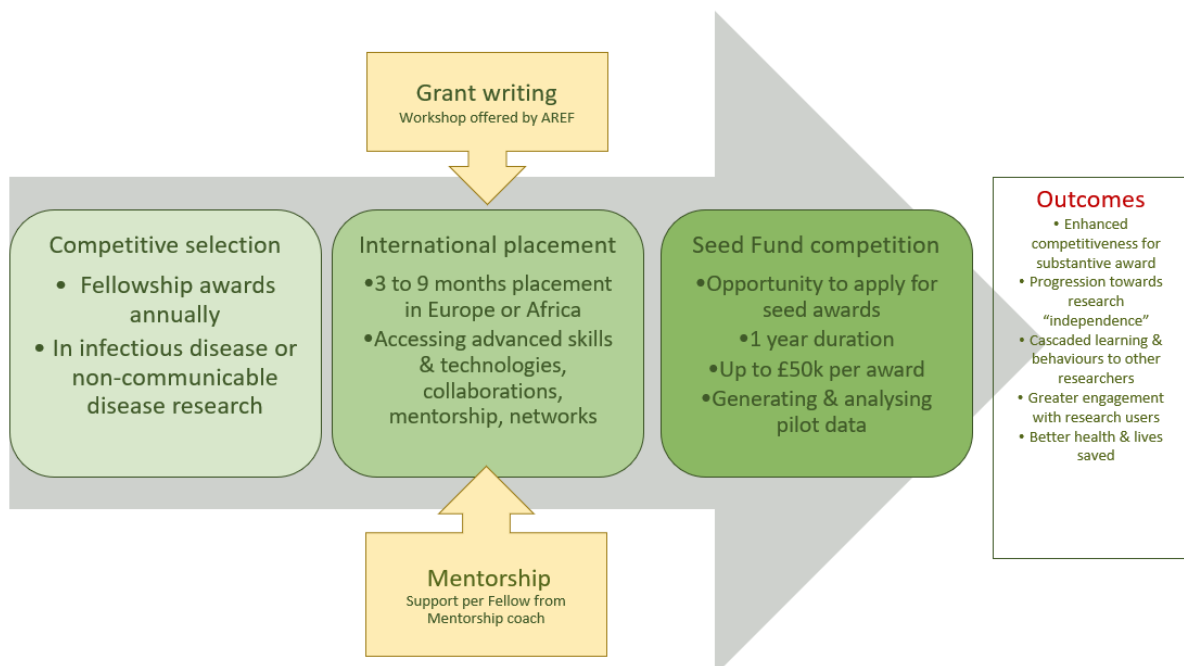
The scope includes human health research in **infectious** and **non-communicable diseases** that are significant and/or identified as “neglected” in Africa.

Fellowship outline

The Fellowship enables researchers to undertake a combination of research training and professional development activities that contribute to the researcher journey. It comprises on the job training (including a small research project), networking and visits, developing collaborations, attending specialist training and an international conference.

The Fellowship is not a project grant and does not provide funds for a whole research project.

Figure 1: Overview of the Programme



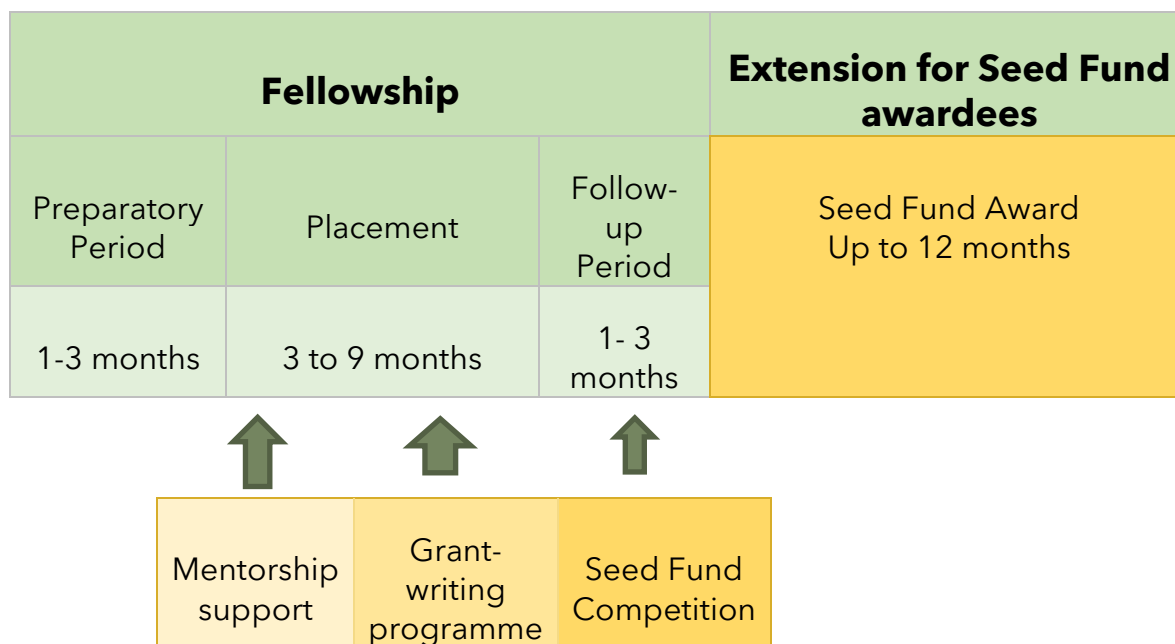
Each Fellowship has the following components (figure 2 below):

- Preparatory period before the placement. A minimum of one month to a maximum of three months.
- Placement for research training and professional development at a centre of excellence in Europe or Africa. A minimum of three months to a maximum of nine months.
- Follow-up Period immediately after the Placement. A minimum of one month to a maximum of three months.
- Mentorship support for each fellow and their mentors.
- Intensive grant writing workshop programme.
- On completing the Fellowship, the opportunity to apply for further funding via AREF’s annual Seed Funding competition.

The maximum period for the whole Fellowship is 15 months broken down as follows:

- Maximum 3 month preparatory period
- Maximum 9 month placement
- Maximum 3 month follow up period

Figure 2: Timeline of the Fellowship and Seed Fund



How much funding is available?

Applicants can ask for a maximum of:

- £25,000 for a Fellowship with a 3-month placement
- £37,000 for a Fellowship with a 6-month placement
- £47,000 for a Fellowship with a 9-month placement

This includes costs for the Preparatory and Follow-up Periods.

We expect to make around 30 RDF awards depending on the funding available.

More details on costs and budgets are in the document: **Guidance on Completing the Application Forms**

Mentorship support “Great mentoring is key for the next generation of scientists”¹.

The value of mentorship and the mentorship gap experienced by early career researchers in Africa is attested to in reports and by individuals. Our experience at AREF is that the mentoring is often confused with directive relationships such as supervision and patronage – and that every emerging researcher wants a mentor.

AREF’s Research Development includes mentorship support as follows:

- Training for Fellows in good mentor/mentee/mentorship practices. This includes engaging with a potential mentor, being a good mentee and becoming a great mentor to the next generation.
- Support Fellows to manage your own mentoring relationships, including identifying a mentor, the first meeting - defining and agreeing the relationship, sustaining the relationship and, where appropriate exiting it.
- To promote peer-mentoring across the cohort of Fellows.

Seed Funds

Towards the end of the Research Development Fellowship programme, AREF will hold a Seed Fund competition.

The Seed Fund is an award **of up to £50,000 over 12 months**. to give Fellows the opportunity to develop pilot data for a larger grant proposal, refine their research questions and develop, adapt or validate innovative methods and data collection.

We expect there will be about three awards available depending on the funding available.

Outcomes

By the end of the placement, we expect Fellows to provide evidence of outcomes including: -

- a) being a more effective researcher
- b) developing their own research ideas
- c) submitting applications and winning funding
- d) disseminating their findings with impact
- e) leading effective collaborative teams.

¹ Nature 552, 5 (2017) doi: 10.1038/d41586-017-07840-2

Long term, AREF's Fellows will be better equipped to shape health research in Africa and globally to improve health and save lives by tackling emerging and persistent infectious diseases or the rising threat from chronic, non-communicable diseases.

Who can apply?

Eligibility

The RDF scheme focuses on Early-Career health Researchers (ECR) from Africa who plan to develop their research career in Africa and have the potential to become research leaders.

Applicants must demonstrate that they have chosen to focus their career on human health research and are progressing on the pathway to become, but are not fully established as, independent researchers, with the potential to lead research that is original and innovative. This can be demonstrated through their employment, training, research experience and outputs.

Nationality and residency

- Applicants must be a national of a country in Africa.
- Applicants need not be resident in Africa at the time of applying, provided that the application is officially supported by an African institution that meets the eligibility criteria for an Employing Organisation which confirms that the applicant is employed locally.

Employment

Applications must be working at least **30%** Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) in an active research role; and EITHER

- a) have guaranteed employment with a legally established research organisation or a university in Africa for the duration of the Fellowship, **or**,
- b) have guarantee of employment at a centre of research excellence outside Africa, and an honorary contract with a legally established research organisation or university in Africa for the duration of the Fellowship. They must spend at least 70% of their time based in Africa (this must be confirmed in the support letter from the institution in Africa).

Academic qualifications

Individuals with the following qualifications may apply:

1. Clinicians and non-clinicians with a PhD qualification or equivalent postgraduate degree (DPh/DPhil/MD) in a health-related subject from a recognised institution of higher education **or**,
2. Clinicians with a specialist clinical qualification. Must have an MBBS or equivalent and a specialist clinical qualification. Examples of specialist clinical qualifications are FRCP, FWACP or equivalent **or**,
3. Clinicians with a Master's degree. Must have an MBBS or equivalent and the Master's must have contained a research component. We would expect a plan to gain a PhD or equivalent doctorate (although not funded as part of the AREF Fellowship).

*If you are currently pursuing a PhD, you must have defended your thesis and obtained your award or a letter of attestation from the institution that you passed your viva examination by the deadline of the call (i.e., before 27 June 2025).

Research experience

While there is no clear definition of an ECR, we expect most ECRs will be within **eight years** of their research (normally PhD) qualification. However, we recognise that career pathways differ, and your research career may have been interrupted, for example, you may have taken time off for caring responsibilities of young children or elderly parents.

Applicants should:

- Have been research active for the majority of their post-doctoral career (post-Masters for clinicians), as evidenced by their employment history and research outputs.
- Have at least three years' research experience, but normally not more than ten, with significant research outputs (most successful applicants have at least three first author publications).
- Not have won a substantial research grant equivalent to GBP £300,000 and above.
- Not have other significant research funding/fellowship commitments for the duration of the AREF fellowship. This is to ensure there is sufficient time to devote to the Fellowship (in the region of 80% FTE for the duration of the placement).

Equality and diversity

- Equality and diversity are core values of AREF, and we encourage applications by scientists irrespective of gender, marital status, colour, race, creed or ethnicity.
- We strongly welcome eligible applicants from Francophone and Lusophone countries in Africa as well as from Anglophone countries of the region.

Language competency

- If you have less than one academic year of scientific training conducted in English, you will need to provide evidence with your application that you meet the standards of language competency required by the Host Organisation.

Previous AREF applicants and awardees

- Previous AREF Research Development Fellows and AREF-EDCTP Preparatory Fellows are not eligible for the current Programme.
- Participants at AREF workshops and researcher/leadership development programmes can apply if they meet the eligibility criteria.
- If you have previously applied for an AREF Research Development Fellowships or an AREF-EDCTP Preparatory Fellowship and it was unsuccessful, please contact us through the portal before submitting an application.

If your situation changes while your application is under consideration and this may impact your eligibility or ability to take up a Fellowship, please let AREF know at the earliest opportunity.

Host Organisation (HO) eligibility

To host an AREF Research Development Fellow, the HO must:

- Be in **Africa or Europe**, including the United Kingdom.

- Be an academic institution or a research-oriented industry or a policy-making organisation. You may propose a placement or part of a placement in non-academic institutions, such as international health policy organisations and research-intensive commercial organisations (e.g. a pharmaceutical company). If you are considering applying for a placement in a non-academic organisation, please contact AREF at an early stage to discuss your application through the "Contact Us" section on the portal
- Be a legal entity constituted under the national law of the country where it is based.
- **Not be the institution which awarded the applicant's Ph.D. or where the applicant has or has had an affiliation** (e.g., honorary position).
- Have a track record of being engaged in world-class research and/or its translation into products, policies or practices to the benefit of the public.
- Be in receipt of substantial, international, competitive (peer-reviewed) research funding.
- Make available all reasonable pastoral care to the Fellow.
- Ensure that the Fellow is able to participate fully in the intellectual life of the Host Organisation and is enabled to make effective use of the opportunities funded by the Fellowship or by the organisation itself.
- Make all reasonable efforts to realise opportunities for continuing mutually beneficial collaboration with the Fellow.
- Possess capacity, including financial capacity, to support and implement the proposed programme of activities.
- Be able to accept the terms and conditions of the award and manage the Fellowship funds in accordance with the terms and conditions, including ensuring appropriate processes are put in place to administer funds to the Fellow and, if applicable, to the Employing Organisation.

Employing Organisation (EO) eligibility

The EO must:

- Be a 'not-for-profit' research organisation or academic institution operating in Africa.
- Be a legal entity constituted under the national law of the country where it is based.
- Have the financial capacity to support the programme as set out in the proposal.
- Possess capacity to support and implement the proposed programme of activities.
- Work with the HO to support the Fellow to achieve the specified Fellowship outputs and outcomes.
- Provide a guarantee to continue to pay the Fellow's salary and agreed benefits under the AREF Fellow's current contract until the end of their AREF Fellowship, including while on placement. This includes also a guarantee to provide scientific and administrative support to allow them to undertake the Fellowship successfully.

- Be able to accept the terms and conditions of the award and manage any Fellowship funds awarded to the institution in accordance with the terms and conditions, including having appropriate processes to administer funds to the Fellow and, where applicable, to the HO.
- Failure to support a Fellow may result in the early termination of the Fellowship award and further payments to the institution being cancelled.

AREF will complete due diligence checks on the grant and financial management capacity of awardee institutions.

A Fellow will not become an employee of AREF or of the Host Organisation by virtue of the AREF Research Development Fellowship.

Application process

You should:

- **All applications must be via the new AREF Portal system online. We will NOT accept any applications or supporting documents by email.**
- Read the **Guidance on Completing the Application Forms** to understand the call and submission details.
- Consult academic and research support / management staff at the organisations involved at an early stage.
- Allow enough time for the application to be reviewed, approved and signed ahead of the deadline.
- Contact AREF if you have any queries using the "Contact Us" section on the portal preferably by 20 June 2025.
- Submit all application documents following instructions in **Guidance on Completing the Application Forms**.
- Apply before the deadline: **13.00 hours GMT on 27 June 2025**

Please note

- We will NOT accept applications by email. We will only accept applications via the portal.
- We will not consider your application if:
 - the application form is not completed properly or,
 - the accompanying documents are not completed or,
 - the application is received after the deadline.
- Applicants can submit only **one** application per call.

Assessment Process

Eligibility Checks

AREF will check all applications against the eligibility criteria. We will reject ineligible applications at this stage and inform unsuccessful applicants of the reason why their application was not successful.

Peer review and selection

AREF will assess applications on the basis of independent peer review.

AREF will first review the suitability of applications focusing on the person and place (including choice of host organisation). Applications that best meet the first review criteria will be assessed against following criteria:

Assessment criteria detail

1. Capacity for the applicant to benefit
 - Employment and if they have had a significant research role.
 - Evidence of expertise in the research area.
 - Advanced and specialist training undertaken.
 - Winning small grants and ambitions to apply for others.
 - Prizes for research performance & publications.
 - Impactful publications, appropriate to the applicant's research discipline and career stage.
 - Sufficient research experience to benefit from a placement.
 - Research experience compatible with being an early career researcher.
2. Research potential and future research
 - Clearly articulated career vision.
 - Potential to become an independent researcher and developing their own research ideas.
 - Clear rationale for research focus and identification of a suitable research niche.
 - Identifies potential impact on health in Africa.
 - Commitment to developing their career in Africa.
 - A clear, rational and logical pathway of activities, capabilities and desired achievements to reach their goals.
 - Persuasive rationale for focusing on the particular future research question.
 - A persuasive strategy for answering the question.
 - Recognition of strengths and weaknesses of the design - and of alternatives.
 - Indications of scale, of numbers to be recruited, sampled etc.
 - Demonstrates ambition, innovation and originality.
3. Fellowship Plan including Research Training Project Abstract
 - Fellowship should be a distinctive "stepping stone" to help researcher development.
 - Plan credibly contributes to applicant's research development path e.g., courses are well-targeted to the development needs, will build new collaborations
 - Proposes innovative, imaginative and effective ways to develop capabilities.
 - Plan is informative with specific tasks and milestones for all three phases.
 - Plan is ambitious but realistic for the time available: scale of activity is appropriate for an early postdoctoral scientist in their setting.
 - Time allocated for all important elements of Fellowship: on the job/project training, skills development/courses, networking, conferences.
 - Research project activities should be oriented to training and to generating analysing pilot data.
 - Recognition of strengths and weaknesses of project design - and of alternatives.
 - Understanding of ethical approval required.

- Evident that the sponsors have provided input into the plan.
 - Described how will use any advance scientific techniques on return to EO. Described the equipment they will need and whether it is available at the EO?
4. Host and sponsor support
- A case is made that the HO is a centre of excellence and the best environment to undertake the placement. For HOs outside of Africa, the need to access expertise and facilities outside of the continent is clearly articulated.
 - Roles and capabilities of the sponsors are clearly identified.
 - Evidence from supporting letters of sponsor commitment to specific actions.
 - The sponsors commit specific resources of their own, additional to those that AREF provides
 - Commitment to developing the fellow: new skills, relationships/networks, and a funding proposal.
 - The Fellowship is more than extending an existing relationship, e.g. between the Fellow and their past PhD supervisor, part of a large international collaboration and work not been driven by the fellow.
 - The Fellow owns and is driving the plan. Sponsor supports not leads.
 - The Employing Organisation shows facilitating the fellowship and the fellow's longer-term development as a researcher.
5. Well justified resources
- The resources requested are realistic and appropriate to the work to be done not too much or too little.
 - Courses/conferences specified in the Plan have been specified with a credible approximate cost.
 - Travel and the costs of travel is appropriate to the plan
 - Evidence that applicants have developed the budget with their hosts
 - The host institution is showing generosity e.g., contributing research costs (costs of assays and analyses, or for training and pilot work).

Feedback

Applicants will be notified of the outcome by December 2025.

While we endeavour to provide feedback to applicants so they can articulate their ideas and plans as best as possible in future proposals, we regret that this may not always be possible.

Award

AREF will undertake due diligence on awardee institutions and review proposed plans and budgets with the fellow and their EO and HO sponsors. AREF usually splits the Fellowship award between the HO and EO. It is likely that award letters will be issued by April 2026.

Fellowships to start from June 2026 but no later than December 2026.