

Africa Research Excellence Fund *EXCELL Malaria Researcher and Leadership Development Programme*: Information for Applicants

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AREF is pleased to offer **Excell Malaria Researcher and Leadership Development Programme** funded by the **Gates Foundation Malaria Programme**. The purpose of this guidance is to help potential applicants understand the aims of the *Excell* Malaria Programme, how the competition is managed and to judge whether you are likely to meet the Programme requirements. Note that individual researchers cannot apply directly to AREF; only representatives of eligible institutions may apply, as described in this document.

1. About AREF and the *Excell* Malaria Programme

The **Africa Research Excellence Fund (AREF¹)** was established in 2015 to nurture *excellent* health research by African researchers, in Africa, with impact for the health and lives of populations in Africa. **In 2015, Professor Sir Tumani Corrah founded the Africa Research Excellence Fund (AREF) to strengthen health research capacity in Africa.**

Africa shoulders a crippling share of the world's disease burden. Millions of lives are lost prematurely - and often needlessly - due to poor health and disease. Families, communities and national development are all adversely affected by poor health.

Over the last ten years, AREF has continued to support institutions and talented African researchers to address critical barriers as they seek to strengthen their capacity to win funds and build leading portfolios of research that can improve health and save lives.

In this 2-year *Excell* Malaria programme, AREF will work closely with three competitively selected institutions with strong malaria research programmes from Africa. The three institutions will develop the research and leadership skills of 3 mid-career and 15 early career postdoctoral researchers (one institutional lead and five *Excell* fellows per institution). The programme will support, financially and through mentorship and training, our partners' local strategies and committed actions for researcher and leadership development. The *Excell* Programme aims to embed structural changes in African research institutions that promote early career malaria researcher development, develop the leadership capacity of *Excell* fellows, and facilitate knowledge exchange across geographic borders. Up to 50,000 USD will be available, \$30,000 within the first year and an additional \$20,000 the second year.

The *Excell* team of experienced facilitators will coach 18 individual malaria researchers from the participating institutions to realise their potential: building strong research careers, empowering excellent teams, winning funding, and collaborating internationally.

1.1. *Excell* Malaria Programme Objectives

The *Excell* programme is centred around three cross-cutting themes and objectives:

1. *Outcomes orientation*: To focus on developmental outcomes that benefit participating researchers and their home institutions and that lead to the production of excellent malaria research outputs. Through establishing a supportive institutional research culture that fosters and develops their potential, provides enabling opportunities, and supports innovative research.

¹ <http://www.africaresearchexcellencefund.org.uk/>

2. *Organisational development*: To have interventions that promote sustained institutional engagement in developing and managing their most talented malaria researchers, thereby enabling committed institutions to grow their research footprint, impact and outcomes.
3. *Individual development*: To provide coaching, mentorship and experiential learning interventions that enable individuals to realise their research and leadership potential in the field of malaria research; develop their skills and capabilities; and to meet challenging research and career goals.

1.2. **Excell Malaria Programme benefits**

The *Excell Malaria* programme aims to provide your institution with the following opportunities and benefits:

- Intensive developmental support for five nominated “rising stars” from your institution
- The opportunity to cascade their learning through your other institutional programmes.
- Cooperation and networking between participating institutions, sharing your experience and best practice – and engaging with other networks.
- An *Excell* enabled capacity strengthening project involving your institutional lead and *Excell* nominees (researchers), focused on an aspect of local transformation within your bigger set of plans, supported by AREF funding up to 50,000 USD per institution.
- Feed-through into greater success at winning funds and to research with greater impact.

If you apply for an award, you will need to describe how your institution would make these opportunities happen – and how the *Excell* programme would advance your institution’s researcher and malaria research capacity strengthening strategy.

1.3. **Learning Themes**

The *Excell* Programme comprises the following five learning themes:

1. The Researcher as Leader
2. The Effective Researcher
3. The Compelling Applicant
4. The Researcher as Manager
5. The Responsible Researcher

1.4. **Disciplinary scope**

The scope of this competition for individuals (nominees) applying through their institutions will focus on malaria research, including non-biomedical disciplines applied to challenging health problems such as mathematics, environmental sciences, behavioural social sciences and health economics.

1.5. **Duration and programme outline**

The programme’s principal events are spaced as follows over a 48-month timetable, within an overall programme length of two years from launch. Below is the general outline:

- Jan 2026 Launch of *Excell* Programme
- May 2026 Opening Conference and Workshop 1
- July 2026 Initial project award (up to \$30,000)
- May 2027 Site Visits and Workshop 2
- June 2027 Embedding award (up to \$20,000)
- June 2028 Workshop 3 and Closing Conference

In addition, participants will receive virtual coaching and mentorship, virtual training, networking sessions, and peer learning support tailored specifically to the needs of the participants.

1.6. Programme governance

At the opening conference a Steering Group will be formed. It will comprise the participating Institutional Leads and the faculty of Theme Leaders and will be chaired by the AREF Chief Executive Officer (CEO). The early career participants will be consulted on how best to ensure their voices are heard. The decision of the AREF CEO will be final in all matters concerning selection of institutions and nominees and of programme management.

1.7. Role of the Institution

To ensure sustainability and integration, the selected institutions will need to engage throughout the programme.

1. The institutions' designated Institutional Leads will participate in the three residential conferences.
2. Institutional Leads through the Steering Committee will be consulted on the curriculum and programme, to fine-tune them to the institutions' needs and programme objectives.
3. Partner institutions will be welcome to volunteer to host a workshop or the final conference, or to propose and lead webinars between the workshops; and to contribute appropriate facilitators and learning resources that they already use and wish to share.
4. The concluding conference will focus on (i) sustainability of graduating participants' and institutional commitments to on-going malaria research and malaria researcher and leadership development; and (ii) translation of research to downstream users and ultimate health benefits.
5. Partners will contribute to formal evaluation of the project and to consideration of sustainability.

2. Eligibility

2.1. Institutions

This call is open to universities and research institutions internationally recognised for their contribution to malaria research, based in Africa. **Note that such research institutions must be a legal entity** established for purposes that include **research** and **research training**. "Internationally recognised" means that the institution can evidence funding, staffing, governance and malaria outputs that show it has connections and impact outside the country in which it is legally established. "Based in..." means that the leadership, governance and programmes of the institution are based unequivocally within the region (a field-site directed by an institution outside the region would not be considered eligible).

Applications will be submitted to AREF by a malaria Institutional Lead who, as designated **Institutional Lead**, is authorized to do so by the leadership of the institution. The Institutional Lead (as the named principal applicant) will be responsible for developing and implementing the *Excell* Malaria programme within their institution.

Your application will need to be sponsored by the institution's leadership: a named official with responsibility for research capacity development, such as the deputy-vice chancellor for research or the research institution's director, must personally engage in local sponsorship and governance of

the *Excell* programme. They will be the Sponsor of the *Excell* Malaria programme within their institution.

AREF will accept applications from an entity within a university, such as a faculty, institute, or research centre, provided that the application is authorised by the institutional leadership. Only ONE application will be accepted from each university or research institution.

Joint applications, such as between two universities or a university and an independent research institution, are welcome: one institution shall be identified as the lead and will be responsible for ensuring sound governance and implementation.

AREF will NOT accept applications from institutions to add to an existing, funded researcher development activity that has the same objectives as *Excell*.

The selection criteria are described at Section 5.3.1.

2.2. Institutional nominees

To qualify as a participant for the *Excell* Malaria Programme, your nominees must meet the following eligibility criteria:

- A national of an African state
- Employed in an eligible institution in a post with a significant and specific *research or research/teaching or research/clinic* role.
- *Scientists and clinicians with a PhD*: 2 to 8 full years of active postdoctoral research experience. *Clinicians without a PhD*: Both (i) an MD or research Masters *and* (ii) 4- to 8 years of active research experience.
- *Active in malaria research with at least 4 publications in this field.*
- Declaration that they have not participated in an equivalent programme to *Excell*, or in separate training events that cover more than two of the AREF five Learning themes (see Section 1.3).

Selection criteria that institutions should incorporate in their own process are described in Section 5.3.2.

Institutions must rank their nominees so as to assist the AREF Selection Panel (Section 5.2) achieve a balanced yet diverse cohort of 15 outstanding individuals from across the three successful African institutions.

Including ineligible nominees or evidence of a weak selection process will reduce the chance of the institution succeeding in its application.

2.3. Participation of AREF Fellows

The normal way for AREF past and present Fellows to participate is to be nominated by their institutions, being considered in competition with other would-be nominees. In addition, if there are vacant places, the AREF CEO may include in the programme AREF Fellows from institutions that are not participating provided that the Fellows otherwise fully meet the criteria.

Note AREF's Towards Leadership has a high degree of overlap with this training programme and as such these alumni would not be accepted as early career fellows. However, Towards Leadership alumni may act as institutional lead and/or support faculty for the programme.

2.4. Equality and diversity

Equality and diversity are core values of the Africa Research Excellence Fund, and we encourage applications by African scientists irrespective of gender, marital status, colour, race, creed, ethnic or national origin.

We strongly welcome eligible applicants from **francophone and lusophone countries** as well as from anglophone countries.

Additionally, we expect institutions to be mindful of the importance of diversity when nominating early career researchers to participate in this programme, particularly in research departments and faculties where women are underrepresented.

2.5. Language competency

All applications should be written in comprehensible, good English but complete fluency is not required.

Institutions should ensure that their nominees have a good command of the English language so they can engage fully and confidently in the programme.

2.6. AREF-supported costs

Up to 50,000 USD funding will be available to support a capacity-strengthening project involving your team, the core of which will be your institution's *Excell* Institutional Lead and nominees. Award money will be provided over two years, up to \$30,000 in the first year and up to \$20,000 in the second. Your team will design and deliver the project during the programme period. The project will be focused on catalysing your institutional capacity development strategy, supporting malaria researchers. It should aim to be transformative, and to demonstrate how your institution can integrate and sustain the benefits of participating in the *Excell* Malaria programme.

Additionally, AREF will fund all AREF-approved travel and subsistence costs of participating Institutional leads and nominees, training materials and teaching costs relating to the conferences, workshops, and online learning.

2.7. Financial management

Most of the funding will be handled by AREF. Consequently, only the award to the participating institutions to support their research capacity strengthening strategy will normally be made to the institution. The award will only fund the specified direct costs of the award. Selected institutions will need to assure AREF that they have sufficient financial management systems in place to manage their award through a due diligence check.

The institution and not AREF shall be liable for all costs incurred due to withdrawal, cancellation, no show or other default by its participants for whatever reason, unless caused directly by an error of AREF itself.

3. Application Process

Applicants should set aside enough time to get the application approved and signed ahead of the deadline. You should consult academic and research support / management staff of your institution at an early stage. Each institution may submit only one application (see Section 2.1).

The application form can be accessed through the AREF portal system at <https://programmes.aref-africa.org.uk/>.

3.1. Preparation

Applicants should do the following:

- Read the Application Form, paying particular attention to the guidance in italics.
- Ensure that their application can be approved and signed in time before the deadline.

3.2. Application

Applicants must submit the following as PDFs:

1. A completed application form signed by the institution's leadership, "the Sponsor": a named official with responsibility for research capacity development, such as the deputy-vice chancellor for research or the research institution's director. The institutional lead must also sign the form.
2. A letter from the Sponsor in support of the application. The letter should address the following:
 - A brief statement of the institution's capabilities in malaria research and research management
 - How the Sponsor is directly involved in research capacity building and, in particular researcher and leadership capacity development (academic development)
 - How the Sponsor will integrate the *Excell* programme into the institution's malaria research capacity development strategy and into the greater research culture.
 - The potential to work with other institutions, such as national and regional capacity development networks, to enhance researcher and leadership development
3. The short academic CV of the Institutional Lead (and any co-applicants).
4. *Selected* documents as appendices to supplement the account in the application form. You may for instance include:
 - An organogram showing governance of the institutional capacity development strategy
 - Relevant strategy documents (or extracts of)
 - Relevant data, for instance on the portfolio of malaria research, malaria publications and research capacity development grants.Each appendix must be numbered and clearly titled. It must reference the section of the Application Form to which it is relevant: conversely, the Application form must reference the appendix by number. However, be selective.
5. The portfolio of nominees' information, comprising the following:
 - The application forms and short CVs of up to five nominated researchers
 - Nominees' evidence: Best four malaria publications (if not easily accessible on the web), their PhD certificate (or equivalent).These should be archived by the Institutional Lead and may be requested by AREF during the selection process.
6. Your account of your selection process for nominating researchers, demonstrating transparency of the process and inclusion of the diversity of malaria researchers within the organisation. Please include any helpful supporting evidence e.g. PDF of an internal call.

7. All submitted documents must be named strictly in accordance with the naming guidance on Part D of the application form

The application form can be accessed through the AREF portal system at <https://programmes.aref-africa.org.uk/>. The deadline for receipt of Applications and supporting documents: 1600 hours (GMT) on 15th October 2025.

4. Selection process

4.1. Eligibility checks

All applications will be checked by AREF secretariat for eligibility against the Eligibility Criteria (see Section 2.1). Ineligible applicants will be informed by 26th November 2025.

4.2. Selection Panel

AREF will establish an independent multidisciplinary Selection Panel, balanced by gender and region, chaired by an international scientist with research capacity strengthening experience in Africa. It will include: (i) Members of the AREF College of Experts; (ii) researchers independent of AREF; and (iii) two *Excell* Theme Leads.

The eligible applications will be assessed by the Panel comprising, as near as possible, 50% women. The panel will include francophone members and scientists from a wide range of research disciplines.

The Panel will advise the AREF CEO, who will have the final decision to approve institutional and individual participation.

4.3. Selection criteria

5.3.1 Institutions

The AREF selection panel will use four main criteria for short-listing institutions and, in italics, the type of evidence to present in the institutional application form:

1. Active development of an institutional strategy for research and research capacity strengthening that includes researcher and leadership development, with evidence of implementation. *A brief account of the policies and systems that are in place, or are being developed, of resources committed by the institution's leadership, and examples of activities implemented. Maximum 1200 words.*
2. *Active institutional level support for malaria research, demonstrated by integration of this area into the institutional or faculty research strategy, supported laboratory space with continual dedication to upkeep and maintenance of facilities, and/or evidence of institutional engagement with malaria policy or clinical practice. Maximum 1200.*
2. A convincing plan for integrating the *Excell* Malaria programme within that strategy, with an emphasis on demonstrating outcomes and achieving sustainability. *How you might integrate the knowledge and skills developed through Excell within your own strategy, including how you could use up to 50,000 USD, and how would you measure success? Maximum 1500 words.*
3. A portfolio of competitively awarded (through "peer review") malaria research projects, funded nationally by government and internationally by donors and research funders. *(a) Headline numbers and financial value of externally funded malaria (i) research and (ii)*

capacity development projects / programmes that were “live,” as reported your most recent annual institutional research report (or equivalent report);

4. The fit of the institution’s cadre of nominees to the *Excell* programme objectives. (a) *A short account of the institution’s advertising and selection process (Maximum 500 words).* (b) *The accompanying portfolio of nominee applications forms and CVs. The institution should strive to nominate a balanced and diverse set of “rising stars” (Section 2.2) and must rank nominees from 1 (top) to 5.*

5.3.2 Nominees

The Institution’s criteria and process for nomination must be fair and transparent, designed to attract applications from strong performers (“rising stars”), and achieve gender balance and disciplinary diversity within the institutional cohort. The criteria should be explicit and based on the following:

1. The individual’s track record of malaria research productivity and achievement (appropriate to their career stage and discipline): *Account of role(s), outputs, achievements, and markers of esteem.*
2. An ambitious yet credible personal career vision and plan. *Personal statement (Maximum 500 words).*
3. A persuasive account of how participating in the *Excell* Malaria programme has the potential to benefit themselves and their institution. *Statement. (Maximum 300 words).*
4. Such other criteria as the institution itself specifies.

5. Notifications to applicants

AREF will notify eligible institutions about the outcome of the selection process by 26th November 2025.

6. Key dates

Some key dates and times are as follows:

Date	Event
May 2025	Call is launched
Oct 2025	Call closes
Nov 2025	Notification of the outcome of the selection process
Jan 2026	Launch of Programme
May 2026	Opening Conference and Workshop 1
July 2026	Initial Project Award (up to \$30,000)
May 2027	Site Visits and Workshop 2
June 2027	Embedding Project Award (up to \$20,000)

7. Contacts at AREF

All questions should be sent to <https://programmes.aref-africa.org.uk> (please include Excell in the Subject Line).