

# Invitation to Express Interest in Writing a Think Piece on “Being a Next Generation Scholar in Mobility & Access in SSA: conditions, opportunities and challenges, ways forward”

## INTRODUCTION

The Volvo Research and Educational Foundations (VREF) “Next Generation Initiative” seeks to contribute to forming a new generation of highly skilled university researchers and teachers in the area of mobility & access, broadly defined, see [www.vref.se](http://www.vref.se). This initiative encompasses all the programs and platforms currently supported by VREF, including the program on “Walking as a Mode of Transport” (WALKING), the “Informal and Shared Mobility in Low-income Countries” (ISM) program, and the “Mobility & Access in African Cities” (MAC) program.

Within the MAC program, the purpose of the NextGen initiative is to develop and support a vibrant community within which young scholars at Sub-Saharan African (SSA) universities can share their academic work, develop their professional skills, and increase their awareness of resources and opportunities for advancing their academic careers. By NextGen Scholars, VREF refers to advanced master students, Ph.D. candidates, and early career researchers (within five years after doctoral degree) – regardless of age.

At this time, VREF through its MAC program would like to invite NextGen scholars at universities in SSA to submit an Expression of Interest (EoI) to write a think piece on the theme of “Being a Next Generation Scholar in Mobility & Access in SSA: conditions, opportunities and challenges, and ways forward.”

**Deadline for submission of an EoI is 15 May 2024.**

## 1. BACKGROUND, PROBLEM FRAMING

In recent years, issues and challenges related to scarcity of resources, challenging working conditions and limited opportunities for NextGen scholars at African universities have been highlighted and discussed (see e.g. Beaudry et. al. 2018). Many young scholars on the continent experience limitations in the opportunities and support for realising their academic plans and dreams.

Historically, research has often not been sufficiently prioritized at African universities, and the few who qualify for – and are able to join – institutions for research and higher education typically experience both joys, challenges and struggles while attempting to follow academic paths. It is clear that many Next Generation scholars at universities in SSA face significant challenges in successfully developing their skills, completing their degrees (or reaching other research goals), and establishing themselves as qualified, internationally competitive scholars.

VREF is interested in learning more about current conditions, challenges and opportunities, as well as possible ways forward for NextGen Scholars at universities in SSA as they carry out their academic work, develop their careers in research and education, and build networks for further exchanging and enriching the results of their work. Examples of challenges which currently

exist include learning how to strengthen one's academic skill development, acquire research funding, and gain access to other resources and opportunities for successfully carrying out professional work.

Among else, recent work has also pointed to the importance of academic mobility opportunities (both intra-country, regional, international) for building networks and collaborations, as well as the crucial role of access to qualified support and advice from senior colleagues through mentoring opportunities and other forms of professional career support (Beaudry et.al 2018). Conversely, it has also been pointed out that strong hierarchial structures and formal or informal power relations at departmental or university levels can work to limit opportunities for young scholars (where "the older generation can often not let go of the song").

VREF would like to acquire more in-depth knowledge, perspectives and reflections on these and related professional conditions and issues among NextGen scholars at SSA universities by commissioning a "think piece" in this area within the framework of its program "Mobility & Access in African Cities" (MAC).

## 2. WHAT IS A "THINK PIECE"?

By "think piece" is meant a text in which the researcher (or small team of researchers) not only discusses the topic of the work, but also reflects on the patterns, meanings and implications of the work's findings, based on her/his/their own expertise, experiences and perspectives.

Although a think piece may include some new empirical work (e.g. surveys, interviews), the focus of a think piece should be on providing an opening and informed discussion of the topic, where the emphasis is more on *reflective, thoughtful, exploratory analysis* than usually is the case with "traditional" scientific texts.

The researcher(s) also has considerable scope for identifying the issues that she/he/they will discuss. The think piece can be relatively short (20-40 pages) and should be accessible to non-experts in the area. The ambition is that each think piece will stimulate further debate and explorations among relevant researchers, students, practitioners and other stakeholders with interest in this area.

## 3. THINK PIECE FOR THE CURRENT EXPRESSION OF INTEREST (EOI) - PURPOSE AND SCOPE

The overall purpose and scope of the proposed think piece are:

- to describe the current situation with regard to professional conditions, frameworks, and/or issues which can influence the ability of NextGen scholars in SSA to achieve their goals and pursue their academic careers within mobility and access (broadly defined);
- to discuss the experiences and perspectives (including gender-based perspectives) of NextGen scholars in SSA in relation to challenges and barriers in their professional situations, as well as approaches for constructively dealing with such challenges;
- to suggest possible resources, opportunities and approaches which NextGen scholars might fruitfully utilize to strengthen their professional work situations;
- to suggest and reflect upon recommendations and possible innovative "ways forward" for NextGen scholars at various stages of their academic careers (master level, Ph.D level, early career researchers)

The think piece might focus on analysis and reflection concerning conditions and challenges related to successfully completing thesis work on master or Ph.D. levels; strengthening academic capacities and skills (such as “how to” write and publish one’s work); gaining access to research applications and projects; building strong professional networks; dealing with institutional research-teaching imbalances; handling hierarchical power structures or gender-related challenges; gaining access to mentoring opportunities; and addressing institutional or infrastructural issues.

It is envisioned that the current think piece will primarily have a qualitative orientation, although small quantitative surveys may be included in the work as a means of compiling and understanding the experiences of perspectives of various cohorts of NextGen scholars. The results of the work will be published by VREF within its MAC program and will be presented at an online event (e.g. a Research Forum).

#### 4. WHO CAN APPLY?

The MAC initiative is directed at NextGen scholars who are based at universities in SSA. Applications from Next Gen scholars originating from SSA who are currently based at universities outside the continent but have strong networks within SSA will also be considered. Although senior scholars may participate in the work, the main applicant/project leader(s) must be a NextGen scholar in the area of mobility and access, broadly defined. VREF encourages collaborations among NextGen scholars at different universities and/or regions in SSA in planning and carrying out the work.

#### 5. EXPRESSION OF INTEREST (EOI) – GUIDELINES

VREF thus invites NextGen scholars in SSA to submit an Expression of Interest (Eoi) for a commissioned think piece on “Being a Next Generation Scholar in Mobility & Access in SSA: conditions, opportunities and challenges, ways forward” as described above. Scholars are encouraged to develop and describe an idea for the think piece with a focus and content that reflects their own interests, approaches and perspectives within the general framework of this invitation.

VREF is flexible with regard to the length of the commissioned think piece but envisions that the work will result in a think piece of approximately 20-40 pages, depending upon the scope of the work. VREF will fund 1-2 think pieces in this area, each **with a maximum budget of 30,000 SEK**.

The think piece may be authored a single researcher or a small team of researchers.

The expression of interest (maximum 2 pages excluding appendices) should briefly describe the following about the proposed work:

- Background and framing that informs the work (including possible relevant work in the area); context and issues to be addressed
- Purpose and scope, including research questions
- Approach (e.g. methodology and program of work that will be carried out)
- Expected outcomes and contributions to new knowledge
- Participating scholars (e.g. main applicant(s) and possible other scholars)
- Appendices: CVs of participating scholar(s), max 3 pages/scholar.

## 6. SUBMITTING AN APPLICATION

Expressions of interest should be submitted by e-mail to [secretariat@vref.se](mailto:secretariat@vref.se) and received no later than **15 May 2024**. VREF will inform all applicants on the outcome of the process before 30 June 2024.