■ SPONSORSHIP

AIRTEL OFFERS TO SPONSOR NEEDY SCIENCE STUDENTS

BY JOHN RICKS KAYIZZI

Uganda's digital transformation drive has received a significant boost following a sh3.85b commitment by Airtel Africa Foundation to sponsor high-achieving students from low-income households pursuing higher education in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM).

The four-year tech fellowship programme, officially launched after a rigorous selection process concluded in January 2026, will provide a full-ride academic experience to 20 students annually.

The comprehensive package covers tuition, accommodation, a laptop, monthly stipend, data plan and structured mentorship, ensuring beneficiaries can focus entirely on academic excellence and innovation.



Airtel managing director, Soumendra Sahu, (behind row-right), Hannington Karuhanga, board chairperson Airtel (behind row-centre), Patrick Mbonye of Q-sourcing (behind row-left), with some of the parents of the beneficiary students in Kampala

HUMAN CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

In an official statement, Airtel said the initiative reflects its long-term commitment to Uganda's human capital development and digital economy.

"Through the Airtel Africa Tech Fellowship, we are investing in Uganda's most promising young minds, equipping them with the skills and resources needed to lead Africa's digital transformation. This is a strategic investment in people, innovation and inclusive growth," the company noted.

It further said the fellowship attracted more than 300 applicants, underscoring the huge demand for financial support in costly STEM courses.

Following a meticulous vetting process by Q-Sourcing Servtec, 20 students were selected and enrolled across Makerere University, Kyambogo University, ISBAT University, Uganda Christian University and Mbarara University of Science and Technology. The students are pursuing courses in information technology, computer science, cybersecurity, software engineering and related fields.

With an annual commitment of about sh195m for the Ugandan cohort, the programme eliminates the heavy financial and psychological burden associated with tuition arrears and upkeep.

For students from disadvantaged backgrounds, this support is transformative, opening doors that would otherwise remain shut.

Beyond individual lives, the initiative carries immense national economic significance. Uganda's telecom and ICT sectors are rapidly shifting from traditional voice and SMS services to a data-driven ecosystem.

These are powered by artificial intelligence, cybersecurity and data science. However, the availability of skilled local talent remains a major constraint.

According to the World Bank, Uganda's ICT sector contributes about 9% to the national gross domestic product and is expanding at an annual rate of 14.8%.

Meanwhile, GSMA research estimates that the sector's full potential — worth an additional sh14.6 trillion ($3.7b) by 2030 — is currently hindered by a skills gap.

■ CONTINENTAL STRATEGY

Uganda is also a key pillar in Airtel Africa Foundation's wider continental strategy, which spans 14 countries.

Through similar programmes, the Foundation is building a network of "Airtel fellows" from Nigeria to Kenya, designed to form a pan-African community of tech leaders capable of steering the continent's digital transformation.