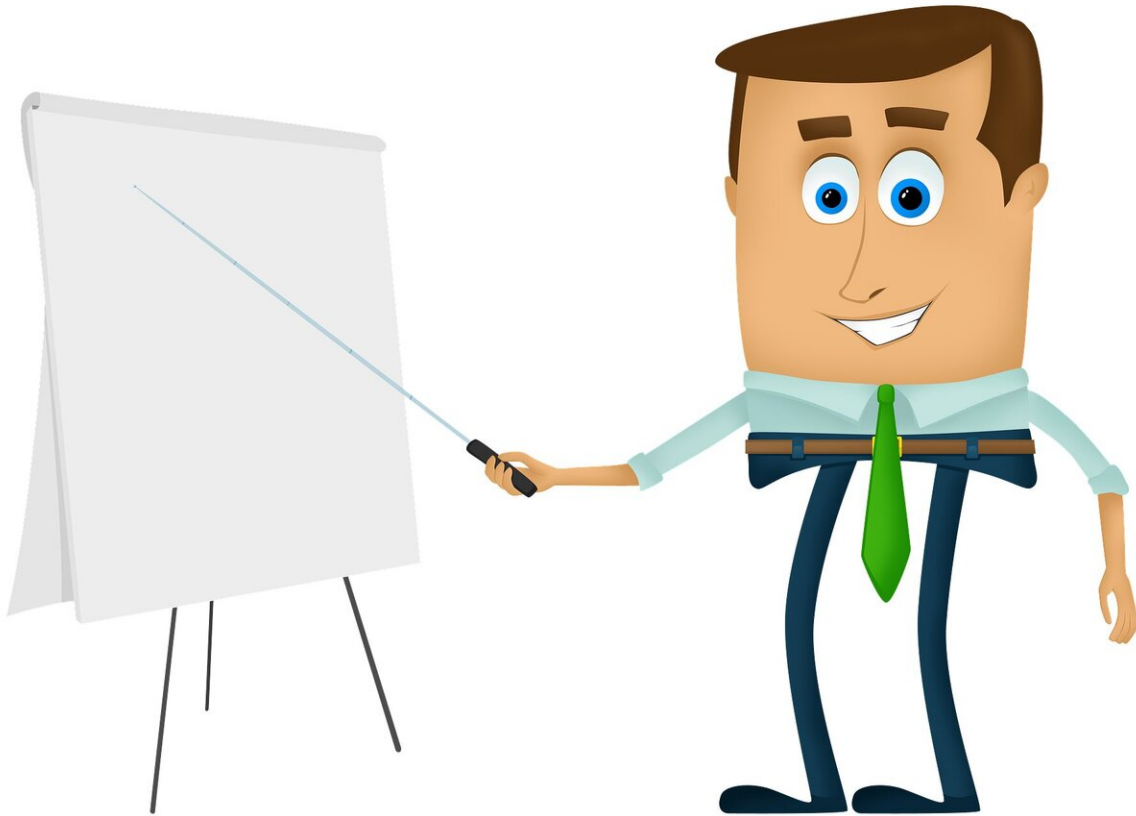


Study finds that giving young people 'soft' skills like networking helps their employment prospects

May 15 2023, by Chijioke Nwosu, Alexis Habiyaremye and Thomas Habanabakize



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The fact that more than half of the South African population [is under 30 years](#) could be beneficial for the country's economic growth and development. But South Africa has not been able to reap this [demographic dividend](#). This is largely due to [a skills mismatch](#).

That's why [60%](#) of its young people (between the ages of 15 and 25) are unemployed. The situation was made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic. Its impact on the labor market disproportionately affected [young](#) and low-skilled workers.

A major cause of youth unemployment in South Africa is [the mismatch](#) between what employers want and what young people have. This is mostly characterized by technical under-skilling relative to the expectations of employers.

The country's schooling system has failed young people, with many learners going through the basic education system without acquiring the necessary literacy and [numeracy](#) skills.

In response to the unemployment crisis, the South African government established the [National Rural Youth Service Corps](#) program in September 2010, targeting [young people](#) in rural areas who are the most disadvantaged. It is still [running today](#).

The program's main objective was to equip participants with technical and vocational skills to enhance their employment prospects, or ability to create their own businesses. Participants receive a stipend during their two years of participation. They are also trained in leadership, networking, and problem-solving.

We sought to [assess the effectiveness](#) of the program in bridging the skills mismatch. We also wanted to identify the skills most likely to be associated with labor market success.

We used a blended methodological approach, combining quantitative and qualitative analyzes. This enabled us to capture the data on skills accumulation and the related labor market outcomes. It also provided us with the human narratives.

Among participants who had jobs, we found that the key determinant of their success was the improvement in their [soft skills](#), including problem-solving, networking and leadership skills. The same was true for the participants who had started businesses; soft skills proved significantly more effective than technical skills.

These results highlight the critical role of soft skills, echoing a growing call in [other countries](#) for increased emphasis on soft-skills in employment support programs.

Overall, despite some success in helping rural youth improve their technical and soft skills, the program has a number of weaknesses that limit its effectiveness in linking its graduates to stable employment or viable enterprise creation. These include insufficient support to program alumni after their exit, and a mismatch between acquired skills and what employers want.

Effectiveness and weaknesses of the program

We also examined the relevance, effectiveness, transformative effects, and equitable inclusiveness of the program. In addition, we looked at the behavior of the participants, including changes in attitudes, commitments and the social and cultural values of individuals and groups.

Most of the participants as well as the program implementation officials we interviewed described the program as a relevant policy intervention to address the unemployment problem among rural youth.

However, they said its implementation raised practical challenges for participants. One key weakness was the program's failure in supporting graduates to find stable employment. It is estimated that less than 10% of exited graduates benefit from such support.

A major factor is that the administration of the program does not have sufficient human and financial resources to commit to post-graduation support. It also lacks adequate administrative structures to track graduates and provide them with the administrative and material resource assistance they need to secure employment.

Similarly, program participants who start businesses are left without support. There's also a lack of business networks in [rural areas](#). Networks often assist new start-ups to integrate in local value chains.

In addition, the mismatch between the technical skills taught within the program and what employers require is a significant impediment to the success of graduates. This makes it difficult for graduates to find sustainable employment or create viable enterprises post-graduation.

Most key informants—those whose positions enabled them to have access to important information relevant to the interview topic—were of the view that the skills and qualifications obtained from the program were inferior to those obtained from technical vocational education and training colleges. This is despite these colleges being deemed [inadequate](#) to the task of closing the [technical skills](#) gap.

Where the program has been most successful has been in ensuring the participation of women. They make up more than half of its participants.

Implications and recommendations

It is therefore not surprising that programs like the National Rural Youth Service Corps have not had a noticeable impact on South Africa's youth unemployment crisis. To succeed, there must be greater synergy between various stakeholders involved in rural enterprise development and employment creation.

There must also be an alignment of skills taught to learners and the needs of employers. Graduates must be assisted with relevant resources, especially land and start-up capital.

In addition, support for graduates must be streamlined to ensure effective tracking of participants when they [graduate](#) and that their needs are assessed properly.

Lastly, we cannot overemphasize the importance of soft skills to the success of youth in the job market—they should form the core of any program for youth employment.

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