



Setting the scene

This session continued the CoP's exploration of the youth employability theme, with Zoheb Khan and Senzelwe Mthembu from the Centre for Social Development in Africa (CSDA) at the University of Johannesburg sharing insights from the Siyakha Youth Assets for Employment Project.

This project tracks a group of young South Africans who enrolled in Youth Employability Programmes (YEPs) run by a range of organisations in the public, private and third sectors that aim to support the transition of excluded young people into employment. Approximately a year after completing their respective programmes, CSDA examines the extent to which YEP graduates are finding decent work and the possible reasons for success and failure, using both survey and qualitative data.



Overview of the presentation

Youth Employability Programmes: lessons learned

Youth employability programmes (YEPs) are aimed at enhancing young people's employment prospects in a labour market characterised by widespread youth unemployment, and are informed by a view of the labour market that sees unemployment as either partly or wholly driven by supply side issues (problems with the supply of labour). This approach views South African youth as poorly educated and lacking certain workplace skills which prevent them from finding work and holding on to it. The aim of the YEPs is to fill this skills deficit.



Presenters Senzelwe Mthembu and Zoheb Khan

Despite the proliferation of these programmes, not much is known about how effective they are in helping excluded young people access work. The Siyakha Youth Assets for Employment Project is a longitudinal evaluation study that seeks to fill this knowledge gap. The study focuses on eight very different YEPs run by organisations in the private, public and civil society sectors. These YEPs represent a wide spectrum of the kinds of interventions that are being delivered to enhance youth employability and vary greatly in size, funding, resourcing, design, duration and intended outcomes, although they all include hard skills, soft skills and some degree of work experience. [Click here](#) to view the slide presentation.

Some reasons for the popularity of YEPs with young people:

Their accessibility – they do not have the kinds of barriers to entry seen in more formal education programmes.



Low costs – many of them are free and they are cheaper to get to, often being run in townships and rural areas close to where the young people live.

Many offer stipends – despite these being really small, many young people conceive of the training programmes as employment because they provide a livelihood.

Access to job-seeking services and resources – while a few provide explicit matching of young people with employers, most provide

computer access, internet, printing and copying services and career advice, which would otherwise be unobtainable or too expensive.

They provide friendship networks – unemployment is very isolating as well as emotionally and psycho-socially difficult, so being in a group of young people who are experiencing the same kinds of challenges can be helpful.

Key preliminary findings based on the quantitative data

The survey results show that three factors are significantly associated with higher employment probability after exiting training. These are: **self-esteem**, **living in a metro** and **per capita household income** (see below).

After controlling for these factors, the positively influential programme features were found to be:

- A substantial focus on **concrete technical skills for a specific occupation** rather than on general workplace skills or soft skills.
- **Explicit matching of youth to jobs**, where YEPs consult with employers on their needs before embarking on the training. Where the matching component is a central feature of the programme, employment probability is considerably higher.

In contrast, **a lack of organisational stability** within YEPs is associated with negative employment outcomes. Factors such as high staff turnover, programme and qualification changes, funding problems, or the YEP not being seen as a core part of an organisation's business significantly reduce employment probability for participants.

The **motivation** for the YEP also impacts on the outcomes – where there is a sense of 'doing charity work' this can result in a greater focus on numbers (reporting on how many young people have been 'reached'), with less attention being paid to quality and impact on the participants – and the consequences of letting them down.

The **cost of looking for work** is a major factor, which is why a higher per capita household income is a significant predictor of being employed. The mean total work-seeking costs are in the region of R800 per month – for transport to potential employers or internet café's, data bundles, printing or copying, and postage – so access to this resource significantly enhances the probability of success. When the family members subsidising the job-search earn very low wages this makes it very difficult.



Findings from the qualitative component

To build upon the survey data a flexible, open-ended approach called *Realist Impact Evaluation* was used to conduct in-depth interviews with 46 members of the original sample. This aimed to assess the impact of the YEPs from the perspective of the programme participants.

Interviewees reported a **variety of short-comings** in relation to the YEPs they had enrolled in. These seem largely to relate to expectations created but not fulfilled:

Limited prospects for upward progression – YEPs are often seen as more of a time-filler than a stepping stone to attaining higher education levels as young people go from attaining matric or post-secondary qualifications to participating in programmes that have lower qualification levels.

Lack of certification – Young people report being promised a certificate at the end of a YEP, but these are generally not provided. This is a major barrier as employers want certification as proof of completion of the training programme.

Lack of assistance in finding employment – Programme participants are promised jobs or help in finding a job, but are then given only ad hoc assistance, for e.g. being allowed to use the organisation's internet and computers to look for work.

YEP design challenges and inadequate vetting of placement organisations – The practice of placing programme participants on learnerships can lead to challenges if host companies do not meet their obligations (e.g. reduced stipends, inappropriate placements, unsuitable conditions of work). There are also issues of YEPs running out of money midway through the programme.

Inadequate financial support – Young people are not given sufficient support to enable them to access and retain opportunities, whether employment or other post-school leaving opportunities. The high cost of transport coupled with a lack of funds can result in those placed in learnerships or work experience programmes dropping out.

Conclusion – recommendations

The preliminary findings highlight the limitations of an exclusive focus on supply side issues. Unemployment cannot be seen as simply a labour supply issue to be solved by improving skills, so several of the emerging recommendations relate to wider structural factors.

- More formalised and accessible career information and guidance, such as the UK's job seeker allowance which combines a stipend with direct one-in-one guidance, direction and help to access opportunities.
- Given that the majority of young unemployed people live in conditions of poverty, providing transport subsidies for young job-seekers, reducing data and call costs, and increasing provision of free public wifi.
- Better coordination and more learning from each other in terms of what is working.
- Limiting the number of YEPs and scaling up those that are effective.
- Being realistic in the creation of expectations.
- Unblocking the post-secondary pipeline by ensuring the timely release of allocated NSFAS and other FET funding.

The Siyakha Project welcomes input from CoP members, as people who work in this area, on the kinds of information that they would find useful in the reporting on this project. The report on this third wave of the research is expected to be released in early 2019.

CoP comments and questions

Several questions focussed on the methodology and findings, particularly relating to the **specific features, contexts and mechanisms that contribute to YEP effectiveness**. This information has been worked into the content above.

Participants were interested in **the extent to which YEPs offered an alternative** to those who had 'fallen out of the education system'. Senzelwe noted that 7 of the 8 YEPs **specified matric as an entry requirement**, although this was not always strictly enforced. 90% of the research sample had at least a matric. This was worrying as one would have expected better outcomes for this group. It was also telling that even in this alternative space of skills development there were barriers to entry – particularly in view of the large portion of the population without a matric.



Regarding the 60% drop in the size of the survey sample a year after participants exited the YEP, Zoheb noted the **anger and discouragement** of those who refused to continue in the research (despite built-in financial incentives such as airtime vouchers). This pointed to 'the bleak reality these young people are faced with'.

There was interest in **whether YEP providers were taking steps to address the issues uncovered** by the research.

Several participants drew attention to the issue of **qualifications and NQF level**:

- The presentation placed emphasis on YEPs being on the same level or a lower level than the qualifications that people already had. Why is this seen as a problem? Although in terms of NQF level the YEP may be lower, presumably the focus and purpose is different – so what does it matter that the level is lower? The quality of the programme may also not be measurable by its NQF level.
- No YEP course is ever a qualification – although some may link to learnerships which lead to qualifications registered on the NQF.
- Even if logically there isn't a problem with YEPs being at a lower level than people already have, this country places so much emphasis on qualifications and people expect matric to open doors to tertiary level, so it is important to ensure that youth properly understand the issues.

Senzelwe observed that a bigger issue was that **people were cycling through YEPs and not progressing**. While there was no single road to progress, it was problematic that young people were continuously going through programmes giving them the same sorts of skills. It was also time wasted and money spent with little return because they were not finding employment.

Participants were interested in **whether the research had looked at ‘matching’ in relation to understanding a young person’s capability** and the importance of this for setting people up for success. Two types of matching were noted (suggesting that individual capability had not been considered). One of the YEPs matched ‘the programme with the needs of an employer’ before training took place – this type of matching was seen as influential. The second kind of matching occurred after training and related to matching YEP graduates with potential job opportunities. While several of the YEPs did this, it was often not done in a structured way.

In response to an observation that the recommendations were cast widely yet did not mention the obvious issue of improving the quality of basic education, Zoheb explained that **the recommendations deliberately avoided a focus on education** as this would reinforce the narrative that young people ‘needed fixing’. In addition, what the research uncovered was that even after going through skills training programmes, employment probability was not really improved. This meant that there were wider structural matters that had to be addressed – many of which could be addressed within a shorter timeframe, unlike the problems in education which would take a longer time to ‘fix’.

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Group Discussion

Building self-esteem

A key topic for all the groups was the importance of creating confident individuals with self-esteem who are able not only to access opportunities but also to sustain the outcomes arising from these opportunities (whether employment / self-employment / post-secondary study).

Stimulating creativity

Our society currently creates survivors, not victors who can create their own livelihoods. If we did not depend on the system to provide progress and instead educated people from early childhood in a way that stimulated their creativity and inner life purpose, they would leave school able to add to, not drain from, the economy. Focussing on employment is of good intent but it is not helping at the source - to do that we need to focus on the individual and stimulating their right brain intelligence so they grow up with a different mindset and can go out and create jobs that you and I have never thought of. They will be able to create enough for all so there will be no need to compete with one another.

Changing the conversation

South Africa’s discourse tends to be negative, being chiefly about unemployment and the lack of opportunity. We need to shift towards a more constructive conversation. Kenyans have a concept called *jua kali* which means “working in the hot sun” and refers to an informal sector of traders and artisans. Even with minimal resources, young people are able to get into this type of income-generating activity fairly easily. Kenyans also do not talk about unemployment to the extent that we do – their collective mind is in a different place altogether. [Follow this link for more on this topic:

<https://www.howwemadeitinafrica.com/the-jua-kali-sector-a-safe-haven-for-jobs-in-kenya/>]

The value of soft skills

Even when people have acquired technical skills that enable them to access employment, they generally do not have the necessary soft skills to cope in a work environment (‘getting hired for their hard skills but getting fired for their lack of soft skills’). Although the findings of this study suggest that soft skills are of less value as predictors of success, other research relating to employability and work readiness identifies a range

of behaviours, attitudes and mindsets as important. This could point to the type of soft skills or the type of soft skills training the YEPs provide (the study looked at soft skills in the aggregate and not at whether any particular soft skills training was associated with better outcomes).

Educating employers

It is also important to educate employers on what they can do to help young people transition successfully into the workplace.

- The Post-school Access CoP of 15 February 2018 engaged with this issue in relation to the *Demand-Driven Training Toolkit*, a resource aimed at assisting employers and others working toward helping young people become work ready. [Click here](#) to view the meeting highlights from this session.

Career guidance and matching

Discussions centred on the importance of career guidance and matching to determine whether young people would potentially cope in the work environment the YEP aims to prepare them for, before joining the YEP. The group also discussed the need for programmes to match employer requirements and how research findings could be used to influence what is available to the youth before they engage in programmes that do not effectively improve their employability.

- The Post-school Access CoP of 8 May 2018 engaged with these issues in relation to the work of the Career Development Services (CDS) in the DHET and lessons from the NBI's work-readiness programmes. [Click here](#) to view the meeting highlights from this session.

Influencing policy makers and corporates

There is a need to get corporates and policy makers to engage with such research findings so they can have a more positive and sustained influence on outcomes within the youth sector. There is a wealth of research information which must be consolidated, targeted and made available in order to be useful in influencing a sustained result for the nation.



Facilitator's summing up



Facilitator Zarina Kahn

Conversations within the CoP often point to the many examples of good practice and lessons learnt that are 'out there' - but the challenge is to 'complete the next loop' by using this knowledge to influence decisions and practice within the broader system. We need to ask *so what* and *what else is there*, and to follow through on the answers to find that next loop. In the case of the YEPs and the training they provide, what is the next loop? Another case in point is career guidance. There is so much information out there on career guidance and the DHET has implemented user-friendly ways of accessing it - but young people are not accessing it, so what is the next loop?

We also need to challenge ourselves as a society to change our conversations - to become more mindful of the language that we use with youth and through the media, and of the influence it has. We have crafted our mindsets to stop at problems and challenges. The discourse is all about finding that job – and not about saying 'what else is there?' The limitations are very real - but are we doing enough to encourage youth to think about alternatives, so we don't reach that level of discouragement where people are disconnected from the process because they cannot find that single job that actually is not available to them?

We can be left feeling overwhelmed by these discussions. How will we fix the problems and how many generations will it take? We clearly need to take a pragmatic approach, where we acknowledge the system and understand the challenges, but search for other ways that empower us and the people we are trying to help.

CoP takeaways from the session

The greatest need is for those of us working in this space to talk to each other more – we need to exchange ideas and to work together to come up with working solutions within a realistic timeframe

Solutions do exist out there – it is finding the connections that is critical – BRIDGE can help us with this

Rather than looking for a single silver bullet we need to work on different approaches, to continue to learn and to avoid trying to make everything fit a particular mould

The methodological challenges around longitudinal studies and the creative ways of dealing with them were very insightful

It is important to learn from initiatives that are already achieving – the sector needs to be more transparent in terms of sharing information

It is particularly important for donors to be well-informed about what really works as the conditions they set have tremendous influence

Recognition of how complex the issues are and of the many systems in play – and the need to understand how they work, connect, and impact one another

The need to give young people appropriate tangible support for job-seeking

In terms of changing the conversation we need to look at what our contribution can be, not only at what government should do

There is value in changing our language and being more positive but if as a society we do not admit the fundamental problems we will keep repeating the same things and not get anywhere – to really have an impact we need to dig down to the root so we can change what we are doing

The need for a change of mindset and vision - instead of looking at the endpoint and how far away it is, starting where we are with what we have and working towards where we want to be – for the youth this means asking “What can I do with what I have already?”

“There are many good initiatives taking place that have good intent, impact and influence – and it is critical to connect and share between these different programmes and processes. That would be a complex undertaking because each programme has its own requirements and constraints, but it is important to find ways of leveraging and utilising the connecting and sharing. All too often we hear of initiatives repeating what others have done – whereas they could have taken it another step forward.”

(Zarina Kahn, CoP facilitator)

Additional resource

Digital Jobs Africa was a large scale YEP which included five South African providers. This report highlights some of the challenges and best practices of that programme.

<https://youtheconomicopportunities.org/sites/default/files/uploads/resource/2017%20DDT%20report.pdf>

Attendees

Name	Company name
Arista Bouwer	IBL
Benita Williams	Benita Williams Evaluation
Benter Okelo	BRIDGE
Bonamelo Moloi	LASEC SA
christina nchapha	Private
Dumisani Dlamini	Private
Edwin Madisha	Sasol
Jade Pieterse	BRIDGE
Jenny Dry	IBL
Josine Overdevest	Flying Cows Of Jozi
Lisa Ann Catano	Bullying/Anger Management
Maggie Josko	Girls and Boys Town
Margie Vorwerk	BRIDGE
Marguerite Callaway	LEAP Schools of Science and Math/ Callaway Leadership institute
Martin Bekker	Royal Bafokeng
Maryla Bialobrzaska	SAIDE
Murray Hofmeyer	Study Trust
Nontokozi Shibase	Reborns
Polite Zhoya	help2read
Raj Naran	WITS
Rebecca Pursell-Gotz	Genesis Analytics
Rezana Hoosain	WITS
Sarah van Zyl	Ignition - Rays of Hope
Senzelwe Mthembu	CSDA - UJ
Smangele Mathebula	help2read
Takalani Muloiwa	Eits University
Thando Moeng	BRIDGE
Thato Masiangoako	Centre for Development and Enterprise
Zarina Khan	Facilitator
Zoheb Khan	CSDA - UJ