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Sample Size

900 youth

Research Implemented by IPA

Yes

The Effects of Soft Skills Training on Labor Market Outcomes for Youth in Rwanda

Abstract

The transition from school to the labor market is a crucial step in the life of young people. Yet youth unemployment is much higher than that of adults in many countries around the world, including Rwanda. Challenges include a mismatch in skills paired with difficulties for young job seekers to signal their motivation and productivity to potential employers. This project evaluates whether soft-skills training provided after graduation from university can improve youth labor market outcomes in Rwanda. Researchers also examine whether reinforcing soft skills may benefit women more than men in the context of social norms detrimental to women's success in the labor market.

Policy Issue

Firms around the world struggle to find workers with appropriate levels of soft skills such as teamwork, leadership, and relationship management. Unemployment rates for youth are higher than those for adults in many countries. One contributing factor is that the skills taught at school to recent graduates may not match those demanded by employers, and youth without work experience often struggle to indicate their abilities and potential to employers. Furthermore, while young women tend to have better educational outcomes than young men in many countries, this advantage does not carry over to the labor market. This indicates that their job prospects may be hindered by prevalent social norms or that their skills are less rewarded in the labor market.

Soft skills facilitate success in the labor market and increase productivity. Evidence indicates that it is possible to enhance soft skills in early childhood and that soft skills are also malleable in adulthood. Additionally, information on the soft skills of workers can improve efficiency in job matching. This suggests that complementing skills learned at school with components related to soft skills might be effective. However, the evidence is limited and mixed on the relative returns to soft skills for women versus men, especially with respect to increasing employability.

Context of the Evaluation

The Rwanda Development Board (RDB) contributes to Rwanda's economic development by supporting private sector development, jobs, and export-driven economic growth. The Chief Skills Office of the RDB, established in 2018, provides oversight and coordinates skills development and employment promotion with the aim of skilling Rwanda for economic transformation.

As in many other countries, unemployment rates for youth are higher than those for adults in Rwanda. During a recent survey of large employers conducted by the researchers in the project, firms reported that they had difficulty finding employees with good communication skills. To address this, RDB partnered with the University of Rwanda to offer a free 160-hour training course focused on communication skills, networking, and other inter- and intra-personal soft skills.

Details of the Intervention

The intervention comprised a 15-day intensive soft-skills bootcamp. The training focused on effective communication, networking, and both interpersonal (teamwork, collaboration, trust, empathy, and negotiation) and intrapersonal (self-awareness, personal initiative, and perseverance) skills.

RDB advertised the bootcamp on local online job boards and invited recent graduates from technical and vocational education and training or university to apply. Applicants were required to have graduated within the last two years and needed to complete three online forms including a registration form, a baseline survey, and a soft-skills assessment.

Among eligible applicants, 1,000 were selected--500 men and 500 women-- to attend one of three in-person public lotteries held in different parts of the country. The final sample comprised 900 youth--450 women and 450 men. Researchers randomly assigned these recent graduates into either a group invited to participate in the soft-skills bootcamp or a comparison group that did not attend the training. Bootcamp participants were offered transportation fees to a venue in the south of the country, accommodation, and subsistence fees during the bootcamp. To facilitate attendance of women with young children, they could bring a caretaker, who also received accommodation and transportation fees.

The training was completed in May 2021, with a 74 percent participation rate and an equal

proportion of women and men participating. Researchers will conduct one follow-up phone survey after six months, and one in-person survey after 12 months. Researchers may conduct a third in-person survey after 24 months which will focus on labor market outcomes. They will also collect administrative data on formal jobs and business creation from social security and tax records. Longer-term changes in soft skills will be assessed using a module developed by the Africa Gender Innovation Lab of the World Bank to measure intra- and inter-personal skills. Gender-disaggregated analysis will be used to determine whether returns to soft-skills training are higher for young women than men.

Results and Policy Lessons

Research ongoing; results forthcoming.

January 27, 2021