

How youth skills training in Kenya can reduce inequality

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Sub-Saharan Africa's burgeoning population of young people is considered one of its greatest [untapped resources](#). Young men and women aged 15-24 constitute about a [fifth of the total population](#). It's a huge resource because, if well tapped, it could significantly drive productivity and growth.



The mismatch between youth skills and labour market expectations makes it challenging for young people to succeed in the world of work.
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Providing requisite skills required by both current and future labour markets is one of the main challenges for governments. The big question remains, what's the best way to tap this huge resource?

Typical of other sub-Saharan countries, Kenya has high youth unemployment rates. In 2019, the World Bank put the figure [as high as 18.3%](#) for those aged 15-24 years. A more recent [tally](#) from the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics put it at 10%.

Every year, between 500,000 and 800,000 youth enter the labour market in Kenya after leaving primary and secondary schools and post-secondary school institutions. Of those completing technical and vocational education and training, [roughly 40% enter the labour market](#). However, there are [concerns](#) that skills acquired in these vocational training institutions do not meet the needs of potential employers.

For instance, the 2018 [report](#) of an employer survey found that 30% of Kenyan firms felt that a poorly skilled workforce was a major barrier to their growth. The corresponding figure in 2007 was 3%. Generally, youth graduating from these institutions have difficulties accessing, creating and retaining jobs.

This mismatch between youth skills and labour market expectations makes it challenging for young people to succeed in the world of work. But there is a dearth of research about the level of academic skills. More importantly, there is little information on the soft skills acquired by youth in Kenya's technical and vocational training institutions.

This is important because there is evidence from developing country contexts that a [whole youth development approach](#) is vital for skill acquisition. This approach is premised on the notion that for youth to be productive and improve their well-being, they should develop holistically. This includes social, physical, educational, emotional, spiritual, ethical, and

psychological development.

In a [study](#) conducted in 2018-2019, we examined what skills those leaving training institutions had. Such information could inform the skills development policy in Kenya. In summary, our findings show that whole youth development is not well integrated within the training curriculum as well as within training practices.

We also found that Kenya's youth skills development perpetuates inequality. The system is well-resourced for urban and well-off families, but leaves the poor and mostly rural youth inadequately prepared, if at all, for the labour market.

The landscape

Kenya has three types of post-school skills training institutions. National polytechnics, which offer higher diplomas, are at the top of the pyramid. Below them are technical training institutes and vocational training centres. The first two types are funded by the national government, though there exist private technical training institutes. Vocational centres are mainly funded by county governments but increasingly by a variety of non-governmental entities.

In 2018, total enrolment in these institutions was [estimated](#) at 363,844, spread over 1,400 institutions. The institutions are managed under a 2013 law. A competence-based education training [curriculum](#) was initiated in 2019.

Our study relied on primary data from a survey of 182 institutions – at all three levels – spread across nine counties. We used questionnaires, assessment tools and focus group discussions to collect information from trainees, instructors, institutional managers and technical staff at the education ministry.

Our study revealed three important drivers of whole youth development. These are individual qualities, community influences and supply side factors, such as funding.

The findings

Our multilevel analysis results show that at the individual level, age and gender play a leading role in the acquisition of holistic skills. For instance, older youth exhibit better life and emotional skills compared to those younger. This could be due to their length of exposure to their lived environment and experiential learning.

On the other hand, overall, male youth exhibit higher acquisition of holistic skills than female youth. This difference could be [explained](#) by gender stereotyping where boys and girls are socialised differently based on societies' preconceived ideas of what they should be in future. Consequently, it is not unusual for boys to experience greater exposure to activities related to science, technology, engineering and mathematics during their life course.

That said, female youth do better in life skills and emotional skills than male youth. This could explain employers' preference for female employees for jobs such as public relations, human resources and early grade teaching that require use of emotional skills.

From a community influence perspective, we found that socio-economic and geographical location of the youth matter a lot. Students from well off families and those from well off counties, if not both, demonstrated higher acquisition of holistic skills than those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

In fact, the influence of the family background is so strong that there was no difference in acquisition of skills among youth from advantaged social economic background who attend vocational centres, the lowest level of training, and those who attend national polytechnics, highest level.

This matters because if employers screen potential employees for acquisition of holistic skills, youth from disadvantaged backgrounds are likely to remain longer out of employment. This may also create a huge social gap between those entering paid employment and those entering self-employment. Indeed, a recent UNDP human development report 2019 [warned](#) that

“ Children from poor families may not be able to afford an education and are at a disadvantage when they try to find work. These children are likely to earn less than those in higher income families when they enter the labour market, when penalised by compounding layers of disadvantage. ”

In the third category of influencers is resources. Managers of national polytechnics (57%) and technical training institutions (44%) reported having adequate equipment. This compared to only 22% of managers in the vocational training centres. The two also enrolled youth with relatively good grades compared to vocational training centres.

The majority of vocational centres, on the other hand, are located in rural areas, mainly accessed by poor rural youth, and are not properly equipped. These dynamics of resourcing training institutions play out in the acquisition of whole youth development skills and create inequalities that could last through generations.

Implications for policy

Our results have stark implications for policy and research. First is the need for post-school training policies and institutions to be seen to close the possible growing gap in acquisition of whole youth development skills based on social-economic backgrounds as this could alienate a section of the population.

Second, it would be important to create effective linkages between training institutions and industry. This is especially in rural centres as they play the key role of preparing young people to transition into work places.

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