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The UCT Knowledge Co-op facilitated this collaborative project with the Action Volunteers Africa a registered non-profit organisation.

PROJECT SUMMARY

612 An outcome evaluation of the Work 4 Progress Programme for unemployed youths

By
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INTRODUCTION

Youth unemployment in South Africa has been escalating over the years to alarming levels, affecting the development of the country. According to Graham and Mlatsheni (2015), approximately 45% of youths aged between 15 and 34 years, are not employed and more than a third of the unemployed youths have never been employed. About 4 to 8% of unemployed youths have given up hope of finding employment mainly because of long-term unemployment. The youth unemployment rate in South Africa is further compounded by more than 600 000 youths who complete school each year and face the prospects of unemployment.

Youth unemployment is a complex societal issue, arising from many interacting factors. Many youths are affected by the poor education system and slow economic growth. Young people from disadvantaged communities are mostly affected by the highly competitive job market where advanced education, skills, and social networks are required to enter the job market. The focus now is on job readiness programmes that help unemployed youths gain access to formal employment and further learning opportunities.

Action Volunteers Africa (AVA) is a non-profit organisation (NPO) that aims to address youth unemployment by providing work opportunities. AVA also provides support to the

participants including mentorship and career guidance to help unemployed youths overcome personal challenges and navigate their first work experience. This evaluation investigated whether the Work 4 Progress programme implemented by AVA has successfully achieved its goal of upskilling youths and improving their employability.

POSITIVES OUTCOMES OF THE WORK 4 PROGRESS PROGRAMME

Eight programme alumni were purposively selected to participate in semi-structured interviews. The summary below presents some of the benefits linked to the Work 4 Progress programme emerging from the stories of the youths. The evidence is provided using direct illustrative quotes from the informants.

1. Stipend provides financial relief and independence amid poverty

The youths shared their backgrounds and life history which enabled a qualitative exploration of the social change in their lives during and after programme participation. Their stories revealed some of the life struggles that they went through before joining the programme. The informants highlighted the importance of stipends in alleviating the financial burdens and they spoke appreciatively of the stipend-paid learning opportunity. Their stories suggest that the impact of a stipend is often more than just financial aid, but contributes to poverty alleviation and can be seen as a strategy to earn a livelihood.

“I was using the R1500 stipend for accommodation and transportation. It was not easy but I did manage and I was enjoying it. I felt that I am now an independent lady and I can do my own stuff”

(Interviewee 8, Aged 28, Cohort 2018; ECD Teacher Assistant).

Interviewee 8 grew up with her grandmother and she experienced severe trauma due to hardships related to childhood parental loss, poverty and lack of job opportunities. She expressed that the stipend she received through the Work 4 Progress programme provided relief to her financial and social struggles as well as a form of independence. She mentioned that she could afford her accommodation, travel to work, buy food and toiletries and experience what it meant to work.

2. Work 4 Progress Programme promotes social skills to cope with life challenges

All the interviewed youths described changes in their personal life that they attributed to the Work 4 Progress programme. One of the key aspects that emerged from the interviewees was that the programme helped them overcome psychosocial challenges. Many of the youths spoke about a lack of self-confidence and interpersonal communication, typical of young people who are not equipped to cope with the challenges of the world of work. The youths further described how engaging in the Work 4 Progress programme helped them gain self-confidence, learn social skills and change negative behaviours. The youths portrayed AVA staff, specifically the team leaders as being friendly, understanding and approachable, which helped them overcome some of their personality struggles.

“I have grown out of that shell now. I have opened myself to interact with people and to speak out. If I don’t like something I say it. I have learned to express myself much better now”

(Interviewee 1, Aged 25, Cohort 2017, Admin Internship).

Before participating in the programme Interviewee 1 lacked self-confidence and she did not know how to converse with people outside her social group. Public speaking and entering a new social situation represented an emotional challenge that was good to overcome. Engaging in the Work 4 Progress programme helped her to gain self-confidence, build positive relationships with people outside their social groups, change negative emotions and improve her employment outcomes.

3. Programme participation can help distressed youths gain emotional stability

Youth unemployment is known to cause serious psychological problems including increased anxiety, depression and stress-related health disorders. The interviewed youths appreciated both the individualised support and group-based support they received from AVA, which helped in achieving greater emotional stability. For example, Interviewee 8 speaks about how the social worker helped her heal from past traumatic experiences.

The other support that they gave (was that of a) social worker when I am struggling emotionally (...). The social worker attended to me just once, then she never came as much as I wanted her to come back. She felt like I was healed of whatever was going on because I was no longer emotional. When I think about it (my previous life), I don’t get emotional. I have adopted to letting go of what I may be feeling at that moment.

(Interviewee 8, Aged 28, Cohort 2018, ECD Teacher Assistant)

4. Experience obtained through work exposure helps in breaking the unemployment cycle

All respondents echoed that the Work 4 Progress programme helped in learning relevant skills and enhancing their career readiness. The youths shared stories about long unsuccessful job search efforts due to a lack of advanced education or work experience. They further echoed that the Work 4 Progress programme provided them with the initial experience they needed to get a job, helping in breaking the unemployment cycle.

When I was done with the (Work 4 Progress) course. I had that experience on my CV which unlocked opportunities for me in other companies.

(Interviewee 2, aged 23, cohort 2020, Entrepreneur)

Interviewee 2 was despondent because of his background which was characterised by poverty, low education level and lack of family support. He has no matric qualification and he dropped out of college because his father struggled to provide for his daily needs and transport money. He got his first job as a training facilitator, because of the experience obtained from the Work 4 Progress programme.

5. Work 4 Progress programme is experience is instrumental in developing realistic career aspirations and a clear plan

The youths shared stories about their past career aspirations before programme participation. Many of the stories showed a lack of a concrete career plan to pursue aspired jobs. The respondents further expressed how exposure to work helped in ascertaining their career interests. Many views upgrading their education as a gateway to where they want to be in life, demonstrating a sense of urgency in upskilling themselves. Those with plans to pursue further education are focusing on enrolling for a university degree and they are using their current jobs to finance further studies.

My future plan is to upgrade my education and carry on being a teacher. I am busy with the applications right now at different colleges and universities. I want to carry on doing ECD and do BED (Bachelor of Education) at foundation phase.

(Interviewee 8, Aged 28, Cohort 2018, ECD Teacher Assistant).

Interviewee 8, previously suffered from career indecisiveness. She spoke fondly about a variety of career directions requiring different skill sets but did not have the necessary guidance to cultivate the search. Career guidance and exposure to work helped her in ascertaining her career interests and she finally resolved to pursue a realistic career in education.

6. Exposure to work helps in the development of new social networks

Most disadvantaged South African youths do not have social networks to connect them to work opportunities. The Work 4 Progress programme offers work opportunities that entail social interaction with different types of people, which is seen as a potential avenue for enhancing the job readiness of youths and securing employment. The narratives of youths emphasised the important role that social networks play in securing employment.

As much as I didn't get the job through the experience that I have. I did get it through some connections. The job that I have now I got it because I was placed near an organisation that was looking for someone We normally went there to deliver coffee sandwiches.

(Interviewee 8, Aged 28, Cohort 2018, ECD Teacher Assistant).

Interviewee 8 previously struggled to get a job for seven years. When she finally got employed, she heard about the opportunity and secured it through social networks she had developed at her job placement.

7. Work 4 Progress programme experience is relevant in obtaining employment

After sharing positive programme experiences, many explained how the skills and knowledge gained connected to the real-world setting. The youths mentioned that the skills they gained from their job placement match the skills required by employers for those who are entering the labour market.

After AVA. I applied for a job and they gave me a call because I had mentioned on my CV that I was assisting on training volunteers some computers at AVA. So, they hired me.

(Interviewee 2, Aged 23, Cohort 2020, Self-Employment).

8. The knowledge gained through programme participation fosters entrepreneurship skills

Some of the youths expressed how they were inspired by work experience during the job placement to venture into entrepreneurship. Fostering entrepreneurship is widely perceived to be critical in expanding employment and earning opportunities and reducing poverty, particularly in the context of South Africa where there are low employment outcomes.

(During my work placement) I was assisting the volunteers to (write) their CVs and train them on the basics of computers. Now, I also make CVs For example, if you want to apply for a job. I write your CV convert it to pdf and send it back to you so that you can apply for the job.

(Interviewee 2, Aged 23, Cohort 2020, Informal Sector)

Interviewee 2 mentioned that he enjoyed the Work 4 Progress programme's job readiness training component where he learned about preparing for an interview and how to write an effective CV. After completing the programme, he worked for another organisation as a training facilitator. However, he described being frustrated with the working conditions and low remuneration in the formal sector and with a feeling that he could earn more in the informal sector. He recently started a 'virtual assistance business' using the skills he obtained from the Work 4 Progress programme.

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH

The evaluation assessed the outcomes of the Work 4 Progress programme, an intervention targeting unemployed youths from disadvantaged communities in Cape Town. It appears that the programme benefitted youths in many of the ways it intended to. The participants in the programme seemed to have gained job readiness skills including job-specific skills and soft skills. The respondents also reported greatly improved social skills which allowed them to interact with the outside world. They used the skills and knowledge they gained during the programme to find decent employment. Several respondents have plans to pursue further education and most of them are focusing on enrolling in university for a degree. The programme design and activities were deemed appropriate for the attainment of programme outcomes, and there was overall satisfaction with the Work 4 Progress Programme.