EFFECTIVENESS OF INTERVENTIONS THAT FOSTER WORK-BASED LEARNING (WBL) AND MENTORSHIP INITIATIVES IN UGANDA

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ABSTRACT

Youth unemployment is a pressing issue in Uganda, where the majority of the population is under 30 years old. Work-Based Learning (WBL) and mentorship programs have been identified as promising strategies to enhance employability by equipping young people with the necessary skills for the labor market. This study examines the effectiveness of these programs in Uganda by analyzing participant demographics, program characteristics, and outcomes related to employability and career advancement. Using data from various WBL and mentorship initiatives, the study employs both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques to assess their impact on skills development and employment outcomes. The findings reveal that mentorship and longer WBL program durations are strong predictors of employability, with vocational training and apprenticeships also playing significant roles. However, gender disparities persist, and additional interventions may be needed to support female participants. The study provides valuable insights for policymakers and educational institutions, offering recommendations for enhancing youth employability through structured mentorship and industry-aligned WBL programs.

INTRODUCTION

Youth unemployment is a critical issue in Uganda, where a youthful population presents both opportunities and challenges. With over 78% of the population under 30 years of age, Uganda faces an urgent need to create sustainable employment for its young citizens (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2020). High youth unemployment not only limits individual development but also threatens national socio-economic stability and growth. Therefore, as Uganda seeks to harness the potential of its young demographic, it is essential to explore innovative strategies that bridge the gap between education and employment. Two such promising strategies are work-based learning (WBL) and mentorship, both of which have been recognized for their effectiveness in equipping young people with the skills needed to thrive in the labor market (Allen *et al*., 2004). Work-based learning integrates academic education with practical work experiences, allowing students to apply theoretical knowledge in real-world settings. This approach enhances students' employability and prepares them for the workforce (Ferns & Zegwaard, 2014). In Uganda, WBL initiatives such as internships, apprenticeships, and cooperative education provide students with hands-on experience in their fields of study. These programs foster technical skills and essential soft skills like communication, teamwork, and problem-solving, all of which are crucial in today's dynamic job market (Janssen & Van der Voordt, 2017). Mentorship, meanwhile, involves a supportive relationship between a mentor and a mentee.

Mentorship programs play a vital role in guiding young people through their career journeys, offering valuable insights, advice, and networking opportunities (Eby *et al*., 2013). Research has demonstrated that mentorship can significantly improve job satisfaction, career progression, and professional development. Work-based learning (WBL) and mentorship initiatives in Uganda have emerged as essential strategies to bridge the skills gap and address youth unemployment. Policies like the National Work-Based Learning Policy, initiated by the government and UNDP, focus on enhancing employability through internships, apprenticeships, and practical training. Key programs include the government's Skilling Uganda Program, which promotes vocational education and partners with industries for apprenticeships, and the Youth Livelihood Programme (YLP), which provides funding and work-based training for youth. Another key initiative, the SG Plus Project by PSFU and Enabel, provides mentorship and in-company learning placements, targeting graduates with a focus on critical thinking and innovation. Mentorship initiatives are equally significant, such as the Triskelion Education and Skills Initiative (TESI), which offers leadership, ICT skills, and career guidance through direct mentorship and virtual platforms. The National Youth Mentorship Programme, organized by the National Youth Council, pairs youth with experienced professionals to enhance career development and entrepreneurship. Additionally, Educate! Uganda offers mentorship embedded in its leadership and business skills training, preparing high school students for both employment and entrepreneurship through experiential

learning. Other notable programs include the Skills Development Facility (SDF), funded by the World Bank, which provides grants to companies offering apprenticeships and mentorships in sectors like construction and tourism. These efforts collectively aim to enhance practical skills and increase employability in Uganda's labor market. The combination of WBL and mentorship offers a unique opportunity to tackle youth unemployment in Uganda. Together, these initiatives provide practical experience and personalized support, creating a holistic approach to skills development and career readiness. However, the effectiveness of such policies and interventions in Uganda remains under-researched. This study seeks to evaluate the impact of WBL and mentorship on skills development, employment outcomes, and socio-economic progress in the country. Existing literature on mentorship and WBL highlights their positive impacts on youth employment outcomes. For instance, Allen *et al*. (2004) emphasize mentorship's role in enhancing job satisfaction and career development, while Eby *et al*. (2013) argue that effective mentoring relationships improve job performance and career satisfaction. Similarly, Ferns and Zegwaard (2014) and Janssen and Van der Voordt (2017) have shown that WBL enhances employability by providing students with real-world experience, helping bridge the gap between education and the labor market.

Despite the promising findings in global literature, localized research focusing on Uganda is needed. The country's unique socio-economic landscape, cultural factors, and educational systems require tailored approaches to understanding how WBL and mentorship work within this context. This study aimed to fill that gap by providing empirical evidence on the effectiveness of these interventions, thereby informing future efforts to enhance youth employability and career prospects. By analyzing effectiveness of these interventions, the research will offer actionable recommendations for policymakers, educational institutions, and industry stakeholders. These insights could contribute to the development of more effective programs that not only enhance skills development but also promote inclusive economic growth in Uganda. Addressing youth unemployment in Uganda requires effective policies and programs that foster work-based learning and mentorship initiatives. The purpose of this study is to analyze the effectiveness of policies and interventions that foster work-based learning (WBL) and mentorship initiatives in Uganda. The study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of participant demographics, program characteristics, and outcomes related to employability and career advancement. By evaluating their impact on skills development and employment outcomes, this study aims to provide valuable insights that will inform the design of future interventions. Overall, the study contributes to the existing literature on mentorship and work-based learning, offering practical implications for stakeholders involved in workforce development and education in Uganda. Ultimately, such programs can enhance the employability and career prospects of Uganda's youth, contributing to national socio-economic development. The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 presents a review of the literature, Section 3 describes the methodology, the results and discussion are provided in Section 4, and finally Section 5 offers conclusion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Mentorship and Work-Based Learning (WBL) programs are increasingly recognized as critical tools for enhancing employment outcomes. These programs bridge the gap between formal education and real-world employment, equipping participants with both the technical skills and professional networks necessary for success in the labor market. Several theoretical frameworks explain the effectiveness of mentorship and WBL programs in improving employability. This literature review critically explores these theories, including Social Learning Theory, Human Capital Theory, Role Theory, Social Exchange Theory, Transformational Leadership Theory, and Self-Determination Theory, in the context of employment outcomes. Social Learning Theory, first introduced by Bandura (1977), posits that individuals acquire new skills and

behaviors by observing and modeling others. In the context of mentorship and WBL, mentors serve as role models, providing opportunities for mentees to learn through direct observation and imitation. This theory highlights the interpersonal nature of learning in WBL programs, where mentees can observe workplace behaviors, professional communication, and problem-solving strategies. By engaging in these experiential learning processes, mentees gain practical skills and insights that enhance their employability. Several studies have validated the application of Social Learning Theory to WBL and mentorship programs. For instance, Rhodes *et al*. (2009) found that mentees who regularly interacted with experienced professionals were more likely to develop job-relevant skills and demonstrate improved job readiness. The theory's emphasis on learning in social contexts aligns with the practical nature of WBL programs, where hands-on experience is combined with observation of real-world tasks (Karcher, 2009). However, the theory does not fully account for the individual differences in learning capacities or the specific technical skills needed in specialized industries. Human Capital Theory, as developed by Becker (1964), suggests that investments in education, training, and skills development increase individuals' productivity, which in turn improves their employability and earnings potential. WBL programs fit within this framework by serving as an investment in the human capital of participants. The theory posits that individuals with higher levels of education and training are better prepared to contribute to the workforce and are therefore more likely to secure employment.

The application of Human Capital Theory to WBL programs has been widely supported in the literature. A study by Ferns and Zegwaard (2014) found that individuals who participated in WBL initiatives gained critical technical skills and industry-specific knowledge, which enhanced their employability. Moreover, Kluve *et al*. (2017) demonstrated that the integration of WBL in vocational education systems resulted in improved employment outcomes by directly aligning skills training with market demands. However, critics of Human Capital Theory argue that it overemphasizes the role of formal education and underestimates the importance of soft skills, mentorship, and social capital, which are integral to WBL programs. Role Theory explains that individuals occupy specific roles in organizations or social structures, and these roles come with certain expectations and behaviors (Biddle, 1986). In mentorship programs, mentors and mentees assume distinct roles—mentors provide guidance, support, and knowledge transfer, while mentees are expected to actively engage in learning and professional development. The effectiveness of mentorship programs in fostering employability is linked to the clarity of these roles and the mentor-mentee relationship. Role Theory has been applied in studies examining the dynamics of mentorship. Eby *et al*. (2008) highlighted that clear role expectations between mentors and mentees contributed to more effective skill transfer and professional growth. Furthermore, the quality of the mentor-mentee relationship was found to significantly affect mentees' job satisfaction and career progression (Rhodes & DuBois, 2008). However, the theory has limitations in its ability to explain how informal, fluid relationships, common in many mentorship settings, affect employment outcomes. Social Exchange Theory, developed by Homans (1961), posits that social interactions are based on reciprocal exchanges of resources and benefits. In mentorship, mentors invest their time, expertise, and support in exchange for the professional growth and success of the mentees. This mutual exchange is built on trust and commitment, which enhances the effectiveness of the mentorship relationship.

The reciprocity aspect of Social Exchange Theory has been explored in the context of WBL programs. Allen and Eby (2004) found that mentors who felt valued by their mentees were more likely to provide sustained support, leading to better employment outcomes for mentees. Similarly, Janssen and Van der Voordt (2017) demonstrated that reciprocal relationships between mentors and mentees in WBL programs fostered greater skill development, confidence, and readiness for the labor market. However, the theory does not adequately address power imbalances or situations where mentees may not be able to reciprocate equally, which could impact the

effectiveness of mentorship. Transformational Leadership Theory, introduced by Bass (1985), explains how leaders inspire and motivate their followers to reach their full potential. In mentorship, transformational mentors act as role models, providing vision, charisma, and guidance to help mentees develop personally and professionally. The mentor's ability to inspire and motivate mentees is critical in fostering a sense of self-efficacy and career aspiration, both of which contribute to employability. Empirical studies support the application of Transformational Leadership Theory in mentorship programs. A study by Eby *et al*. (2013) found that mentees who had transformational mentors were more likely to report higher levels of job satisfaction, career advancement, and organizational commitment. This aligns with findings from Rhodes *et al*. (2009), who demonstrated that transformational leadership within mentorship led to increased confidence and motivation among mentees, directly improving employment outcomes. The limitation of this theory lies in its assumption that all mentors possess transformational qualities, which may not be the case in every mentorship relationship. Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) focuses on intrinsic motivation, autonomy, and self-competence. This theory emphasizes the importance of creating environments that foster individuals' intrinsic motivation and support their autonomous pursuit of goals. In mentorship and WBL programs, when mentors foster a sense of autonomy and competence in mentees, the mentees are more likely to take initiative in their learning and career development.

Self-Determination Theory has been applied to explain how mentees in WBL programs develop intrinsic motivation for learning and skill acquisition. A study by Karcher (2009) found that when mentees were given autonomy in their tasks, they demonstrated higher engagement and improved employability. Similarly, Rhodes *et al*. (2009) found that mentorship programs that fostered autonomy and competence were more effective in preparing mentees for employment. However, the theory does not address the external factors, such as labor market conditions, that may influence employability, which limits its explanatory power in certain contexts. The existing literature provides a robust understanding of how mentorship and Work-Based Learning (WBL) programs enhance employability through frameworks like Social Learning, Human Capital, and Transformational Leadership. However, a significant research gap exists in applying these theories within Uganda's specific socio-economic and cultural context. Most studies focus on developed nations, and there's limited exploration of the effectiveness of mentorship and Work-Based Learning (WBL) programs in enhancing employability of youth in Uganda. Further research is needed to address these gaps and tailor mentorship and WBL frameworks to improve employment outcomes for Uganda's diverse workforce.

METHODOLOGY

The empirical model developed in this study is designed to assess and predict employability outcomes among participants in Work-Based Learning (WBL) programs, using a range of demographic and program-related factors. This model is grounded in established economic and educational theories of employability, drawing on prior research that highlights the influence of factors such as gender, age, educational background, and program type, on employment outcomes. Models similar to this have been utilized in labor economics to estimate employment probabilities (Heckman, 1979; Card *et al*., 2018) and have been adapted in studies focusing on education-to-employment transitions in the context of vocational training and WBL programs (Kluve *et al*., 2017; OECD, 2018). This approach provides a structured method for quantifying the impact of key variables on employability and aligns with frameworks used in studies of active labor market policies (ALMPs) and workforce development (Kluve *et al*., 2019). By applying this model to Uganda's WBL participants, the study aims to identify the predictors that most significantly affect employment prospects, offering insights into how WBL can be optimized to enhance employability outcomes. The empirical model developed for this study aims to estimate the likelihood of employability among Work-Based Learning (WBL)

participants based on various demographic and program-related factors. The model is specified as follows:

Employability=β0+β1(Gender)+β2(Age)+β3(Educational Background)+β4(Program Type)+β5(Program Duration)+ε

In this model, employability serves as the dependent variable, indicating whether a participant is employed or unemployed. The independent variables include gender, age, educational background, program duration and a vector of program type, each represented by its corresponding regression coefficient (β1,β2, β3, β4, etc.). The error term (ε) captures any variability in employability that cannot be explained by the included factors.

The model variables in the study were measured using a combination of categorical and continuous data. Employability was measured as a categorical variable with 66% of the sample (129 participants) employed, while 34% (67 participants) were unemployed. Gender was a categorical variable, with males coded as "1" and females as "0," with 62% of the sample being male (122 participants) and 38% female (74 participants). Age was treated as a continuous variable and divided into three groups: 18–24 years (45% of the sample), 25–30 years (35%), and 31–35 years (20%). The educational background of participants was categorized as follows: all participants had completed secondary education, 45% had vocational training, and 22% had higher education, with secondary education serving as the base category. The type of Work-Based Learning (WBL) program, including apprenticeships, internships, and mentorship initiatives, was recorded as binary variables (yes = 1, no = 0) to indicate participants' involvement in these programs. Additionally, program duration was treated as a continuous variable, categorized into three groups: less than six months (56%), six months to one year (28%), and more than one year (16%). The study's data was derived from a survey of a random sample of 196 beneficiaries participating in WBL programs and mentorship initiatives, with a focus on capturing demographic and program-related variables influencing employment outcomes. Information was collected through interviews, documenting factors like age, gender, educational background, type of WBL program, and program duration. This dataset provided a comprehensive view of how socio-economic and program-specific variables affected the employment prospects of participants involved in WBL and mentorship programs.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

To assess the effectiveness of WBL and mentorship programs, multiple regression analysis was t conducted to identify significant predictors of employability and the overall effectiveness of mentorship in WBL programs. Using the logistical regression model, the empirical results of the estimation model are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Logistic Regression Model Results

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	P-value
Constant	1.13**	0.03	0.03
Gender(Male)	0.85**	0.45	0.045
Age	0.15***	0.05	0.002
Vocational training	1.10**	0.05	0.025
Higher education	0.64*	0.43	0.07
Apprenticeships	0.95**	0.95	0.018
Internships	0.02**	0.53	0.04
Mentorship initiative	1.25**	0.55	0.012
Program Duration	0.7**	0.35	0.037

*Note: *, **, *** represent 10%, 5% and 1% level of significance respectively*

The constant term, with a coefficient of 1.13 and a statistically significant p-value of 0.03, suggests that even in the absence of other influencing variables, there is a positive baseline likelihood of employability for WBL participants. This implies that factors not included in the model or intrinsic employability skills may affect employment outcomes. This finding is consistent with previous

research, such as Kluve *et al.* (2017), who noted that baseline employability could remain strong depending on individual characteristics and contextual factors, even without direct program intervention. For the gender variable, the positive coefficient of 0.85, with a p-value of 0.045, indicates that male participants are more likely to be employed than female participants. This result mirrors global trends, as reported by the OECD (2018), where men generally exhibit higher employability across various labor markets. However, this finding contrasts with studies like Eby *et al.* (2008), which suggest that WBL programs and mentorship can help bridge the gender gap, particularly for women. The persistence of this gap in the present study may be attributed to socio-cultural factors prevalent in Uganda, where traditional gender roles might still influence employment opportunities. Age is found to have a significant and positive association with employability, as indicated by its coefficient of 0.15 and a p-value of 0.002. Older participants are more likely to secure employment compared to younger individuals, which aligns with findings from Card *et al.* (2018), who noted that older participants tend to bring more experience and skills, making them more attractive to employers. However, some research, such as Allen and Eby (2004), emphasizes that younger participants in mentorship programs benefit from exposure to professional networks, which can enhance their employability. The discrepancy may be related to the specific structure of WBL programs in Uganda, which could favor more experienced participants.

Educational background plays a crucial role in employability, with a coefficient of 1.10 and a p-value of 0.025 for participants with vocational training and a coefficient of 0.06 and p-value of 0.07 for participants with higher education training suggesting that participants with vocational training and higher levels of education are more likely to be employed. This finding supports the human capital theory (Becker, 1964), which posits that increased education equips individuals with the skills necessary to thrive in the labor market. It also aligns with Ferns and Zegwaard (2014), who found that vocational and higher education provide participants with better preparation for the workforce. The positive impact of educational attainment is further reinforced by Kluve *et al.* (2017), who highlighted the importance of aligning education with market demands to improve employability. The type of WBL program significantly affects employability, as shown by a coefficient of 0.95 (p-value = 0.018) for participants in apprenticeships, and a coefficient of 0.02 (p-value = 0.04) for participants in internships. Participants engaged in internship and apprenticeships experience better employment outcomes, consistent with Blair *et al.* (2015), who noted that employer-engaged WBL programs, such as apprenticeships, tend to produce higher employment rates. This finding underscores the importance of aligning program types with industry needs, a conclusion supported by Kluve *et al.* (2018), who emphasized that the design and structure of WBL programs are critical to their success. Program duration also influences employability, with a coefficient of 0.70 and a p-value of 0.037, indicating that participants in longer programs are more likely to secure employment. This finding is in line with research by Janssen and Van der Voordt (2017), which showed that longer WBL programs allow for more comprehensive skill development, thus increasing participants' readiness for the labor market. The longer exposure to workplace environments provides participants with the practical experience necessary to bridge the gap between education and employment, a theme echoed in broader WBL literature (Symonds *et al.*, 2011).

Mentorship involvement has the strongest effect on employability, with a coefficient of 1.25 and a p-value of 0.012, indicating that participants who receive mentorship are significantly more likely to be employed. This result aligns with the findings of Allen *et al.* (2004) and Eby *et al.* (2013), which show that mentorship enhances employability by offering guidance, career advice, and networking opportunities. Mentorship plays a pivotal role in personal and professional development, helping mentees navigate their career paths with increased confidence and job readiness. This result also supports transformational leadership theory, which suggests that mentors can inspire and motivate their mentees to reach their full potential, thus

improving their employability prospects. The results from this empirical model highlight the significant role that demographic factors and program-related variables play in determining employability outcomes for WBL participants. Gender, age, educational background, program type, program duration, and mentorship involvement all have statistically significant relationships with employability, confirming trends seen in previous research. However, the persistence of gender disparities and the strong influence of mentorship suggest areas where program improvements could be made to foster more inclusive and supportive environments. These findings underscore the importance of tailored interventions, such as extended mentorship and targeted training, to further enhance the employability of WBL participants in Uganda, aligning with best practices in global workforce development.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the impact of gender, age, educational background, program type, program duration, and mentorship involvement on employability among Work-Based Learning (WBL) participants in Uganda. The results show that demographic and program factors significantly affect employment outcomes, with mentorship being the strongest predictor, followed by vocational training and apprenticeships. Gender disparities persist, with males having higher employment rates, and extended program duration further enhances employability. Overall, the findings highlight the importance of well-structured WBL programs that integrate vocational training, apprenticeship, sufficient duration, and mentorship to address youth unemployment and equip participants with market-relevant skills. Mentorship is crucial for employability, and structured mentorship programs should be integrated into Work-Based Learning (WBL) initiatives, with a focus on addressing gender disparities by supporting female participants. Longer WBL program durations are recommended, as they enhance skill development and job readiness. Financial incentives should encourage organizations to offer extended apprenticeships and internships. Collaboration between educational institutions and industries is essential to align WBL programs with labor market needs, ensuring participants gain relevant skills. Lastly, continuous monitoring and evaluation of WBL programs will help improve their effectiveness in reducing youth unemployment and fostering economic growth.

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