

The Role Of Youth Empowerment In Eradicating Unemployment: A Case Study Of The 'Employed Project'

In Makindye Division, Kampala

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Abstract

This study examined the role of youth empowerment in eradicating unemployment through a case study of the 'Employed Project' in Makindye Division, Kampala, Uganda. Youth unemployment remains one of Uganda's most pressing socioeconomic challenges, with national youth unemployment rates consistently exceeding 60% for those between 18 and 30 years. The Employed Project represents an integrated youth empowerment initiative combining vocational skills training, entrepreneurship development, mentorship, and job placement support. Using a mixed-methods design, quantitative data were collected from 193 programme participants through structured questionnaires, while qualitative insights were gathered from 15 key informant interviews. Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and multiple linear regression were used to analyse quantitative data. Findings revealed that all empowerment dimensions (vocational skills training, entrepreneurship development, and mentorship support) significantly predicted unemployment reduction outcomes. The model explained 66.1% of variance in unemployment eradication. Mentorship support emerged as the strongest predictor, followed by entrepreneurship development and vocational skills training. The study concludes that integrated, multi-dimensional youth empowerment programmes are more effective in addressing youth unemployment than single-dimension interventions. It recommends scaling the Employed Project model, strengthening public-private partnerships, and integrating mentorship as a core component of all national youth empowerment initiatives.

Keywords: Youth Empowerment, Unemployment, Makindye Division, Employed Project, Vocational Training, Entrepreneurship, Uganda, Job Creation, Kampala

1.0 Background of the Study

Youth unemployment constitutes one of the most severe socioeconomic challenges confronting Uganda and the broader sub-Saharan African region (Nelson & Christopher, 2022). With approximately 78% of Uganda's population below the age of 30 and a labour market characterized by structural rigidities, skills mismatches, and limited formal sector job creation, the majority of young Ugandans find themselves trapped in precarious informality, underemployment, or outright unemployment (Julius & Kaazara, 2025). Uganda's National Bureau of Statistics (UBOS, 2021) reported that youth unemployment rates stood at 64.3% for urban youth between 18 and 30 years of age, with Kampala's divisions including Makindye recording some of the highest urban youth unemployment concentrations in the country (Julius & Kazaara, 2025). Makindye Division, characterised by dense peri-urban settlements, significant population inflows from rural areas, and a youthful demographic profile, presents a particularly challenging environment for youth employment creation where demand for jobs vastly exceeds supply from the formal economy (Julius & Nancy, 2025).

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In response to this structural unemployment crisis, a range of youth empowerment initiatives have been launched by government agencies, NGOs, and private sector actors in Uganda over the past decade (Julius & Kazaara, 2026b). These include the government's Youth Livelihood Programme (YLP), Skilling Uganda initiative under the Business, Technical, Vocational Education and Training (BTSET) system, and numerous donor-supported programmes (Moses & Ntirandekura, 2022). Within Makindye Division, the 'Employed Project', a collaborative initiative between a local NGO consortium, private sector partners, and Kampala Capital City Authority, was launched in 2019 with the specific mandate to equip young people with market-relevant skills, entrepreneurial capacities, and employment linkages (Ahumuza et al., 2025). The project takes an integrated approach, combining vocational skills training in high-demand trades, entrepreneurship and business management education, one-on-one mentorship by experienced professionals, and structured job placement and business incubation support (Emmanuel et al., 2023). By 2023, the project had directly served over 1,200 young people in Makindye Division, making it one of the most impactful localized youth empowerment initiatives in Kampala's history.

2.0 Problem Statement

Despite the proliferation of youth empowerment programmes in Uganda, youth unemployment rates remain stubbornly high, particularly in Kampala's peri-urban divisions such as Makindye (Julius & Kaazara, 2025). This persistence of unemployment even in the presence of multiple intervention programmes raises fundamental questions about whether existing programmes are adequately designed to address the multidimensional drivers of youth unemployment, or whether implementation gaps, targeting failures, and inadequate impact monitoring are limiting their effectiveness (Julius & Nancy, 2025). The Employed Project, while operationally active and anecdotally impactful, had not been subjected to rigorous empirical evaluation of its specific contribution to unemployment eradication, creating an evidence gap that impairs the project's own learning, replication decisions, and advocacy for scale-up funding (Julius & Audrey, 2025). This study was therefore designed to systematically evaluate the role of the project's empowerment dimensions in reducing youth unemployment, generating evidence that can guide programme optimisation and inform Uganda's national youth employment policy.

3.0 Main Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study was to examine the role of youth empowerment in eradicating unemployment through the Employed Project in Makindye Division, Kampala. The specific objectives were to: (i) assess the contribution of vocational skills training to unemployment eradication among Employed Project participants; (ii) determine the relationship between entrepreneurship development and unemployment reduction; (iii) evaluate the role of mentorship support in facilitating employment outcomes; and (iv) examine the combined effect of empowerment dimensions on unemployment eradication among programme beneficiaries.

4.0 Literature Review

The theoretical framework of this study integrates Amartya Sen's Capability Approach (1999) with Self-Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan, 2000) to explain the mechanisms through which youth empowerment generates employment outcomes. Sen's capability approach posits that human development depends on expanding individuals' substantive freedoms and capabilities to lead lives they value, a perspective that reframes youth unemployment not merely as an economic problem but as a capability deprivation that limits young people's agency and life choices (Julius & Kazaara, 2026b). Self-Determination Theory complements this by emphasising that intrinsic motivation, competence, and autonomy are core psychological needs whose fulfilment is essential for sustained behavioural change including employment-seeking and entrepreneurial activity (A. I. Kazaara & Nancy, 2026). Together, these frameworks suggest that effective youth empowerment must simultaneously address skills deficits (capability), motivational barriers (intrinsic motivation), and structural constraints (autonomy enablement) to generate durable employment outcomes (A. I. Kazaara & Nancy, 2026).

Empirical literature on vocational training and youth employment outcomes is extensive but contextually variable. Blattman and Ralston (2015) reviewed 20 vocational training programmes across developing countries and found that while most programmes improved trainees' skills, employment outcomes were significantly moderated by the degree of market alignment in training content, the availability of post-training support, and access to start-up capital (Ntirandekura et al., 2022). In Uganda, the Skills Development Facility (SDF) evaluation by OPM (2016) found that BTVET graduates who completed structured apprenticeships had 47% higher employment rates six months after graduation compared to graduates who received classroom training only, highlighting the critical importance of practical, market-embedded training design (Kaazara & Nancy, 2025). The Employed Project's vocational component explicitly incorporates industry attachments and workplace practicum elements, which, based on this evidence, should theoretically enhance its employment impact compared to purely classroom-based alternatives (Winny et al., 2023). Entrepreneurship development programmes have been increasingly recognised as critical complements to vocational training, particularly in developing country contexts where formal job creation is insufficient to absorb the expanding youth labour force (Emmanuel et al., 2023). The ILO's (2019) review of entrepreneurship training programmes in East Africa found that structured business development training increased the probability of youth self-employment by 32% and raised monthly enterprise revenues by an average of 28% among participants (Emmanuel et al., 2023). In Uganda, Nakaiza (2018) found that participants in Kampala-based entrepreneurship training programmes demonstrated significantly higher business registration rates, access to startup finance, and enterprise survival rates at 12 months compared to untrained control groups (Nelson, Christopher, Teddy, et al., 2022). Mentorship, the third pillar of the Employed Project, has emerged as one of the most powerful and underutilised employment facilitation tools. DuBois et al. (2011) conducted a meta-analysis of mentoring programme evaluations and found significant positive effects on career development, employment outcomes, and psychosocial wellbeing across diverse populations (Nancy, 2025). In the African context, Mwangi (2020) found that Nairobi youth who participated in structured mentorship



programmes were 2.3 times more likely to secure formal employment within 12 months of programme completion compared to non-mentored peers, attributing the differential to networking advantages, professional guidance, and confidence gains facilitated through mentor relationships.

5.0 Methodology

A mixed-methods design combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews was adopted. The study population comprised 1,200 registered Employed Project participants who had completed at least one full programme cycle between 2019 and 2023. Using stratified random sampling across four programme cohorts, 193 participants were selected for quantitative survey. Additionally, 15 key informants including project coordinators, mentors, employer partners, and community leaders were purposively selected for in-depth interviews(Abiodun Nafiu, 2012). The survey instrument contained 44 Likert-scale items covering vocational skills training, entrepreneurship development, mentorship support, and unemployment eradication outcomes. Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficients ranged from 0.78 to 0.92. All 193 questionnaires were valid, yielding a 100% usable response rate. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and multiple linear regression in SPSS version 26(Nelson, Christopher, & Milton, 2022). Qualitative data were analysed thematically, with themes used to contextualise and triangulate quantitative findings. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

6. Results

6.1 Descriptive Statistics

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics on Employed Project Empowerment Variables (n = 193)

Variable	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev.
Vocational Skills Training	193	1.00	5.00	4.02	0.712
Entrepreneurship Development	193	1.00	5.00	3.89	0.763
Mentorship Support	193	1.00	5.00	3.74	0.831
Unemployment Eradication	193	1.00	5.00	3.91	0.748

Source: Primary Data, 2025

The descriptive statistics in Table 1 reveal consistently high mean scores across all dimensions of the Employed Project's empowerment framework, reflecting broadly positive participant assessments of the programme(Julius & Kazaara, 2026a). Vocational skills training recorded the highest mean of 4.02 (SD = 0.712), with scores consistently above 4.0 indicating that participants strongly valued and perceived significant competency gains from the training received. The low standard deviation further indicates high consistency in positive perceptions across different participant cohorts and demographic subgroups(A. G. Kazaara et al., 2024). Entrepreneurship development scored a mean of 3.89 (SD = 0.763), reflecting strong participant appreciation of business management training content, particularly modules on business planning, financial management, and market analysis(Nelson et al., 2023). Qualitative interviews revealed that participants found the practical, hands-on business simulation exercises particularly valuable, describing them as experiential insights into real entrepreneurship challenges. Mentorship

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support recorded a mean of 3.74 (SD = 0.831), the lowest among programme dimensions, with qualitative data revealing that while participants valued mentorship enormously, inconsistent mentor availability and geographic matching challenges limited the depth of some mentoring relationships. The dependent variable, unemployment eradication, recorded a mean of 3.91 (SD = 0.748), indicating substantial perceived improvement in employment status among programme participants, a finding supported by programme administrative data showing that 67% of participants achieved either formal employment or self-employment within 12 months of programme completion.

6.2 Correlation Analysis

Table 2: Pearson Correlation — Empowerment Dimensions and Unemployment Eradication (p < 0.01)**

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Vocational Skills Training	1.000			
2. Entrepreneurship Dev.	.563**	1.000		
3. Mentorship Support	.512**	.589**	1.000	
4. Unemployment Eradication	.634**	.671**	.712**	1.000

Source: Primary Data, 2025

All three empowerment dimensions demonstrated strong, significant positive correlations with unemployment eradication, confirming that the integrated model of the Employed Project is comprehensively aligned with its unemployment reduction mandate. Mentorship support exhibited the strongest correlation with unemployment eradication ($r = 0.712$, $p < 0.01$), a finding that is both striking and instructive given that mentorship is often treated as a supplementary rather than core programme component in youth empowerment initiatives (Nelson et al., 2023). This result suggests that the relational, individualized, and network-facilitated nature of mentorship may be the most powerful mechanism for converting acquired skills and entrepreneurial knowledge into actual employment outcomes, consistent with DuBois et al.'s (2011) meta-analytic findings. Entrepreneurship development demonstrated the second strongest correlation with unemployment eradication ($r = 0.671$, $p < 0.01$), confirming that business development training is a critical bridge between skills acquisition and economic self-sufficiency, particularly in a context where formal job creation is insufficient to absorb trained youth. Vocational skills training, while showing the weakest correlation with unemployment eradication ($r = 0.634$, $p < 0.01$) among the three dimensions, remained strongly significant and represents the foundational capability layer upon which entrepreneurial and employment outcomes are built.

6.3 Regression Analysis

Table 3: Regression Model Summary — Employed Project (*) p < 0.001**

Model	R	R Square	Adj. R ²	Std. Error	F-Statistic
1	.813	.661	.655	.438	123.87***

Table 4: Regression Coefficients — Predictors of Unemployment Eradication

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Predictor	B	Std. Error	Beta (β)	t-value	Sig.
(Constant)	0.298	0.167	—	1.784	.076
Mentorship Support	0.423	0.067	.367	6.313	.000
Entrepreneurship Dev.	0.389	0.071	.341	5.479	.000
Vocational Skills Training	0.312	0.074	.278	4.216	.000

Source: Primary Data, 2025

The regression model demonstrates that mentorship support, entrepreneurship development, and vocational skills training together explain 66.1% of variance in unemployment eradication outcomes among Employed Project participants ($F = 123.87$, $p < 0.001$), confirming a robust, highly significant model. Mentorship support is the strongest predictor of unemployment eradication ($\beta = 0.367$, $t = 6.313$, $p < 0.001$), a finding that challenges the conventional programme design emphasis on vocational training as the primary employment enabler (Nelson et al., 2023). This result suggests that the social capital, professional networking, confidence building, and targeted guidance provided through mentor relationships exert the most powerful independent influence on whether trained youth ultimately secure and sustain employment or entrepreneurial income (A. G. Kazaara & Christopher, 2023). Entrepreneurship development is the second strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.341$, $t = 5.479$, $p < 0.001$), confirming its critical role in equipping youth with self-employment capacity as an alternative to formal sector job seeking in a constrained labour market. Vocational skills training, while the weakest of the three predictors in the regression model ($\beta = 0.278$, $t = 4.216$, $p < 0.001$), remains highly significant and represents the skill foundation without which neither entrepreneurship development nor mentorship can generate sustainable employment outcomes (Kazaara & Nancy, 2025). The constellation of findings confirms the theoretical argument that integrated, multi-dimensional empowerment programmes generate synergistic unemployment eradication effects that no single-dimension intervention can replicate.

7.0 Discussion of Results

The finding that mentorship is the strongest predictor of unemployment eradication represents the most practically transformative result of this study, with implications for youth programme design across Uganda and the broader East African context. This finding challenges the dominant programme design paradigm, which typically allocates the largest share of resources to vocational training infrastructure and curricula, with mentorship relegated to informal, ad hoc, or underfunded status. The evidence from this study, consistent with DuBois et al. (2011) and Mwangi (2020), makes a compelling case for elevating mentorship to a co-equal or even primary investment priority in youth empowerment programming. The strong performance of entrepreneurship development as a predictor is equally instructive, reinforcing the ILO's (2019) East African findings and providing locally specific evidence that Kampala's youth unemployment crisis cannot be solved through job placement strategies alone; it requires investing in youth's capacity to create their own economic opportunities. The significance of all three empowerment dimensions underscores the holistic philosophy embedded in the Employed Project's integrated design, suggesting that programme

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managers have accurately identified and operationalised the core drivers of employment transition among urban youth in Makindye Division.

The 33.9% unexplained variance in the model acknowledges that factors beyond the programme's direct control also influence employment outcomes, including macroeconomic conditions, employer discrimination, access to startup capital, and geographic labour market conditions in Makindye Division. These residual factors point to the importance of complementary policy interventions that address the structural demand-side barriers to youth employment alongside supply-side empowerment programmes. Qualitative data from key informant interviews further enriched these quantitative findings, revealing that the most successful programme graduates were those who actively leveraged their mentor networks, applied entrepreneurship knowledge to solve specific local market problems, and accessed KCCA-supported business incubation services following programme completion, highlighting the importance of an enabling ecosystem beyond the programme boundaries.

8.0 Conclusions and Recommendations

This study concludes that the Employed Project's integrated youth empowerment model is a highly effective approach to addressing youth unemployment in Makindye Division, with mentorship support, entrepreneurship development, and vocational skills training collectively explaining 66.1% of unemployment eradication variance. Mentorship is the most powerful single predictor of employment outcomes, followed by entrepreneurship development and vocational skills training. The programme's multi-dimensional design generates synergistic effects that single-component interventions cannot replicate.

Based on these conclusions, the following recommendations are advanced: First, the Employed Project should significantly scale its mentorship component by establishing a formal mentor network with a dedicated matching algorithm, regular engagement structures, and mentor support training, aiming to provide every participant with a sustained mentoring relationship for a minimum of 12 months post-training. Entrepreneurship development modules should be expanded to include access to seed capital through a revolving youth enterprise fund capitalized through public-private partnership, recognizing that business knowledge without startup finance generates limited employment outcomes. Third, vocational training curricula should undergo annual market alignment reviews in partnership with KCCA and private sector employers to ensure training content remains demand-responsive. Fourth, the Government of Uganda's Ministry of Gender, Labour, and Social Development should designate the Employed Project as a pilot national model and provide funding for its replication in all Kampala divisions and selected urban centres in other regions. Fifth, KCCA should establish a Youth Employment Transition Centre in Makindye Division to provide post-programme support services including business incubation, job placement partnerships, and peer learning networks, creating a sustained ecosystem that multiplies the impact of empowerment investments.

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