Longitudinal Descriptive Results from the Siyakha Youth Assets for Employability Study: Effects of Program Duration on Employment Outcomes

SUMMARY

In this brief, we examine the effects of youth employability programs (YEPs) on participants' labor market outcomes. We assess how the length of YEPs is associated with post-program employment and employability. Counterintuitively, the data show that participants of shorter-duration programs did as well or better than those who participated in longer-duration programs.

About Siyakha Youth Assets

Siyakha Youth Assets was a longitudinal, cluster-randomized study implemented in South Africa between 2015 and 2019. Siyakha's primary research objective was to examine the causal impacts of youth employment and financial inclusion programs on financial capabilities, employability, and longer-term employment effects for South African youth. The study was conducted by the Global Social Development Innovations at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the Centre for Social Development in Africa at the University of Johannesburg, in partnership with eight organizations providing youth employability programs in South Africa.

The full baseline and endline reports for the Siyakha Youth Assets for Employability study are available at gsdi.unc.edu.

This brief is part of a series of research briefs on longitudinal descriptive findings from the Siyakha Youth Assets for Employability Study. Siyakha was supported by the Ford Foundation, the Jobs Fund (South Africa Siyasebenza), the South African National Youth Development Agency, and the University of Johannesburg.

Background

The Siyakha study comprised both randomized and non-randomized evaluations of workforce and financial literacy training programs offered to South African youth. The study sought to test the effects of these programs on participants' employment and financial wellbeing outcomes. Data were collected at four points in time, including prior to program participation and at a two-year follow-up after program completion (Wave 4).

This brief examines the effects of program duration on youths' employment outcomes. Program duration is often an important variable when considering the effects of an intervention. For interventions that produce positive effects, we might expect participants who receive more of that intervention to demonstrate positive effects of greater magnitude than do participants of shorter duration programs.

Our primary measures of employment and employability include rates of current employment and take-home pay. Other outcomes of interest include job search preparedness—for example, the presence of an up-to-date curriculum vita and cover letter; persistence in applying and interviewing for jobs; and expectations around compensation. Changes in participants' employment characteristics between baseline and Wave 4 reflect lasting effects that may be a result of program participation; as such, these pre-post changes are the focus of this brief.

Findings

Program Duration

Program duration does not appear to be correlated with our core measures of current job status and take-home pay. Participants of short duration programs were, at Wave 4, more likely to be employed than their counterparts in programs with medium and long durations (see Figure 1).

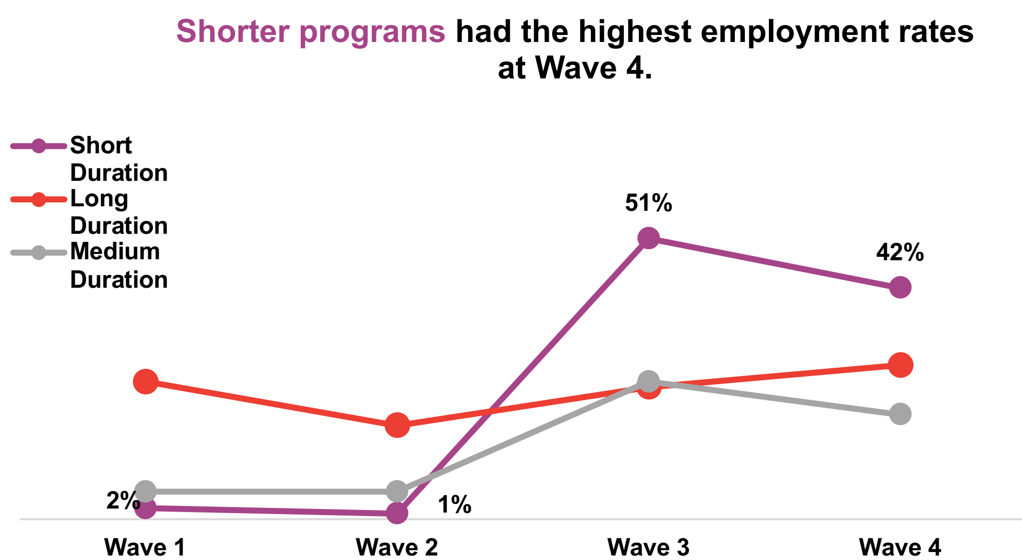

Figure 1. Proportion of participants employed by program duration over time.

Notably, employment rates among participants of both short and medium duration programs were very low at Waves 1 (baseline) and 2 (program completion), before substantially increasing at Wave 3. Although employment rates decreased from Wave 3 to Wave 4, Wave 4 employment rates for participants of both short and medium duration programs was markedly higher than those employment rates reported at Wave 1. In contrast, employment rates among participants of long duration programs remained relatively constant across waves.

Participants of shorter-duration programs were earning marginally more on average at Wave 4 than were participants of longer-duration programs (see Figure 2), suggesting that program duration did not have a significant influence on participants' incomes.

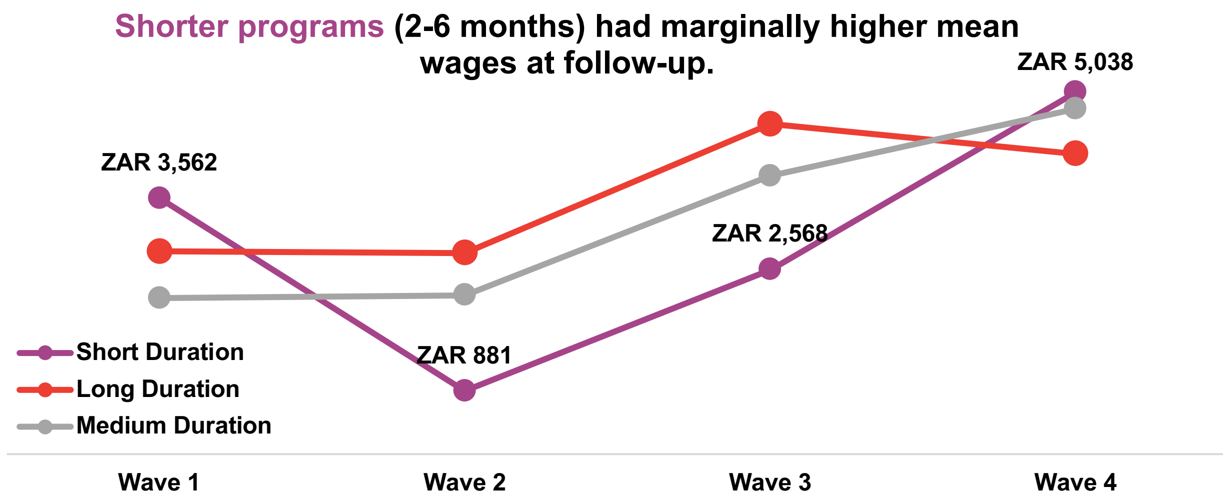

Figure 2. Mean wage by program duration over time.

Indeed, the absence of a clear trend over time in mean wages suggests that program duration may not be a useful explanatory factor.

Preliminary results across other employment-related outcomes show shorter-duration program participants doing better than their counterparts—for example, participants of programs less than two months in duration had higher reservation wages—or show marginal differences between participants who attended programs of different durations.

Discussion

In theory, longer-duration programs may produce greater employability benefits than shorter-duration programs. However, this is not evidenced in the data, which suggest the opposite. One explanation for this counterintuitive finding may be selection bias: individuals who, at baseline, place a greater value on their time may be more inclined to enroll in shorter-duration programs. These participants were not more likely to be employed at baseline, but they may have had more extensive or valuable work experience or training as compared to their counterparts in longer-duration programs. Alternately, shorter duration programs may be more intensive (e.g., more hours per day or more days per week) as compared to longer duration programs, with program duration being an inaccurate measure of participants' actual program dosages.

In either case, it may be that program duration is not a causal variable, but rather that other associated variables, such as dosage, confound the relationship with employment, or that there was a selection bias that led certain types of participants to enroll in shorter vs. longer duration programs.

The content of this brief was prepared by William Curran-Groome and Rainier Masa.
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