

# Soft Skills and Entrepreneurship Training for Secondary School Students in Uganda



In sub-Saharan Africa, where youth unemployment rates are very high, teaching students the skills required to be successful entrepreneurs or to compete in the formal labor market has the potential to reduce youth unemployment, drive economic growth, and reduce poverty. Whether such skills – particularly soft skills – can be taught, however, is an open question. In Uganda, researchers partnered with Educate! and IPA to evaluate the impact of the Educate! Experience program, a leadership and entrepreneurship skill development program for secondary school students. Four years after the intervention, graduates' soft skills improved relative to non-graduates, while impacts on hard skills were more limited. Participants were more likely to have graduated from secondary school and female graduates were also more likely to be enrolled in or to have completed tertiary education. In addition, Educate! graduates reported having fewer sexual partners, being less sexually active, and waiting longer to start a family than non-graduates. They also expressed reduced social acceptability of violence and reported fewer threats of and lower incidence of physical violence. *These results are preliminary; final results are forthcoming.*

## Policy Issue

Education systems in Africa face many challenges in equipping students with the skills needed to be successful in adulthood. While secondary schools are largely fee-based and require substantial investments for poorer families, graduates face few formal employment opportunities and often lack the entrepreneurial skills required to start or operate their own small businesses. Teaching students the hard and soft skills required to be successful entrepreneurs or to compete in the formal labor market has the potential to reduce youth unemployment, drive economic growth, and reduce poverty. But whether such skills can be taught is an open question and a policy priority.

Indeed, a recent review of 28 studies relying on employer surveys across multiple countries finds that socioemotional (soft) skills are the first priority in 77 percent of the studies that rank employer skill preferences.<sup>[1]</sup> How malleable soft skills are in adulthood and whether training programs that aim to increase the stock of these skills can generate improvements in productivity and life-outcomes have only begun to be explored.<sup>[2]</sup> Most of the existing literature



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### COUNTRY

Uganda

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### PROGRAM AREAS

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examines only the short-run effects of business training.<sup>[3]</sup> The few studies that have documented impacts over time often find that effects disappear in the longer term.<sup>[4]</sup> To the researchers' knowledge, this was the first study to rigorously evaluate the long-term impacts of a skill development program for youth in school.

## Evaluation Context

The Educate! NGO aims to enhance skills among youth to help them engage and succeed in both formal employment and entrepreneurial activities in East Africa. The Educate! Experience program is implemented during the last two years of secondary school and delivered within existing secondary schools (government, private, and community schools) by practically-trained youth mentors, who use hands-on teaching methods and practical applications in classrooms and in Student Business Clubs. The program's goal is to develop leadership, workforce-readiness and entrepreneurship skills in secondary school students. It teaches youth soft skills including both interpersonal skills—e.g., communication and teamwork—and intra-personal skills—e.g., self-confidence, critical thinking, creativity and grit. It also teaches hard skills such as business planning, budgeting, savings, etc. (read more below)

## Details of the Intervention

Researchers partnered with Educate! and IPA to conduct a clustered randomized evaluation of the Educate! Experience program in Uganda over a four-year period. The evaluation measured impacts of the program on students' skills, economic outcomes, educational attainment, community involvement, and gender empowerment outcomes in Uganda. The study also investigated whether the Educate! Experience program impacted intimate partner violence (IPV)-related outcomes.

Researchers randomly assigned 48 schools, stratified by district (6 districts), to either be part of the comparison group or to receive the full program. A total of 1,942 students participated in the study in those schools (966 received the program; 976 did not).

Students in the treatment group received the full Educate! Experience program, which has three main components:

1. A social entrepreneurship and leadership course: A 35-lesson course aimed at fostering socially responsible leadership skills, business/entrepreneurship skills, community awareness/engagement, group and individual "personal projects" such as community initiatives and businesses, and group mentorship.
2. Mentorship: one-on-one mentoring sessions focused on personal development; once per term, the mentor holds a group mentorship session to discuss any issues with the entire class.
3. Student Business Development Clubs: clubs focused on business development and designed to help scholars design projects that generate income.

The program also included a teacher support training and a scholarship for qualified and

accomplished candidates.

The program was successfully implemented during the 2012-2013 school years. A follow-up survey was conducted in 2017 to measure quantitative impacts, and participants in a current relationship or in a relationship within the last 12 months prior to the survey were also administered an additional survey module focusing on couples' decision making, gender social norms, and IPV-related outcome. Researchers used behavioral games to measure soft skills.

## Results and Policy Lessons

**Based on preliminary results from the four-year follow-up, the program had strong and meaningful impacts on Educate! graduates' soft skills.** Educate! graduates showed large, statistically significant impacts on soft skills such as creativity, grit, ability to manage stress, and exhibited higher levels of self-efficacy (the extent to which an individual is in control of their life and empowered to take action to implement a plan). Impacts were also recorded for selected Big Five personality traits (e.g., Extroversion, Openness and Agreeableness).

**Furthermore, Educate! graduates were substantially more prosocial and demonstrated higher degrees of persuasion.** The study did not find any impact on political participation, community engagement, or trust in institutions, however.

**The program had limited impacts on knowledge of hard skills.** On average, Educate! graduates did not display more business knowledge than their comparison group counterparts. Educate! graduates were, however, more knowledgeable about identifying opportunities for business, better at deliberative dialogue, and better at identifying win-win strategies compared to those in the comparison group.

**The program also had positive impacts on educational outcomes, particularly for female participants.** Educate! graduates were 3.7 percentage points (or 4 percent) more likely to complete high school relative to those in the comparison group. Female graduates were 8.4 percentage points (11 percent) more likely to be enrolled in tertiary education. Furthermore, Educate! graduates were more likely to select business and STEM majors in university.

**At the time of the four-year follow-up the new skills had not translated into higher rates of employment (formal or self-employment) or higher wages, earnings, revenues, or profits relative to the comparison group.** However, it is important to note that many graduates were still pursuing their education at the time of the follow-up (35 percent of the sample were still enrolled in tertiary education). It is therefore too early to understand whether the program impacts labor market outcomes, and a longer-term follow up is needed. As highlighted above, the Educate! program led to important changes in youths' mindset and soft skills, investments in education, all factors typically strongly correlated with economic outcomes.[\[5\]](#)

**In addition, the program generated positive social spillovers including delayed family formation, less risky behavior, shifts in social norms, and reductions in intimate partner violence.** Educate! graduates were not only less likely to justify IPV, but females in the treatment group

were also 6.2 percentage points less likely to report threats and incidences of physical violence (28.7 percent of women in the treatment group reported threats or incidences of violence, compared to 34.9 percent in the comparison group).

Overall, the findings join a small but growing body of research suggesting that soft skills associated with entrepreneurial success are malleable and can be taught, and that improvements persist for years afterwards. The research team is planning 7-year follow-up to study the impact of the Educate! Experience program on labor market outcomes, among others, and shed light on the underlying mechanisms through which the intervention operates and yields lasting impacts.

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## Sources

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