

THE BASIC EDUCATION EMPLOYMENT INITIATIVE.

DID IT WORK FOR YOUNG PEOPLE?

Youth Capital partnered with ORT SA CAPE and Youth@work - organisations that have extensive experience in recruiting, training, and placing young people in schools in the role of assistants - to carry out research to understand the impact of public employment programmes that employ young people in schools through short term work opportunities.

The insights of ORT SA CAPE and Youth@work were invaluable in both the design of the research survey, and the recommendations put forward in response to the survey results.



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INTRODUCTION.

Youth Capital is a youth-led advocacy campaign with an Action Plan to shift gears on youth unemployment in South Africa. Youth Capital's vision is a society in which every young person has the skills, support, and opportunity to get their first decent job.

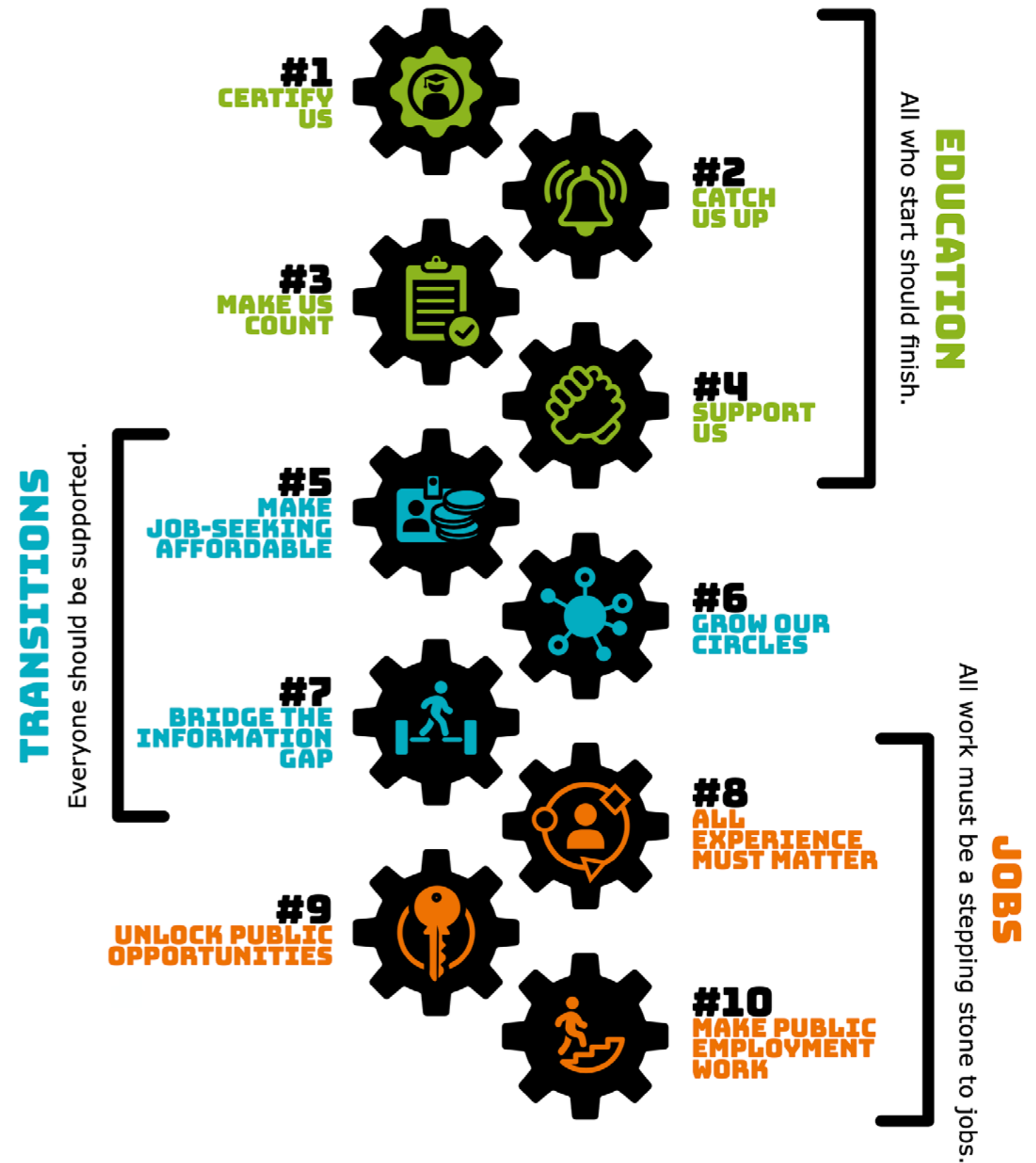
In 2020, Youth Capital published [Shift: An Action Plan to Tackle Youth Unemployment in South Africa](#). This Action Plan highlights leverage points that would improve outcomes for young people: supporting them in finishing their educational journey, supporting them in their transition into the world of work, and ensuring that existing employment initiatives and opportunities work for them.

ONE OF THE CALLS TO ACTION IN THE ACTION PLAN IS MAKE PUBLIC EMPLOYMENT WORK – A CALL TO ENSURE THAT PUBLIC EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMMES ARE MEANINGFUL WORK OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE.

If designed well, public employment programmes can be stepping-stones to future learning and earning opportunities for young people.

THIS REPORT LOOKS AT THE EXPERIENCE OF NEARLY 3 000 SCHOOL ASSISTANTS, MOST OF WHOM FORMED PART OF THE OVER 320 000 YOUNG PEOPLE WHO PARTICIPATED IN THE FIRST PHASE OF THE BASIC EDUCATION EMPLOYMENT INITIATIVE (BEEI), TO DERIVE EXPERIENTIAL INSIGHTS FOR THE DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THESE TYPES OF PUBLIC EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMMES.

AN ACTION PLAN TO SHIFT GEARS ON YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT.





MAKE PUBLIC EMPLOYMENT WORK:

According to Statistics South Africa's Labour Force Survey for Quarter 2 of 2021, 9.1 million youth (15-34 years old) are not in employment, education, or training (NEET)¹. More and more young people in South Africa are joining the ever-growing queue of the unemployed; desperate to find work in a struggling economy, a search made even more difficult by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

SOLVING THE YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT CRISIS REQUIRES A NUMBER OF INTERVENTIONS.

One that has been given priority by the government is public employment programmes, such as the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP). **Public employment programmes are government initiatives that aim to directly create employment.**

Launched in 2004, the EPWP seeks to create temporary work opportunities for those who are unskilled, unemployed, poor, and vulnerable².

Through the programme, government and state-owned enterprises generate temporary, labour-intensive employment opportunities through the delivery of public infrastructure such as schools, roads, and clinics, as well as the provision of socially useful services including home-based care, community security, and the cultivation of community gardens. Since its inception, the EPWP has generated over eight million work opportunities.

Public employment programmes are often designed as low-skilled work opportunities. This makes them a prime entry point for young job-seekers, particularly those who have little to no formal education, training, or work experience.

Public employment programmes have the potential to be a pathway to stable employment for young people, by giving them a short-term opportunity that enables them to gain work experience, develop transferable skills, and build their social networks.

THE PRESIDENTIAL EMPLOYMENT STIMULUS.

In response to COVID-19's impact on jobs and livelihoods, the Presidential Employment Stimulus was launched towards the end of 2020. Intended to be an augmentation of existing government commitments to employment creation, **the objective of the Presidential Employment Stimulus is to support livelihoods while the labour market recovers:** investing in public goods and services, enhancing skills and employability, and boosting demand in the economy at the same time.

One of the initiatives of the Presidential Employment Stimulus is the BEEI.

COORDINATED BY THE DEPARTMENT OF BASIC EDUCATION (DBE), THE BEEI AIMED TO PLACE 300 000 EDUCATION ASSISTANTS AND GENERAL SCHOOL ASSISTANTS IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS - MAKING IT SOUTH AFRICA'S LARGEST EVER PUBLIC EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMME.

Over 320 000 young people (18-35 years old) were employed as Education Assistants or General School Assistants in the first phase of the BEEI which ran from December 2020 until April 2021³. This makes it a good case study for modelling future public employment programmes aimed at creating entry points into the job market for young people.

**2 905 YOUNG PEOPLE
AND 108 SCHOOL
MANAGEMENT
REPRESENTATIVES
COMPLETED
YOUTH CAPITAL'S
ONLINE SURVEYS.**

METHODOLOGY.

In April 2021, Youth Capital ran two online surveys. One for young people employed as assistants at a school, and the other for school management at schools where these assistants were employed. 2 905 young people and 108 school management representatives completed the respective surveys.

These respondents represent participants in both the BEEI and other school assistants programmes that are implemented through the Youth Employment Service (YES). Programmes implemented through YES run for one year, and these programmes were established prior to the BEEI.

The surveys were distributed through social media platforms and through Youth Capital's network of NGOs, some of whom run programmes that place young people in schools in the role of assistants. The two surveys are not a representative sample of all the youth and schools who were part of the BEEI or other school assistants programmes. However, the results highlight some interesting insights from both the viewpoint of young people and the schools that hosted them.

In July 2021, the DBE released a closeout report for the first phase of the BEEI. Results from the DBE's closeout report are used in this report to inform conclusions drawn from the two surveys carried out by Youth Capital.

RESULTS.

The results presented here relate to the 2 905 youth who completed the survey for young people employed as assistants.

Thirty percent of respondents participated in a school assistants programme through YES and their implementing partners, and 69% participated in the BEEI.

WHY DID THEY APPLY FOR THE PROGRAMME?

42% had an interest in education or in working with children.

28% needed the money.

20% wanted to gain work experience or learn.

Sixty percent of respondents were unemployed prior to their employment as an assistant.

WERE ASSISTANTS PAID ON TIME?

While all respondents received a stipend, 60% said it had been paid on time each month, 27% reported it was paid late some months, and 11% reported that it was paid late each month.

RESPONDENTS' PROFILE

Amongst the 2 905 respondents:

22% were between the ages of 18 and 24.

80% were female.

39% had a matric qualification as their highest level of education.

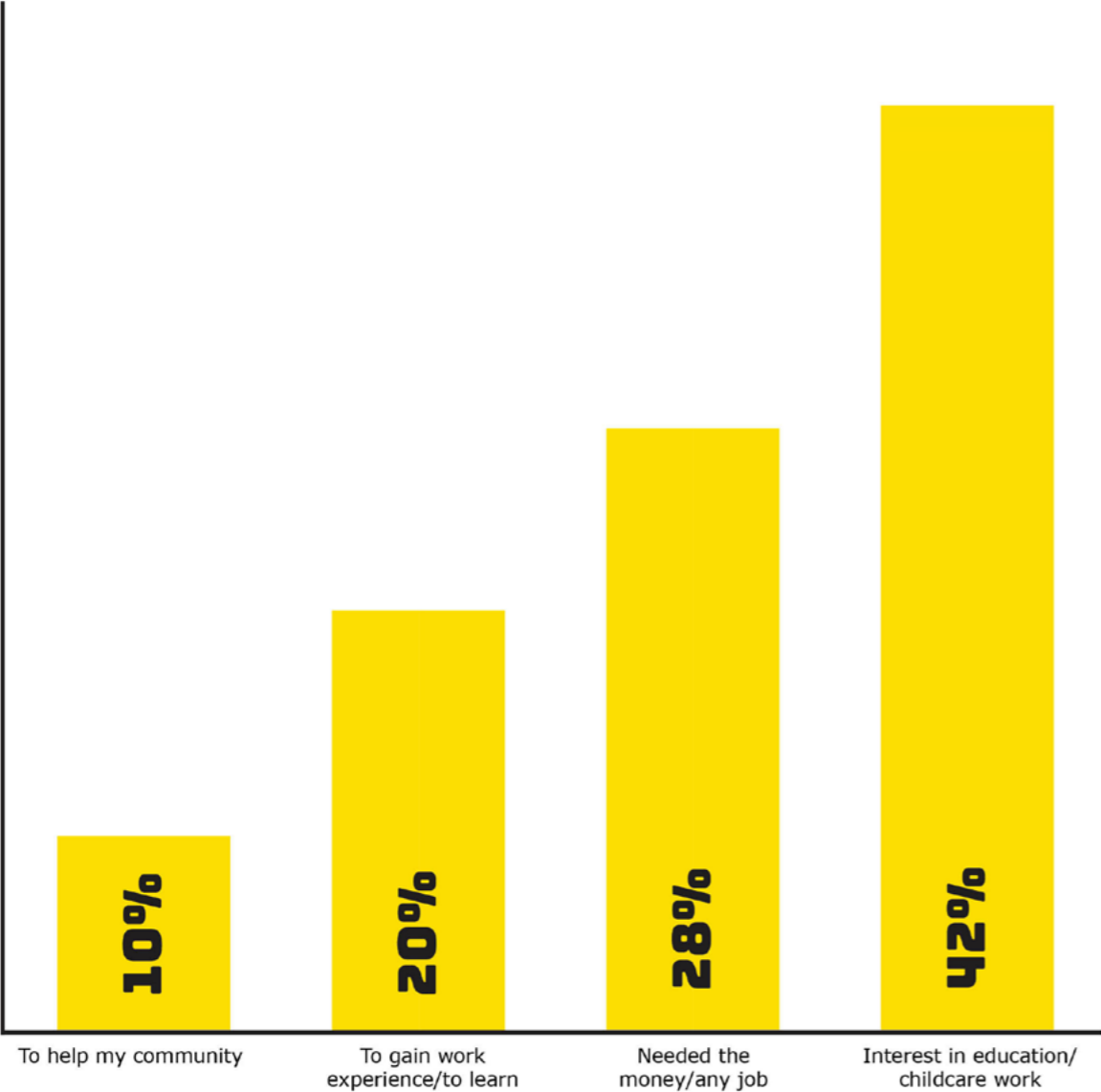
This is similar to the profile of the overall BEEI cohort, as reported in the DBE's closeout report.

49% were between the ages of 18 and 24.

73% were female.

38% had a matric qualification as their highest level of education.

REASON FOR TAKING THIS JOB.



SIXTY PERCENT OF RESPONDENTS WERE UNEMPLOYED PRIOR TO THEIR EMPLOYMENT AS AN ASSISTANT.

TRAINING AND SKILLS DEVELOPMENT.

Sixty percent of respondents received training prior to their placement at a school. According to respondents, the training focused on workplace readiness and, to a lesser degree, health and safety.

Training on other skills such as computer literacy, facilitating literacy and numeracy activities with learners, and financial literacy was rare - less than 5% of respondents reported receiving this type of training.

WHEN ASKED WHAT TYPE OF SKILLS THEY FELT THEY HAD GAINED, 66% OF RESPONDENTS MENTIONED TIME MANAGEMENT, WHILE 12% MENTIONED TEACHING SKILLS.

Less than 2% of respondents reported developing skills in project management, leadership, facilitation, communication, computer literacy, or administration. Despite this, 79% of respondents either said the training and skills development they received was helpful or that they learnt a lot.

Furthermore, the majority of respondents (60%) reported receiving training from school staff. This aligns with responses from school management representatives. However, only 23% of school management respondents said that assistants had been given adequate training before commencing work at the school.

Twenty-five percent of school management respondents recommend that assistants be given more training prior to commencing their placement.

TYPE OF WORK DONE.

Respondents were distributed across the grades as follows:

- ⚙ Grades R-3: 39%
- ⚙ Grades 4-6: 33%
- ⚙ Grades 7-9: 20%
- ⚙ Grades 10-12: 16%

Most respondents (82%) worked with learners.

According to the DBE's closeout report, assistants were trained across the following areas:

- ⚙ **Home Language and Mathematics** (for those recruited as Education Assistants)
- ⚙ **ICT – e-Cadres**
- ⚙ **Child and Youth Care Work**
- ⚙ **Reading Champions**
- ⚙ **Handymen**

In order to better understand what the received training translated to in practice, respondents were asked about how their time was spent. They reported the following with regard to the activities they were engaged in at school:

75% spent most or a lot of their time on in-classroom activities.

71% spent most or a lot of their time on one-on-one learner support.

60% spent most or a lot of their time on administration support.

17% spent time having nothing to do.

Seven percent and 6% of respondents said they spent most or a lot of their time on maintenance and garden work respectively. This figure is low compared to the DBE's closeout report, which states that **38% of all assistants hired were General School Assistants whose responsibilities focussed on supporting the maintenance of school infrastructure**

“I have learnt so much, and fell in love with the little ones. I think they have their skills in softening hearts. I have learnt patience, admin work, and how to manage children in groups. I have experienced a lot of change in my family due to the little [stipend] we get.”

An Education Assistant

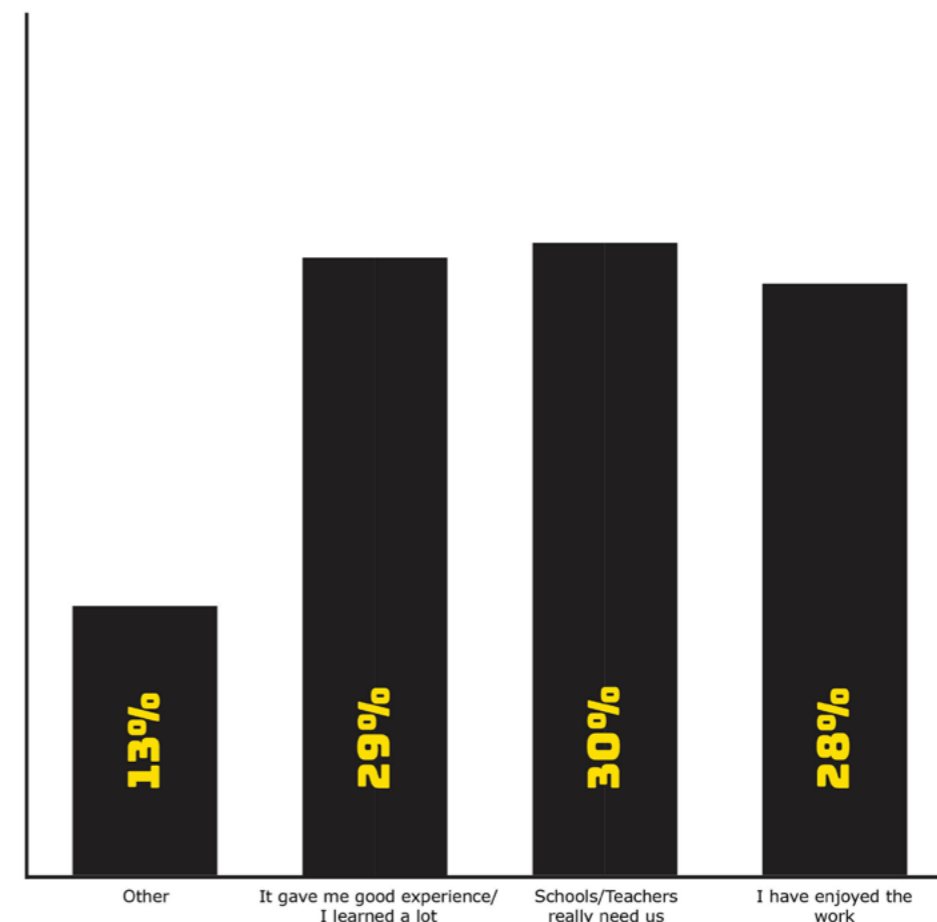
OVERALL EXPERIENCE.

Overall, both assistants and schools found the experience positive. Eighty-seven percent of youth respondents said either that the opportunity was a good experience, they enjoyed the experience, or the school really needed them. Eighty-six percent of school management respondents said that having these types of positions are beneficial overall, and 95% said that having these types of positions are beneficial to the school.

These findings align with the DBE's closeout report, which states that **an average of 98% of schools thought that the assistants were beneficial to the school.**

A range of recommendations for future school assistants programmes were provided by school management respondents, the most common one (26%) being that the assistants' contracts should be extended.

WHAT WAS YOUR EXPERIENCE OF THE PROGRAMME?



NOTE: Other includes: The contract must be extended; It was challenging/too much work; We need more training/guidance; Roles/responsibilities were not clear; They need to pay us on time; I did not enjoy it; and Other.

DISCUSSION.

It is clear from both the results of these surveys as well as conversations with schools, young people, and civil society organisations that **the role of school assistants is beneficial** - to both schools and young people.

A crucial question to ask with regard to the design of public employment programmes of this nature is whether their purpose is to provide young people with a short-term work opportunity that provides temporary financial respite, or to create a pathway for young people to gain experience, skills, and social networks that will help them gain a meaningful foothold in the labour market.

Youth Capital believes that for school assistants programmes, and public employment programmes in general, to have a meaningful impact in addressing youth unemployment, it should be the latter.

We propose the following recommendations based on the findings of the surveys and the experience of civil society organisations that have an extensive understanding of facilitating and implementing school assistants programmes.

A CRUCIAL QUESTION TO ASK WITH REGARD TO THE DESIGN OF PUBLIC EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMMES OF THIS NATURE IS WHETHER THEIR PURPOSE IS TO PROVIDE YOUNG PEOPLE WITH A SHORT-TERM WORK OPPORTUNITY THAT PROVIDES TEMPORARY FINANCIAL RESPITE, OR TO CREATE A PATHWAY FOR YOUNG PEOPLE TO GAIN EXPERIENCE, SKILLS, AND SOCIAL NETWORKS THAT WILL HELP THEM GAIN A MEANINGFUL FOOTHOLD IN THE LABOUR MARKET.

TRAINING AND MENTORING.

This is an area that has scope for significant improvement.

Training received by young people in the BEEI programme differed from school to school, and the majority of this training did not appear to have a strong focus on transferable skills.

The DBE's closeout report states that basic orientation training was given to all assistants in a printed manual, and an electronic version was made available to teachers through the Teacher Connect platform.

However, this platform was not referenced by anyone in either of our surveys. It is then not surprising that the DBE's closeout report notes that only 50% of all assistants participated in this online training, as it appears there was a lack of awareness of the platform.

The delivery of training was also complicated by COVID-19.

Many training sessions took place online. However, if training was disrupted on account of connectivity issues, its delivery was often not rescheduled.

Furthermore, the DBE seems to have designed the rollout of the initiative with the expectation that Principals would ensure that the training was delivered. The DBE's closeout report states that, "Principals were provided with training to allow them to provide orientation to the youth. On this basis, all the appointed youth must have received some form of orientation..." (page 39). However, given the high workloads of Principals, particularly over the period when assistants were placed, this was not a realistic expectation.

Part of the purpose of school assistants programmes is to provide young people with real-world work experience. Thus, it is to be expected that participating youth need guidance, support, and mentorship to help them carry out their assistant role. If teachers are not properly briefed and prepared to provide this guidance, support, and mentorship, it impacts negatively on the ability of the assistant to do the job well.

⚙️ *Training should be given prior to commencement of the position, and continued learning should be provided, even if through WhatsApp in a self-learning style.*

Alternative plans should be in place for challenges that may arise through online training - such as connectivity and load shedding.

⚙️ *Mentorship should be a compulsory component of school assistants programmes.*

The role of the mentor and mentee should be clearly established at the beginning of the programme. Feedback from the survey indicates that school staff are able to provide this, if the staff are well-informed and are able to take on this additional responsibility.

“Close mentorship is required in order to utilise their expertise effectively. A carefully worded contract is needed which structures the employment relationship.”

A School Management Representative

CONTRACT PERIOD AND EXIT PATHWAYS.

An insight from organisations that have experience in training and placing assistants in schools is that **a contract period of one year is optimal to provide the necessary training to the assistants,** and ensure that schools reap the most benefit for the time and money invested into each assistant on the programme. This insight is supported by the recommendations from schools who took part in the survey, who recommended that contracts should be longer than 3-4 months.

Additionally, contract periods should be clear to participants from the start - the DBE extended the contract period from 31 March 2021 to 30 April 2021. However, this decision was only made public in the final week of March - leaving young people in a state of anxiety over whether they would continue to be employed or not.

“The time period of their contracts should be extended for the duration of the full academic year.”

A School Management Representative

⚙️ *Instead of 3-4 month contracts, assistants should be contracted for a full school year.*

Given school holidays, actual time on the job over the course of a school year is closer to nine months. Contracting assistants for a full school year would ensure that assistants have enough time to gain meaningful work experience, skills, and social networks; and that schools get the maximum value from having assistants.

In addition, this information needs to be made clear at the start of the contract, so that young people can prepare themselves for when it comes to an end.

⚙️ *Programmes such as these need to have an exit strategy in place for participants.*

Inferring from the DBE's closeout report, an exit strategy was not a core component of the first phase of the BEEI: "The DBE is considering how the youth on the BEEI can be supported beyond their participation in the initiative. This forms part of the National Pathway Management Network (NPMN) through which the youth can be exposed to various learning, employment, or entrepreneurial opportunities." (page 51).

If these types of programmes are designed to be short-term, then support and information should be provided to the beneficiaries, during the course of the programme, to equip them to navigate their next (post-programme) step in more informed ways than they would have had they not participated in the programme. Additionally, there needs to be a strategic approach to how this opportunity provides a meaningful exit pathway to those who participate.

SELECTION OF CANDIDATES AND SCHOOLS.

Feedback from the schools who hosted assistants indicate that the overall experience is better for both assistants and schools if roles and responsibilities are made clear from the start. Furthermore, school management would prefer to be involved in the recruitment process, as in some instances they felt the wrong candidates were selected, leading to a poor overall experience of the programme.

“The schools must do all the recruitment and be able to assess the type of assistant required in respect of the needs of the particular school. Training should be done prior to the assumption of duty.”

A School Management Representative

⚙️ *Schools should be included in the hiring process, and the roles and responsibilities of assistants and schools should be laid out clearly at the outset of the programme.*

Furthermore, placing youth in schools within the communities where they live is beneficial as they do not have to navigate transport issues to get to work on time, and oftentimes they are already known by members of the school community.

“Allow the schools to manage the process. [The] Harambee route led to confusion. Or they must provide a list of candidates to interview quickly and not later AFTER schools had already started their process. Confusing.”

A School Management Representative

CLOSING.

The BEEI is South Africa's largest ever public employment programme. Funding for the BEEI amounted to R7 billion, and over R4 billion of this was used to create job opportunities for unemployed youth (the majority of the remaining funds was used as a relief fund to schools struggling to pay staff as a result of the pandemic). The DBE hopes to implement a second phase of the BEEI in the course of 2021.

GIVEN THAT PUBLIC EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMMES ARE A LARGE FOCUS OF THE PRESIDENTIAL YOUTH EMPLOYMENT INTERVENTION, THERE ARE LESSONS TO BE LEARNT FROM THE BEEI THAT ARE RELEVANT FOR THE DESIGN OF OTHER (CURRENT OR FUTURE) PUBLIC EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMMES THAT SEEK TO BENEFIT YOUNG PEOPLE, WHILE ALSO ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF THEIR COMMUNITIES.

This report has highlighted important considerations with regard to the design and delivery of public employment programmes like the BEEI. These considerations should be taken into account with respect to the implementation of such programmes, including the potential second phase of the BEEI.

The key components of success highlighted in this report are relevant for any intervention that aims to create an entry point into the job market for young people who have little or no work experience. Many young people lack the basic skills needed to succeed in the job market, and need training, mentorship, and guidance.

Furthermore, it makes sense, in light of this, to ensure the duration of a work experience opportunity is long enough to impart relevant transferable skills, and to ensure that the experience has real impact. Fortunately, there is already a wealth of experience in the sector. The design of these interventions should therefore build on existing best practices, in order to achieve maximum impact for all stakeholders.

“It was bumpy in the beginning since learning everything took a little bit of time, but to say that being with the kids [and] helping the teachers has been a great experience. What I do want to say is that this opportunity to work as a school assistant has opened my mind to further study, and I know [that] without this amazing opportunity I wouldn't have come to that conclusion.”

An Education Assistant

ENDNOTES.

1. Statistics South Africa. Quarterly Labour Force Survey: Quarter 2: 2021. (2021). Available at: <http://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=14606>
2. International Labour Organization. South Africa: Expanded Public Works Programme. (2018). Available at: https://www.social-protection.org/gimi/RessourcePDF.action;jsessionid=Pnf_i-V99z3tBzZ2f6me0CbnwFRuBW_JHGbbGa9hgpGXWRcjPn3K!1588761716?ressource.ressourceId=55007
3. South African Government. Presidential Employment Stimulus: March Progress Report. (2021). Available at: <http://www.thepresidency.gov.za/content/presidential-employment-stimulus-progress-report-march-2021>



Youth Capital is a youth-led campaign with an Action Plan that combines data with young people's lived experiences to shift gears on youth unemployment.

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