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Regis University
Regis College
Master of Development Practice

Master's Candidate: **Audrine Iradukunda**

Capstone Title: **Bridging soft skills gap between university graduates and entry-level professional careers in Kigali, Rwanda**

Presented in the MDP Community Forum on: **April 29th, 2022**

I approve this capstone as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Development Practice.

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**Bridging Soft Skills Gap Between University Graduates and Entry-level
Professional Careers in Kigali, Rwanda**

Master of Development Practice, Regis University

Audrine Iradukunda

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Personal Statement

I grew up in a big family of ten people. In most cases, we did not have the financial ability to pay for our education. Luckily enough, we had generous people and NGOs that supported us to finish our studies, and the circle continued until I was able to finish high school. However, in 2015 when the political crisis started in Burundi, everything faded away. Schools were closed, and any other activity that was helping us generate income to support ourselves stopped. A friend of mine who fled to the neighboring country Rwanda was introduced to the Kepler program, a non-profit organization working with Southern New Hampshire University to offer refugees and vulnerable students from Africa higher education degrees. I would say that my Kepler experience taught me that it is not about getting an education but instead getting the right education that prepares and equips you with skills that are relevant to the job market. As someone who was coming from a French background with cramming as a method of studying, the education I received at Kepler equipped me with the necessary skills that supported me to grow and sustain jobs. Since my graduation, I have been working as a facilitator, curriculum designer, and learning coach; something I would not have fathomed 10 years because of where I was. The education that I received changed me forever, and I am a witness that education can shape people to be the best version of themselves.

With the opportunities that I was given, I started thinking about how education empowered me and how it has the potential to do so for others. My identity and beliefs changed utterly. As Nelson Mandela said, “education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world.” I believe

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that regardless of background, ethnicity, or country we are from if given a platform, and high-quality education, it can change your life forever.

With my experience in facilitation, coaching, and curriculum design, I hope that my program will improve the living standards of those who will be part of it. I hope they will also use the skills they will learn to compete with others in various job markets. I hope the program will equip them with skills that will help them find greater employment opportunities and dispositions that will allow them to keep their jobs.

Literature Review

Africa is the world's youngest continent, and almost 60% of Africa's population is under the age of 25. The youth population is expected to double by 2050, and Sub-Saharan Africa has the fastest-growing population globally. Currently, the population under 35 represents almost a billion people (UNDP, 2017). Research conducted by the UN in 2017 indicates that even though young people are better educated than their elders/parents, this has not improved their job prospects. Youth remain twice as likely to be unemployed as their elders, and youth account for 60% of all of Africa's jobless, according to the World Bank. This is highly associated with the rapid population growth rates, lack of soft skills required at the workplace, and skills mismatch (Ighobor, 2017).

A study conducted by Bessen (2018) to evaluate graduates' job readiness found that employers are having a hard time filling job vacancies because some graduates still lack the required skills, with some lacking communication soft skills. Employers are not just complaining, the skills gap is real and has been affecting the economies of many countries, as well as the development of graduates on an individual level. Research conducted by a human resources consultancy worldwide on a "talent shortage survey" revealed that 35% of 38,000 employers reported difficulty filling jobs due to a lack of available talent (Bessen, 2014). According to Sarrin (2019), "Many times, fresh graduates are not fully prepared to begin professional practice as they show a deficient performance in job interviews which does not help in closing the gap of unemployment. Possession of good academic qualifications is not enough to secure good employment".

Sub-Saharan countries are no exception. Rwanda has more than 50,000 students who graduate annually on a tertiary level, yet according to the National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda (NISR, n.d.), the unemployment rate among university graduates is now 23.5%.

This literature review examines the soft skills gap between university graduates and entry-level professional careers. To answer the research question, "What are the effects of soft skills gaps on career placement for university graduates in Rwanda?" We will explore the concept of the soft skills gap within the Rwandan context and why the gap is critical. We will examine the lacking fundamental skills, who notices the gap, and its impacts on development. We will then look at what the Rwandan government has done to reduce the gap as well as programs within the country using performance-based assessments for practice and how they are working to solve the problem. Lastly, we will explore the formula for closing the skills gap at the tertiary level.

The Skills Gap

On a global level, three out of four employers say that they have a tough time finding university graduates with the soft skills that companies need, and educators agree (SHRM, 2020). This is referred to as the "skills gap." According to BambooHR (2020), the skills gap refers to the disparity between the skills an employer expects their employees to have, and the actual skills employees possess. A study conducted by Blomberg (2018) with more than 200 employers highlighted that the most significant area that graduates are lacking in is soft skills. The report reflects that graduates are ill-prepared to tackle challenges that require soft skills and there is a mismatch between what young people learn in school and the skills employers demand. The report shows that businesses, organizations, and companies that collaborate with universities and connect graduates and employers were the first to detect the skills gap among university graduates.

The national population of Rwanda is approximately 13.4 million, the majority being young people with a median age of 19 years, with a growth rate of 2.6 % (Rwanda Labor Market Information System, 2018). The report presented by the United Nations (UN) stated that Rwanda is among many countries in Africa that are experiencing fast and sustained economic growth, and this is due to many investments, job creation within the country, and the fact that many young people are taking charge of their futures through entrepreneurship, business creation, incubation, technology, etc. (UNDP, 2017). Even though the National Institute of Statistics in Rwanda (NISR) projects 1,500,000 jobs by 2024 and emphasizes inclusive growth for all in the sector and the creation of productive work for all, the unemployment rate in Rwanda is still high at 23.5%. Researchers at NISR attribute this to the lack of attention to soft skills development at the tertiary level, and applicants' inability to meet international standards qualifications (NISR, 2020). In addition, the pace of job growth is still below that of population growth, making it harder for individuals to secure stable jobs. On the other hand, employers are concerned about a scarcity of skilled workers, yet many graduates struggle to find employment (New Times, 2021).

Skills Gap Analysis and Its Impact

TIME magazine (2020) noted, “the entry-level candidates who are on tap to join the ranks of full-time work are clueless about the fundamentals of office life. Somewhere along the road from education to employment, the system is not routinely equipping all students with all the skills they need to succeed”.

A study conducted by PayScale (2017) confirmed that recent graduates are missing top-tier skills to fill the roles at the workplace, and these include soft skills. The top skills that recent graduates lack include writing proficiency, public speaking, critical thinking, problem-solving,

attention to detail, communication, leadership, innovation, creativity, the ability to deal with complexity and ambiguity, and time management.

In a local context, a study conducted by the Education Development Center (EDC) in Rwanda highlighted not only that some graduates are having hard time persuading the employers through their resume or CV submission, but even when applicants make it past the interview process, it is hard to convince hirers during the interview process. Employers are coping with new hires who are not able to write a professional email, struggle to organize and prioritize tasks, or have a challenging time collaborating with coworkers (Alcid & Martin, 2017).

Theoneste Ndikubwimana (2020), Head of the Department of Academic Quality, Accreditation, and Qualification at the Higher Education Council said that all universities should include soft skills in their curricula given the critical importance of these competencies when graduates start their careers. Soft skills development is critical for universities if they are to produce competent graduates. However, the journey is still long as there is still a lack of practice of soft skills, which leads to graduates completing their studies without those skills and struggling to find employment and maintain their jobs (Mbonyinshuti, 2020).

BAG Innovation (2020), a gamified digital platform and employment agency that collaborates with universities and employers in Rwanda, said the soft skills gap is a massive challenge in Rwanda. In their interviews, they pointed out that students and recent graduates struggle to enter the job market and find decent employment upon graduation due to a lack of practical exposure and experiences with soft skills such as communication, time management, public speaking, and problem-solving. They highlighted that graduates often struggle with simple yet critical tasks like producing a professional CV/resume and passing job interviews. They added

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that some employers now offer communication skills training because early career professionals often lack skills in this area. They advise learning institutions to work with employers to identify the market demands and introduce innovative programs that will equip students with the skills needed in different fields (New Times, 2021).

Harambe (2021), another employment agency connecting graduates to employers, stated that graduates struggle to meet employers' demands. They note that when employers seek their ideal employees, the profile includes English and technology proficiency, problem-solving skills, being able to adapt quickly to the environment, and technical skills based on the job demands. However, in most cases, many graduates they have been working with do not even have basic skills such as completing CVs, the ability to speak English, or proficiency in Microsoft Office. (Harambe, 2021).

Moreover, a national study conducted by the Rwanda Development Board (2019) confirmed that skills development, through education and work experience, does not currently respond to labor market needs. Technical and Vocational Educational Training (TVET) and universities are not effectively providing students with the skills they need for work, as shown by just 20% of recent TVET graduates being fully employed after graduation. According to a new report by the Public Capacity Building Agency (Kwibuta, n.d.), the overall skills gap situation in the country reveals a 40 percent gap in the skills expertise required to achieve its development goals. The study mentioned that even those who possess the technical skills are having a tough time marketing themselves or competing at the job market to secure the jobs (Kwibuta, n.d.). Due to these issues, the Rwandan labor market is dominated by foreigners, members of the diaspora who studied outside of Rwanda or those who studied in programs with international curricula. Consequently, the government has created a national job policy called "Hire Rwandans First." However, the

foreigners working in education are allowed to get a work permit without any issue, especially teachers, lecturers, professors, and facilitators, which shows that there is a huge need for more employees in the education sector.

Strategy Adopted by the Rwandan Government to Reduce the Skills Gap

With the overall skills gap situation in the country, the Rwandan government sought to build a strong economy with competitive citizens by the year 2025. Therefore, after conducting thorough research, analysis, and identifying the skills gap, the Rwandan Ministry of Education adopted and commenced the implementation of a new curriculum focused on competency-based learning (CBL) in 2016. The primary purpose was to enable graduates to cope with job-related demands, become problem solvers, and be competitive. It was also intended to focus on educational skills, soft skills, attitudes, and values rather than only knowledge (Nsengiyumva et al., 2021). This curriculum also aimed to develop generic competencies, integrating information communication technology (ICT) tools in education, while also taking care of cross-cutting issues (i.e. skills that can be taught indirectly alongside different courses, such as introducing financial literacy in math class) in the classroom setting to achieve learner-centered teaching methodologies (Rwanda Education Board, 2015).

The last few years have seen an increase in usage of the competency-based curriculum (CBC) in education. However, there were major challenges that arose along the way, including insufficient teaching and learning resources such as laptops, textbooks, computer labs, and labs for other courses. Since one must determine the behaviors that students should be able to demonstrate during and at the end of the course in a CBC, it was not possible for students to learn how to write a CV or a resume, or an email without resources such as laptops or internet. This led to students learning such skills in theory rather than practicing them. Another challenge was that the grading

system was not developed, and since the schools did not have access to computers, it was not possible to implement a grading system where students were assessed and graded based on competencies (Nsengiyumva, 2020). This pushed schools to keep using the old systems in which students are assessed based on grades rather than competencies. Thus, due to inadequate preparedness to enact CBL, students are still learning theories and memorizing content for the sake of grades (Ndiokubwayo et al., 2018). However, the government is still making efforts to reduce the skills gap as it has been collaborating with the World Bank to provide Skills Development Funds to Ventures and programs working towards reducing the skills gap observed by the personal business operators (SDF, 2020).

Best Practices in Performance-Based Programs/Organizations

We have programs within the country that have been trying to reduce the skills gap. There is VVOB Rwanda, which is an education for a development organization that has operated in Rwanda since 2017. The organization has been working on a project that focuses on training teachers in soft and digital skills development and online learning for 21st-century skills to allow teachers to reduce the skills gap. They believe that providing quality opportunities for continuous professional development, most notably through effective professional learning communities and school-based coaching and mentoring for teachers, would reduce the skills gap (VVOB, 2021).

There are also other private institutions working towards reducing the skills gap. Kepler has been using a CBL model in which students are assessed based on competencies. Through different courses, such as professional competencies, Kepler offers students training in soft skills like critical thinking, teamwork, communication, public speaking, interpersonal skills, and management, while also working to inculcate the right attitudes in their graduates to meet the needs of a global and knowledge-based economy. The institution collaborates with local employees to

build the pipeline from classroom-to career. According to Kepler (2020), the model has been successful, with 90% of graduates finding full-time employment or pursuing further education within six months of graduation.

There are other best practices that organizations have implemented with different strategies to reduce the skills gap among their employees. Miller et al. (2014) conducted a study in Rwanda and found that some organizations train their employees through regular professional competencies and professional development or even provide funds for their employees to leverage their skills as a strategy for increasing staff retention. In another study conducted by the US Chamber Organization (2018), they found that some businesses have been collaborating with the education sector to connect directly with schools to ensure that they have the right skills before joining them. In addition, a growing number of companies are now focusing on students' education as part of their business strategies (US Chamber Foundation, 2018). Moringa School Rwanda gives its employees access to learning materials where they can learn any soft skills they have identified based on their profession/titles. They also mentioned that they have learning and development funds for their employees who wish to acquire knowledge/skills beyond the learning materials. However, they emphasized that when hiring they would not hire anyone who did not possess soft skills that they need.

In conclusion, with Rwanda attracting many investors, enhancing private sector competitiveness with a focus on increasing market access, and removing barriers to private sector growth, there is still a huge need to bridge the soft skills gap. As Rwanda continues to advance their learning systems to better prepare their graduates for the knowledge-based sector in the job market, many organizations, programs, employers, and schools have been trying their best to develop soft skills among their employees and students. However, there is still needed to explore

and examine employers' and employees' perspectives on the matter, the actual skills that are lacking on the part of graduates, and how these gaps can be bridged.

Introduction to Community and Context

Rwanda is a landlocked nation located in East Africa, with a surface area of 10,169 square miles. Currently, it is considered densely populated with a population of approximately 13.4 million, and a life expectancy at birth of 67.8 years. The country is divided into four Provinces, the City of Kigali, and 30 districts in total. 17.43% of the population lives in urban areas and cities. Kigali, the capital city, is the economic center with a population of more than a million. (NISR, 2021). The official languages are Kinyarwanda, English, and French, with all Rwandans speaking Kinyarwanda.



Figure 1. Political map of Rwanda from mapsofworld.com

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In Rwanda, there are five social classes, A, B, C, D, E, and F, called “Ubudehe” in Kinyarwanda. The A category is for the people earning 600,000 Rwf (\$600) and above per month; the B category, 65,000 - 600,000 Rwf (\$65-\$600); the C category, 45,000 - 65,000 Rwf (\$45-\$65); the D category, 45,000 Rwf (\$45), and the E category is for unemployed people, elderly, and people with disabilities who do not own any assets (IGIHE, 2021).

Poverty in Rwanda is still high. Around 39% of the country’s population remains below the poverty line, and the majority belong to the third category and below Ubudehe. According to research conducted by USAID, some of the factors contributing to the challenge are the poor education system, low domestic savings, and many rural Rwandans operating subsistence farms, thus having little disposable time and income (Penz, 2020).

Rwanda education operates on a 6-3-3-4 system. Six years for primary school, three years for ordinary level, three years for advanced level, and four years for university bachelor’s degree. The educational system uses two official languages throughout the academic year. Kinyarwanda in primary school (P1-P3), and English from P4 through university (US Embassy in Rwanda, 2019). Annually, Rwanda produces more than 50,000 graduates on a tertiary level. However, over 10,000 college graduates are unemployed; the unemployment rate remained higher among females (26.7 percent) as compared to males (19.9 percent) (NISR, 2021). These young graduates all dream of getting high-paying jobs and creating businesses to support themselves and their families. However, the lack of soft skills to enter the market and the leading skills of being able to learn on the job do not allow them to compete and get the jobs or promotions they need. That being said, the majority of the youth population are the first generation to attend college, with an obligation to financially support their extended families. Regardless of the challenges of not being competitive enough to compete in the marketplace or international markets, these young graduates

still find ways to get low-payment jobs that could allow them to pay bills for themselves and their families.

When it comes to gender parity, Rwanda has been ensuring that both men and women are represented in parliament and political positions. With 61.3% in the Chamber of Deputies and 38.5% in the Senate, the country is ranked in the top five countries in the world for gender equality according to the Global Gender Gap Report (2019). In education, more women have access to primary school, and the country has reached its highest net enrollment with 97.5% for girls and 95.7% for boys. However, girls are less likely than boys to continue on to university. Some of the factors that hinder girls' achievement include the gendered norm of female responsibility for household tasks that diverts time and attention from school/teaching, unplanned pregnancy, which leads to increasing childcare responsibilities, and environments that discourage the participation of girls (USAID, 2014).

Research conducted by the World Bank on sub-Saharan Africa reveals that it is hard to transition from school to work for many young African graduates and particularly for young women. "In Sub-Saharan Africa, young women are over 1.5 times less likely than young men to be formally employed or undergoing education or training. Unequal access to educational opportunities, early marriage rates among young women, and responsibilities for unpaid care and housework are some of the factors contributing to this disparity" (Indhira & Matulevich, 2019). The same research reveals that only 15% of Rwandan males are not in education, employment, or training compared to 38% of females (Indhira & Matulevich, 2019). Gender roles are still a burden to Rwandan women: household duties, taking care of their families, early marriages, and other cultural norms hold them back from developing and empowering themselves. Cultural influence is another component pushing women to get married right after college. Getting a college

degree is considered the highest achievement for women, so society starts to expect that they must get married once they attain it. This is another challenge that hinders women/girls from investing in themselves and building their careers (Blackden et al., 2014).

Technology & Education Context

Rwanda is working towards transforming the country from low-income to medium-income and aspires to become an upper-middle-income country and a high-income country by 2050. To achieve this goal, the country is growing its knowledge-based economy and has seen high development gains in the energy, and agriculture transport sectors since the genocide in 1994. This system has reduced the poverty rate by 12 percent, and food security in general. The government has also achieved economic growth by reforming the financial and business sectors and improving relations to acquire foreign aid through organizations like USAID, World Bank, and other international agencies (Minecofin, 2020).

For the country to drive the transformation to a knowledge-based economy, ICT is a crucial element. The country has adopted many fields in ICT, such as e-commerce and e-services, mobile technologies, application development, and automation, and has been designed as a regional center for the training of professionals and researchers on communication technologies (Rwanda Development Board, 2020). Additionally, Rwanda has created high-quality policies to help it transition to a knowledge-based economy. The Ministry of Education has developed policies and programs to improve educational quality, such as the 2019 National Teacher CPD Framework, and to support ICT integration in education, including the ICT in Education Policy, 2016 (Mugiraneza, 2021). However, even though technology has become a crucial tool for businesses in Rwanda, education is among the sectors that are still lagging to utilize it. For the past few years, Rwandan education has been adjusting its agenda to integrate the use of technology in teaching and learning

to achieve productivity and catch up with the international standards. However, only a few institutions that are primarily private have been able to keep up with the use of technology in their learning. With the lack of digital access in schools, computers, and the internet, most schools could not use technology in their curriculum. This hit Rwandan education badly in COVID-19 times, and the pandemic has shown an incredible number of large-scale efforts to use technology in support of remote learning. Many higher institutions schools were obliged to close for several months since they could not provide online learning to students. With a lack of technology integration in the education system, many graduates struggle even to accomplish small tasks such as writing an email, applying to different opportunities, and even accessing information about those opportunities (Pellini, 2022).

Stakeholder Analysis

We have identified different stakeholders based on the program's needs, areas of interest, and inputs. We chose potential partners such as the University of Kigali, Kigali Independent University, and the University of Rwanda because they are the biggest local higher education. The common risk was skeptical to partner with a new program in our discussion. The youth employment accelerators partners such as BAG Innovation, Harambe, and Impact Hub were chosen for their input on the employment opportunities. Individual partners such as curriculum designers, facilitators, and learning coaches are consultants with experience and passion for education who will work with us to ensure we deliver high-quality work. The ways of engagement we have articulated are based on our assumptions, experiences, and inputs.

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Stakeholders	Name of the person/org.	Relationship to the project	Fit	Priority	Why & How to engage
University	Kepler	Potential Partner	High	High	<p>Why</p> <p>Kepler program trained their students to become competitive at the job market by equipping them with relevant skills including soft and technology skills in a blended learning model. We are planning to partner with them in order to hire their graduates with relevant experiences who will be supporting in the marketing, learning process, and coaching. We believe that working with their graduates won't require us a lot of resources or time to onboard or explain the model of our program.</p> <p>How to engage</p> <p>Kepler has a career team that helps students to get employment opportunities. We will work with the team to connect with us with the right candidates.</p>

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<p>Higher Education Institutions</p>	<p>-Kigali Independent University -University of Rwanda -AUCA -University of Kigali</p>	<p>Potential Partners</p>	<p>High</p>	<p>Medium</p>	<p>Why We are targeting the local university graduates, and these three institutions produce the highest number of graduates in the country per year. Moreover, during our research, we have talked to students and graduates from these universities and they confirmed that they do/did not get the needed soft skills, and are willing to enroll in the program.</p> <p>How to engage, Therefore, we are planning to partner with them with the ideal of getting the graduates directly from the universities. Therefore, we are planning to use the strategy of talking to the public relations or career department to clearly show them the added values that we are giving to their graduates if they partner with us. We will show clearly explain to them the services we are offering which are equipping their graduates with needed and relevant soft skills to the job market, as well as connecting them to the job opportunities.</p>
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Bridging Soft Skills Gap Between University Graduates and Entry-level Professional Careers

Ministry	Ministry of Education Higher Education Council	Potential Partner	High	Medium	<p>Why</p> <p>Currently, the ministry of education in partnership with educational organizations has the agenda of improving the education system to ensure that graduates are equipped with the relevant skills to become competitive in the job market.</p> <p>How to engage</p> <p>In the near future after monitoring and evaluating the success of the program. We will engage with the ministry of education/HEC to ensure that we are partnered to get skills development funds as well as other support needed to scale at a national level. We will show them how our services are contributing to the national agenda of producing competitive graduates (reducing the skills gap as well as the unemployment rate).</p> <p>We will submit a case statement document that includes who we are, what we do, our mission and vision, why our organization’s vision matters, why we deserve their support, the impacts we’re making and planning to make, and how they can support us.</p>
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<p>Youth Employment Accelerator</p>	<p>Harambe Impact Hub Deriv Impact Hub Bag INnovation</p>	<p>Potential Partner</p>	<p>High</p>	<p>High</p>	<p>Why</p> <p>As organizations that seek to solve the global youth unemployment challenge by connecting competent graduates to employers, partnering with them will give us a greater chance for our graduates to compete with others as well as platforms for job opportunities.</p> <p>We will ensure that our graduates meet the standards and criteria required and connect with them through their public relations team that usually partners with organizations’ training on skills. We will also reach out to the talent recruitment manager and discuss how to test our graduates and be included in the talent pool</p>
<p>Individuals</p>	<p>Learning Coaches Curriculum Designers Facilitators</p>	<p>Potential Partners/Employers</p>	<p>High</p>	<p>High</p>	<p>Why</p> <p>We will need the human capacity to build the program starting from the curriculum design, marketing, recruitment, facilitation, etc.</p> <p>How to engage</p>

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					Engaging with them and showing them how it aligns with their mission as educators. Offering some compensation for encouragement.
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Bridging Soft Skills Gap Between University Graduates and Entry-level Professional Careers

Beneficiaries	University Graduates Unemployed university graduates	Program beneficiaries	High	High	<p>The beneficiaries are at the center of our program. Without them, the program would not exist.</p> <p>We will engage with them in different ways:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Using their schools to connect them with us - Using a referral strategy to attract more graduates - Offering some incentives or other ways (reduction in the tuition, paying in installments, etc.) to encourage women to engage with our program. - Creating a safe space for all categories of women (single mothers, girls, married, etc.) - Be flexible and create asynchronous or evening options for those who are busy with work. - Including in our advert the need to improve their job readiness skills and that we have a career team that will assist them and connects with the employment agencies.
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Needs Assessment

In this section, I will describe the process I used to identify the needs of the community. I will start with a description of data sources, then share the key findings from the survey, interview and focus group data, and look at the relationship between several factors that influence the needs of people within the community. Lastly, I will analyze the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) based on the research perspective from the literature review and needs assessment.

Data Sources

We conducted a needs assessment to identify the importance of the soft skills as well as the overall impacts of these skills deficits at the organizational and individual level, assessing the specific soft skills needed at the workplace, evaluating the existing programs/interventions in place, and assessing interventions to bridge the gap. We used various research methods to collect data from all the stakeholders. Of the 70 people asked to complete our survey, we received responses from 45 students/graduates and 12 employers. Additionally, we conducted interviews with lecturers/educators from Rwanda Polytechnic, the University of Rwanda (UR), and Akilah. We also conducted interviews and focus groups with students and graduates from UR, the University of Tourism, Technology, and Business, and Kigali Independent University (ULK).

Findings

Importance of communication soft skills: In the survey sent to employers in Kigali, 100% confirmed that communication soft skills are critical to employees' performance. They have also confirmed that they have identified gaps in their recruitment efforts and employees' daily performances and assessed soft skills during the interview process. They mentioned that during the hiring process, they first check how candidates write their CV or cover letter, and during the

interview process, they look at the body language, professionalism, verbal and nonverbal communication skills, etc. They mentioned that many job seekers have lost the opportunities to be shortlisted because of how poor their CV or cover letters look. While those who reached the interview level got eliminated because of a lack of public speaking or articulating their responses. Anais, a human resources manager at Derive, an organization that hires on average 20 people per month, mentioned that they now prefer to work with recommendations from programs that are confident with their candidates and already have the basic communications skills. She mentioned that it is displeasing to see a graduate who cannot edit properly their CV or who cannot respond to a simple question like, “Tell us about yourself.” On the other hand, graduates from both local public and private institutions acknowledged that communication soft skills are among the most important skills to secure job opportunities. However, three out of five have expressed concerns that they did not learn these skills in class, and those who learned them did not get the chance to practice them. We have identified that graduates who had a chance to acquire and practice those skills are more likely to get job opportunities compared to those who did not. We have also identified that communication skills would be the key to successful land opportunities

Specific soft skills needed at the workplace

Participants were asked to identify the soft skills they would want an employee to possess.

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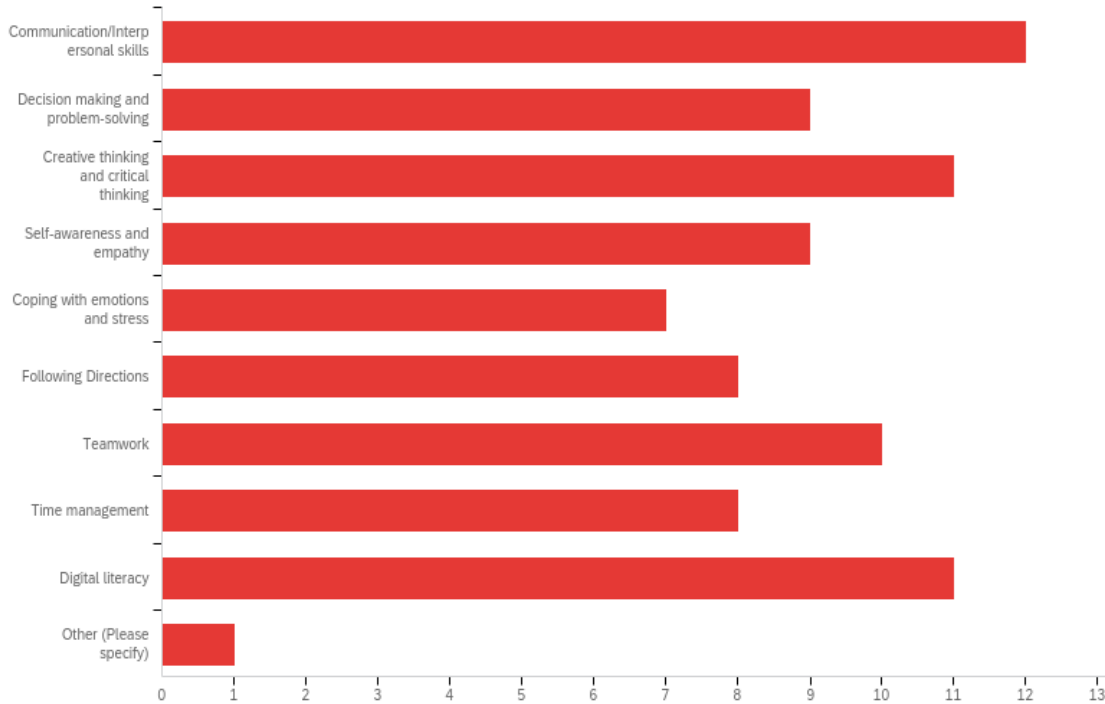


Figure 2. Summary of participant responses.

As seen from the above chart, communication/interpersonal skills are the most important soft skills that employers would wish their employees to possess followed by creative thinking and critical thinking, teamwork, decision-making and problem-solving, self-awareness and empathy, following directions, and time management. For the employees, the results do not differ from the employers. Communication/interpersonal skills came first with 16.23%, followed by teamwork with 13.50%, decision-making and problem-solving had the same rating as time management with 12.28%, creative thinking and critical thinking was rated at 11.40%, coping with emotions and stress at 9.21%, and lastly, following directions at 7.02%. In a focus group, one graduate mentioned that it has been two years that he is unemployed and thinks that is one of the reasons why he hasn't yet employed is the lack of soft skills. He mentioned that he has applied for more than 20 jobs and has only been invited to five interviews. He added that he thinks he has the technical skills that it takes to land an entry job; however, when it comes to interviews, it is hard to convince the

interviewers and communicate what is needed. Moreover, four graduates from the University of Tourism, Technology, and Business Studies mentioned that they became aware of the importance of those skills once they started working in tourism. They mentioned that it could have been better if they had learned communication skills in a school or anywhere else. Two mentioned that they have lost their jobs twice because of dealing with international customers because of that. They added that more than any other field, the tourism industry needs communication soft skills. They mentioned that since tourism works with people from all around the world, they need to learn how to communicate with clients, time management, etc.

Overall, in all the interviews, students and graduates kept mentioning that regardless of the degrees, it could be better to incorporate into the curriculum the basic communication skills such as networking, resume writing, job searching, interviewing, learning how to learn, etc. They mentioned that there is a lack of diversity in the job market as graduates from international programs get jobs easily compared to graduates from local universities.

Existing programs/interventions in place

In an interview with four educators/lecturers from Rwanda Polytechnic, the University of Rwanda, and Kigali Independent University, they mentioned that they offer some courses such as Communications theory, English listening, and writing that offer some soft skills. However, those courses are optional and do not contribute to the average of credits. From the class observation, classes are populated, and each class has a minimum number of 100 students.

From a conversation that I had with students in a focus group, they expressed their concerns that they do not get the chance to participate or apply since they are being taught in teacher-centered learning where they are just receptive and listening to what the lecturers are teaching and waiting to memorize for the exams, and what really matters is the grades they get at the end.

Possible interventions to bridge the gap

Participants were also asked to identify proposed solutions that they felt would best bridge the communication soft skills gap among students/graduates.

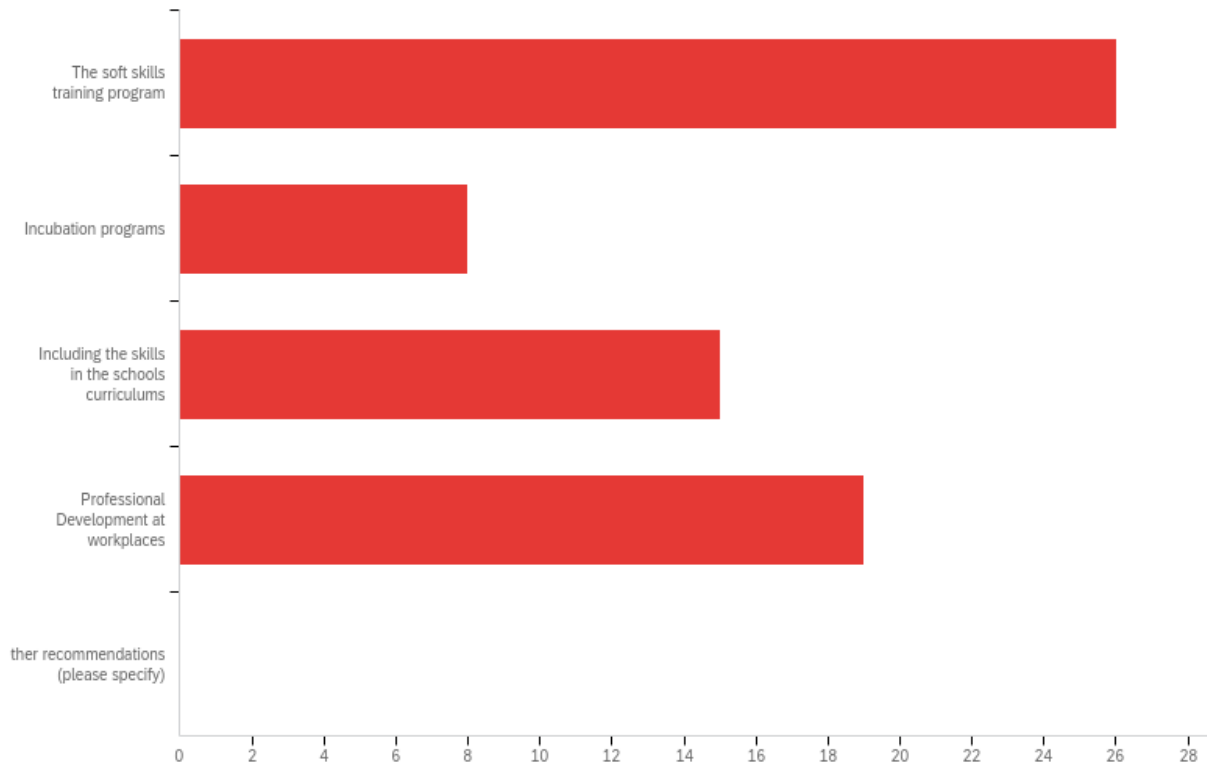


Figure 3. Summary of participant responses.

As seen from the above chart, the leading possible intervention is “The soft skills training program” with a rate of 38.24%, followed by “professional development workplaces.” From the survey, students/graduates mentioned that sometimes it is too late for them to learn these skills in school, and some do not have the resources to self-teach themselves. From the educators' side, they stated that since they do not have the power to change the curriculum or system, it is up to graduates to own their education and search for other opportunities such as training programs to empower themselves. On the employers’ side, some mentioned that a professional development workshop

can leverage their employees' performances, but others stated that it is up to employees to enable themselves and think outside of the box on how they can gain those skills, which must be evident in attitude changes, in their performances, and via certificates. They mentioned that employees can even use the professional development funds dedicated to them to learn those skills and earn certificates.

Intersectionality

Based on participants' responses, we realized that there is an interconnected nature of social categories, such as gender, and other categorizations that hinder some graduates from learning communication soft skills while others have full access to the skills.

Gender. When it comes to expanding knowledge and investing in one's career, there is an enormous difference in how both women and men respond. From the research, every male participant agreed that they will not have any problem participating in any training if they can afford it or it aligns with their goals. However, 4 out of 5 women responded that there are many factors that hinder them from continuing their studies. They mentioned that once completing their bachelor's, they do not have the privilege of getting enrolled in different training as their objectives change along the way because of the family pressure to get married or even the environment. One of the participants mentioned that it has been three years that she has been bullied a lot by her family, friends, and society in general for not being married after three years of completing her bachelor's. They mentioned that they are told so many times that if they keep learning men will fear them and they will not have husbands. On the other hand, for those who are already married, family responsibilities do not allow them to engage in anything since they must take care of the kids and do household chores.

Financial. We have also found that there is a relationship between one’s economic status and the ability to expand their knowledge. From the research, 100% agreed that the education they receive is based on their ability to pay. They mentioned that those who attend public institutions do a chance to learn and practice communication soft skills, while those who attend institutions that use international curricula have an upper hand since they have the resources (laptops, etc.) and the education system that allows them to learn and practice the skills. Moreover, they highlighted that it’s not easy to get enroll in any programs that can boost their knowledge since they cannot afford them. Also, the lack of internet won’t allow them to have access to the information needed.

SWOT Analysis

For this part, we will analyze the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats based on the research perspective from the literature review and needs assessment.

<p>Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Government willing to support - Students/graduates have identified the gaps - Graduates are willing to increase their knowledge - Available hubs spaces for small businesses and programs 	<p>Weaknesses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Students/Graduates do not have the means to pay to expand their knowledge - Education institutions not understanding the importance of soft skills - Teacher-centered learning system - Lack of resources (technology, infrastructure, etc.) - Lack of inclusive pedagogy - Lack of collaboration between schools and employers
<p>Opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Employment agencies are willing and ready to support competent graduates and connect them with employers - Skills Development Funds for youth - Employers willing to hire new competent graduates 	<p>Threats</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of resources such as internet and laptops - Lack of access to adjusting the curriculums

- Technology improvement to facilitate online learning	
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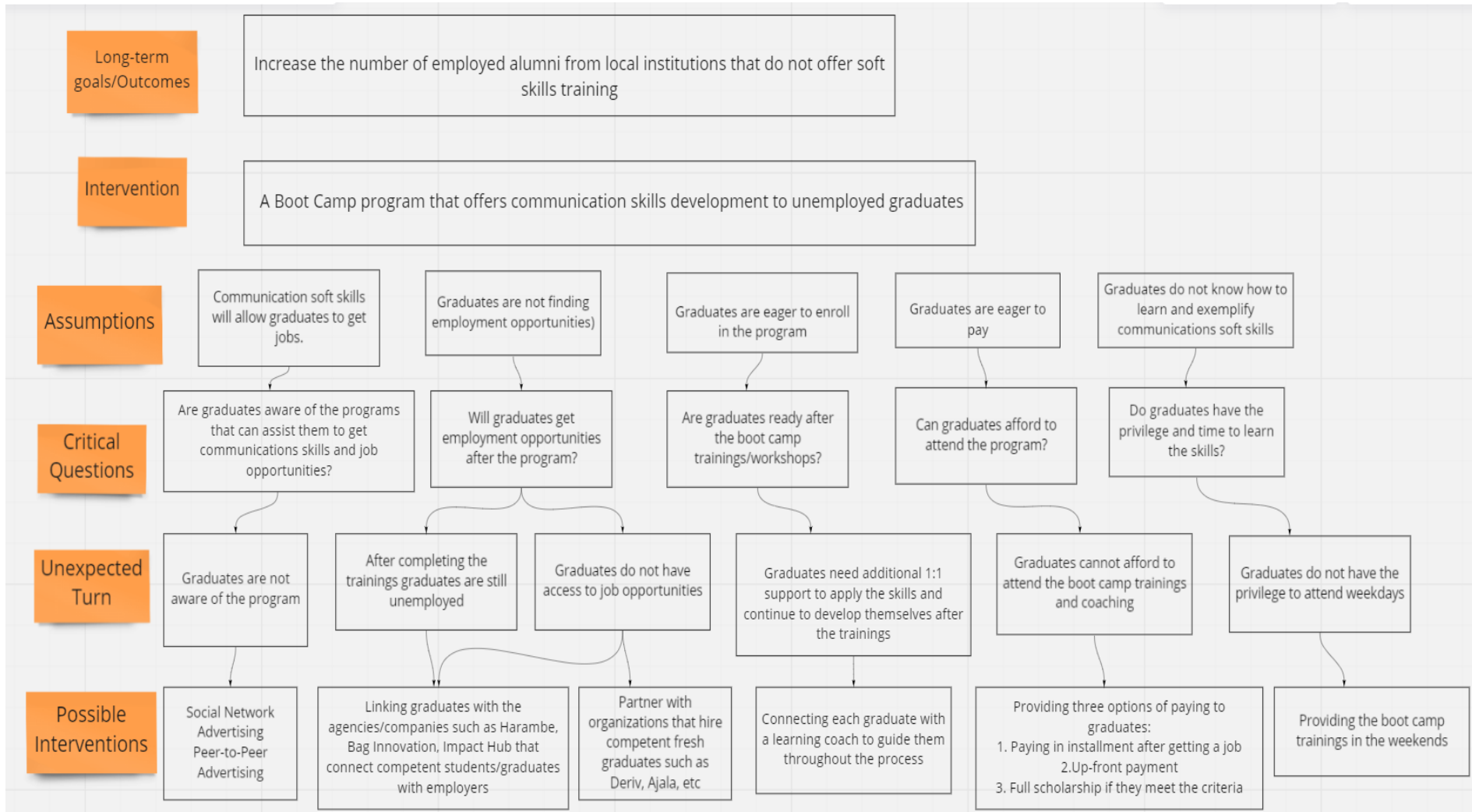
Figure 4. SWOT Analysis

Theory of Change

We have identified that there is a need of offering communication soft skills to university graduates to boost their chances of getting employed. Therefore, we are bringing in an intervention of a boot camp program that offers communication soft skills to graduates with an of increasing in the number of employed alumni from local institutions that do not provide communication soft skills.

Even though we are assuming that graduates will be eager to enroll in the program and get jobs, we are also not forgetting that they might not find employment opportunities and might not be able to apply and exemplify the soft skills learned from the program. While the program is designed to include the needed communication soft skills for the graduates to land jobs, it cannot guarantee that all the participants will be ready and will get job opportunities on their own. We also cannot guarantee that all the interested participants will afford the program or have the privilege to attend the program. Therefore, our interventions include linking graduates with employment accelerators such as BAG Innovation, and Harambe to be linked with employers. To ensure that graduates are utilizing the skills learned, we will connect them with coaches to guide them till they find jobs. We will also provide an installment payment method to ensure that all the interested and eligible graduates can participate in the program.

Theory of Change



Akili Connect Program Description

Akili Connect is a career readiness boot camp program aiming at bridging the communication soft skills gap between university graduates and entry-level professional careers to increase the number of employed graduates from local institutions. The program will focus on providing specific communication soft skills such as email writing, job searching, cover letter and curriculum vitae writing, job interview, networking, and learning how to learn that will allow them to transition the theoretical knowledge into actionable outcomes.

Although one might be a computer genius, a scientist, or possess technical skills in various areas, one still needs communication soft skills to become successful in what they are doing. From our research, we have discovered that most local universities tend to prioritize hard skills and do not give soft skills the weight they deserve, and yet the labor market prefers graduates with a blend of hard and soft skills. The soft skills we will be offering our fresh graduates will put them in a highly advantageous position and allow them to highlight their values even when they are lacking relevant experiences.

We are targeting fresh unemployed local university graduates with the ability to speak and write English, use basic technology such as google email, and Ms office, as well as attend online sessions. The program will run intensive workshops for admitted graduates for a period of two months, and we will be working with incredible and diverse staff who will be supporting our graduates throughout the program until they get job opportunities.

Program Goal(s) and Outcomes

Akili Connect's goal is to increase the number of employed university graduates from local public and private institutions that do not offer soft skills. To achieve our program goal, we need to ensure that these goals are set and achieved:

Goal 1

The first goal is to equip graduates with communication skills to develop high-level proficiency and thus become competitive in the job market. We will know this goal is met when, upon completion of the training, participants demonstrate proficiency in rubrics in oral, written, and presentation communication skills, graduates are able to write professional emails, CVs, and cover letters, graduates can search for job opportunities relevant to their areas of interest and skills. Additionally, graduates will practice applying for job opportunities using the skills learned from the sessions and interviewing for job opportunities to convince the job employers that they fit the roles.

To achieve this goal, we will design micro-courses that will upskill our participants and help them in their job searching journey. The micro-courses include email writing, job searching, CV and cover letter writing, job interview, and networking. Additionally, we will include in lesson plans practical exercises that allow participants to practice how to write professional emails, how to behave in job interviews, and how to network. We will develop rubrics/criteria that will allow students to self-assess and receive feedback from the coaches. Moreover, we will have practical sessions where they will practice the interview process with their peers.

Goal 2

Our second goal is to equip graduates with the mindset of learning how to learn soft and hard skills on the job regardless of their gender. Every employer desires an employee that values constant learning. Continuous learning gives the potential to expand one's skills sets, and increase the chances of getting promoted. We will also ensure that at the end of the program participants can identify their development needs and can articulate how to achieve them. We want to offer our participants the ability to identify their learning needs and how to learn them. Additionally, we want to ensure that both genders are represented in our program. Based on our research, we have seen that women find it hard to continue their studies once they graduated, therefore, we will ensure that 50% of the graduates enrolled in the program are female. We will also provide incentives of 2% off the tuition fee to encourage the participation of female graduates.

Goal 3

Our third goal is to avail employment information to graduates through partnerships with employment agencies and employers. We will know this goal is met when, by the end of the training, 100% of the graduates enrolled in the program are registered in the talent hiring pool database of youth employment accelerators, 70% of the graduates enrolled in the program have had a chance to participate in at least one job interview, and 50% have secured job opportunities (internships, part-time or full time).

To achieve this goal, we will partner with employment accelerators such as Harambe, BAG Innovation, and Derive to register our graduates in their employment database. Moreover, we will teach our graduates how to navigate through job searching and use job opportunities platforms

such as NDANGIRA, Job in Rwanda, etc. to ensure that they are applying to relevant job opportunities.

Activities

For Akili Connect to start and run successfully, there are major activities that need to be in place.

Marketing

We will start by creating flyers and social media accounts on WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter to raise awareness of our program. We will also use a word-of-mouth marketing strategy, and work together with graduates to help us raise awareness about the program.

Recruitment

We are planning to recruit two consultant curriculum designers who will assist in developing the lesson plans and coaching sessions. We are planning to work with two Kepler alumni volunteers who already have experience in education and are eager to give back to their communities. We will also hire a Grants and Communications Manager who will be helping in raising funds for the program's sustainability.

To recruit and enroll participants in our program, we are planning to create a Google form as an application that potential applicants will fill out. We will include questions that ask their names, gender, employment status, and two essay questions to test their English level. We will then shortlist the applications and conduct interviews before enrolling them.

Curriculum Design

Based on the literature review and needs assessment, we have identified that graduates are struggling with the basic communication soft skills such as how to write a CV, and cover letters, and how to present themselves during job interviews. Therefore, we will design six micro-courses. The proposed for each course are as follows:

Email writing: With this course, graduates will develop an understanding of the mechanism of the format, structure, and tone of a professional email. At the end of the course, graduates will be asked to write emails to each other as well as apply for a job using an email.

Job searching: Graduates will learn tips for job search. They will be introduced to official websites/sites that post daily job opportunities such as Jobs in Rwanda, Ndangira, etc. At the end of the lesson, they will be required to find at least one interesting job post that they can apply to. Through practices/assignments/activities, participants will be working on searching for jobs that are relevant to their experience, skills, and interests, and that is official.

Cover letter and curriculum vitae writing: Graduates will learn the importance of a cover letter and CV as well as their components/elements. At the end of the lessons, they will get a chance to create their own cover letters and CVs based on the jobs of their interests. They will be given examples of CVs and cover letters and asked to compare them to identify pros and cons based on what they have learned

Job interview. Graduates will develop an understanding of how to use the STAR interview technique, which is a method that teaches you how to respond to interview questions by discussing the specific situation, task, actions, and result of the situation to ace job interviews. They will learn how to adjust and leverage their tone and verbal and non-verbal communication in an interview. At the end of the lesson, they will get a chance to practice the mock interviews with their peers where one will play an employer using questions developed, while the other, a potential candidate,

and vice-versa using developed STAR interview questions such as tell us about yourself, tell me about a time when you handled the pressure well, etc. We will also invite a career development coach and an employer to speak about what they look for in candidates' interview responses.

Networking. In this course, graduates will learn and practice networking. The purpose of this course is to help graduates expand their networks to increase their chances of getting jobs. We will invite the participants to two networking events that happen often for graduates and students and require them to bring at least two contacts from the events.

Learning how to learn. In this course, graduates will learn how to identify their skill gaps and how to own their learning journey. We acknowledge that there are other skills that one needs to accomplish successful tasks that we will not be offering in this program. Therefore, we believe that teaching this soft skill will help them to be resourceful in their learning needs and in the workplace.

Class Facilitation

After creating instructional slides that we will use to facilitate the sessions. We will deliver eight sessions in total over eight weeks. We will ensure that graduates take ownership and control their learning process. Emails, CV, and cover letter writing concurrently as well as public speaking and networking. We will deliver these sessions online using Zoom, Google Meet, and Google Slides. We will meet in person twice to allow human interaction for the mock interview process.

Assessment and Peer-Feedback

By the end of each session, graduates will assess and give each other feedback based on the criteria created by both facilitators and participants.

Coaching

At the end of the training sessions, we will connect graduates to their learning coaches. Through mentorship, the coaches will guide them through the processes of job searching and application support, job applications, interviews, skills development, employment opportunities, etc. They will preferably meet online, but it will also depend on the needs of the graduates and coaches' availability to either meet online or in person.

Partners

We will create partnerships with individuals, private institutions, government, and youth employment accelerators to achieve our goals and serve our community effectively.

Individuals

We will engage with different individuals with relevant experience in education. Under this category, we have curriculum designers who will design high-quality lesson plans that will be delivered to our graduates. We have facilitators, who will deliver the materials by guiding and managing our graduates to ensure we are meeting our goals. We also have learning and career coaches who will be mentoring our graduates to ensure that they are setting and achieving realistic career targets. These people will bring their expertise and passion to education and community projects.

Private Institutions

We will partner with Chancen, which is a private institution covering the cost of education for graduates who cannot afford their education and can pay it back after getting jobs. They pay

tuition fees whilst studying and once graduates start earning a monthly income above 80,000 Rwf, they will start the repayments. Partnering with them will give our graduates an option to cover their finances. We will have to explain to our graduates what the income share agreement package has and its pros and cons before signing anything. We will also partner with Kepler to collaborate with their alumni who are passionate about education. This will be great exposure for them to practice skills they have learned in class and contribute back to their community.

Government (Ministry of Education, Higher Education Council)

We will collaborate with the government to ensure that we are aligning our curriculum development with the standards and policies in place. Since the Rwandan government works hard to ensure that youth are empowered and collaborates with the World Bank to implement the skills development funds under the Rwanda Priority Skills for Growth to minimize the skills gap, we will use this platform to apply and compete with other creative ideas to gain the funds.

Youth Employment Accelerators

We will engage with employment accelerators such as BAG Innovation, Harambe, Impact Hub, Deriv, etc. Partnering with them will give networks to our graduates to get job opportunities and compete at the national level. This will be a win-win situation, as we will also be providing them with competent graduates who will not need to go through additional training to get ready for the interviews or any other job assessments.

Sustainability

To achieve Akili Connect's long-term goals, we will promote financial sustainability, partnerships, research, knowledge, and information sharing.

Research, Knowledge, and Information Sharing

We will follow up with our graduates after they complete the program to collect data on challenges they are facing, suggestions for improvement, how they will be using the knowledge acquired from Akili Connect, and how we can continue supporting them. We will also collect feedback once they are in their desired job markets to adjust our curriculum according to their needs. Continuous research on the skills gap, best practices, and improvements will be conducted to collect in-depth knowledge on other categories of the skills gap in the sector. Our future plans include expanding our program to work with employers and offering training/workshops to employees as part of professional development.

Financial Sustainability

We are planning to apply for funds through competitions such as Norssken Impact Accelerator 2022 where the top 5 business ideas receive \$5000, mentorships, and an office. We will also participate in Skills Development Funds (SDF) calls for grant proposals. To ensure financial sustainability, we are planning to engage with Chancen, an organization that covers expenses for students and allows them to pay back once they find job opportunities. This will allow us to provide all the necessary materials, and resources needed to students without worrying that they will drop out. Once the first phase, which is a piloting phase, becomes successful, we will start income-generating activities such as offering training/workshops to organizations that need to strengthen their communications, as well as to teachers.

Evaluation

In this session, I describe the key indicators that will be used to assess and measure our goals, and ultimately the success and impact of Akili Connect.

Bridging Soft Skills Gap Between University Graduates and Entry-level Professional Careers

Our first goal is to equip graduates with communications skills to develop high-level proficiency and thus become competitive in the job market. Success metrics specific to this goal include:

- 100% of the graduates can produce professional cover letters, CVs, and professional emails.
- At least 50% of the graduates who have been shortlisted for the first round because of professional CVs, cover letters, and professional emails.
- 100% of the graduates have successfully applied the skills learned in the job interviews and have passed the interviews.

Our second goal is to equip graduates with the mindset of learning how to learn soft and hard skills on the job regardless of their gender. Success metrics specific to this goal include:

- 90% of the participants have identified their learning development needs and how to achieve them
- 50% of enrolled participants in the program are female.
- 100% have completed the program successfully
- At least 90% of the program participants are satisfied by the end of the program and have provided positive feedback and area of improvement to facilitators and coaches.

Our third goal is to avail employment information to graduates through partnerships with employment agencies and employers. Success metrics specific to this goal include:

- 100% are registered in the employment agencies database
- At least 50% of the participants who have completed successfully the program have secured internships, and part-time or full-time jobs during or three months after the program.

Bridging Soft Skills Gap Between University Graduates and Entry-level Professional Careers

- At least 70% of the program participants have had a chance to participate in at least one job interview.

Implementation

Timeline

The timeline for Akili Connect Program is reflective of the planning and early stages of program development for the first phase. The calendar for the first phase will take 12 months, from August 2022 to August 2023. The duration of each activity is solely based on my personal experience as a student, an entrepreneurial leadership facilitator, a learning coach the experiences of business owners that I had discussions with, as well as my partners. To determine the order of each activity, I based on the urgency and importance of each task.

Activities	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug
Research	X	X	X	X									
Develop a program proposal	X	X											
Develop employment agreement		X											
Marketing		X	X	X	X								
Staff Hiring (Curriculum designer, Funds & Comms Manager, Facilitator & Coaches, Tech Person)			X	X	X								
Creating comms for internal and external stakeholders					X	X							
Develop partnership agreement					X	X							
Grant writing					X	X	X						
Partners recruitment							X	X					
Curriculum design					X	X	X						

Bridging Soft Skills Gap Between University Graduates and Entry-level Professional Careers

Feedback on curriculum design								X						
Admissions & Enrollment									X					
Workshops/Training begin										X	X			
Assessment & Grading											X			
Coaching											X	X	X	X
Job placements												X	X	
Sharing graduates' successful stories													X	
Monitoring and evaluation														X

Capacity

To implement the program and run it successfully, we will need experienced staff, expertise, and other materials.

Staff

Akili Connect program will need two curriculum designers and facilitators, two coaches, one grant, and a communication person to run successfully. Curriculum designers will design career readiness courses and facilitate delivering the content. Facilitators will also be coaching graduates throughout the journey. The tech support team will oversee setting up Zoom meetings, emails for graduates and staff, and other technology-related issues. The communications and funds team will oversee the handling of communications between internal and external stakeholders, raising funds, and marketing.

Infrastructure

Even though most of our staff will be consultants working remotely and the workshops will be conducted online, we will have at least two workshops in-person, thus renting a shared

Bridging Soft Skills Gap Between University Graduates and Entry-level Professional Careers

place that has access to the internet, chairs, and all the necessities. This shared place will also be used for some teams, partners, and donor meetings.

Suppliers

Akili Connect will provide internet packages to our staff and graduates, paying for Zoom premium accounts, Gmail, and other basic office supplies. For the two in-person workshops, we will provide snacks, tea, and coffee to encourage participation for our graduates and staff.

Funding

We are planning to start with personal savings for the first phase, however, we will be working with experienced people who will help with the Akili Connect program. We are planning to apply for funds through Norrsken Impact Accelerator 2020 where the top 5 receive \$5000, mentorships, and an office. We will apply for the Skills Development Funds (SDF) calls for grant proposals organized by the government to bridge the skills gap in the public and private sectors. We will charge a tuition fee of \$100 to \$200 per applicant for the training and coaching services. Graduates who will be able to afford it will pay upfront while those who will not pay back after landing job opportunities through income shared agreement. Additionally, we will partner with Chancen to cover the tuition of the participants who will not be able to afford the program, however, we will ensure first that participants agree on the terms and conditions of paying back after getting job opportunities.

Activities	Quantity	Amount	
		Rwf	USD
Staff salaries	7	4,000,000	4000

Bridging Soft Skills Gap Between University Graduates and Entry-level Professional Careers

Internet	25	250,000	250
Zoom and Gmail subscriptions	1	200,000	200
Marketing Materials (T-shirts, fliers, etc)	10	100,000	100
Communications		100,000	100
Rent		1,000,000	1000
Supplies (snacks, tea, and coffee)		300,000	300
Total		6,000,000	6000

Figure 5. Proposed budget for Akili Connect

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Annex

Annex I: Survey Questions

- Skills gap between university students/graduates and entry-level professional careers. For students and graduates
 - https://regisu.qualtrics.com/jfe/preview/SV_d13QA8m6L8Hbs2i?Q_CHL=preview&Q_SurveyVersionID=
- Skills gap between university students/graduates and entry-level professional careers. For students and graduates. For employers
 - https://regisu.qualtrics.com/jfe/preview/SV_0HxHjae93ZdP6tg?Q_CHL=preview&Q_SurveyVersionID=current

Annex II: Resources

- [Implementation of competency-based learning in Rwanda](#)
- [Training manual](#)
- <https://drive.google.com/drive/u/0/my-drive>
- <https://drive.google.com/drive/u/0/my-drive>

Annex III: Course Skills Map Outline

Courses	Learning Objectives
Email writing	- Ability to understand and apply email etiquettes accordingly

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ability to professionally use email to communicate
Job searching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ability to identify potential and official job opportunity portals - Ability to understand/identify what the desired job opportunities
Cover letter and curriculum vitae writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ability to create professional cover letter that reflects their qualifications and strengths - Ability to create CVs and Cover letters that meet the job market standards
Job interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ability to successfully participate in job interviews ranging from informational, technical, and behavioral interviews - Ability to successfully articulate their responses to the employers' questions
Networking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ability to identify potential events to expand their networks - Ability to identify to differentiate different strategies of networking
Learning how to learn	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ability to identify their learning and development needs and owning their learning journey