

Mentorship programmes in Kenya can make graduates more employable. Here's how one works

By [Dr. Chao Mbogho](#)

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Several studies [have shown](#) that besides technical education, "soft skills" are critical for graduates to succeed as innovators, entrepreneurs, and in the formal workplace. [These include](#) problem-solving, teamwork and communication.



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Mentoring relationships – where an experienced person offers guidance and support to a mentee – [are some](#) of the most effective methods to nurture these employability skills. This can be seen in [South Africa](#) and in the [Middle East and North Africa](#) region.

Other benefits that students receive through mentorship [include](#) raised learning outcomes and increased completion rates.

However, there is a [lack of](#) consistent mentorship frameworks for Kenyan university students. For example, up to 73% of tech students [don't receive](#) consistent mentorship outside the classroom.

This gap may exist [due to](#) work overload among academics and a shortage of staff members who could become mentors.

Addressing this gap in mentorship provision is important. I'm a computer scientist and academic. I am also the founder and programme lead for KamiLimu, a structured mentorship programme for university students studying tech-aligned courses. The programme is supported by a ten member management committee, made up of programme alumni and industry professionals.

KamiLimu carried out [a survey](#) earlier this year which evaluated just how much of an impact our structured mentorship programme had on imparting skills that were useful for employers. This included insights into how well employers rated the beneficiaries of the programme.

Our data showed that tertiary-level students strongly believed that consistent and structured mentorship was an effective way to equip them with soft skills.

In addition, eight employers expressed that, compared with students who might not have undergone such a programme, the mentored students were a high-value addition to their companies.

A lack of consistent mentorship models leads to a skills gap which affects the global competitiveness of Kenya's students and graduates. There's a big need for more of these mentorship programmes to nurture skills, alongside classroom learning.

Structured mentorship

[KamiLimu](#) offers structured mentorship to bridge skills gaps among Kenyan tertiary-level students. The programme was conceptualised in 2016 after a survey and focus group was conducted among students from four Kenyan universities to determine their needs for mentorship.

The results of this process led to the five pillars the programme focuses on:

- Personal development, such as how to enhance self-confidence
- Professional development, such as how to prepare for technical interviews
- Innovation skills
- Scholarship awareness and application;
- Community engagement.

The curriculum combines immersive, hands-on workshops and simulated learning. For instance, competitions simulate real-world environments, such as mock job application processes, public speaking and presentations. Mentees also work in teams to pitch solutions for societal issues. Each mentee in the programme receives four levels of mentorship from the programme lead, workshop facilitators, one-to-one professional mentorship, and one-to-one peer mentorship.

These skills aren't typically contained within the curricula. The programme also maintains a 50-50 representation of mentees who identify as male or female to offer a platform for equal inclusion.

KamiLimu has been supported by grants from Google, its alumni-network, and proceeds from public ticketed events that we host.

Students apply to join the eight-month-long programme and 30 to 40 mentees are selected per cohort. Since 2016 KamiLimu has served 169 students from 19 Kenyan universities. We have also collaborated with 95 industry professionals, 19 organisations, and 33 alumni who have served as mentors, workshop facilitators, and hiring partners.

Employability skills

We structured our analysis of how employable our programme made students around the 2019 QS Skills Gap [Report](#). This is one of the first series of reports to directly compare the mismatch between employers and student expectations.

At least 50% of the participants strongly agreed that the structured mentorship approach imparted 14 out of the 15 employability skills cited in [report](#). These skills include communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and leadership. And 42% of participants strongly agreed that the mentorship programme imparted data skills. This refers to ability to organise, analyse, and synthesise data to make meaning.

In addition, the skills gap report indicated that the technology industry's top three skills gaps are: problem-solving, creativity, and communication. Of the survey participants, 69%, 65%, and 87% strongly agreed that the structured mentorship approach imparted these skills.

Beneficiaries of the programme have demonstrated the acquisition of these skills by [excelling](#) in international innovation competitions, working on and [publishing](#) personal ICT projects, and [earning job placements](#) in Kenyan start-ups.

So far, nine employers from seven Kenyan companies have hired talent from KamiLimu's pool of beneficiaries. We asked them to rate the capabilities of the mentees in comparison to graduate hires who had not undergone such a programme. All the employers rated as "excellent" the level of value-addition that our mentees brought to their companies.

Replicable framework

Programmes like this do have their challenges. For instance funding is needed to facilitate the events, rent a venue, and support mentees. It's also vital to maintain collaborations with industry professionals and companies. But, in the long term, it's worth it.

The mentorship programme we created can be replicated in learning institutions and workplaces in five steps:

- conduct a needs assessment to gain clarity on what specific areas mentees need mentorship on
- design the composition of the mentorship group, including duration of the mentorship programme, the number of mentees, the gender representation, and how the mentees will be recruited into the programme
- design a delivery model; this includes the format of group meetings or one-to-one sessions, and the type of guides that mentors will receive to facilitate their sessions
- collaborate with experts who will serve as mentors
- measure impact using metrics. This includes retention rate, skills acquisition, employability impact, and stakeholder feedback.

The combination of these skills will continue to be crucial for global competitiveness. Structured mentorship approaches, such as the one offered by KamiLimu, are a key way to nurture employability and innovation skills.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Chao Mbogho, Educator, Researcher, Mentor, Kenya Methodist University

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