

# Career Builders: Key Components for Effective Global Youth Career and Workforce Development

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RTI Press publication OP-0045-1709

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### Suggested Citation

Nassar, S., and Al-Qimlass, A. (2017). *Career Builders: Key Components for Effective Global Career and Workforce Development*. RTI Press Publication No. OP-0045-1709. Research Triangle Park, NC: RTI Press. <https://doi.org/10.3768/rtipress.2017.op.0045.1709>

This publication is part of the RTI Press Research Report series. Occasional Papers are scholarly essays on policy, methods, or other topics relevant to RTI areas of research or technical focus..

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3768/rtipress.2017.op.0045.1709>

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### **Acknowledgments**

The authors wish to acknowledge the conceptual support for the development of this research by Drs. Peter Joyce and Eric Johnson, our *Career Builders* project collaborators at RTI International.

### **Abstract**

Global youth unemployment is a significant cause of poverty, resulting in the persistent marginalization of populations. Education and career counseling professionals and professionals in policy, research, and practice concur that the consequences of global youth unemployment are dire. But leaders in these domains have not yet come to an agreement on the best ways to face this global challenge.

Our analysis of interdisciplinary literature on global youth unemployment is a first step in identifying and formalizing best practices for culturally appropriate career and workforce development worldwide. This research will support education and career counseling professionals in developing appropriate career and psychosocial support interventions, establishing empirical intervention efficacy and other program evaluation protocols, and creating a capacity-building infrastructure for knowledge-sharing across policy, research, and practitioner stakeholder groups. We also include a proposal for next steps to establish rigorous empirical support for these future initiatives.

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## Introduction

Globally, youth represent 25 percent of the total working population (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2013). About one in three youth ages 15 to 24 suffers from a deficit of decent work opportunities (ILO, n.d.a). In addition, almost 43 percent of global youth labor is either unemployed or working but still living in poverty (ILO, 2015). In the United States, the statistics are less dire but still disturbing, with nearly 10 percent of youth between the ages of 16 and 24 struggling with unemployment (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017).

Interdisciplinary literature across policy, research, and practice highlights gaps in educational and career achievement, earning potential, and psychosocial risks such as stress, anxiety, or depression among global youth. These gaps contribute significantly to poverty and the consequent marginalization of populations. Yet elements of effective career and workforce development interventions remain undefined, let alone agreed upon across the various relevant domains and disciplines. What is needed is a comprehensive synthesis of policy, research, and practice so that mutually impactful infrastructure and connections among these three domains can be established to facilitate a unified approach to tackling the global challenges of global youth unemployment.

The *Career Builders* project is a University Scholars Program partnership between RTI International and North Carolina State University developed to tackle the challenges of youth unemployment globally. We initially sought to develop a curriculum to facilitate appropriate career and psychosocial training and other support interventions within the field of youth career and workforce development. We quickly realized that the vast array of interdisciplinary and inter-source literature detailed recommendations for interventions and other best practices from unique disciplinary perspectives. Consequently, we shifted our focus to creating a meaningful synthesis of the relevant literature to serve as a foundation for creating effective global youth workforce development initiatives, including research, from across the wide array of relevant domains and stakeholder groups.

In this occasional paper, we provide an overview of our methods for surveying and analyzing this literature. We also present the results of our synthesis and the status of the outcomes of our research.

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## Methods

We began our synthesis by selecting works representing education and career development policy, research, and practice. These sources included peer-reviewed works from the scholarly fields of counseling, education, and career development as well as trade and other nonacademic documents from initiatives within the youth career and workforce development space in both the United States and other countries. We also conducted electronic searches, deliberately using broad terms such as “youth” and “career” or “career development.”

We then reviewed the results to determine relevance for inclusion into the subsequent synthesis, especially regarding application to youth career or workforce development. We also classified the literature based on its population studied and type or source of the respective document.

We used a content analysis with a summative approach to address our research inquiry. In general, qualitative content analysis can be described as a qualitative research method intended to enable investigators to analyze texts systematically (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Rosengren, 1981) and to interpret the analyses (Holsti, 1969; Rosengren, 1981). In our first review step, we identified four emergent topics or themes. In the second step, we classified each of the literature sources by their relevant theme or themes. These emergent broad topics were (1) best practices, (2) promising considerations, (3) foundational frameworks, and (4) shortcomings or gaps. We discuss findings for each below.

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## Results

### Best Practices

We found descriptions of best practices spanning settings worldwide and youth demographics such as age throughout the literature we surveyed. The first best practice we identified is the need

for implementers to make appropriate cultural adaptations within their programs so that such efforts can be as relevant and effective as possible (EQUIP3, 2012a; ILO, n.d.b; Guerra & Olenik, 2013; Olenik & Fawcett, 2013; YouthVoices, 2017). For example, developers or implementers must be aware of any gender bias that may exist within a culture or community toward specific occupations before initiating a coeducational training program designed to recruit program completers for a specific occupation or job. If providing such coeducational training was deemed important, engaging community leadership, parent education, and other proactive initiatives would be important to address the nature of the gender bias or stereotyping. Neglecting to account for inherent biases could hamper the recruitment, completion, and placement rates of any training program.

A second best practice was the focus of *Positive Youth Development* (PYD), defined by YouthPower as an approach to global youth development that

engages youth along with their families, communities, and/or governments so that youth are empowered to reach their full potential. PYD approaches build skills, assets and competencies; foster healthy relationships; strengthen the environment; and transform systems. (YouthPower, n.d.)

Among these skill-building and competency-oriented goals is the development of *soft skills* (Guerra & Olenik, 2013; ILO, n.d.b; S4YE, 2015; Olenik & Fawcett, 2013). As described in a *Child Trends* report (Lippman, Ryberg, Carney & Moore, 2015), these soft skills include social, communication, and higher-order thinking skills such as problem solving, critical thinking, and decision-making. Developing this skill set is supported, additionally, by the intrapersonal skills of self-control and positive self-concept. The focus on transforming the environment and systems speaks to the need for holistic approaches to program development.

A final best practice came from the Individual Learning Plan literature, an outgrowth of the movement toward integrating school-aged youth with disabilities in the United States (Colorado Department of Education, 2017; Kentucky Department of Education, 2012; NCWD, 2013;

Solberg, Wills, Redmond, & Skaff, 2014; Office of Disability Employment Programs, n.d.; Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, n.d.). This area of counseling literature focuses on integrating career guidance throughout a student's academic span, developing concrete plans for each student, and emphasizing the importance of self-exploration, career exploration, and career planning and management (Solberg et al., 2014).

## Promising Methods

We identified promising methods for developing and implementing global programs of workforce development for youth. The first is the push to incorporate both soft skills and technical and vocational education and training skills, along with transferable skills, into models and curricula. This trend highlights a move toward a more holistic version of career guidance (EQUIP3, n.d.; EQUIP3/Youth Trust, 2005; EQUIP3, 2012a; EQUIP3, 2012b; Guerra & Olenik, 2013; ILO, n.d.b; International Youth Foundation, 2014; Olenik & Fawcett, 2013; S4YE, 2015). Other promising ideas include engaging the community for both program effectiveness and sustainability, using peers as trainers and mentors, and implementing technology-based delivery systems when and where available (EQUIP3, 2012a; Guerra & Olenik, 2013; ILO, n.d.b; International Youth Foundation, 2014; Olenik & Fawcett, 2013; S4YE, 2015).

An additional promising method came from the US-based literature regarding career development and career counseling with vulnerable populations. Examples include programs that target individuals with disabilities, disenfranchised youth, and youth in foster care (Gavin-Williams; 2016; Nassar-McMillan, 2014; Nassar-McMillan, Taylor, & Conley, 2016; National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth [NCWD/Youth], 2013). Such interventions show promise to the extent that they can be adapted to youth populations worldwide. Other ideas informing youth career guidance are the concepts of resilience, mattering, hope, and grit (Clark, 2016; Jung, 2015; Kang, Chai, & McLean, 2015; Shin & Kelly, 2015).

## Foundational Frameworks

Common foundational frameworks emerged within both the global workforce development literature and the counseling and education literature insofar as those bodies of work concern youth. Most consistent was an ecological approach, which aims to address the multiple systems in play, ranging from the individual to the larger community (Bloom, 1956; Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Dawis, 2002; Gottfredson, 2002; Nassar-McMillan, 2014). Other promising theories include social cognitive career theory (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2002), which focuses on barriers and supports within one's environment, and Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom, 1956), which focuses on knowledge, skills, and attitudes. These approaches and theories continue to move global workforce programs toward a holistic version of career guidance.

## Shortcomings and Gaps

In addition to salient features and themes found within the literature we reviewed on programs and issues related to youth workforce development, we also identified shortcomings and gaps. The first is the high number of redundancies, found mostly within the global youth workforce development literature. These include curriculum components, the substantial number of syntheses (as well as the referenced literature within the syntheses), and recommendations and best practices for developing and implementing global programs for workforce development among youth (Care, Anderson, & Kim, 2016; EQUIP3, 2012a; ILO, n.d.b; Kluve et al., 2016; National Youth Employment Coalition, n.d.; S4YE, 2015; USAID, n.d.). Although these redundancies in and of themselves are not problematic, they speak to the continued need for some overarching structure for best practice. For example, some literature sources overlooked the component of career guidance altogether within their descriptions of programs or their best practice guidelines.

Another shortcoming is the wide age range associated with the word "youth" in this literature. This term is applied to individuals anywhere from 10 to 35 years of age (EQUIP3/Youth Trust, 2005; EQUIP3, 2008; ILO, n.d.b; National Youth Employment Coalition, n.d.; S4YE, 2015; YouthPower, n.d.). Alongside this

wide age range is the lack of consideration for the stages of human development that occur during an individual's "youth."

Finally, evaluation practices applied to these workforce development programs around the globe are not always rigorous. This is particularly the case with respect to outcome versus output data and anecdotal versus statistically significant or even descriptive quantitative data (International Initiative for Impact Evaluation, 2016; Care, Anderson, Kim, 2016; ILO, n.d.b; Kluve et al., 2016; J-PAL, n.d.; Nassar-McMillan, Akcan Aydin, & Taylor, 2015; Nassar-McMillan & Conley, 2011; S4YE, 2015; USAID, n.d.; USAID, 2017).

## Discussion

Conducting the literature survey and synthesis through the lens of global youth career and workforce development led to several important observations. Among these is the need for a more holistic and broadly encompassing approach for these initiatives across policy, research, and practice. In a related point, curricula and training must be adaptable to a wide range of youth, cultures, and communities. Moreover, agencies and organizations evaluating such programs must ensure that those efforts are effective. Evaluations should include adequate baseline data before or at the time of initial implementation, data collected at specified points throughout implementation, and data collected at the conclusion of the program. Finally, evaluation data should inform current and future policy regarding relevant follow-up or new initiatives.

Upon deeper analysis of the literature and the four themes from our content analysis, we offer some observations regarding six key components that these career and workforce development programs need to address. These six key components are (1) ecological perspectives, (2) needs assessments, (3) selection of trainers, (4) participant curricula, (5) delivery, and (6) program evaluation.

First, the creation and implementation of a youth workforce development initiative requires an ecological perspective (one that is holistic, systemic, and comprehensive). The ecological perspective

serves as the overall framework for creating an effective program model addressing, for example, ethical and cultural considerations.

Second is needs assessment, which ultimately informs program implementers of the path their program should take. A critical component is identifying and involving stakeholder groups (including the youth themselves). Accounting for their priorities, resources, and needs to co-create goals for the program is crucial.

The third key component is selection of trainers within global youth workforce development programs. Program directors should identify and select final trainers based upon the findings of the prior needs assessment. This identification and selection process will likely build upon existing community infrastructures (for example, classroom teachers). It should also incorporate country-specific and external education and career curriculum experts.

Participant curricula constitute the fourth core component. Implementers building such curricula need to incorporate career education, guidance, and counseling concepts. They also need to plan for involvement in these efforts by youth, parents, and other relevant stakeholder groups identified in the earlier phases. Topics should include, as appropriate, self-exploration, the world of work (i.e., relevant career options, labor market information, and similar topics), and career decision making, as well as technical and vocational education and training, soft skills, and transferable skills. Those developing these programs must also take into account any vulnerabilities within the participant group(s), such as educational, literacy, and developmental levels, and address them accordingly in the curriculum development process.

Fifth, curriculum delivery is a central element of these programs pertaining to all participant groups. The two main questions to answer are the “where” and “how” of curriculum delivery. Examples of the

“where” include either integrating career curriculum and interventions into existing, broader curriculum structures or implementing the effort as a standalone model, such as a career center. The “how” includes factors such as individual versus group approaches, technology-enhanced activities, and peer-to-peer interventions.

Sixth, evaluation is imperative. When developing and implementing program evaluation, investigators must address key issues such as whether the evaluation will be a stand-alone measurement or part of a larger evaluation process. Additionally, the program evaluation required for funding agencies ideally should include intervention research, as well as outcome (versus solely output) data.

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## Conclusions

Our process of surveying and analyzing relevant literature yielded six key components for programs that seek to address the global challenges of youth unemployment. Although preliminary, our content analysis includes literature spanning various complementary disciplines, domains, and sources of literature. Our analysis yielded commonalities among best practices, promising considerations, and foundational theories, as well as gaps and shortcomings. Moreover, the clear identification of six key components at this stage is compelling. The next step in creating recommendations is to validate them empirically.

Moving forward in the Career Builders project begun by RTI International and North Carolina State University, we are conducting a field-based study. We will engage experts in policy, research, and practice to participate in evaluating dimensions of programs that they deem relevant to effective global youth career and workforce development initiatives. Gaining consensus about important characteristics of these programs and critical aspects of evaluation will be a necessary first step in successful research.

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**RTI Press publication OP-0045-0917**