Hands-on
Learning from our implementing partners

Helping young people in South Africa’s townships succeed against the odds

Many young South Africans are born into a world of exclusion and deprivation in South Africa’s townships, and the cards are firmly stacked against their chances of escaping this life of poverty. From an early age, their prospects are hampered by poor-quality schools that offer low curriculum coverage. And outside of school, poor students often have nowhere to do their homework, and little time to do it in because they are kept busy running household errands.

Even when there is time for homework their parents frequently fail to provide an academically supportive environment, since they often lack a basic education themselves and because they are generally pre-occupied with financial worries and other problems of poverty. This mix of unfavourable circumstances leads to poor matric results, and together with a low awareness of post-school opportunities it contributes to high youth-unemployment rates.

Changing the odds

IkamvaYouth’s aim is singular yet ambitious: To help these disadvantaged students get the best possible matric qualification so that they are eligible for post-school opportunities (tertiary education, learnerships or employment).

Established in 2003, IkamvaYouth now has eight branches in four provinces: Makhaza (Khayelitsha), Nyanga and Masiphumelele in the Western Cape, Ebony and Ivory Park in Gauteng, Umlazi and Chesterville in KwaZulu-Natal and Grahamstown in the Eastern Cape. Most students enrol from Grades 9 and 10, and tutors are mainly volunteer students from local universities - a large proportion of which are ex-Ikamvanites.

Promising numbers

In its own words, the programme measures success “by the number of Grade 12 learners who access tertiary institutions and/or employment-based learning opportunities when they matriculate”.

Overall, IkamvaYouth has had 1374 participants between 2005 and 2011, 351 of whom have successfully matriculated, while most of the others are yet to reach matric.

The comparative results look promising. 36% of Ikamvanites passed matric with the required “bachelor’s degree endorsement” in 2010, compared with 24% nationally and just 16% amongst IkamvaYouth’s feeder schools. And at 15%, the Ikamva matric failure rate was half the national average, and significantly lower than the 47% failure rate amongst its feeder schools.

Raising the bar

One of the reasons why more Ikamva students gain access to university is because they are more likely to take Maths and Physics, both of which are mandatory requirements for entry into many fields of university study.

An overwhelming majority (81%) of Ikamvanites took Maths, compared with less than half of students who did so nationally. On average, they scored higher marks than their feeder-school
counters in all subjects, but the differences were particularly significant in Maths and Physics.

**Data constraints**
Although these matric results provide a clear, standardised measure of achievement, analysing to what extent IkamvaYouth is responsible for that achievement is more complicated. This is mainly due to the fact that students who are more able and motivated are also more likely to make the sacrifices required to attend IkamvaYouth in the first place. So their matric success may to some extent be attributable to their attitude, skills and motivation, rather than to IkamvaYouth's intervention only. It’s important to keep this in mind when analysing the success of Ikamva’s strategy, but it doesn’t mean that there is nothing to be learnt from the programme’s results.

**Learning from Ikamva’s experience**
A recent evaluation of IkamvaYouth by a team of economists from Stellenbosch University set out to identify critical strategic components and success factors, examine the short and long-term impact of the programme and assess its scalability. To achieve these aims, the researchers surveyed both past and present learners through a combination of online and fieldwork-based surveys, and qualitative interviews.

**Strategic components and success factors**

**Academic support**
IkamvaYouth recognises that poor students often lack an adequate second site of learning, and the programme bridges this gap through providing a stable environment where students can meet regularly, practise what they have learned and ask tutors to explain concepts that they didn’t understand in class. But this is about more than just providing a secure location and extended learning time. The real benefit of the Ikamva academic model lies in tutors’ willingness to align their teaching pace with students’ ability, along with better curriculum coverage, more appropriate assessment, improved feedback and a focus on reading and writing text.

**Suitability of tutors**
It helps that the tutors are ex-Ikamvanites, as they are able to understand the students’ challenges and speak their language. The study found little evidence that the tutors were particularly well trained or that they were necessarily more skilled than school teachers. Instead, the tutors’ commitment, positive interaction with students and additional learning time seem much more important in helping Ikamvanites succeed.

**The importance of motivation**
Students must sacrifice time and effort to make the Ikamva model work for them. To stay motivated, they have to believe that a different life is possible. There is a fine balance to be struck somewhere in between building confidence and creating unrealistic expectations, but it is indeed vital that students accept this possibility of a better future. To achieve this, IkamvaYouth provides career guidance, mentoring by university students, information on post-school opportunities and outings to universities.

**Leadership**
A major contributing factor to IkamvaYouth’s success appears to be the enthusiasm and aptitude for planning displayed by those leading the organisation.

**Administrative support**
At face value this is the least exciting component of IkamvaYouth’s success strategy, but it is nonetheless important. Life in the townships often lacks a basic practical support structure, and IkamvaYouth makes up for this in a number of ways, most notably through officially grading students’ homework-session attendance using
green, silver or gold categories. The organisation also monitors and tracks students’ progress over time, and helps them apply for post-secondary opportunities. This last service is of particular benefit to many students from poor backgrounds, who lack family support and have little experience handling complex applications. Without support, they are prone to making basic administrative mistakes such as failing to attach copies of required documentation, or missing deadlines.

**Branch-based nuances**
The branches don’t all operate in the same way. Services such as providing food and refreshments, travel support and mentoring were introduced in different places at different times. In general, priorities are influenced by local realities. This raises the question whether IkamvaYouth should be seen as one organisation or many? And if it’s the latter, is there anything to be learnt from the local differences?

The survey results show that students from the various locations indeed assign different ratings to the relative importance of specific activities. For example, respondents from Masiphumelele emphasise the importance of weekly homework sessions, whereas students from other branches thought the Saturday tutoring sessions were more important.

Such differences in needs and approach do not, however, translate in large variations in academic results. And perhaps this uniformity in inter-branch performance occurs precisely because each local branch is flexible enough to change emphasis and adapt according to the specific needs of its local students.

**Impact and limitations**
All surveyed Ikamvanites have a positive impression of the organisation. As mentioned above, it isn’t statistically possible to attribute participants’ relatively superior matric performance and professional success solely to IkamvaYouth, although looking at the survey responses the students appear happy enough to do this themselves.

**Motivation and aspirations**
97% of respondents stated that IkamvaYouth inspired them to work harder. And when it comes to their views on – and aspirations for – the future, many former Ikamvanites are highly motivated and ambitious.

Students often come from broken homes and have a limited sense of community, and it seems that many participants rely on IkamvaYouth for more than just specific academic support or social guidance: it offers them a place where they can be challenged and a community to which they can belong.

**Constraints and challenges**
Using university students as tutors means that there can be mass absenteeism over exam time, which leaves the programme struggling to support its students during their own critical exam period. Although this is a problem, the alternative of using local post-matrics – many of whom may be unemployed – brings its own challenges, since they aren’t necessarily the best role models.

A major issue for Ikamva is whether students become overly dependent on their support (both academically and socially), leaving many students struggling once they’re left out on their own at university. There is therefore an opportunity to provide more explicit preparations for the demands of an independent life at university and beyond. Indeed, many students indicated that Ikamva should provide more extensive support in this regard.

Overall, the singular emphasis on good matric results in order to gain access to tertiary education can be counterproductive, as it creates the impression that tertiary education is the only gateway to success. This can leave students feeling like failures if they don’t make it in university. Nothing in the survey responses indicate that IkamvaYouth is responsible for fostering such views, but perhaps more can be done to equip students for alternative outcomes.

**Scalability**
It’s possible to argue that the model isn’t really scalable because the success of each centre depends so heavily on the strength of its leadership. If the organisation grows significantly,
the strength of this leadership may be diluted, so students could find the programme less attractive. The survey does not, however, show any significant difference in inter-branch performance, which may indicate that Ikamva’s success lies in the strength of its model, and not in the particular strength of leadership at branch level.

Nonetheless, although strong leadership may not be a sufficient condition for success, it is certainly one of the many necessary conditions, so expansion should always be done in tandem with a sensible leadership recruitment strategy to ensure that new branches have good people who can maintain the integrity of the model.

Conclusion

The secret of IkamvaYouth’s success lies in the clear and focused nature of its objectives, along with the concerted efforts of motivated leadership teams who are willing to adapt to local needs and conditions. Although it is not statistically possible to attribute ex-Ikamvanite’s matric results directly to their IkamvaYouth experience, the feedback from the students themselves certainly indicates that the model has a significant impact in helping young people succeed against the unfair odds that come with growing up in a South African township.

The extremely good matric results enjoyed by Ikamva students raise questions about what IkamvaYouth adds that schools do not usually provide. As mentioned, there is no indication that the tutors are particularly skilled educators. What appear to be missing in many townships schools are the supportive environment and the sense of belonging that participation in Ikamva brings to many. This offers important pointers to other organisations offering education to children in difficult economic and social circumstances.

In 2011, The DG Murray Trust and IkamvaYouth requested a team of researchers led by Prof Servaas van der Berg, the NRF Research Chair in Social Policy in the Economics Department at Stellenbosch University, to undertake an evaluation of IkamvaYouth, with a view to examining the short term and longer term impact of the programme, investigating the key success factors of the model, and assessing its scalability. This learning is a summary of the report. The full report can be found on the IkamvaYouth website.