

What institutions must do differently to close the formation deficit

by [Abdullahi Ibrahim](#) [March 2026]



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A technically trained youth who cannot navigate ambiguity is not work-ready. They are certification-ready.

"Work readiness" in current African policy discourse means technical competence and formal qualification. The labour market evidence, enterprise survival data, and behavioural economics literature collectively support a more demanding definition: work readiness is the simultaneous possession of technical competency and the leadership capability to apply that competency effectively under real-world conditions of

uncertainty, institutional weakness, and resource constraint. The two are not separable. Certifications do not create economic value. Productive agents do.

Implications for Youth-Serving Organisations

Integration is the design imperative, not addition. Leadership formation cannot be bolted onto a technical curriculum. It must be the frame through which technical content is delivered.

Organisations that attempt to add leadership modules to existing programmes without redesigning the core

architecture will produce the same outcomes with more content.

The structural redesign required includes extended programme duration, embedded coaching, competency-mapped progressions, and outcome tracking that extends beyond the six-month placement window.

Organisations that cannot commit to 18-month minimum engagement timelines should consider partnerships with dedicated leadership formation providers rather than attempting superficial integration. The stakes of getting this wrong are significant. A generation trained without being formed is a generation equipped with credentials it cannot convert into durable economic outcomes.

Implications for Multilateral Funders and Development Banks
Current funding metrics reward placement rates and training volumes. Shifting to earnings persistence, enterprise sustainability, and civic participation metrics at 36-month intervals would restructure incentives for integrated programming.

The AfDB's Jobs for Youth strategy currently lacks a systematic leadership competency component. Embedding one is a design choice available at the strategy refresh stage. The data exists. The diagnostic is not contested. What remains is the institutional will to realign metrics with outcomes.

Implications for Governments

TVET policy frameworks across Africa remain almost exclusively focused on technical competency standards. Including behavioural and leadership competency standards within National Qualifications Frameworks would signal that formation, not just certification, is the policy objective. Rwanda's Competence-Based Curriculum reform, which explicitly includes leadership and civic competencies in secondary vocational education, offers a regional precedent worth examining and adapting.

Without policy-level acknowledgment that formation matters, the structural incentive for training providers is to optimise for certification volume rather than capability development. Governments set the terms of that optimisation through the standards they enshrine and the outcomes they fund.

Implications for the Private Sector

Employer investment in internships and workplace-based learning is currently structured around technical task performance. Expanding these programmes to include structured leadership mentoring and feedback would accelerate the formation process that the training sector alone cannot complete.

The cost increment is modest. The return in MSME survivorship and workforce retention is measurable. Employers who consistently cite behavioural and attitudinal gaps in graduate recruits have both the incentive and the capacity to help close them through deliberate workplace-based formation.

The Demographic Imperative

Africa's working-age population will reach 1.1 billion by 2030. Whether this demographic weight becomes an economic asset or a structural liability depends partly on skills. More critically, it depends on whether the continent produces young people who are not just trained but formed: capable of leading themselves and others through the institutional complexity and market volatility that define African economic life.

"The skills obsession has produced an impressive institutional infrastructure. It has not produced proportionate economic outcomes."

The diagnostic is available in the labour market data, the enterprise failure statistics, and the employer survey findings. It has been present for years. Fewer than three in ten African youth in formal training programmes transition into stable wage employment within two years of completion.

Hard-skills-only programmes produce employment gains that erode within 18-24 months. Leadership and management capability deficits are the primary cause of enterprise failure in nearly half of sampled cases. These are not ambiguous findings.

The Design Response

The formation deficit is not a soft problem. It is a structural one, embedded in programme architecture, funder incentive structures, policy frameworks, and employer practice. Closing it requires changes across all four.

Youth-serving organisations must redesign for formation rather than certification. Funders must shift the metrics they reward. Governments must embed behavioural and leadership standards in national qualification frameworks. Employers must invest in workplace-based leadership mentoring, not just technical task supervision.

Africa's youth do not lack ambition or ability. What too many of them lack is the formation environment that converts those qualities into durable economic outcomes. Providing that environment is not an idealistic aspiration. It is a practical imperative, and the evidence for its value is already in the data.

References

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