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Blended Career Guidance for Kenyan Youth- A Scalable Four Pathways Model

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Abstract

There are acute, pervasive gaps in career guidance to underserved groups in Kenya. This paper aims to explore the impact of blended career guidance initiatives in rural Kenya. This research paper integrates empirical findings, field implementation, and theoretical grounding from the Decent Work initiative, dubbed Ajira Poa! This research study focused on rural Kenyan youth across Nyandarua, Nakuru, and West Pokot. The paper examines how blended, context-sensitive career guidance can significantly impact youth career readiness and employability as well as programming. Using a four-step developmental model: self-awareness, exploration, planning, and decision-Making, the program tailored support across four key pathways: apprenticeship, entrepreneurship, college readiness, and workplace readiness. This study was rooted in Super's lifespan theory and the systems theory framework. This paper illustrates what it takes to scale youth empowerment in low-resource settings. It also offers practical recommendations to address digital exclusion, localization, and systemic gaps.

Keywords: *Blended career guidance, digital equity, career readiness, youth employment, employability*

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1. Introduction

1.1 Context and Background

Kenya is home to one of Africa's most youthful populations, with over 75% of citizens under the age of 35 (KNBS, 2023). This demographic presents enormous potential for national development, yet paradoxically, it coexists with a persistent youth unemployment crisis. The challenge is even more severe among rural youth, who are often marginalized from mainstream employment interventions. Lacking structured career guidance, exposure, mentorship, and digital access, many find themselves disconnected from a labour market that increasingly demands future-ready skills and strategic career decision-making (OECD, 2021).

In response to these gaps, the Ajira Poa! initiative was implemented across three counties: Nyandarua, Nakuru, and West Pokot. The project aimed to deliver localized, stage-sensitive career guidance. By blending in-person engagements with digital tools, the program introduced a four-step career development model: self-awareness, exploration, planning, and decision-making, all targeted at aligning youth aspirations with real-world labor market pathways. This approach mirrors calls from South African research for earlier and more inclusive career guidance, particularly in resource-constrained environments (Farao & du Plessis, 2024).

1.2 Problem Statement

Globally, countries with structured and inclusive career guidance systems are better positioned to align education with employment outcomes (OECD, 2018). In Africa, however, the need for structured and contextualized career guidance remains unmet, particularly in underserved communities.

Traditional career interventions in Kenya tend to be centralized in urban spaces and anchored in static or imported models that do not account for contextual realities such as poverty, digital exclusion, and localized industry patterns. Moreover, there is limited empirical evidence on the effectiveness of blended models that integrate dual approaches. This study filled this contextual and methodological gap and simulated online and offline career learning for youth in rural or semi-urban settings. As highlighted by Farao and du Plessis (2024), the lack of structured career services in low-resourced schools leads to inconsistent access, self-directed pathways, and reduced preparedness for life after school. These deficits are more than logistical. The systemic gaps deepen inequality by perpetuating the exclusion of marginalized youth from opportunity pipelines. Without structured career guidance, youth are prone to make misaligned decisions that undermine their potential for economic self-sufficiency (Shah et al., 2021).

Globally, countries with structured and inclusive career guidance systems are better positioned to align education with employment outcomes (OECD, 2018). In Africa, however, the need for structured and contextualized career guidance remains unmet, particularly in underserved communities. For this reason, this study makes three key contributions to the body of knowledge. First, it addresses the contextual gap by moving beyond urban-centric approaches and situating career guidance within Kenya's rural realities through localized content, bilingual delivery, and culturally responsive facilitation. Second, it responds to the methodological gap by piloting a comprehensive blended pathway that integrates in-person and digital learning, while documenting the design features that enhance inclusivity and feasibility in low-resource settings. Third, it fills the empirical gap by generating rare evidence from rural Africa on the effectiveness of blended career guidance, linking observed gains in youth confidence, career planning, and readiness to specific scaffolding strategies and support mechanisms.

1.3 Research Questions

The following three research questions guide this study:

1. How effective is blended career guidance in improving employment readiness among rural Kenyan youth?
2. What systemic, digital, or psychosocial barriers continue to hinder impact?
3. What scalable, context-sensitive models can be developed for wider application?

1.4 Rationale and Significance

This paper seeks to fill that gap by documenting the experiences, challenges, and learnings from the Ajira Poa initiative. Insights from the project can contribute to policymaking, guide future interventions, and inform the development of scalable models tailored to Kenya's rural realities. Moreover, by building on frameworks such as Super's Life-Span Theory (Super, 1990) and the Systems Theory Framework (Patton & McMahon, 2006), this research advances scholarly discourse on adapting career development models to the Global South. It also echoes recommendations from Farao and du Plessis (2024), who advocate early interventions, localized tools, and better training for educators and stakeholders involved in youth career guidance and employment programs.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Blended Career Guidance and Employment Readiness among Rural Kenyan Youth

Sub-Saharan Africa's youth bulge is often portrayed as a demographic dividend with transformative potential. Farao and du Plessis (2024) argue that this youthful African population, especially in underserved areas, requires tailored career guidance support to realize this potential. However, as Naidoo et al. (2020) caution, failing to address rural exclusion in policy and programming risks turning this dividend into a liability. The situation in Kenya mirrors these findings: over 75% of the population is under 35 (KNBS, 2023), yet youth unemployment remains persistently high, exacerbated in rural areas by structural limitations in access to career guidance and labor market exposure.

Career guidance opportunities remain scarce in many African rural settings. Sefotho (2017) and Dlamini (2019) report that schools in low-resource contexts often lack trained advisors, structured programs, and meaningful exposure to vocational pathways. Albien (2021) advocates for localized approaches, observing that importing urban-centric models often leads to poor uptake and disconnects learners from opportunities relevant to their context. The Ajira Poa initiative addressed these gaps by placing interventions in local schools, integrating community mentors, and offering bilingual delivery to ensure accessibility.

These challenges are not unique to Kenya. Global research highlights measurable gains in employability when guidance is structured, consistent, and introduced early. Yamamoto et al. (2025) found significant improvements in self-efficacy, decision-making, and job-search skills following guidance programs in high schools, with pre- and post-tests confirming marked growth in confidence and employability. Similarly, Dodd et al. (2022) validated a psychometric measure showing that greater exposure to guidance activities (including employer engagement, labor market information, and one-to-one counseling) is directly correlated with higher career readiness scores. These findings emphasize the value of consistent, scaffolded programming, reinforcing Ajira Poa's decision to embed mentorship and assessment tools at each training stage.

Research also highlights approaches that make guidance impactful. Horrillo et al. (2021) underscore the holistic benefits of involving families alongside learners, noting that readiness improves when career programs adopt a Positive Youth Development (PYD) approach that incorporates non-cognitive skills, family engagement, and experiential learning. Ajira Poa's incorporation of parental engagement sessions and experiential career activities aligns with this evidence, extending its relevance to rural learners who often lack career-literate parental support.

Kenyan evidence reinforces these global findings. Umuro and Obuba (2023) found a positive correlation between structured career orientation initiatives and youth employability in Marsabit County. This reinforces the relevance of a blended approach in rural Kenya, demonstrating that localized delivery combined with structured planning yields measurable readiness outcomes.

2.2 Barriers to Career Guidance Impact in Rural Kenya: Systemic, Digital, and Psychosocial Dimensions

The integration of technology in career guidance holds great promise, especially for improving access in underserved areas. However, digital solutions can deepen inequalities unless digital inclusion is actively addressed. Hence, this research initiative employs blended learning models that combine online platforms with human interaction and local delivery. Ajira Poa, aligned with this approach, creates regional hubs and mobile-first tools while maintaining physical engagement through mentorship and group coaching. Bilingual delivery also ensured that content was accessible to learners with diverse literacy levels. This strategy proved particularly effective in counties like West Pokot, where English literacy is unevenly distributed.

Ohei and Mantzaris (2023) highlight that, despite technology's transformative potential, unequal access to ICT infrastructure, devices, and advanced digital skills continues to exclude rural youth, especially in low-connectivity contexts. They advocate for targeted digital literacy initiatives, arguing that youth employability depends on the intersection of technical skills, access, equity, and supportive ecosystems.

Beyond digital limitations, Ajira Poa revealed significant psychosocial challenges. Gee et al. (2020) also found that underserved adolescents often face intersecting psychosocial challenges such as poverty, disrupted schooling, and family instability. These factors indicate that readiness programs must integrate counseling, emotional support, and culturally sensitive pedagogy to sustain learner motivation and engagement.

Structural underinvestment compounds these barriers. Mbom et al. (2024) identified inadequate state support as a critical weakness in youth training systems, underscoring the need for public-private collaboration to scale access to career and entrepreneurship guidance. These systemic barriers validate Ajira Poa's emphasis on partnerships with schools, county governments, and NGOs, enabling outreach in low-resourced settings.

Despite recognition of its importance, career guidance remains underfunded and inconsistently implemented across much of Africa. Makola et al. (2021) and Musset & Mýtna Kureková (2018) emphasize that policy frameworks often fail to institutionalize career services, particularly in public schools. In Kenya, while the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) nods toward career preparedness, delivery mechanisms are often lacking, especially in rural and ASAL regions. Albien (2021) notes that a shortage of qualified career development professionals continues to hinder implementation, reinforcing the need for blended models like Ajira Poa, which leverage non-traditional facilitators and scalable content delivery to address this gap. To counter these barriers, the Ajira poa program introduced device-sharing initiatives, localized hubs, and bilingual content. These adaptations demonstrate that blended approaches are possible in underserved areas but require intentional design, sustained investment, and wrap-around support.

2.3 Scalable Context-Sensitive Models for Rural Youth Career Guidance in Kenya

The systems theory framework (STF) provides a powerful foundation for interpreting the multi-layered influences on career decision-making. Patton and McMahon (2006) describe STF as a meta-theoretical lens that connects individual, social, cultural, and historical systems to vocational development. The framework has been especially useful in African contexts, where learners' decisions are influenced by intersecting constraints, including family expectations, educational inequalities, and resource gaps (Farao & du Plessis, 2024). The Ajira Poa model aligns with STF by embedding family-informed sessions, peer group discussions, and storytelling methods that reflect learners' lived realities, thus fostering decisions grounded in both self-awareness and systemic understanding.

Recent scholarship emphasizes integrating guidance and curriculum to achieve scalability. Xiaoqing and Zainudin (2025) propose embedding structured career planning into formal education, linking employability skills, mentoring, and digital guidance platforms under a unified strategy. They argue this approach bridges the “academic-to-workforce gap,” making readiness programs sustainable in resource-constrained contexts. To scale effectively, programs also require reliable measurement tools. Dodd et al. (2022) provide empirical evidence for program scalability by validating a universal readiness assessment tool that policymakers can use to benchmark and evaluate interventions across schools. When combined with localized pedagogy, these measurement tools allow replication without diluting cultural relevance.

Horrillo et al. (2021) further highlight that scalable readiness programs succeed when they adopt an asset-based, community-driven model that leverages local mentors and family engagement rather than importing urban-focused designs. This aligns with Ajira Poa’s layered delivery, which uses village-based facilitators, mother-tongue resources, and online LMS support to make guidance accessible and culturally resonant.

Together, these insights position Ajira Poa as a replicable blueprint for rural African contexts. Its layered delivery model, combining community leadership with digital tools, demonstrates that blended guidance can be scaled affordably and effectively, provided programs remain rooted in local realities and supported by robust policy frameworks. Structured tools, such as the RIASEC assessment and goal-setting frameworks, can enhance career decision-making. Sodano (2015) affirms that interest inventories help individuals identify areas of uncertainty and clarify choices. However, other scholars argue that decision-making is often shaped more by cultural and socioeconomic norms than by logic. In rural African settings, gender roles, economic constraints, and societal expectations often override personal interests or aptitudes. Ajira Poa tackled these cultural overlays by embedding narrative sessions, reflective exercises, and community-aligned examples into its curriculum, making decision tools more meaningful and locally resonant

3. Theoretical Review

The Ajira Poa, career guidance initiative, was underpinned by two foundational theories: Super’s Life-Span, Life-Space Theory and the Systems Theory Framework (STF). Both offered critical insights into tailoring career guidance to the lived realities of rural Kenyan youth as they navigate an uncertain employment landscape.

3.1 Super's Life-Span Theory

Super's Life-Span Theory emphasizes career development as a lifelong process encompassing stages such as growth, exploration, establishment, and maintenance. Ajira Poa is strategically focused on the exploration stage, thus helping participants (mostly aged 18–25) reflect on their self-concept through structured phases of self-awareness, career exploration, action planning, and decision-making. This aligned with Super's proposition that self-concept is shaped by personality, abilities, and life roles. The self-concept must be fundamentally matched to the occupational world. Youth in Nyandarua, Nakuru, and West Pokot responded strongly to activities that highlighted personal interests, values, and market-aligned opportunities, reinforcing the utility of developmental-stage-specific models.

Mata-Correas et al. (2025) provide a nuanced framework that distinguishes between career indecision (a temporary state of uncertainty) and career indecisiveness, which stems from more deep-seated personality or cognitive traits. Their scoping review identifies key contextual, emotional, and behavioral variables that influence both constructs, highlighting the need for adaptable intervention approaches. The study introduces the CIPP-C model, which maps the trajectory of career decision-making across Context, Input, Process, Product, and Consequences. For rural youth in the Ajira Poa programme, career indecision often stemmed from information gaps and lack of exposure, whereas deeper indecisiveness related to identity development, emotional readiness, or intergenerational pressures. Recognizing these distinctions allowed facilitators to customize engagement and refer more complex cases for individualized coaching.

3.2 Systems Theory Framework (STF)

In addition, the Systems Theory Framework (STF), as articulated by Patton and McMahon (2006), acknowledges that career decisions are embedded within broader, dynamic systems of influence, including family, education, culture, and socioeconomic status. Ajira Poa's blended delivery model directly responded to these systemic realities: many participants faced digital exclusion, language barriers, or lacked family guidance on vocational matters. By integrating personalized coaching, LMS support, and community-based learning hubs, the program embodied the STF's principle of contextual relevance.

This dual-theoretical foundation ensured that Ajira Poa addressed both the internal developmental needs of youth and the external systems shaping their decision-making. As recommended in recent research (Mata-Correas et al., 2025), such integrative, theory-informed guidance is essential for navigating modern challenges of career indecision and improving employability outcomes in under-resourced settings.

3.3 Conceptual Framework

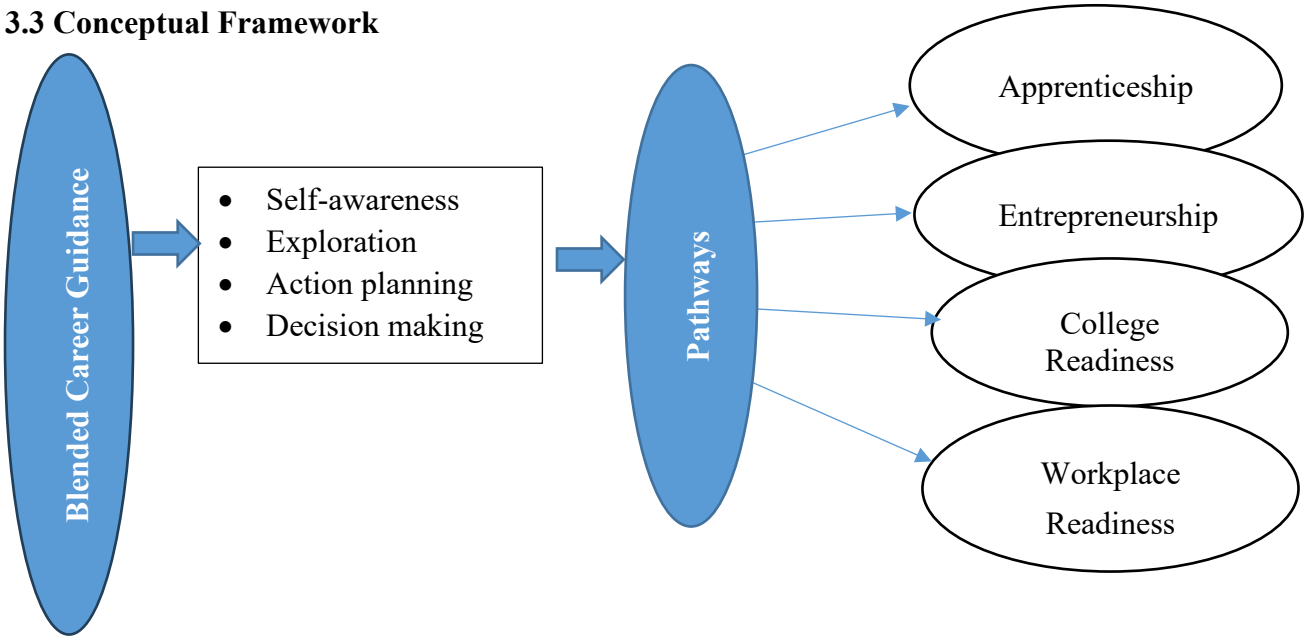

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

The programme started with a three-day in-person training based on the four-step developmental model: self-awareness, exploration, planning, and decision-making. Following this, participants selected one of four thematic pathways: Apprenticeship, College Readiness, Workplace Readiness, or Entrepreneurship, based on their individual preferences. They then participated in a five-day virtual training session tailored to their chosen pathway. These sessions were delivered through Zoom and supported by the Learning Management System (LMS). For many participants, this marked their first substantial experience with digital learning platforms. The interactive features, including breakout rooms, live quizzes, and video segments, were particularly well-received and helped sustain engagement throughout the sessions.

However, several challenges emerged during implementation. Limited ICT skills made it difficult for some learners to navigate the LMS effectively. Others had difficulty accessing Zoom consistently, largely due to unreliable internet or a lack of suitable devices. A few participants experienced fatigue when using the platform, which was often linked to insufficient orientation and the initial learning curve required to engage fully with the digital tools.

To address these issues, several practical improvements were proposed. These included offering a digital onboarding session before the training began to build participants' confidence with the technology. There was also a recommendation to provide subsidized devices or create local access hubs to support participants without personal digital resources. Translating key materials into local languages was suggested to enhance understanding and inclusivity. Additionally, allowing for one or two days of orientation between county sessions could ease the transition into the virtual learning environment.

These suggested improvements highlight the importance of intentionally designing for accessibility and support in digitally delivered programs. They are important considerations when scaling blended career guidance initiatives in underserved regions, where digital

readiness cannot be assumed. Ensuring equitable access to technology and proper orientation is critical for the success and sustainability of such models.

3. Methodology

3.1 Design and Approach

The study employed a mixed-methods evaluation, integrating both quantitative and qualitative insights. This approach was selected to capture participants' diverse, context-specific experiences while ensuring rigorous, in-depth analysis. Drawing from best practices in career development research, particularly as recommended by Mata-Correas et al. (2025), the evaluation design included pre-training baseline assessments, post-training reflection forms, trainer logs, and observational field notes.

Methodological triangulation was key in enhancing validity. Quantitative data provided measurable changes in confidence and digital readiness, while qualitative narratives offered a nuanced understanding of internal shifts, barriers, and aspirations. This dual approach aligns with literature emphasizing inclusive, grounded strategies for youth-focused career interventions in low-resource settings (Farao & du Plessis, 2024).

3.2 Program Delivery

The Ajira Poa initiative adopted a thoughtfully blended delivery model designed to meet the unique learning needs of rural youth, while honoring the realities of their environments. Structured in two distinct phases, the program integrated the strengths of both face-to-face engagement and virtual instruction to create a holistic, accessible experience.

The first phase consisted of three-day in-person workshops held at community hubs across each participating county. These initial sessions played a foundational role, introducing participants to key career development concepts, nurturing peer-to-peer exchange, and facilitating self-discovery through guided activities. For many, this was their first opportunity to reflect on personal strengths, values, and aspirations in a safe, supportive environment.

The second phase involved five-day virtual training sessions, tailored to each of the four career pathways: apprenticeship, college Readiness, entrepreneurship, and workplace readiness. Delivered via Zoom and supported through the CCGD Learning Management System (LMS), these sessions offered deeper, pathway-specific exploration. The virtual format ensured continued access to mentorship, resources, and reflection beyond the physical workshops, creating continuity in the learning journey.

To ensure inclusivity and relevance, the program delivery was carefully adapted to the participants' linguistic, technological, and cognitive needs. Instruction was offered in simplified English and Kiswahili, with occasional use of local dialects to enhance comprehension and connection. Sessions were intentionally interactive, utilizing breakout rooms, polls, and embedded videos to foster active participation. Participants engaged in reflective journaling, completed LMS-based quizzes and assignments, and accessed curated video content that resonated with their contexts.

Both group and individualized coaching sessions were integrated into the program design, offering youth the opportunity to ask questions, receive feedback, and navigate their career decisions with support. Downloadable workbooks were provided to reinforce learning and promote independent reflection beyond the classroom.

Ultimately, the Ajira Poa program delivery model was more than a logistical framework; it was a deliberate strategy to bridge gaps in access, deepen engagement, and affirm the dignity and potential of every rural youth who participated. Through this hybrid model, learning became not only possible but personal, meaningful, and transformative.

3.3 Data Collection Methods

To comprehensively evaluate the effectiveness of the Ajira Poa program and to authentically capture the lived experiences of its participants, a multifaceted data collection approach was employed. This layered strategy was intentionally designed to illuminate both the cognitive and emotional dimensions of youth career development. This ensured that impact was measured not only by the information gained, but also by shifts in confidence and motivation to take the next career steps.

The process began with pre-training assessments, which established a critical baseline. These instruments captured key indicators, including participants' existing levels of career clarity, preferred pathways (e.g., entrepreneurship, college readiness), digital literacy skills, and prior exposure to structured career guidance. This initial snapshot helped to contextualize participant starting points and informed the tailoring of content and support.

Following the training, post-training reflection forms were used to gather nuanced feedback directly from participants. These reflections provided insight into how the training was received. Primarily, this assessed the perceived relevance of the content, the effectiveness of the blended delivery format, the quality of coaching interactions, and the extent of personal transformation experienced throughout the program. Participant voice remained central in evaluating impact.

To complement participant self-reports, trainer logs served as a valuable internal monitoring tool. Facilitators documented implementation fidelity, noted participant engagement levels, and recorded any real-time challenges encountered. This is particularly related to digital access and instructional adjustments. These logs also captured adaptations made on the ground to accommodate emerging needs or unexpected barriers, providing an internal lens into delivery quality.

Additionally, field observations offered an informal but essential dimension to data collection. These allowed the team to track group dynamics, map patterns in digital access, and identify psychosocial influences such as peer support, anxiety, or hesitation. Such factors, often left unspoken, may still significantly shape engagement and learning.

Together, these methods created a robust framework for analysis, enabling the research team to examine outcomes from multiple vantage points. By considering both cognitive outcomes, such as enhanced decision-making and career planning, and affective shifts, including increased self-efficacy, motivation, and hope, the evaluation honored the complexity of the career readiness journey. This holistic approach underscored Ajira Poa's commitment to deeply listening to and learning from the youth it sought to serve.

3.4 Data Analysis Strategies

Quantitative data from baseline and endline assessments were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify shifts in self-awareness, pathway alignment, and comfort with digital tools.

Qualitative data from reflection forms, trainer logs, and field notes were analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach to thematic analysis.

Themes were then mapped against the four career pathways to contextualize how different types of youth experienced the intervention.

Additionally, the evaluation framework was structured using the CIPP-C model (Context, Input, Process, Product, Consequences) by Stufflebeam and Shinkfield (2007). This provided systemic insights into how career readiness outcomes were shaped by program design, local dynamics, and learner engagement patterns.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

All ethical procedures were followed in the planning and implementation of the study. Informed consent was obtained from each participant, with facilitators ensuring a clear understanding regardless of literacy levels. Participation was voluntary, and respondents could withdraw at any stage without consequences.

Data privacy was upheld through anonymized coding of responses, and all findings were shared only in aggregate. The study received institutional clearance and followed ethical protocols consistent with the program-established research protocols.

4. Findings

4.1 Demographic Profile of Participants

A total of 351 young people in 2021 participated in the Ajira Poa! career guidance training, each carrying with them hopes, questions, and untapped potential. They came from three rural counties in Kenya: Nyandarua, Nakuru, and West Pokot. This diverse setting brought together a rich tapestry of backgrounds and aspirations. Nyandarua contributed 129 participants, Nakuru 138, and West Pokot 84, all within the formative age range of 18 to 25 years. This is well reflected in Table 2 below.

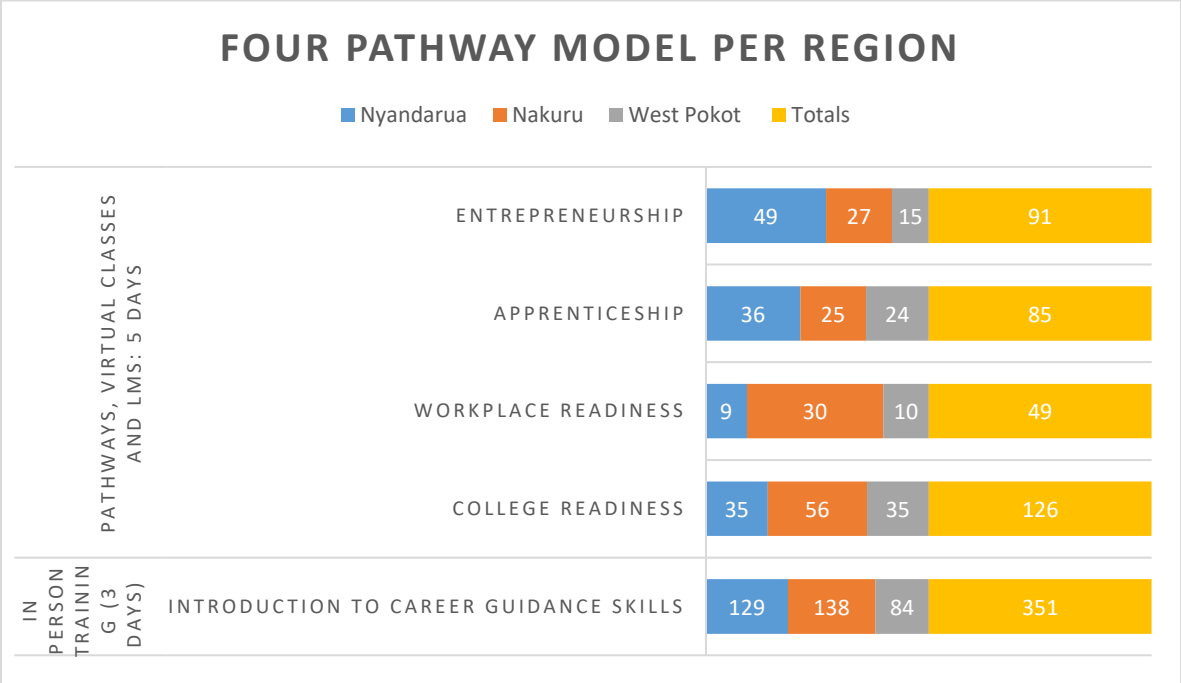

Figure 2: Four pathway models per region

The group reflected a healthy balance between young men and women, with a 50:50 gender ratio, affirming the program's commitment to inclusive empowerment. In terms of educational attainment, 60% had completed secondary school, 30% had pursued some form of tertiary education, and 10% had completed only primary schooling, yet all shared the same thirst for direction and clarity in their career paths.

What stood out most was that 75% of these youth had never before received structured career guidance. For many, this was their very first opportunity to receive tailored support in thinking through their future. This single figure speaks volumes, as it reveals how urgent and necessary it is to design programs that are not only accessible and relatable but also grounded in the unique realities rural youth face. The Ajira Poa initiative became more than a training; it became a doorway into possibility, reflection, and informed decision-making for a generation that has too often been left on the margins of formal career development support.

4.2 Career Discovery

The Ajira Poa, a career guidance program, made notable strides in enhancing participants' sense of direction and self-awareness. Among the 351 youth from Nyandarua, Nakuru, and West Pokot, a substantial number (71) reported gaining a clearer understanding of their vocational paths after the training. They described feeling more aligned with their interests, strengths, and values, and were able to articulate career goals with increased conviction.

Fifty-five participants (55) also indicated improved personal confidence and self-understanding. These outcomes were attributed to self-assessment tools, personality reflections, and values clarification activities. In many cases, youth shared that the training enabled them to reconnect with long-buried inner aspirations, which had been overshadowed by economic hardship or societal expectations.

Additionally, thirty-seven 37 participants reported that the one-on-one coaching they received was among the most impactful aspects of the training. Personalized conversations allowed them to surface nuanced questions, identify barriers, and design actionable next steps. For several youth, this was the first time they had received tailored career guidance. This experience of career discovery created a sense of being seen, heard, and validated.

4.3 Satisfaction and Confidence

The program achieved remarkably high levels of participant satisfaction. A total of 92% of respondents indicated they would recommend the training to peers. Their reasons included the content's relevance, value, and practical utility. The participants reported increased confidence in making career decisions. This represented a significant shift, especially considering that 68% of the cohort had never previously received career guidance. Youth articulated that the training helped them assess opportunities more critically, avoid misaligned paths, and take bolder steps toward their goals.

4.4 Challenges to Digital Inclusion

Despite these successes, the initiative also revealed substantial barriers to digital inclusion during the five-day virtual training component. Many participants lacked access to reliable digital devices. Some relied on borrowed smartphones, while others had to travel long distances to public centers with internet access.

Where devices were available, poor internet connectivity and unaffordable data bundles created additional constraints. Network instability particularly affected learners in West Pokot and remote areas of Nyandarua.

Low digital literacy also emerged as a challenge. Although the LMS and Zoom platforms were simplified for ease of use, several participants, particularly those with only primary education, struggled to navigate them effectively. Some were unfamiliar with online etiquette, such as breakout rooms and shared documents.

Language presented a final layer of complexity. While the training was offered in Kiswahili and simplified English, a subset of learners, particularly in West Pokot, required further translation or visual aids. Trainers responded adaptively by interpreting key terms in mother tongues and using illustrations, but acknowledged that the full value of digital content was not always realized.

4.5 Ratings of Training Components

Participant feedback highlighted three core components of the Ajira Poa program as particularly effective in advancing their career development. Firstly, career identification and decision-making tools stood out as the most highly valued aspect of the training. Seventy-one (71) participants cited these tools as instrumental in aligning their personal traits, such as interests, strengths, and values, with real-world career options. Practical activities, including interest mapping, goal-setting charts, and the Holland RIASEC model, were frequently mentioned for their usefulness in carer discovery. These tools offered a structured approach that helped youth explore opportunities that had previously seemed out of reach.

Second, personalized coaching and assessments were acknowledged by thirty-seven (37) participants as a significant support mechanism. The one-on-one sessions provided an opportunity for participants to process their thoughts, ask tailored questions, and receive individualized feedback. For many who had never interacted with a career advisor or mentor, these sessions offered valuable clarity and a sense of being seen and supported in their unique journeys.

Third, self-awareness modules received positive feedback from participants. By using self-awareness focused on life values, the program invited participants to engage in meaningful self-reflection. These activities helped them better understand their identity, recognize areas for personal growth, and articulate what mattered most to them.

These three components - career assessment, coaching, and self-awareness did more than convey knowledge. They served as catalysts for internal change. For many, the path to career clarity began not with external job options but with a renewed sense of purpose, self-belief, and direction. This internal transformation created a strong foundation for making informed and confident decisions about the future.

4.5 Pre-Training Insights

Across the three counties, participating youth brought with them a wide range of educational backgrounds, experiences, and aspirations. The pre-training assessments offered a valuable window into their expectations and hopes for the Ajira Poa program, highlighting five key areas of interest.

A total of sixty-one (61) participants expressed a desire for personal growth or a transformative life change, signaling that many viewed the training not just as a skills-building opportunity, but as a chance to reset or redefine their life direction. Another forty-eight (48) participants specifically sought help with career identification and decision-making, underscoring the importance of structured tools and frameworks to navigate the complex world of work.

Forty youth joined the program with a clear interest in advancing their careers and accessing job opportunities. Their responses indicated a readiness to transition. These transitions relate to whether from education to employment or from one job to a more fulfilling path. Meanwhile, twenty-five (25) participants were eager to develop entrepreneurial skills and learn how to start or strengthen small businesses. This group reflected the growing appetite for self-employment among rural youth, especially in contexts with limited formal employment opportunities. An additional fourteen (14) participants hoped the training would offer insight into labor market trends and employment patterns, revealing a keen awareness of the need to align personal aspirations with economic realities.

Open-ended responses further illuminated the deeper motivations behind these expectations. Seventy-two participants emphasized that career guidance was essential for "identifying and maximizing potential." At the same time, fifty-five (55) pointed to the importance of receiving information that would help them "make informed career decisions." These insights affirmed the program's dual emphasis on psychological readiness and practical decision-making tools.

Together, the data painted a clear picture of youth who were not only seeking employment but also craving direction, affirmation, and purpose. The Ajira Poa initiative responded to these needs by centering both internal development and external opportunity, ensuring that the program spoke to the whole person, not just the job seeker. The above information is shown in Figure 3.

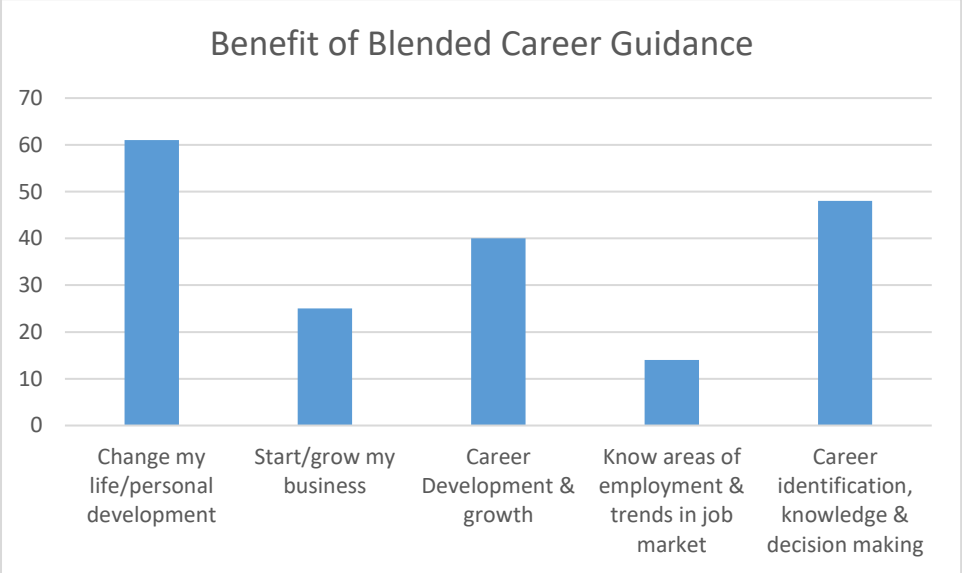

Figure 3: Benefits of blended career guidance

4.6 Virtual Training Experience and Delivery Reflections

The five-day virtual training sessions introduced participants to the four thematic pathways: Apprenticeship, College Readiness, Workplace Readiness, and Entrepreneurship. These sessions were delivered through Zoom and supported by the Learning Management System (LMS). For many participants, this marked their first substantial experience with digital learning platforms. The interactive features, including breakout rooms, live quizzes, and video segments, were particularly well received and helped sustain engagement throughout the sessions.

However, several challenges emerged during implementation. Limited ICT skills made it difficult for some learners to navigate the LMS effectively. Others had difficulty accessing Zoom consistently, largely due to unreliable internet or a lack of appropriate devices. A few participants experienced fatigue when using the platform, which was often linked to insufficient orientation and the initial learning curve required to engage fully with the digital tools.

To address these issues, several practical improvements were proposed. These included offering a digital onboarding session before the training began, to build participants' confidence with the technology. There was also a recommendation to provide subsidized devices or create local access hubs to support learners without personal digital resources. Translating key materials into local languages was suggested to enhance understanding and inclusivity. Additionally, allowing for one or two days of orientation between county sessions could ease the transition into the virtual learning environment.

These suggested improvements highlight the importance of intentionally designing for accessibility and support in digitally delivered programs. They are important considerations when scaling blended career guidance initiatives in underserved regions, where digital readiness cannot be assumed. Ensuring equitable access to technology and proper orientation is critical for the success and sustainability of such models.

5. Discussion

5.1 Interpretation of Key Findings

The findings from Ajira Poa confirm that structured, context-aware career guidance can produce measurable benefits for youth even in under-resourced rural settings. The sharp increase in self-reported career discovery, self-confidence, and motivation illustrates how even brief interventions (when localized and stage-sensitive) can restore agency and ignite purpose. The power of a four-step model (self-awareness, exploration, planning, and decision-making) was evident across counties, where youth not only reimagined their futures but also took tangible steps to align their aspirations with opportunities.

This program validated the hypothesis that career guidance must extend beyond vocational information. True transformation occurs when youth are supported to connect their inner lives (values, strengths, self-concept) with outer realities (market trends, training pathways, entrepreneurship). The integrative approach: combining coaching, digital access, reflective tools, and group dialogue created a scaffolded learning experience that was both personal and practical.

5.2 Comparison with Previous Studies

These results reinforce existing literature on the need for blended, equity-driven approaches to youth career development. Albien (2021) and Sefotho (2017) emphasize that models must account for the lived realities of young people, particularly in marginalized spaces where traditional urban-centric solutions fail. Ajira Poa program aligned with this insight by fusing in-person mentorship with mobile-first digital components and culturally adaptive delivery.

Moreover, the initiative responds to the critical gaps identified by Farao and du Plessis (2024), who found that most rural youth navigate the school-to-work transition without adequate career guidance, exposure, or encouragement. By centering career development on learner agency and community-grounded pathways, the Ajira Poa initiative demonstrated how structural gaps in policy and practice can be creatively and effectively bridged.

The high ratings for one-on-one coaching also mirror findings by Sodano (2015), who emphasizes the importance of personalized support in overcoming career indecision. Similarly, the use of a reflective decision-making model resonates with Mata-Correas et al. (2025), who advocate for tools that account for both emotional readiness and systemic influences.

5.3 Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, this study affirms the utility of Super's Life-Span Theory in guiding interventions for emerging adults. Participants of this research study, most of whom were in the exploration stage, benefited significantly from activities that emphasized self-concept and decision readiness. The developmental framing allowed facilitators to tailor exercises to specific age-related needs, rather than offering generic information.

The systems theory framework (STF) was also practically validated. Learners' decisions were deeply shaped by family influence, financial limitations, cultural norms, and access to education. The use of theory confirms the premise that career choices are not made in isolation but in dynamic interaction with multiple systems. Ajira Poa program deliberately included the contextually grounded delivery, including local mentors, mother-tongue translation, and flexible technology, enabling learners to process information within their lived reality, not outside it.

In practice, this study offers a roadmap for designing scalable models that remain deeply human. The blend of coaching, interactive tools, and community engagement created an ecosystem of support, even within tight resource constraints. The LMS platform, though not universally accessible, introduced youth to a digital learning environment that mirrors the future of education and work.

5.4 Unexpected Research Study Results

While digital exclusion was anticipated, the extent of linguistic barriers in certain counties (especially West Pokot) was more pronounced than expected. Participants needed frequent interpretation, and some visual learners preferred diagrams and stories over reading-based tools. This insight pushes for greater investment in culturally adaptive, visually rich learning formats.

Another surprise was the emotional depth that emerged from reflective exercises. Youth cried during sessions, opened up about past traumas, and expressed gratitude for being "seen." This was especially significant in counties where career support had never been formalized. The psychological healing dimension of career guidance, though not originally foregrounded, proved essential. This calls for future models to include trained psychological support, even within career-focused programs.

Finally, the high degree of participant engagement, despite network issues and unfamiliar platforms, challenged assumptions that rural youth are disengaged or digitally averse. Given proper orientation, clear structure, and emotional safety, these youth displayed resilience, adaptability, and commitment. The challenge lies not in their willingness to learn, but in the systems that have historically failed to meet them where they are.

6. Conclusion

The Ajira Poa career guidance initiative illustrates the profound impact that structured, localized, and blended guidance can have on youth in rural Kenya combining stage-based models like Super's Life-Span Theory and the Systems Theory Framework with practical

coaching, interactive tools, and community-sensitive delivery, this research study created deep internal and external shifts among participants.

Key findings reveal that career discovery, confidence, and hope can be cultivated even in resource-constrained environments. This was done through intentional design, relevant tools, and human connection. Moreover, the emotional healing and empowerment experienced by youth reinforce that career development must be holistic, not just informational.

Notwithstanding this, the study exposes persistent barriers: digital exclusion, low literacy, language gaps, and systemic neglect of career guidance support in public education. These challenges demand strategic investments. Of great importance are access to technology, educator capacity building, and the development of culturally resonant tools.

For policymakers and practitioners, the Ajira Poa program offers a scalable blueprint for localizing content, training hybrid facilitators, blending delivery modes, and meeting learners and youth where they are. The standard imagined ideal conditions do not exist in rural settings. As Kenya navigates its youth bulge, such models will be vital in transforming dormant potential into dynamic productivity.

7. Limitations

The study was limited to three counties and primarily focused on short-term post-training outcomes. Longitudinal data on actual career transitions, job placements, or long-term educational impacts were not collected. Another challenge is digital access, with limited participation in the full virtual component, especially among those with low device ownership or digital literacy.

8. Suggestions for Future Research

Future studies should consider follow-ups six months to one year post-training to track real-life outcomes of career choices. There is also a need to investigate the emotional and psychological dimensions of career readiness among rural youth and develop trauma-informed, strengths-based guidance frameworks. Exploring how career guidance can be institutionalized within Kenya's CBC framework and teacher training colleges is also recommended.

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