



DAVIS COLLEGE
AKILAH

GRADUATE SURVEY REPORT

2016 - 2019

A WORD FROM THE AKILAH INSTITUTE PRESIDENT

As East Africa's pre-eminent institute for women's leadership and career development at Davis College, Akilah is committed to educating and developing women leaders using the most effective methods available. This commitment requires us to objectively assess our program model to determine whether we are fulfilling our mission to prepare young women for economic independence and leadership roles.

Akilah alumnae offer an important window into the effectiveness of our programming. By evaluating the impact of an Akilah education on graduates' professional and personal lives, we can pinpoint areas where we are succeeding and where we can improve.

We have already gained significant insights from our monitoring and evaluation efforts to date. For example, in 2017, we saw that graduates desired more practical skills – the previous theory-driven curriculum meant students had a wealth of knowledge but gaps in their ability to apply those skills in the workplace.

Since then, we have transitioned our academic programs to a competency-based education model and expanded opportunities for students to develop and strengthen skills through extracurriculars, leadership roles, competitions, and the business incubation center alongside internships. Drawing on lessons from previous evaluations, we have adapted our data gathering processes as well. Understanding that key metrics such as income are personal matters, the survey was anonymized to provide graduates space to respond while respecting their privacy. By listening to our graduates, we increased our response rate significantly, resulting in a more broad-based study across cohorts and majors.

These current evaluation findings build on our previous studies and continue to show that graduates experience measurable change in their lives as a result of the knowledge, skills, and confidence acquired at Akilah.

They increase their incomes, assume management positions, make decisions in their households,

and actively participate in community groups. We have also seen how the lives of our alumnae are impacted by external factors, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting economic crisis.

We have observed many of these changes in our alumnae firsthand, and by applying a rigorous monitoring and evaluation framework to our observations, Davis College and Akilah can continue to objectively and efficiently test them over time. The alumnae evaluation, and subsequent evaluations, will not only contribute to our own institutional knowledge, enabling us to make informed decisions about current and future programming, it will also allow us to share our academic and workforce development philosophy, model, and learnings with the global education community and with those who care deeply about women's education and youth economic empowerment.



KAREN SHERMAN
President, Akilah Institute



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

The Akilah Institute was founded in 2010 to address the need for higher education opportunities for women in Rwanda, and now serves as the women's leadership Institute at Davis College. Together, Davis and Akilah offer an accessible and affordable model of market-relevant higher education, with two-year competency-based diploma programs in Business Management and Entrepreneurship, Information Systems, and Hospitality and Tourism Management. Davis College and Akilah's academic programs center on five key pillars: 21st-century skills, personalized learning, innovation, ethical leadership, and sustainability, preparing students to launch meaningful careers as well as their own ventures.

METHODOLOGY

This evaluation was conducted for the purpose of both accountability and learning: it analyzes outcomes for the 588 Akilah graduates in cohorts 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2019, and results will inform future planning and improvement processes and measures. The approach to the evaluation was guided by good practice drawn from the evaluation conducted in 2017 with the 2012, 2014, and 2015 graduating cohorts. As such, the evaluation took a mixed-methods approach that reached graduates remotely, including an online survey and online focus group discussions. The online nature of the study was driven by coronavirus-related restrictions, as well as a goal to streamline and anonymize the evaluation process, making it more manageable to internally scale while simultaneously encouraging broad response from graduates. Despite the limitations, the survey reached a near representative group of graduates by year and program of study (n=273).



KEY RESULTS

SKILLS: Leadership skills were the most consistently reported skills learned across programs and cohorts, with 72% of all sampled graduates reporting to have obtained at least one leadership skill. Leadership skills featured prominently within the focused discussions across years and programs. Qualitative evidence suggested that the leadership skills obtained, particularly growth mindset and high self-confidence, served as a nexus for further skills development in other areas, and when combined with effective communication skills and teamwork, improved graduates' employment prospects.

Overall, 68% of graduates reported to have applied some career navigation skills in their job search or jobs. Within focus group discussions, confidence in building professional relationships and networks again emerged as the primary career navigation skill highlighted, and, overall, 83% of graduates agreed that they had someone to go to for advice on their career.



EMPLOYMENT: Among the 232 graduates from cohorts 2016 to 2019 who responded to this survey question, there is a current employment rate of 53%. The relatively high unemployment rate is largely driven by the class of 2019, which is the only cohort where more respondents were unemployed (64%) than employed, demonstrative of the COVID-19 pandemic's real and immediate impact on graduates' ability to find work. In fact, 92% of unemployed graduates indicated that their employment status had been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. If cohort 2019 is excluded from the employment calculation, the overall employment rate for graduates from cohorts 2016-2018 significantly increases to 72%. This figure is still below Akilah's average rate and most probably related to the impact of the current economic downturn.

Of those who were employed, 71% are in permanent contracted positions working an average of 5.1 days per week. Others are working in a professional internship (1%), casual employment (22%), or self-employment (6%). The increase in casual employment - relative to previous statistics gathered by Akilah - was explained by graduates to be a result of changing strategies adopted by their employers to mediate the effects of the pandemic on their businesses.

Despite being classified as 'casual', graduates across categories of work are still working five days per week on average. As many graduates support other family members, the effects of the changed work situations are having negative impacts on their households' financial stability.

INCOME AND ADVANCEMENT: Overall, graduates earn an average of 180,001–200,000 RWF (\$240–\$267 USD) a month, which is nearly four times the national average annual income of USD \$830 and over 13 times the national median annual income of USD \$235 in their current jobs. Moreover, graduates experienced a 58% growth in income between their first job after graduation to their current job. In addition, 61% have received at least one promotion in position and/or salary since graduating, and 43% of graduates are in a supervisory role and supervise an average of 3.5 employees.



COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION: 90% of graduates reported participation in at least one community group, with the three most-frequently reported types of groups being savings groups (60%), religious groups (59%), and marketing cooperatives (39%). The graduates interviewed in focused discussions detailed various levels of engagement and influence in their community groups, and many linked their increased engagement to their increased confidence and sense of social responsibility obtained through the leadership curriculum. Some graduates mentioned starting their own community initiatives, including helping teenage mothers start soap businesses for income, volunteering at the local hospital, mentoring young girls, or starting shoe businesses which employ rural women.

MULTIPLIER EFFECT: Over 93% of graduates reported making financial decisions regarding education, healthcare, household improvements, and spending of their personal income jointly with another person or alone. When asked if their opinions and feedback were thoughtfully considered when making various household financial decisions, graduates felt their perspectives were considered ‘most of the time’ or ‘all of the time.’

89% of sampled graduates are supporting at least one individual or family member financially. Financial support was assessed across the following categories: education, healthcare, housing, food, and livelihoods.

On average, graduates are paying for 1.7 other individuals’ education, 2.2 other individuals’ healthcare, 2.2 other individuals’ housing, 2.9 other individuals’ food, and 2.7 other individual’s livelihood (including business support and agricultural inputs).

Findings reveal that graduates are not only more economically independent and self-reliant as a result of their education, employment opportunities, and increased income (i.e. intragenerational mobility), they have also increased the socioeconomic status of their parents, siblings, and children (i.e. intergenerational mobility) through financial support.



INTRODUCTION

ORGANIZATIONAL BACKGROUND

Founded in 2010, Akilah is the women's leadership Institute at Davis College Rwanda. Together, Davis and Akilah offer a unique model of market-relevant, competency-based education with two-year diploma programs in Business Management and Entrepreneurship (BME), Information Systems (IS), and Hospitality and Tourism Management (HTM). In addition to the courses in their selected diplomas, leadership skills and technology are infused throughout the curriculum. Students are immersed in the English language through coursework and English-only instruction. Students also receive career development services and participate in professional engagement activities where they gain experience in project management, research, community organizing, and public speaking. The curriculum and experiential program elements were designed to address the human capital needs of the private sector and prepare promising young people to achieve their professional and personal goals.

EVALUATION PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

This evaluation was conducted by an external Monitoring and Evaluation Specialist for the purpose of both learning and accountability. The results of this evaluation will inform future planning and improvement processes at Davis College and Akilah.

It will also be used as an accountability tool to measure program effectiveness and results for the graduating classes of 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2019. Findings will be shared with both internal and external stakeholders to inform the above-mentioned processes as well as with supporters, partners, and the alumnae community.

The overall objective of this evaluation is to validate Davis and Akilah's theory of change. Specifically, this outcome evaluation assessed the relevance of the academic program to market needs and its effectiveness in increasing participants' likelihood of attaining economic independence through employment and leadership roles in the workplace and in society. The evaluation does not include a comparison group; therefore, the emphasis is on developing a descriptive understanding of how well the program worked rather than demonstrating a causal impact of the program on specific outcomes.

EVALUATION SCOPE

The evaluation was conducted from November 2020 to January 2021 and covered all diploma programs and graduating classes from 2016 to 2019. During this time, there have been 588 Akilah graduates in four classes. Furthermore, the objective of the evaluation was to assess outcomes at intervals of at least twelve and twenty-four months after graduation from Akilah.

APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

The evaluation focus and questions were structured around Akilah's four specific objectives, or expected outcomes:

1. Young women graduates achieve economic independence through employment for which Akilah prepared them.
2. Young women graduates show leadership in their workplace.
3. Young women graduates show leadership in their communities.
4. Young women graduates show leadership in their households.

These objectives were defined with the knowledge that educating young women is the wisest and most effective investment a country can make. Women's education in East Africa and around the globe has been shown to spur economic growth and improve family outcomes. Women are more likely to reinvest their earnings back into their families relative to men, and each year of schooling achieved has potential to boost a woman's wages. The Nike Foundation found that investing in girls would add \$3.2 billion into the East African economy. When women lead productive and purposeful lives, they are capable of transforming their families, communities and nations.

The approach to the evaluation was guided by good practice drawn from the evaluation conducted in 2017 with the 2012, 2014, and 2015 graduating cohorts. The methodology required by Akilah, especially in light of the current pandemic, needed to be both rigorous and streamlined so that the academic team could take on monitoring and evaluation as a regular and ongoing function.

As such, the evaluation took a mixed-methods approach that reached graduates remotely, including an online survey and online focus group discussions. The survey was distributed to all graduates from cohorts 2016 to 2019 and aimed for a response rate which reached statistical significance at a 5% margin of error with a 95% level of confidence (i.e. 233 graduates). There are limitations to this approach, including the possibility of response bias as a result of reaching a non-representative group of graduates. Therefore, some mitigation strategies were employed to minimize potential bias, including triangulation of data through focus group discussions and upholding the anonymity and confidentiality of data provided by graduates in the survey.



FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS: Focus group discussions (FGDs) were organized to triangulate quantitative data from surveys with qualitative feedback and insights across graduate cohorts (2016-2019) and programs (HTM, BME, IS). A total of six FGDs were arranged by program and cohort¹ in order to capture potential differences between these sub-groups related to their experience at Akilah, curriculum improvements, and other changing external factors, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Graduates were randomly selected for participation in the online groups to further ensure a diversity in perspectives were captured. In total, 30 graduates participated in the groups.

ANONYMOUS REPORTING: As reporting on certain indicators may be considered personal, such as income and decision-making power, some graduates opted-out of participating. Through an online and anonymous survey, the evaluator was able to assure graduates that their data would only be used in aggregate form without being personally identified and increase response rates. The survey also integrated measures to restrict responses so as to avoid duplicate entries.

Ultimately, the survey response rate was 46%, meaning that 273 graduates of the total possible 588 graduates in cohorts 2016-2019 responded, exceeding the target of 233. The survey reached a near representative group of graduates by year, though slightly disproportionate responses were received for cohorts 2017 and 2018.

¹ Cohorts '16 & '17 and cohorts '18 & '19 were grouped together as the curriculum during those years was considered relatively similar, with the move to competency-based education occurring in 2017.

Response Rate Relative to Actual Graduates by Year

YEAR	SURVEY %	SURVEY COUNT	ACTUAL %	ACTUAL COUNT
2016	14%	37	14%	85
2017	13%	35	20%	117
2018	23%	64	14%	85
2019	50%	137	51%	301
OVERALL		273		588

While the exact reason for low response amongst 2017 graduates is not known, the academic leadership team noted that many graduates

from cohort 2017 are from Burundi and returned to their country post-graduation and are therefore not as responsive.

Response Rate Relative to Actual Graduates by Program

PROGRAM	SURVEY %	SURVEY COUNT	ACTUAL %	ACTUAL COUNT
BME	24%	65	25%	145
HTM	56%	154	57%	337
IS	20%	54	18%	106
OVERALL		273		588

In addition, there was near representation in survey response across programs of study. As such, with limitations in mind, Akilah is confident the results present an

accurate and representative picture of graduate outcomes across programs and can be used to inform broader decision-making.



UN Women, in partnership with Akilah, FAWE Girls, Gashora Girls and others organized the Girls Takeover Initiative to facilitate intergenerational dialogue between professionals and 25 women, who shadowed leaders at UN Agencies, Embassies and private sector companies. View more about this event [here](#).

RESULTS

RELEVANCE OF SKILLS IN THE WORKPLACE

CAREER NAVIGATION SKILLS

In the theory of change, career navigation skills include networking, job-search and application skills, negotiation skills, career planning, and expanded career goals and aspirations. Overall, 68% of graduates reported to have applied some career navigation skills in their job search or jobs, a 10% decrease from the 2012-2015 alumnae

evaluation report. The specific skills graduates applied, in order of the most frequently mentioned, included: writing a cover letter and CV according to a specific audience and purpose (55%), public speaking (51%), building professional relationships and networks (49%), career planning skills and goal setting (44%), writing business correspondences using proper business etiquette (30%).



“Regarding professional connections, I was lucky enough to join UN Women. Back when I was at Akilah I attended Girls Takeover Initiative, which UN Women organized, and I met their Representative and wrote her a thank you note afterwards. That’s how I was able to secure an internship there, and then a job.”

Esther Mbabazi
Business Management & Entrepreneurship,
Class of 2019

Overall, 83% of graduates agreed or strongly agreed that they had someone to go to for advice on their career, and also that they were good at finding the resources needed to pursue their talents and interests. Within focus group discussions, confidence in building professional relationships and networks again emerged as the primary career navigation skill highlighted. Specifically, graduates noted how confidence with engaging professional networks has helped them to overcome challenges related to limited market opportunities, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic or as a result of fewer employment options typically available to diploma holders.

Whether it is approaching other prominent professionals during conferences and events or maintaining strong connections with employers at their former places of internship, confidence in approaching people and making a case for their qualifications was key for graduates in securing their first job.

One recent (2018-2019) graduate of the BME program illuminates this finding: “For me, I didn’t have many challenges. The main challenge is that we don’t have a degree, because some people focus more on that than the experience and the skills that you have. However, we [at Akilah] are always using our connections to find something. Through informational interviews, and going out to conduct professional interviews, I met with this person who is currently my boss.”

Of note, graduates of the HTM program were consistently more likely to report learning career navigation skills relative to graduates of the IS and BME programs; however, BME students were 8% more likely to have reported learning to write business correspondence using proper business etiquette skills. BME graduates were also 5-10% less likely to have learnt public speaking.

While graduates of BME participating in focus groups did not specifically note challenges with public speaking, they did note how their limited knowledge in some skill areas, such as accounting and finance, hindered their confidence to compete in business competitions:

“I have done competitions with people from other institutions, and what I have discovered is that we do not have enough skills in business and...cannot compete.”

Another 2016-2017 graduate noted how she is unable to stand up for her skillset in the workplace after landing the job on paper: “I have seen challenges. It has not been easy to do things to advance like to use Quickbooks, and to work on taxes, and to go deeper into accounting, when you are in business, you have very little knowledge. [In my job], I have said I studied entrepreneurship and [my employers] expect me to know everything in finance and I can’t defend myself.”

When reviewing data across years, it is noted that some cohorts were more likely to report learning some skills relative to peers in other cohorts. For example, the class of 2016 was over 15% more likely to have learnt how to write professional cover letters relative to other cohorts, while the class of 2017 was approximately 10% less likely to have learned career planning skills and goal setting.

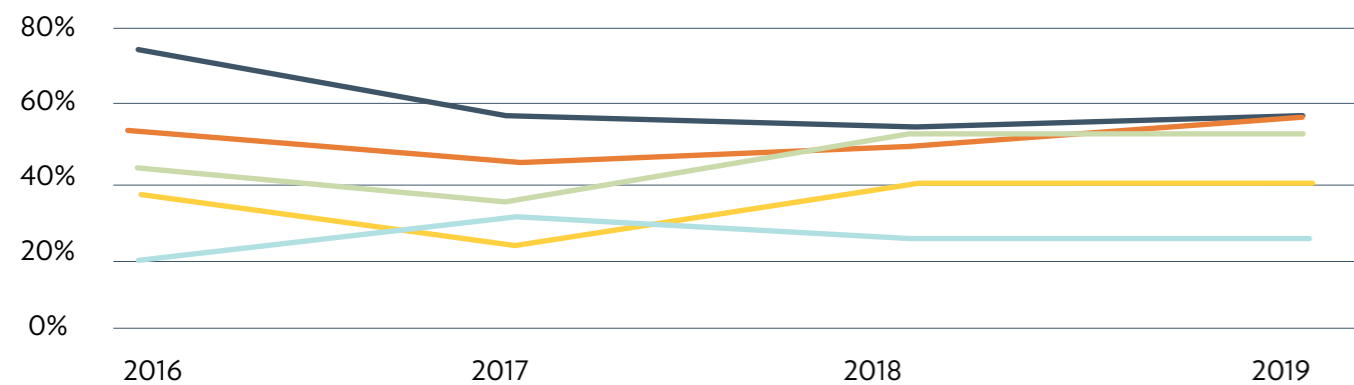
Generally, in terms of longitudinal trends, it can be seen that reported learning on cover letters slightly decreased over time by the various cohorts, while career planning and networking show slight increases.

The differences between cohorts, as noted by academic leadership, may be explained by the move to competency-based education in 2017 and structural changes to the provision of careers support, which moved from a separate department with talent advocates to support provided through student academic advisors.

Noticing challenges with maintaining the same level of support as the study body was growing, Davis and Akilah initiated a careers taskforce to bolster the careers support offered to students. Work is still underway to ensure students receive the support they need to thrive.

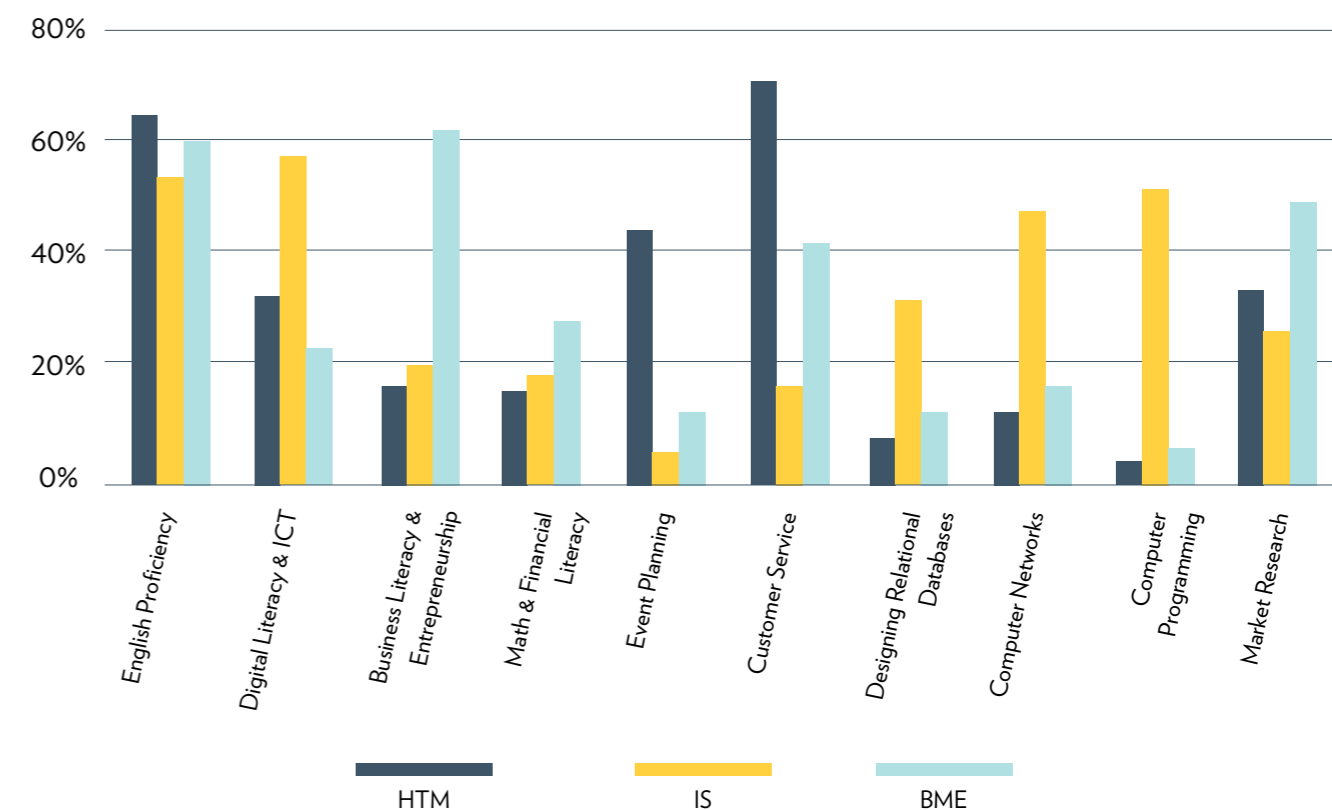


Career Navigation Skills by Cohort



CAREER NAVIGATION SKILLS BY COHORT				
	'16	'17	'18	'19
COVER LETTERS	70%	54%	52%	53%
CAREER PLANNING AND GOAL SETTING	43%	31%	47%	46%
BUSINESS CORRESPONDENCE AND ETIQUETTE	24%	34%	30%	31%
PUBLIC SPEAKING	51%	43%	47%	56%
NETWORKING	43%	34%	52%	53%

Industry-specific Technical Skills by Program



INDUSTRY-SPECIFIC TECHNICAL SKILLS

Of the industry-specific technical skills applied amongst graduates, English skills were cited most frequently, consistent with the trends within the 2017 alumnae survey. Overall, 59% of 2016-2019 graduates reported to have obtained proficiency in speaking, listening, reading and writing. In the 2017 study, English skills were

often referred to as the gateway to obtaining other skills, like customer service, public speaking, and general confidence. A similar sentiment was expressed in this 2021 study, however, the focus was primarily on their ability to effectively communicate generally, with less emphasis on their initial inability to speak English: “We are advanced in terms of how we express ourselves... how I communicate with workmates or the interviewer, we always get appreciation from that.”

This slight shift in focus is likely due to contextual factors; previously, many graduates studied in French during their secondary schooling, which was prior to Rwanda’s national shift from French to English as the primary language of instruction and business.

One graduate from IS class of 2016-2017 also noted how her English skills added value to her community and helped her more actively contribute:

“Being at Akilah and learning leadership skills and English was very important to me. With English, you find you are very important in your community and you can become very helpful to other community members.”



As expected, graduates were more likely to report learning skills which aligned with their respective programs. However, it is important to note some shared trends between programs, with the curriculum building cross-sectional skills, such as customer service, market research, and financial literacy.

When referring to areas for improvement, graduates from the BME program noted the focus on theory rather than practical skills. Graduates noted that they primarily learned entrepreneurship skills, however employers expect them

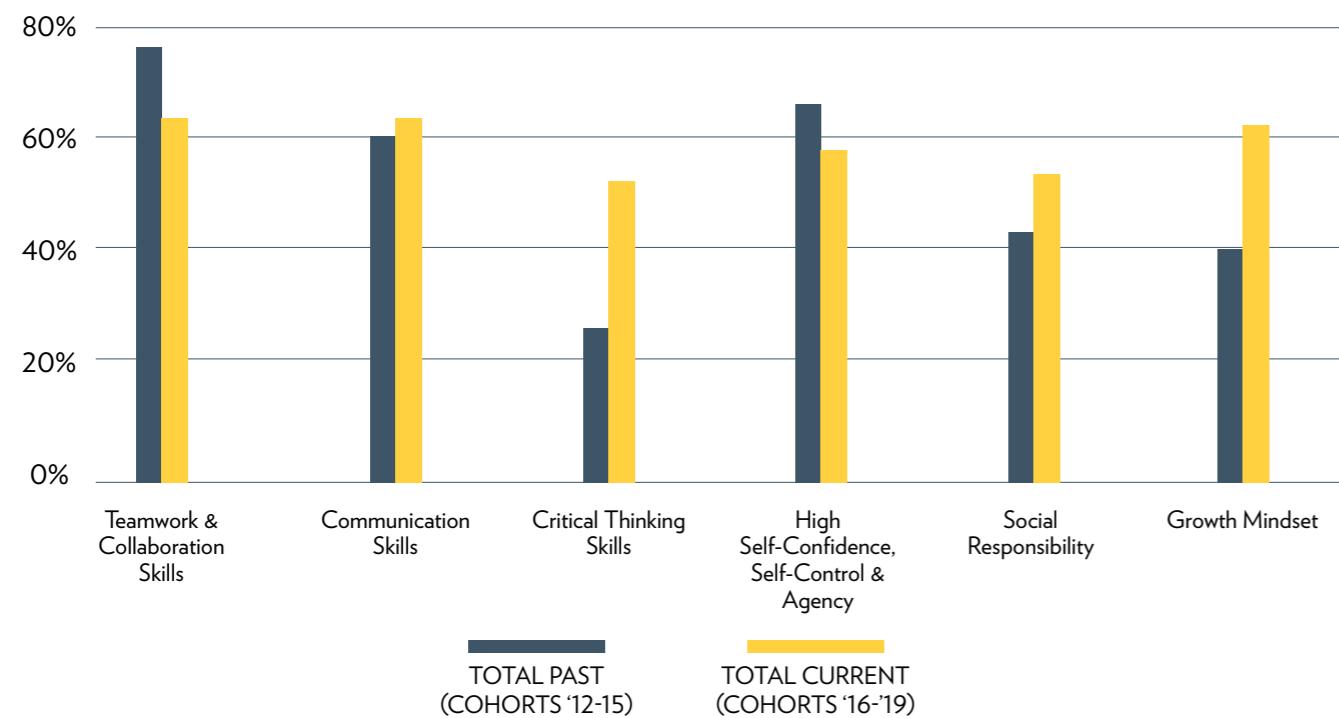
to have more in-depth business management skills: “Another issue is that the skills we obtained were for entrepreneurship, it was entrepreneurship as a course and now it is business management and entrepreneurship, and we are expected to have more business skills in order to manage a big amount of money.” Skill areas for improvement, which were mostly drawn from the 2016-2017 focused discussion, included finance and accounting, managing taxes, data analysis and data-driven decision-making, and the use of different applications, such as Quickbooks®.

IS program graduates noted both strengths and areas for improvement in Akilah’s curriculum, and emphasized the challenges Akilah, as an institution, and Akilah graduates face in staying relevant in the field. One IS graduate (2016-2017) portrayed the predicament through an example: “In some ways, programming is all about languages. If I give an example in life, you are taught Arabic and Chinese, but you go to work at a company that uses German, so you have to learn a new language. That’s how our field works, it is constantly changing and

also different businesses require knowledge of different languages. But generally, what [Akilah] gave was a good introduction, and we can compete to learn new knowledge.”

Another graduate responded with her own experience, and added on that it was easy to forget technical skills if not practiced frequently: “At one point I was doing data entry in my job and making reports, and then I was asked to do networking and programming, and it was a challenge. I was just doing data entry, so I lost practice.”

Leadership Skills by Cohort Groups



IS graduates also provided potential solutions and recommendations, clarifying that in IS there does not need to be emphasis in the curriculum on English skills in the same way as other programs, and there was a need to cover IS technical competencies in greater depth. Recommendations included adding specialty courses, allowing more time and course credits for free research to learn different programming languages, combining English and leadership classes to allow more time for IT courses, or extending the IS program to three years to allow students to obtain a sufficient number of IS courses that could transfer to a degree program.

HTM graduates did not note any specific areas for skill improvement within focus group discussions. The main challenges related to skills development were primarily faced in the workplace, mentioning how easy it was for them to get siloed into one department; for example, if the graduate was hired as a waitress, it is not easy to transition to customer service and sales departments. Their frustration with this is heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic, as due to staff shortages, graduates are working across departments without much recognition or opportunity to formally transfer to new departments for their own career growth. This is a change from the 2017 study, when graduates still cited missing some practical skills; since then, the curriculum has been adapted to add more practical experience within the coursework.



LEADERSHIP

At Akilah, six characteristics of leadership have historically been targeted for development within the leadership curriculum. The leadership skills developed include:

HIGH CORE SELF-EVALUATION²: People with high core self-evaluation have a strong sense of self. They are confident, value themselves, and believe in their own abilities and capacity to succeed. Components of high core self-evaluation include emotional stability and emotional intelligence, self-efficacy, confidence, and positive self-esteem.

GROWTH MINDSET³: People with a growth mindset believe that they can improve their basic abilities through hard work, diligence, and openness to feedback from others. People with a growth mindset demonstrate conscientiousness, discipline, time management, and dutifulness. They are achievement-striving and open to feedback from others on how they can grow and improve.

² J.E. Bono and T.A. Judge, "Core Self-evaluations: A Review of the Trait and Its Role in Job Satisfaction and Job Performance," *European Journal of Personality*, 17(Suppl1), S5-S18, 2003.

³ Carol Dweck, "What having a 'growth mindset' actually means," *Harvard Business Review*, 2016.

TEAMWORK AND COLLABORATION ⁴:

Teamwork and collaboration skills are closely related to communication and problem solving. People who work well in teams are agreeable, kind, trustworthy, and socially competent. They are also straightforward and able to actively listen and provide constructive feedback in order to manage and resolve interpersonal conflicts.

COMMUNICATION: People with strong communication skills are assertive and confident public speakers who are able to present themselves clearly.

HIGH-ORDER THINKING:

Higher-order thinking involves critical, logical, and reflective thinking and problem solving. People with higher-order thinking skills are able to be adaptive and flexible, to critically assess facts and resolve challenges by thinking ‘outside of the box’ to provide innovative and relevant solutions.

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY:

People who demonstrate social responsibility are ethical leaders. They are appreciative and open to new ideas, values, and cultures, and have a strong sense of responsibility to act with integrity, respect, and empathy.

Leadership skills were the most consistently reported skills learned across programs and cohorts, with 72% of all sampled graduates reporting to have obtained at least one leadership skill. The most frequently reported skills were teamwork and collaboration skills (64%), communication skills (64%) and a growth mindset (63%), followed by self-confidence and agency (57%), social responsibility (53%) and critical thinking skills (52%).

There were similar trends seen in the 2017 study with 2012-2015 graduates, in which a high number of graduates reported having obtained leadership skills at similar frequencies.

While the values are not directly comparable between the surveys – with the new survey streamlined to remove open-ended questions and skill categories adapted slightly for clarity and alignment with the competency-based curriculum – it can be seen that generally, teamwork and collaboration skills, high core self-evaluation, and communication skills were the most highly reported. However, in this study with cohorts 2016–2019, more graduates reported improved social responsibility, a growth mindset, and higher-order thinking skills relative to their 2012-2015 counterparts.

When reviewing reported leadership skills across programs, IS students were least likely to report acquiring leadership skills across categories,

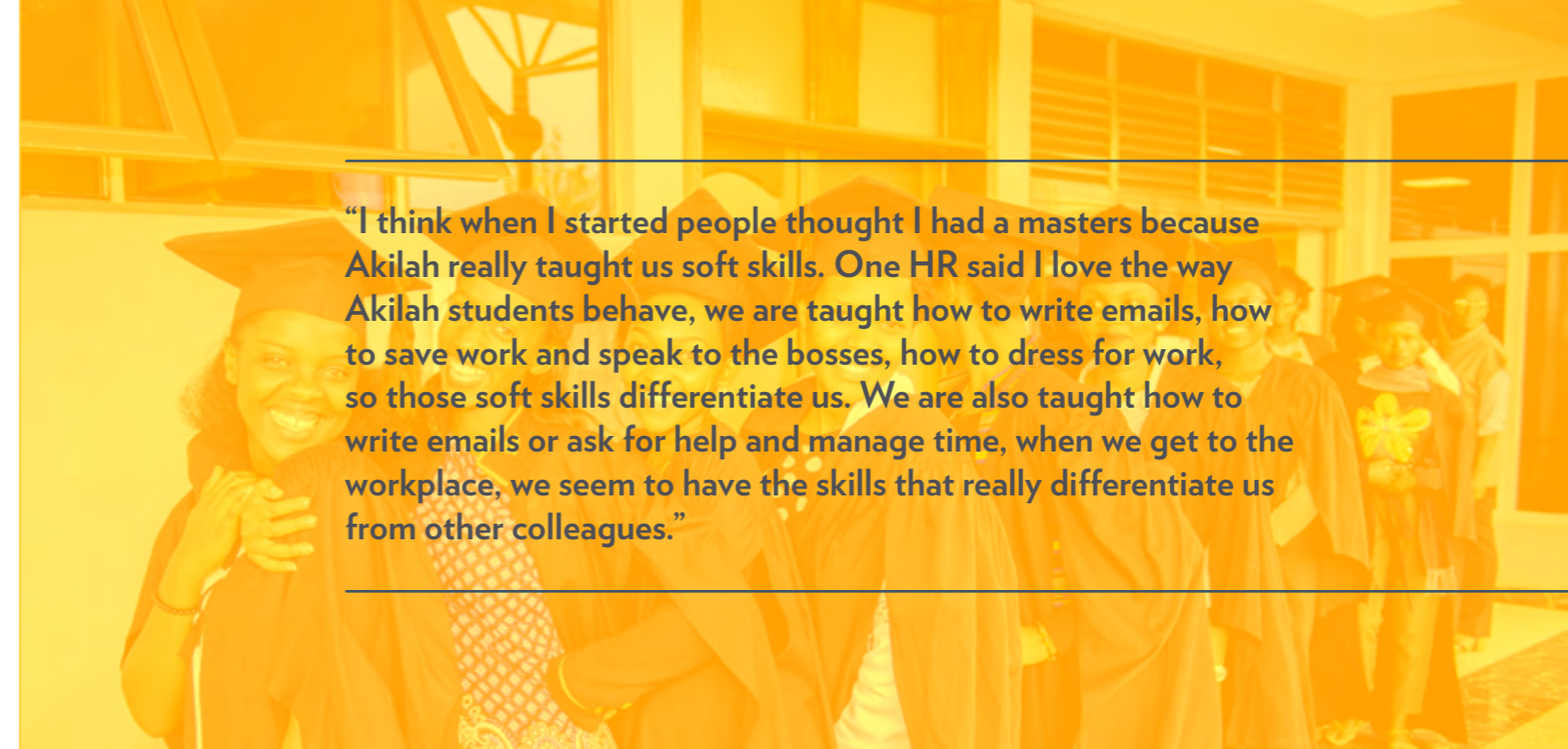
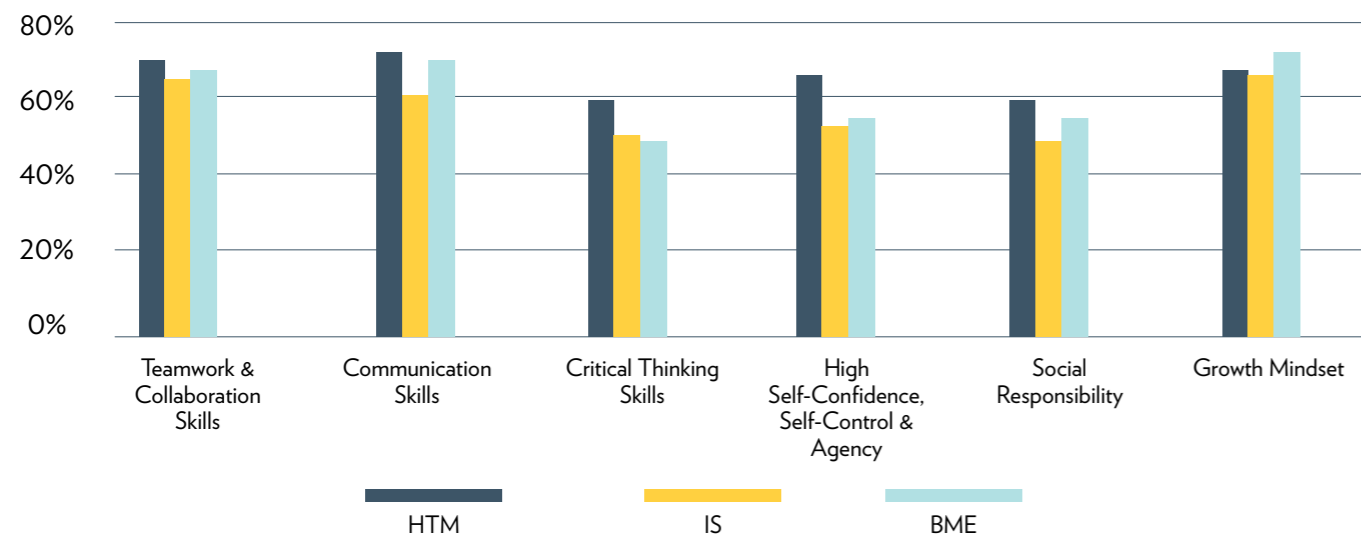
relative to their colleagues in other diploma programs. However, the differences were only slight, especially between IS and BME program graduates.

Leadership skills featured prominently within the focused discussions across years and programs. Qualitative evidence suggested that the leadership skills obtained, particularly growth mindset and high self-confidence, served as a nexus for further skills development in other areas, and when combined with effective communication skills and teamwork, improved graduates’ employment prospects.



⁴ J.W. Pellegrino and M.L. Hilton (Editors), “Education for Life and Work: Developing Transferable Knowledge and Skills in the 21st Century,” Committee on Defining Deeper Learning and 21st Century Skills, National Research Council. Board on Testing and Assessment and Board on Science Education, Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press), 2012.

Leadership Skills by Program



“I think when I started people thought I had a masters because Akilah really taught us soft skills. One HR said I love the way Akilah students behave, we are taught how to write emails, how to save work and speak to the bosses, how to dress for work, so those soft skills differentiate us. We are also taught how to write emails or ask for help and manage time, when we get to the workplace, we seem to have the skills that really differentiate us from other colleagues.”

Graduates mentioned how their leadership skills help them to stand out against their colleagues: “We really stand out, there are differences particularly in leadership and communication. There is that quick adaptivity to the work environment. Also, teamwork and problem solving and communication. It’s about listening to one another and problem solving, and this makes us stand out from the rest.”

Critical thinking and the ability to adapt, as mentioned above, as well as a growth mindset and confidence to take on and grow from challenges also differentiated graduates from

their colleagues: “I can say our skills are way above, and we also have the confidence and skillsets, we are encouraged and overcome problems. I am always willing to learn and take risks at the workplace and that has helped me to advance.”

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The set of leadership skills developed in graduates also proved particularly useful as they sought to adapt to the changing and constrained conditions presented by the pandemic. Graduates across programs, faced with unemployment, realized new income-generating opportunities, especially those from the newly graduated 2019 cohort. One graduate from HTM started her own fashion line, which she assigned to the confidence and skills she obtained from Akilah: “Before I tried to look for a job, but I couldn’t find one because it was a really

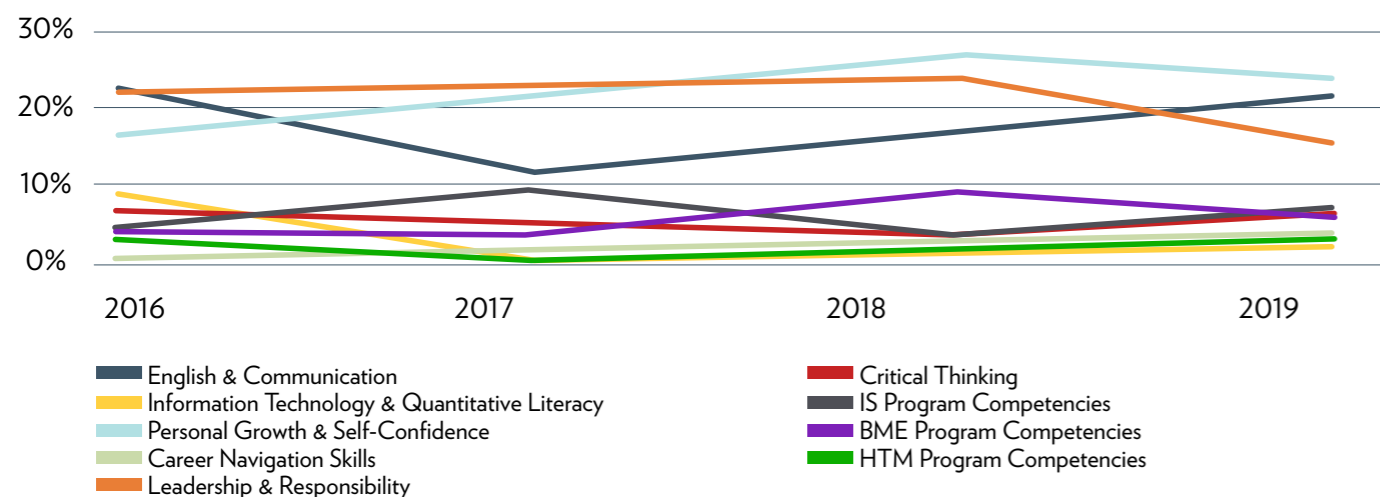
hard time and employers were saying they could not hire anyone. Still, even though I started, I have some ideas, not materials, they are small, but they are ideas. I tried to create a fashion design business, it wasn’t easy to create fashion during that time, so I tried to create some fashion at home to innovate. This is how I started, from the social change projects, we were able to think about how we can create something that can help us and help our community.” Another 2019 graduate participating in FGDs started a business making and selling organic honey.

By being able to endure these difficult times, graduates gained confidence in their ability to grow and adapt throughout their careers: “I am not in the field of IT right now, but what I learned wasn’t only IS, it was also self-confidence and self-growth, and so I was able to feed into what I was doing. I can divert my path and do anything I set my mind to...that mindset is what Akilah created in us, that we can do anything.”

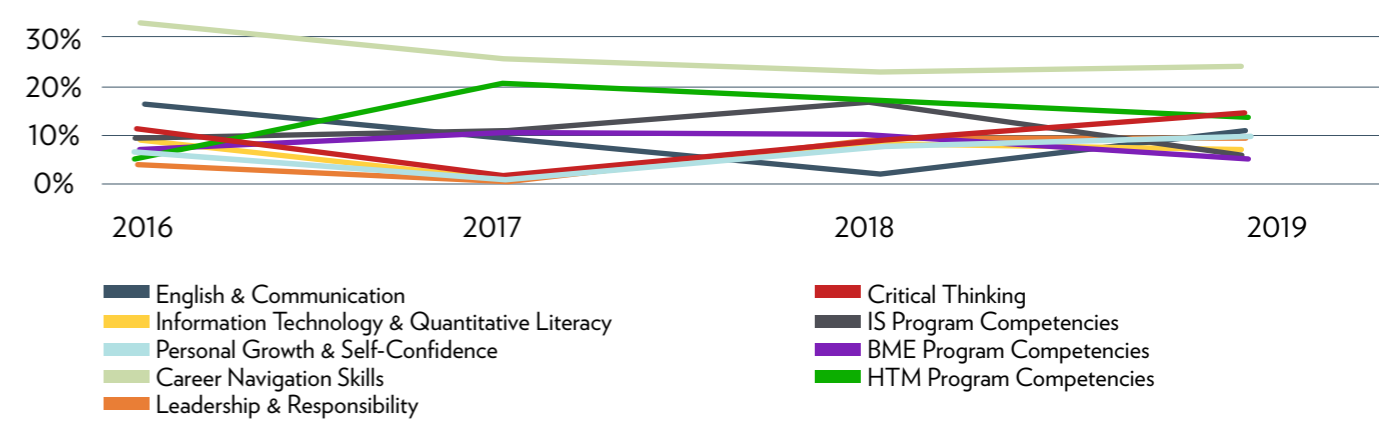
At the same time, graduates also mentioned feeling constrained in the workplace in their ability to practice their leadership skills due to various, more traditional and hierarchical management styles still present: “It is also a challenge because we have gained some skills and we really want to apply those skills. But people take them differently, we have this attitude that makes us feel outstanding, to speak for ourselves and want to do the right thing...Sometimes the manager doesn’t understand this because they have been in different systems that don’t favor these attitudes. It is a challenge, but I think Rwanda will get to the point of valuing new ideas, hard work and leadership more.” Another graduate noted the same: “I can say that sometimes Akilah graduates are perceived as over-confident, and so I have learned to balance confidence and humility at the same time.”



Most Useful Skills Obtained by Cohort



Skill Areas For Improvement by Cohort



EDUCATION BENEFITS AND SATISFACTION

When graduates were asked which element of the program best prepared them for entering the workforce, 46% mentioned competencies primarily related to the leadership curriculum, such as personal growth and self-confidence (23%), leadership and responsibility (19%) and critical thinking (4%). The second-most reported set of skills were program specific competencies in information systems, hospitality and tourism management, and business management and entrepreneurship (19%) as well as general competencies in English and communication skills (19%),

followed by information and communication technology and quantitative literacy (2%) and career navigations skills (2%).

While trends were mostly consistent, showing that there was consensus across years on the most useful skills obtained within the program, there are some interesting changes seen across years as well, perhaps signaling updates made to the curriculum which made the program more, or less, relevant. For example, there was a large dip in reporting on English and communication skills as the most useful program component for the class of 2017, while a greater proportion of the

2017 cohort reported IS program competencies⁵. There was also a consistent increase in personal growth and self-confidence as a key element setting graduating cohorts up for career success, and a sharp decline in those reporting leadership and responsibility skills between 2018 to 2019.

Career navigation skills were the least supportive in helping students prepare for the workforce, and also highlighted as a top area for improvement in the curriculum across graduating cohorts.

⁵ The sample was largely representative of the program composition by year. However, it is the case that fewer graduates from the class of 2017 responded to the survey than targeted.

The Net Promoter Score (NPS) is a proxy and means for measuring customer satisfaction and predicting business growth that is prominently used in the private and public sector across industries. It is an index ranging from -100 to 100 that measures the willingness of customers, in this case graduates, to recommend the received services to others. After responding the question: ‘On a scale from 0-100, how likely are you to recommend Akilah Institute to a friend or colleague?’ respondents are grouped as follows:

- Promoters (score 9-10) are loyal enthusiasts who will keep buying and refer others, fueling growth;
- Passives (score 7-8) are satisfied but unenthusiastic customers who are vulnerable to competitive offerings; and
- Detractors (score 0-6) are unhappy customers who can damage a brand and impede growth through negative word-of-mouth.

Subtracting the percentage of Detractors from the percentage of Promoters yields the NPS, which can range from a low of -100 (if every customer is a Detractor) to a high of 100 (if every customer is a Promoter). Akilah’s NPS, which is 36.93, is intended to reflect the graduates’ true and reactive feelings towards the educational experience provided. An average ‘good’ score has been listed online as either above 30⁶ or above 60⁷, and higher education⁸ and education and training industries were consistently seen to have the highest average NPS compared to other industries⁹, showing a 51 to 71 average rating, respectively. This suggests that Akilah is in a good position, however, when comparing to the education industry at large, adjustments could be made to improve the student experience.

6 <https://www.retently.com/blog/good-net-promoter-score/>

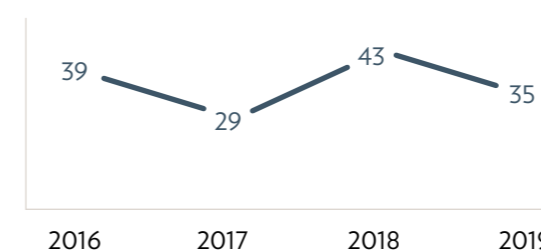
7 <https://schooladmin.com/blog/net-promoter-score-101-what-your-school-needs-to-know-about-nps/>

8 Ibid.

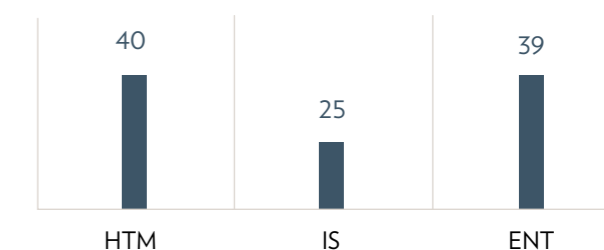
9 <https://www.retently.com/blog/good-net-promoter-score/>

It is important also to highlight that internet service providers, software and apps, and other tech solutions typically receive lower NPS on average. As such, it is harder to meet customer expectations in this industry; with curriculum changes to support more technology integration over time, as well as an IS focused program, Akilah’s lower numbers could be partially explained. As seen below, IS graduates provided a lower overall assessment of Akilah and their likelihood of recommending the learning institution to a friend or colleague.

Net Promoter Score by Year



Net Promoter Score by Program



Across years, there is more variation in the NPS. As noted in previous sections, the 2017 graduating class were less likely to report acquiring skills across most categories, and this could be reflected in their lower NPS. There is not a clear explanation yet for why this specific class was less satisfied, and possible reasons could span from the cohort composition (number of Burundian students) to curriculum changes; for example, 2017 was the year Akilah transitioned to competency-based education. For the class of 2019, the NPS is likely lower due to challenges faced with graduating into a period of job shortages and economic crisis as a result of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. This is explored further in the subsequent sections.

ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

While many definitions of women's economic empowerment exist, there are common themes that continue to arise in the definitions, including: women's economic empowerment means women have access to markets, options to advance economically, and decision-making power surrounding their own livelihoods¹⁰. This section focuses on findings related to the first two elements of this definition: employment and advancement. The evaluation found that through formal education, leadership development, and career services, graduates experienced gains in their employment and advancement opportunities since graduation.



TRANSITION TO EMPLOYMENT

Among the 231 graduates who responded to the question on employment since graduation¹¹, results demonstrate that graduates have held anywhere from zero to seven jobs since graduating, though on average have held approximately two jobs since graduating. Cohort 2016 to 2018 graduates were more likely to hold more than one job, with 2019 graduates holding fewer jobs on average, which is expected considering the time graduates have been in the market. The average jobs held, when disaggregated by program, is relatively consistent (2.1-2.3 jobs).

On average, graduates were likely to have held one unpaid internship and approximately two jobs across cohorts; however, cohort 2017 held fewer unpaid internships and more paid positions relative to other cohorts.

¹⁰ Erin Markel, "Measuring Women's Economic Empowerment in Private Sector Development," links, 2014. ; <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/economic-empowerment>; <https://ww2.gatesfoundation.org/equal-is-greater/our-approach/>

¹¹ 273 graduates responded to the survey, though 42 did not respond to the question on employment status

Maximum, Minimum and Average Number of Jobs Held Since Graduation by Year

YEAR	MAX	MIN	AVERAGE	AVERAGE PAID EMPLOYMENT
2016	6	0	2.4	7
2017	6	1	2.8	11
2018	7	1	2.6	8
2019	7	0	1.8	16
OVERALL	7	0	2.2	42

Average Number of Jobs and Job Type since Graduation by Year

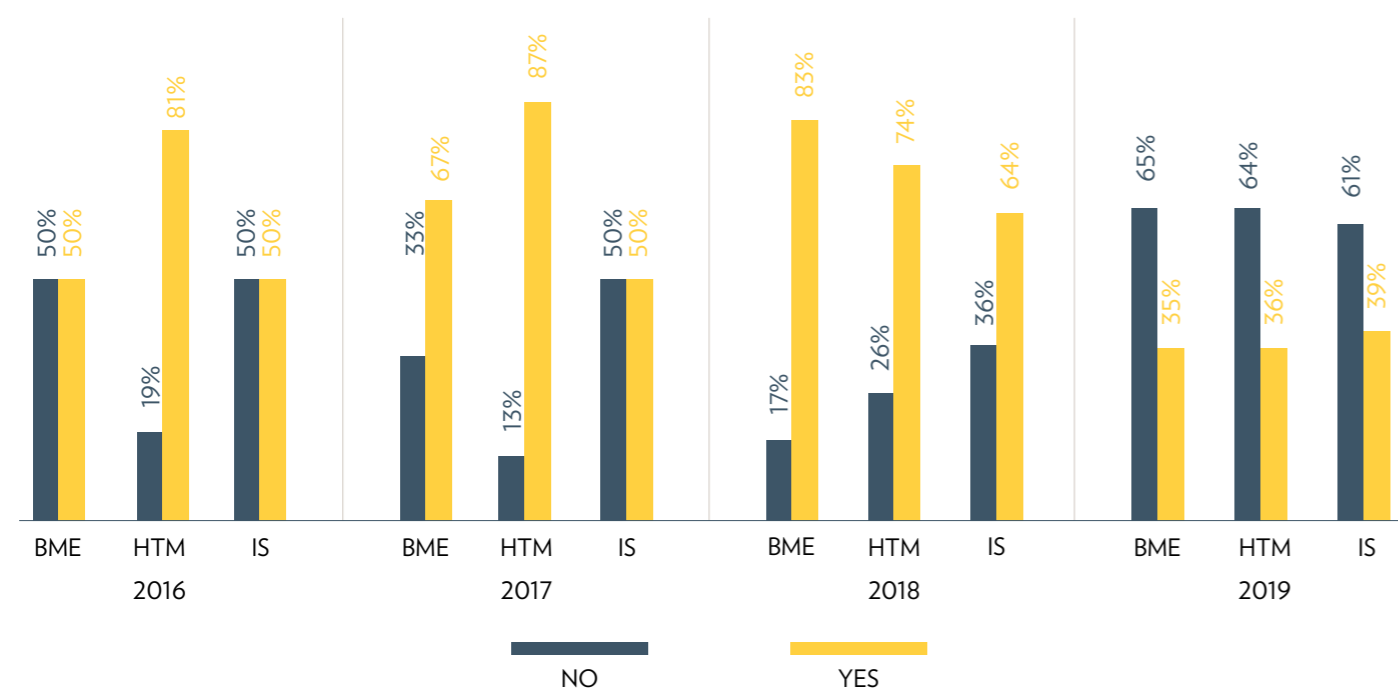
YEAR	AVERAGE TOTAL JOBS	AVERAGE UNPAID INTERNSHIPS	AVERAGE PAID EMPLOYMENT
2016	2.4	0.8	1.6
2017	2.8	0.6	2.2
2018	2.6	0.9	1.6
2019	1.8	0.9	0.9
OVERALL	2.2	0.9	1.3

Average Number of Jobs and Job Type since Graduation by Program

PROGRAM	AVERAGE TOTAL JOBS	AVERAGE UNPAID INTERNSHIPS	AVERAGE PAID EMPLOYMENT
BME	2.2	1.1	1.1
HTM	2.1	0.8	1.3
IS	2.3	0.8	1.5
OVERALL	2.2	0.9	1.3



Employment Rates by Year and Program



CURRENT EMPLOYMENT

Among the 232 graduates from cohorts 2016-2019 who responded to this survey question, there is a current employment rate of 53% - a stark contrast to the 89% of 2012-2015 graduates who responded to and were employed at the time of the 2017 study. The current high unemployment rate is largely driven by the class of 2019, which is the only cohort where more respondents were unemployed (64%) than employed, demonstrative of the pandemic's real impact on graduates' ability to find work.

In fact, 92% of unemployed graduates indicated that their employment status had been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Of those reporting unemployment¹², 32% said they lost their job as a result of the pandemic and 60% said they were in the job market, though few employment opportunities were available and it has been more difficult to find a job; only 8% of those unemployed reported that their unemployment status was not a result of the pandemic. If cohort 2019 is excluded from the employment calculation, the overall employment rate for graduates from cohorts 2016-2018 significantly increases to 72%.

Graduates provided examples of how the pandemic has affected their situation. One BME graduate running her own business had more limited sales as she was unable to reach Muhanga district where her business was operating: "This pandemic caused me to lose money because I failed to reach where my business is running." Others noted losing jobs or challenges finding jobs, especially cohort 2019: "Due to COVID-19, many people have been affected and people have lost jobs and it is hard to find another job as many institutes are not hiring." As the unemployment numbers are growing in the country, competition for open positions is more fierce: "It is hard to find a job when industries are reducing employees, and the income is less as well. I applied to one place, and there was one position but 2,000 applicants." Small and new companies were forced to shut down, also causing graduates to lose jobs: "I worked for a start-up company, so maybe we could start again if it comes to that. They are not sure whether they will open again as they only opened last year. I am now searching for a new position."

Interestingly, despite the tourism and hospitality sector being hit hard in Rwanda as a result of travel restrictions and social distancing regulations, graduates of the HTM program were more likely to have retained employment through the pandemic. This is not fully reflected within the focus group discussions, in which many graduates reported having lost their jobs at hotels, restaurants and tour companies: "As you know, tourism is totally down, and since I am a tour consultant, I am no longer working."

IS and BME graduates reported similar employment rates, at 48% and 50%, respectively. The highest rates of employment were amongst graduates of the 2017 HTM cohort at 87%, followed by the 2016 HTM cohort at 81%, and the 2018 BME cohort at 83%.



“The big challenges that we are facing is because of this pandemic, even if we are working...you know everyone has personal and family issues, sometimes they give you a salary and sometimes it is not enough, but you can't go somewhere else because you can't find another job, so you end up doing dishes and things you don't want to do anyway because you need the money. But maybe the pandemic will end, and we can go back to a normal salary.”

Of those who were employed and providing detail on employment (103), most (71%) are in permanent contracted positions working an average of 5.1 days per week. Others are working in a professional internship (1%) or in casual employment (22%). Overall, 6% of graduates are self-employed, with equal representation from each diploma program. Business types include restaurants and tour companies, arts/fashion companies, and youth services.

The increase in casual employment was explained by graduates to be a result of changing strategies adopted by their employers to mediate the effects of the pandemic on their businesses, especially amongst businesses in the tourism and hospitality sector, which could explain why employment levels were somewhat maintained. In the 2017 study of 2012-2015 graduates, only 4% of employed graduates were hired as casual workers. However, despite being classified as ‘casual’, graduates across categories of work are still working five days (with the exception of self-employed graduates, who reported four workdays on average). This provides additional insights into how employment options have become

less stable for employees. As one graduate mentioned, businesses are cutting staff, decreasing pay, changing work schedules and contracts to be more flexible, and adopting new hiring strategies: “We have a big number who are not working. The ones who were working, all were suspended from their work. Last month, they got the chance to be re-hired, but they are not working the hours they were supposed to work. It's only like once a week and they pay only for the shifts they are doing.”

Another graduate confirmed the same and noted how they are also taking on additional responsibilities, as well as pay cuts: “We are really few in our workplace and you do a lot of jobs and you get little money in exchange, and now because of COVID-19, the hotel started to use casuals and so they get really low money and we do so much work and the salary is making it really hard to feed our families. So, we are pushing to get more responsibilities so we can earn more money.” As many graduates support other family members, the effects of the changed working situations are having negative impacts on their households' financial stability.

JOB SATISFACTION

Job satisfaction was assessed across seven categories: wage and benefits, work hours, work environment, job duties and skills required, and opportunity to advance. Overall, graduates reported satisfaction levels of 78% (an average satisfaction level of 3.9, ‘satisfied,’ out of 5, ‘very satisfied’). Across years, 2017 graduates reported the highest average satisfaction rates (88%), and 2016 graduates reported the lowest average satisfaction rates (73%). Across programs, HTM graduates were least satisfied with their jobs across categories (75%), while BME and IS graduates were similarly satisfied (83% and 82%, respectively). Graduates reported the lowest satisfaction levels with their income, followed by opportunities to advance. Graduates were most satisfied with their job duties and skills required to fulfill them, suggesting that they are satisfied with the relevance of their employment to their skillsets and interests, but face somewhat limited advancement opportunities.

INCOME AND ADVANCEMENT

Historic data shows that 25% of 2016-2018 graduates¹³ were employed prior to joining Akilah. In their previous employment, graduates from cohorts 2016-2018 were earning an average monthly income of 50,000 RWF (USD \$67¹⁴). This suggests that the employment rate within these cohorts has increased by 42% and 50%, respectively, and demonstrates how graduating from Akilah improves employment prospects, despite challenging conditions.

GRADUATES ARE EARNING NEARLY FOUR TIMES THE NATIONAL AVERAGE ANNUAL INCOME¹⁵ OF USD \$830 AND OVER 13 TIMES THE NATIONAL MEDIAN ANNUAL INCOME OF USD \$235 IN THEIR CURRENT JOBS¹⁶.

¹³ Baseline values for pre-Akilah employment rates for cohorts 2018 and 2019 are not currently available.

¹⁴ An exchange rate of 750 is applied to all RWF to USD calculations, which was the average value in 2016 based on published exchange rates from the National Bank of Rwanda; it was also the rate used in previous studies and will allow for simple longitudinal comparisons in USD. Most graduates receive salaries in Rwandan Franc, which is the currency used for the salary indicator within all surveys

Overall, graduates earn an average of 180,001–200,000 RWF (\$240–\$267 USD) a month and 61% (61 of 100 graduates reporting) have received at least one promotion in position and/or salary since graduating. 43% of graduates are in a supervisory role and supervise an average of 3.5 employees.

This demonstrates improvements in employment outcomes from the 2017 study, when 58% of 2012-2015 graduates had received at least one promotion in position and/or salary since graduating, and 36% of graduates were in a supervisory role overseeing an average of 2.4 employees. The average salary in their current employment remained the same between studies.

Graduates are earning nearly four times the national average annual income of USD \$830 and over 13 times the national median annual income of USD \$235 in their current jobs.

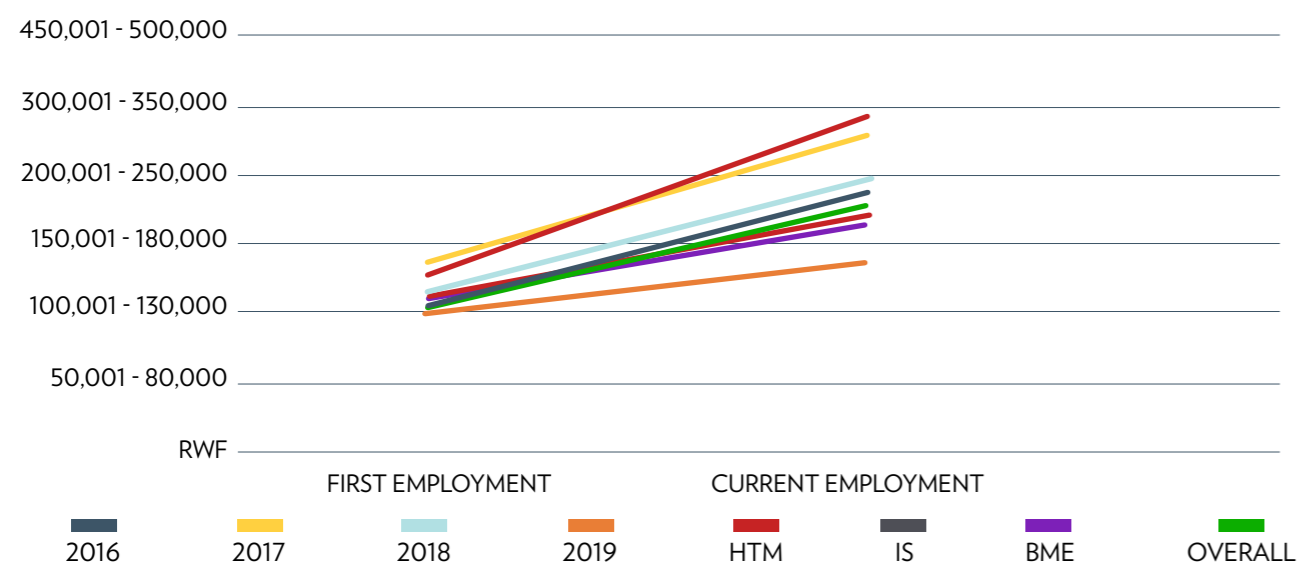
PROGRAM	MINIMUM	MAXIMUM	AVERAGE
BME	0	13	2.8
HTM	0	65	4.1
IS	0	10	2.2
OVERALL	0	65	3.5

HTM graduates, on average, have a larger supervisory function in roles extending from customer service agents and managers, housekeeping managers, and operations managers in hotels, restaurants and bakeries, tour agencies, and manufacturing companies. BME graduates follow in their work as program managers and administrative assistants in freight forwarding companies, education institutions, fashion companies, and non-profit and community-based organizations. IS graduates supervise fewer employees on average in their roles as network technicians/administrators, IT officers and software engineers at academic institutions, energy companies, and business accelerators.

¹⁵ GNI PPP (World Bank Atlas Method); 2019.; The Atlas Method controls for inflation and exchange rate fluctuations, making it more of a comparable indicator across countries, as opposed to general GNI PPP.

¹⁶ Glenn Phelps and Steve Crabtree, “Worldwide, Median Household Income About \$10,000,” Gallup Poll, 2013. N.B. 2013 is still the most updated data on median incomes.

Salary Growth After Graduation



Currently, cohort 2017 and IS graduates are the sub-groups earning the most, each with an average monthly salary of 250,001-300,000 RWF. Cohort 2019 (130,001 – 150,000 RWF) and BME graduates (150,001 – 180,000 RWF) are earning the least on average. While graduates reported their incomes in ranges, and a precise calculation of percentage growth is not possible, relative growth can be calculated as movement from one category to another. Overall, graduates experienced a 58% growth in income between their first job after graduation to their current job. IS saw the most significant leap in salaries, from 130,001 – 150,000 RWF to 250,001 – 300,000 RWF, which is an approximate 83% increase. This could suggest that the IS sector has a higher entry-level salary in Rwanda, as fewer graduates of the IS program were holding supervisory roles relative to others.

Salaries were also affected by the pandemic, with many accepting pay cuts or not receiving expected promotions: “The pandemic caused me problems. I expected to be promoted because I have been with my company for five years but because of the pandemic I couldn’t even ask for that. So this was a real challenge.” One graduate noted that her salary, with time, is slowly returning to normal, but this is not the trend quite yet: “On my side, COVID-19 has affected our operations because we had lockdown. The good thing is that we still got some clients, but we did have salary reductions, and sometimes we depend on donors as a non-governmental organization and so it affected us so much, and now we are recovering and salaries are going back to normal.”



SOCIAL EMPOWERMENT

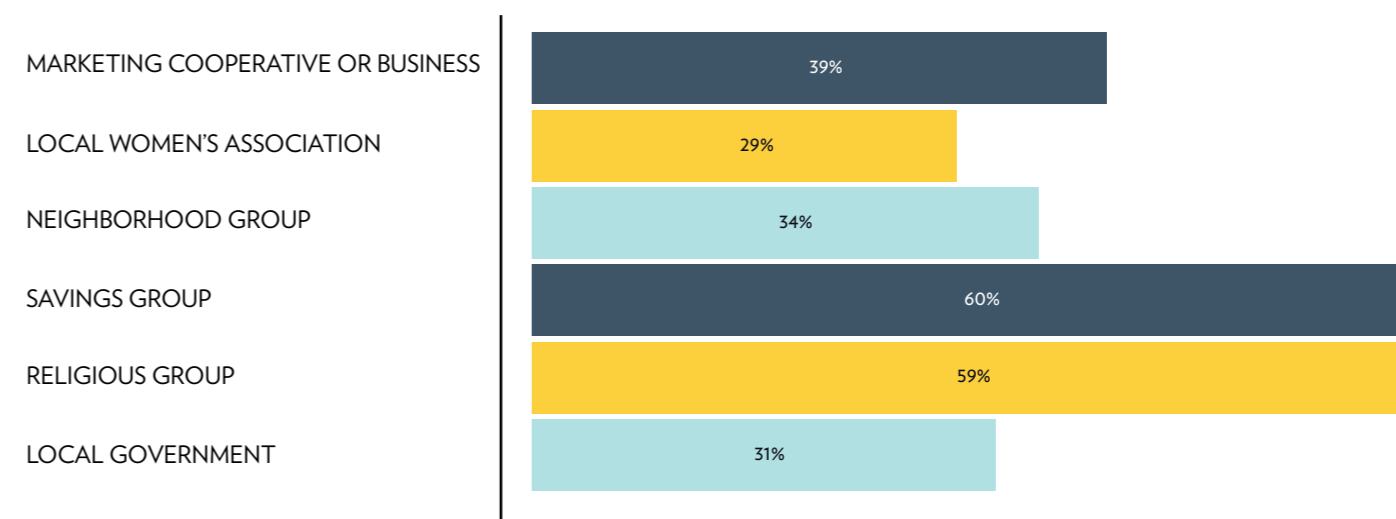
The findings demonstrate that, under normal conditions, graduates are accessing markets through employment and advancing as a result of their skills, however, they face significant external challenges due to the volatile market conditions that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought forward. Nonetheless, in the definitions of women's economic empowerment, there is also an element of social empowerment through increased participation and decision-making power surrounding their own livelihoods. This evaluation also focused on the non-economic outcomes tied to women's empowerment. Specifically, the evaluation explores empowerment in the realms of education and employment, and the impact this has on the personal and social realms of women. Non-economic outcomes of interest include a graduate's agency and capacity to influence decisions involving herself, her family, and her community, and how graduates have been able to adapt to and overcome external challenges such as those stemming from COVID-19.

“On my side, I have been able to engage in my community in terms of using the skills I got from Akilah...I work on a project, which supports the most vulnerable children and youth, so they can feed themselves and help their families and change their standard of living. In that project, I am faced with different challenges, I help 3-4 teenage mothers and I could see they are really suffering because they don't know their rights and how to say no to men who abuse them and violate them. I got inspiration to help them through the social change project, where we helped street kids, and during that period I saw that we had a lot of issues in our community. I started this project in January of this year, and my boss was willing to cooperate in providing some financial aid.”

COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

90% of graduates reported participation in at least one community group, with the two most frequently reported types of groups being savings groups (60%), religious groups (59%), and marketing cooperatives (39%). Of notable difference from the 2017 study of cohorts 2012-2015, the proportions participating in savings groups increased by 34% and marketing cooperatives emerged as a more prominently featured group. The frequency of participation was higher amongst these community group types as well, with graduates attending marketing cooperatives an average of 3.2 times per month, religious groups 2.9 times per month, and savings groups 2.1 times per month. In descending order, neighborhood activities, local government, and local women's associations were attended by fewer graduates and less frequently.

Community Group Participation



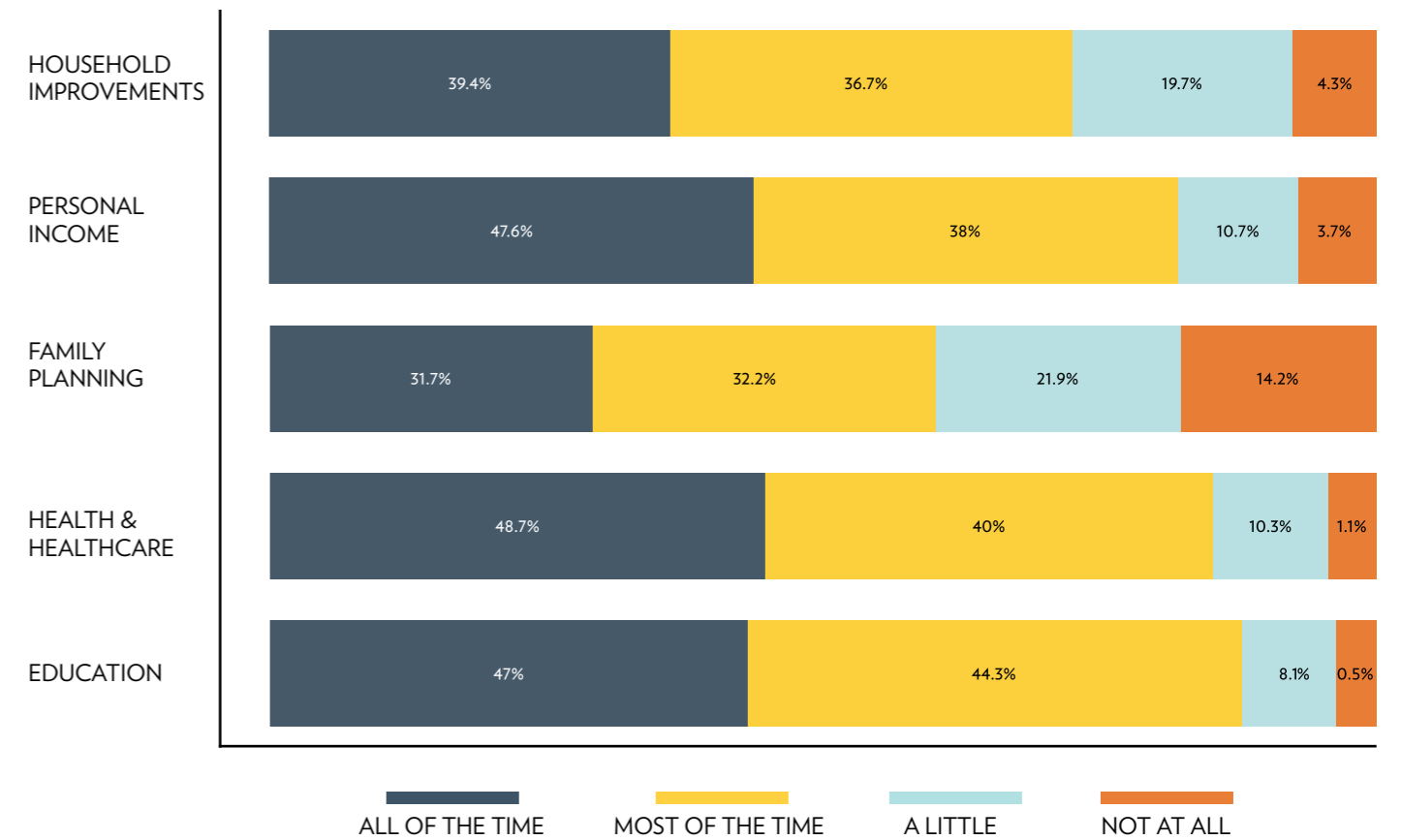
The sample data suggests community participation has a varied distribution across years, employment status, and income. Graduates from cohort 2017 and from IS were least likely to report community participation and cohort 2019 was approximately twice as likely to report participation in community groups across groups, though unemployment rates in the 2019 cohort were the highest.

The graduates interviewed in focused discussions detailed various levels of engagement and influence in their community groups, and many linked their increased engagement to their increased confidence and sense of social responsibility obtained through the leadership curriculum. In the story highlighted below, the graduate even secured additional funds from her employer to support her self-initiated community project. Graduates of the BME program highlighted how they extended their learned business management skills to their communities, in some cases even starting social enterprises: “What I got from Akilah, I learnt that any idea, even small, matters. I have also gained some money by solving a problem in my community. There is a business problem that I have solved in agriculture, and I started a business in agriculture through what I learned from Akilah.”

“Akilah has equipped me personally with confidence. From the time they get you involved, they make it clear you have something to share. For example, I can approach problems in my community and family with a business mind. When it comes to family gatherings and community gatherings, I am able to approach with a business mindset. I can see that knowledge brings confidence.”

Graduates across programs also noted the compounding effects of knowledge. The sense of having knowledge to offer to their communities increased their confidence, and simultaneously increased their communities’ confidence in them, which further bolstered graduates’ sense of agency: “The leadership skills I got allowed the community to recognize me, but before I couldn’t even feel confident enough to go to the community or to mentor young girls as I have.” Some other initiatives started by graduates were helping teenage mothers start soap businesses, volunteering at the local hospital, mentoring young girls, or starting shoe businesses which employ rural women.

Perspective Considered in Household Decision-Making



HOUSEHOLD PARTICIPATION

This evaluation also assessed graduates’ decision-making power in their households. Over 93% of graduates reported making financial decisions regarding education, healthcare, household improvements, and spending of their personal income jointly with another person or alone. When asked if their opinions and feedback were thoughtfully considered when making various household financial decisions, graduates felt their perspectives were considered ‘most of the time’ or ‘all of the time.’ One graduate in focus groups described how her role changed from being a passive consumer of household resources, to a respected and engaged household member: “Before Akilah, I did not participate in my family. If I wanted something, I would have to ask – I was just sitting there. But now I am engaged in financial decision-making, and I share my ideas and what I have, which is really important.”



However, with regards to family planning, 20% of graduates indicated that they do not make these decisions at all and 14% indicated that their perspectives were not considered in family planning matters. While personal family planning was not raised in FGDs, the rationale provided within the 2017 study for lower engagement in family planning was largely because most graduates are not married and did not believe this question was relevant when discussing other family members' relationships.

For those graduates in focus groups with families, they highlighted how leadership has helped them to manage their households and engage equally with their partners: "I am now a mother, I have a home. If something happens at home, my husband and I sit together and share and look forward to a good answer together. However before, he might make decisions without my view, but now everything we do discuss."

THE MULTIPLIER EFFECT

Evidence indicates that women tend to invest more of their income in their families than men do. Therefore, the evaluation examined the multiplier effect of Akilah graduates' education and economic independence. Our evaluation explicitly investigated these spillover effects by measuring graduates' financial contributions to household and community members. Findings reveal that graduates were not only more economically independent and self-reliant as a result of their education, employment opportunities, and increased income (i.e. intragenerational mobility), they have also increased the socioeconomic status of their parents, siblings, and children (i.e. intergenerational mobility) through financial support.

89% of sampled graduates are supporting at least one individual or family member financially. Financial support was assessed across the following categories: education, healthcare, housing, food, and livelihoods. On average, graduates are paying for 1.7 other individuals' education, 2.2 other individuals' healthcare, 2.2 other individuals' housing, 2.9 other individuals' food, and 2.7 other individuals' livelihood (including business support and agricultural inputs).



The numbers being supported by graduates represent an increase from the 2017 study, across categories, with support provided for housing, food and other individuals' livelihoods increasing by a full one to two people. Focus group participants suggested that this was due to the COVID-19 pandemic; if graduates maintained their employment while others in their families lost jobs, the financial burden of care landed on them: "For me, I did not stop working, and my family depends on me. I see this happening with others, too. If there are three in a family, and two are no longer working, the whole responsibility goes onto one person and that is hard for one person."

In addition to financial support, graduates are also supporting their families through non-financial means: "I have been teaching my siblings in their courses and helping them to study. I have also been helping with school fees from my salaries, it is a way of saying thank you to my parents for everything they have done for me."

While it has been difficult for graduates to sustain their families through the pandemic, the quote to the right is demonstrative of graduates' pride in their capacity to support family members' socioeconomic mobility.

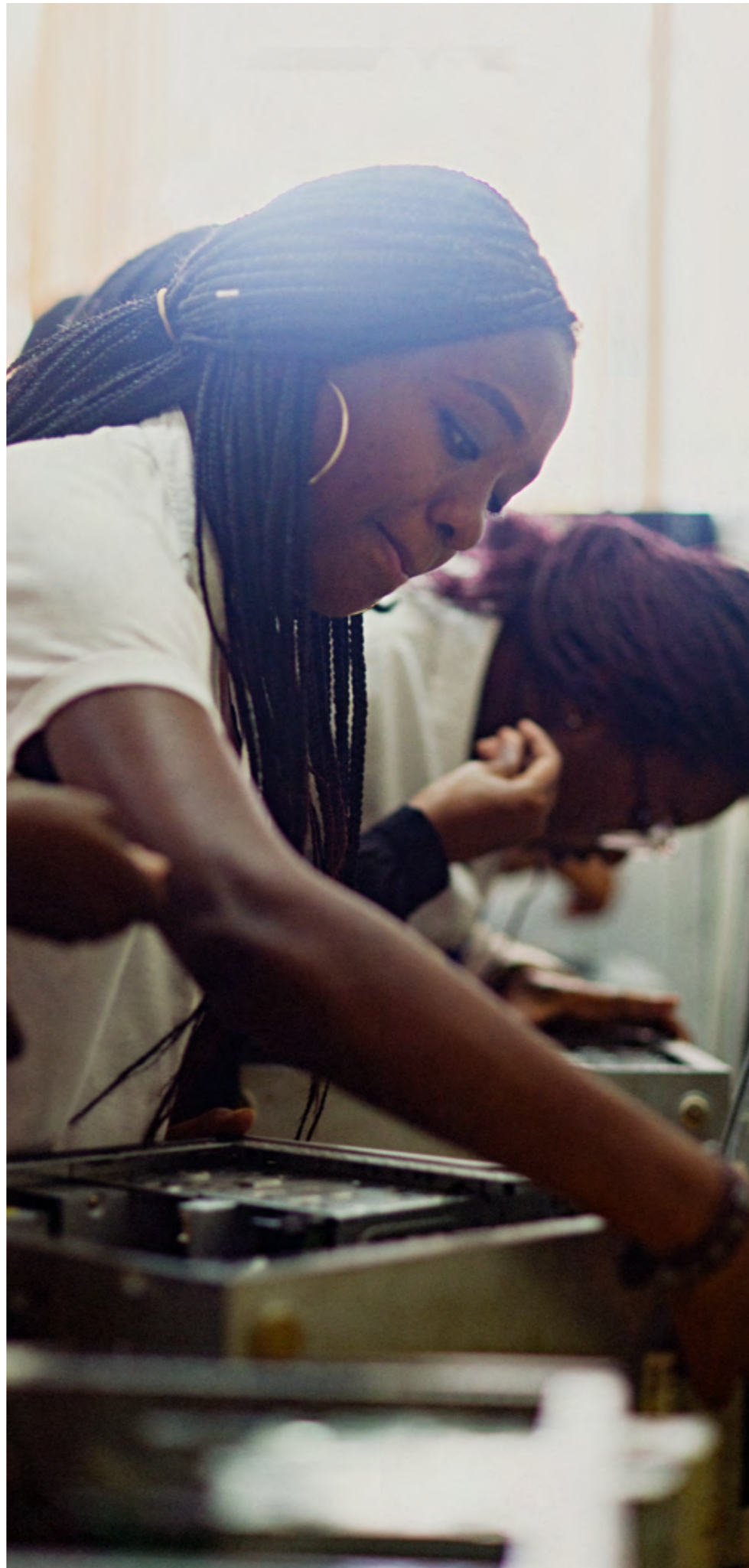


"Because of Akilah and my job, I was able to support my family and six siblings with school fees and to meet their basic needs. I help them so much and make sure they are in good condition and I am able to support them with healthcare, if my mother is not capable of doing that. I can do something to support, and I got that mindset from Akilah...I see my siblings growing and joining university, and I am excited that I can do something for them."

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of this evaluation verify that graduates proceed along the expected pathway to employment, advance in their careers and obtain leadership roles in their families and communities. Through their post-graduate journey, graduates are applying the skills they obtained at Akilah to achieve these outcomes, while also recognizing gaps in their technical skillsets, and capitalizing on obtained soft skills such as a growth mindset, critical thinking and social responsibility to advance further – to start socially-responsible enterprises, to develop new programming skills, to return to higher education, and to make career moves across departments and sectors.

In fact, leadership development at Akilah and graduates' subsequent application of these skills in their workplace and communities stood out as a key differentiating factor in their success. 46% of graduates felt that the leadership training at Akilah was the program component that best prepared them for entering the workforce, and 72% of graduates said that they continue to apply the leadership skills they learned at the Akilah Institute in their careers. And while career navigation skills were cited as the biggest area for program improvement by graduates, they were



still able to utilize the skills and resources obtained through Akilah to build professional networks: 83% of graduates believed they had someone to go to for advice on their careers and that they were good at finding the required resources to pursue their talents, interests and goals. The confidence obtained through their increased knowledge had cross-cutting effects: graduates cited a new ability to clearly communicate, seek mentors and build networks, and advocate for themselves and their professional capabilities, ultimately helping them to stand out above other job seekers to better bridge the education-to-workforce gap.

Graduates also experienced substantial gains in their income since before attending Akilah. Graduates currently earn approximately four times the national per capita average; this represents an **average change from 50,001–80,000 RWF to a salary between 180,000–200,000 RWF**. In addition, 61% of employed graduates have received at least one promotion in position and/or salary since graduating, and 43% of graduates are in a supervisory role and supervise an average of 3.5 employees. Graduates' improved economic independence allowed them to increase the financial support provided to family members, while also improving their participation in family decision-making. Graduates were proud of their ability to now contribute to their families and provide intergenerational mobility.

There are also notable differences in employment and salaries between some groups. The cohort 2019, which graduated into the pandemic and, subsequently, an unstable employment market faced more considerable barriers to employment. However, faced with uncertainty, graduates sought to adapt to the changing and constrained conditions presented by the pandemic through the application of their leadership skills. Graduates across programs, faced with unemployment, realized new income-generating opportunities and also increased their engagement in community groups.

Cohort 2017 and IS graduates are the sub-groups earning the most, with the latter sub-group also experiencing the highest growth in income: **IS saw the most significant leap in salaries, from 130,001–1500,000 RWF to 250,001–300,000 RWF, which is an approximate 83% increase.** This could suggest that the IS sector has a higher entry-level salary in Rwanda, as fewer graduates of the IS program were holding supervisory roles relative to others.

Continuing on the theme of programmatic differences, IS graduates were also the least satisfied with the program (as measured by the NPS), and were less likely to have reported obtaining specific leadership, technical and career navigation skills than graduates of other programs. IS program graduates noted both strengths and areas for improvement in Akilah's curriculum, and emphasized the challenges Akilah, as an institution, and Akilah graduates face in staying relevant in the field: the technology sector is constantly changing and innovating, and therefore, there are many skills to learn, which are also easy to forget if not practiced frequently.

IS graduates also provided potential solutions and recommendations, clarifying that in IS there does not need to be emphasis in the curriculum on English skills in the same way as other programs, and there was a need to cover IS technical competencies in greater depth. Recommendations included adding specialty courses, allowing more time and course credits for free research to learn different programming languages, combining English and leadership classes to allow more time for IT courses,

or extending the IS program to three years to allow students to obtain a sufficient number of IS courses that could transfer to a degree program. These recommendations for deepening specific skillsets also applies to BME graduates, who had similarly expressed needing more coursework on finance and accounting, data analysis and data-driven decision-making in order to be more competitive applicants in their field.

It is therefore recommended that Davis and Akilah further explore options for certificate programs and specialty courses, either offered independently or through partnerships with other specialty training institutes, adding options

for more in-depth study of certain topics for graduates to more easily specialize in their careers.

Graduates across cohorts and programs also faced considerable challenges as a result of the pandemic. The employment rate among graduates is lower in contrast to previous studies, and 92% of unemployed graduates indicated that their employment status had been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.



Of those who are employed, 71% are in permanent contracted positions working an average of 5.1 days per week, and 22% are in casual employment contracts, though still working five days per week on average. The uncertainty of one's employment status, including more demanding work hours and schedules and decreased salaries is straining graduates. As many graduates support other family members, the effects of the changed working situations are having negative impacts on their households' financial stability, as graduates increase the number of family members they support. It is also straining graduates' ability to repay their student loans.

Finally, graduates had also highlighted some limits to their ability to practice their leadership skills in the workplace due to various, more traditional and hierarchical management styles still present, with some graduates noting in focus groups that Akilah graduates are 'too' empowered.

As Davis seeks to expand its women's leadership Institute, it is recommended that a more thorough gender analysis be conducted to understand the longer-term impacts of the program on social empowerment, and potential constraining factors both internal and external to the college. This report, along with the 2017 study, provides a solid base for the study and could be expanded on through surveys and/or interviews with staff, employers, community leaders, and members of graduates' households.

It is Akilah's intention to continue to develop its position as a thought leader in women's education, and therefore, Akilah should build on this evaluation's evidence and assess net effects of its model through a more in-depth study. Through thoughtful work and critical reflection, more women will gain access to quality education and employment opportunities, starting them on the path towards economic independence.

NOTABLE LESSONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

MANAGEMENT RESPONSE

Continue to reflect on and improve the leadership curriculum, ensuring it is a core component of Akilah's program model. Noting the role communication skills and professional networks played in graduates' first employment opportunity, develop opportunities for students to participate in networking events.

Accepted. We understand that Akilah's leadership curriculum has a direct impact on student and graduate outcomes. As such, we will continue to refine and improve upon our leadership curriculum, some of which may have been lost when the program's foundation year was eliminated and with the transition to competency-based education. Through our careers taskforce, we have also agreed to pioneer a life cycle approach to the careers journey for holistic support to both students and alumnae.

Explore opportunities for strengthening the technical aspects and relevance of the curriculum, primarily for the BME and IS programs. It is recommended that Davis and Akilah further explore options for certificate programs and specialty courses, either offered independently or through partnerships with other specialty training institutes, adding options for more in-depth study of certain topics for graduates to more easily specialize in their careers. Similarly, Akilah should coordinate with other universities and colleges offering degrees to understand which changes are needed to ensure course credits transfer towards bachelor's degrees.

Accepted. Davis and Akilah recognize the importance of ensuring graduates remain competitive in the market. This includes setting graduates up to continue to advance their skillsets and their careers. We have already started to discuss ways to address this recommendation through a BA taskforce. IS leadership have made significant curriculum changes, and the class of 2022 have started a new curriculum that strengthens students' programming skills and IS-specific competencies. In addition, the college recently launched online certificate courses to include in-demand offerings related to IS and plan to expand these courses over time to include other professional certifications. Finally, BME leadership have introduced a managerial accounting course in addition to the financial accounting course from the class of 2019. They are also planning to further redesign the accounting course in response to feedback from employers and student surveys.

Build on this report to further validate and understand some of the trends emerging in the data. There are some unanswered questions, such as why cohort 2017 was less satisfied, how the career navigation program component could be improved, and why some graduates gain employment and advance at a faster rate than others. This report, along with the 2017 study, provides a solid base and could be expanded on through surveys and/or interviews with staff, employers, community leaders, and members of graduates' household.

Accepted. Akilah will seek to develop a short survey for staff and employers to respond to, specifically looking at trends which warrant further exploration.

As Davis seeks to expand its women's leadership Institute, Akilah, it is recommended that a more thorough gender analysis be conducted to understand the longer-term impacts of the program on social empowerment, and potential constraining factors both internal and external to the college.

Accepted. We believe this topic warrants an external evaluation and designated new funding to undertake.



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