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Impact of mentoring on the likelihood of getting jobs in the agricultural sector in Benin

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ABSTRACT

This study evaluates the impact of mentoring programs on the likelihood of getting a job in the agricultural sector after a one-year experiment conducted in Benin. The program provides graduates in agriculture-related fields with capacity building (digital skills, job search skills, and interpersonal skills) – as well as the support of a professional who is either a junior (junior model) or a senior (senior model) – as they seek jobs. The evaluation framework followed a mixed-methods design that incorporated survey data and qualitative data. The findings from the randomised controlled trial (RCT) showed a positive impact of the senior mentoring model, which increased the likelihood of getting a job in the agricultural sector by 16.4 per cent. In addition, the senior mentoring model had more impact on the likelihood of getting a job for both genders with an increase of 18.7 per cent for men and 11.9 per cent for women. Furthermore, mentees valued receiving practical career-related assistance, a realistic perspective on the workplace, and psychological and emotional support. The study suggests the need for a comprehensive policy package by policymakers and the institutionalisation of a formal mentoring program by youth-serving organisations based on the senior model.

Introduction

The labour market in sub-Saharan Africa receives thousands of young graduates every year from training institutions. In 2013, sub-Saharan Africa had nearly 60 per cent of young people out of work, and each year, nearly 10–12 million enter the labour market (OIT 2013). These figures are alarming because unemployment at a young age, in particular, has been proven to have a large and negative effect on future labour market outcomes, particularly in terms of employment (Bell and Blanchflower 2011; Yeboah and Jayne 2018). Job seekers face numerous barriers to getting jobs and commonly cited issues include that searching requires substantial effort, they do not know where or how to search for jobs efficiently, and it is difficult to communicate one's skills to employers (Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab 2022; Babcock et al. 2012). This explains why, in most countries, boosting youth employment has become a major policy priority (Dekker and Hollander 2017). Benin, for instance, is one of these countries with a young population, and increasing youth un(der)employment. In 2019, the youth unemployment rate was 4 per cent (for 15–24 year olds) (World Bank 2019), hiding alarming facts on youth employment. For instance, 72 per cent of the workforce was underemployed (ECA 2018). Furthermore, being a young woman in the labour market is challenging, with men more likely (42.01 per cent) to complete the transition from school to work than women (38.33 per cent) (Dedehouanou et al. 2018). In addition to the common constraints faced by graduates, such as lack of job-searching know-how, corruption,

nepotism, and lack of access to the social networks (Baah-Boateng 2014; Baah-Boateng 2016; Broussar and Tekleselassie 2012; Elder and Koné 2014; Ismail 2016), women are also affected by sexual harassment in the recruitment process (Chakravarty, Das, and Vaillant 2017).

The lack of effective support mechanisms for youth access to decent jobs in general, and in the agricultural sector in particular, is an impediment to accessing decent jobs in Benin. In fact, agriculture remains a key sector of the country's economy, contributing about 25 per cent of the gross domestic product (GDP), with many underexploited opportunities (World Bank 2019). In 2012, most youths (95.4 per cent) indicated they did not receive any advice on how to seek employment and find information on vacancies (INSAE 2013). Most of the youth, therefore, rely on their social networks (mainly parents and friends) for advice and support. Several studies have shown the high contribution of job seekers' "social networks" in addressing the labour market challenges (Dedehouanou et al. 2018; Eliason et al. 2019; Kloman-Kouakou, Kouakou, and Gbakou 2020). For example, 51.4 per cent of young employees got their jobs through a friend or a family member who provided support during the job search and the recruitment process (INSAE 2013). The social network provides an "informal" solution to the lack of support mechanisms for youth.

The literature available on job-oriented mentoring finds that mentoring – defined as a process by which a more experienced "mentor" gives support to a less experienced "mentee" across a wide range of issues relevant to work and professional development such as job search support (Castanheira 2016; Heslin and Turban 2016) – can formalise, democratise, and effectively play the role of the social network for many young people (Zhang et al. 2016). Furthermore, mentoring can facilitate the transition from school to work, by helping to build confidence, in addition to sometimes providing practical training in employability skills (Raposa et al. 2019). More specifically, Kluve et al. (2016) stress that effective approaches are those that combine training on the lacking skills. The positive outcomes of mentoring can be more pronounced among vulnerable youth segments, and hence, reduce inequalities. For young women, mentoring can be an effective means to enhance social support and networks, and to provide social and personal support beyond skills development (Chakravarty, Das, and Vaillant 2017). Therefore, the youth represent an important target group that could potentially benefit from mentoring. In this system, mentors are not necessarily required to be "senior" for the mentoring to yield positive outcomes. The seniority of a mentor might intimidate younger mentees and keep them from expressing their own opinions and ideas (Chen 2013). In contrast, mentors who have more experience in helping roles or professions have been found to be more effective, both in formal mentoring relationships (DuBois et al. 2002), and in informal mentoring relationships (Van Dam et al. 2018). In addition, Vries, Webb, and Eveline (2006) recommended that mentoring programs aiming at exploring gender differences should pay particular attention to the seniority gap between mentor and mentee. Therefore, depending on the context, a mentee can derive more benefits from a junior professional than from a senior professional. However, while indications are positive, much remains unknown about how and in which conditions mentoring can successfully and sustainably facilitate the transition from schools to decent work in sub-Saharan Africa. When contextualised to the agricultural sector, evidence that developed and tested formal mentoring is non-existent, to the best of our knowledge. This research aims to bridge the gaps with a randomised controlled trial (RCT) in Benin. We evaluated how mentoring models (junior vs. senior) designed for unemployed agriculture graduates, who are seeking employment, can increase the likelihood of getting jobs. RCT is often called the "gold standard" of evaluation methods, as it is the only method that allows a comparison of outcome – with and without a particular intervention, while avoiding selection bias due to observed or unobserved factors (Webber and Prousen 2018).

Most of the research on job-oriented mentoring programs to lessen barriers faced by job seekers reveals they assisted people in high-income countries looking for jobs more intensively and efficiently. The study by Altmann et al. (2018) that encourages job seekers to increase and improve their search effort is an example from Germany. More recently, Belot, Kircher, and Muller (2019) conducted an RCT by giving job seekers access to an online platform that orients them to industries or career categories they may not have previously thought about. In sub-Saharan Africa, Wheeler et al. (2022)

provided evidence that incorporating training for job seekers on how to use LinkedIn in a job search in South Africa increased the end-of-program employment rate by 10 per cent. Additionally, by establishing CV and interview workshops – and encouraging job seekers to include reference letters in their job applications – Abebe et al. (2021) demonstrated a positive employment outcome in Addis Ababa. However, programs that had greater effects for women reflect the higher constraints that women experience in the job market and their readiness to use new strategies to help in their job search. Jensen (2012) and Abel, Burger, and Piraino (2020) are two studies that found that women had a bigger impact than men in India and South Africa, respectively. In Benin, different programs and projects with job-oriented mentoring components have been implemented, namely: Support Program for Salaried Employment, Independent Employment Support Program, Job Applicant Capacity Building, and Decentralised Partnership for Employment (Adegbola et al. 2020). However, the impacts of these projects and programs have not been evaluated. This study, therefore, contributes to the growing but limited literature on the impact of job-oriented mentoring programs in sub-Saharan African countries (Abebe et al. 2021; Abel, Burger, and Piraino 2020; Wheeler et al. 2022) by drawing on past experiences to design our treatment. It provides the first experimental evidence on mentoring targeted to agriculture graduates, to our knowledge. Our work is novel in taking insights from earlier experiments. Although the concrete results of our research are specific to agriculture graduates in Benin, lessons learned from this investigation will be useful for the sub-Saharan African region, which faces similar challenges. This investigation will generate policy-relevant insights on how governments and non-state stakeholders can design, develop, and scale up mentoring programs that effectively improve youth employability and in turn increase their access to jobs in the agricultural sector.

The current study also addresses many of the methodological flaws in prior studies by using a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design (Creswell 2003) to systematically investigate the outcome of a mentoring program for agriculture graduates' mentees. A mixed-methods strategy guaranteed that the limits of one approach, such as the absence of contextual information available in quantitative survey data, were complemented by the strengths of the other – which included a thorough grasp of mentees' personal experiences. The study employed semi-structured interviews with mentees to provide additional context and explanation of the findings.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. In the next section, the experimental setting and design are provided. The methodology, including data collection, baseline analysis, and impact estimation is presented in the third section. The fourth and fifth sections inform about the research findings and their discussion, respectively. The final section deals with the conclusion and implications for policy and practice.

Experimental setting and design

Theory of change

The mentoring program was operationalised around a theoretical framework inspired by Rhodes' (2005) model that identifies the process of action of the mentoring relationship and the variables to influence (Figure 1). The mentoring relationship is based on the qualities of empathy, trust, and reciprocity, which are the levers of an effective intervention. These qualities would lead to a real impact on the identity, cognitive, and relational development of agriculture graduates. As the different developmental spheres are affected by the relationship, they would then generate a positive effect on the employability of agriculture graduates. Therefore, if agriculture graduates participate in capacity building and have support from a mentor, they will be more competent in identifying job opportunities, develop the skills required to get a job, benefit from the mentor's guidance in accessing and applying for other opportunities, and consequently, increase the likelihood of being employed (Figure 1). Agriculture graduates can get jobs in a wide range of positions in Benin (Kaki, Gbedomon et al. 2022). Government agencies frequently hire agriculture graduates to conduct research, provide
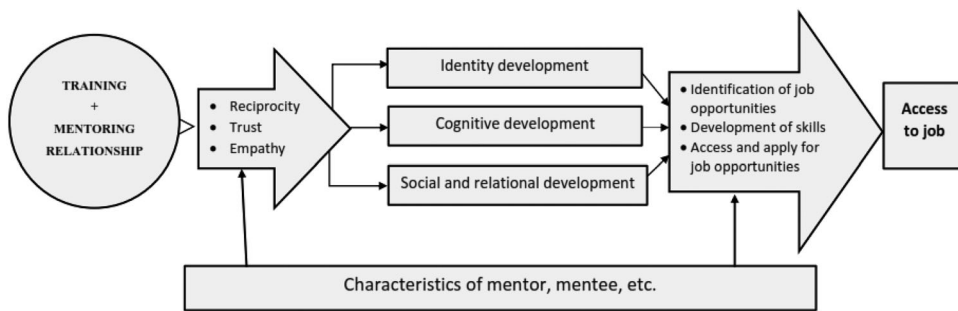
Figure 1. Theory of change of the mentoring program. Source: adapted from Rhodes (2005).

consultancy services to farmers, or manage projects. Moreover, in the private sector, graduates often work as farm managers, sales representatives, technicians, or consulting service providers. Finally, agriculture graduates are typically employed in the management and implementation of projects in civil society organisations and international organisations. In line with the goals of this mentoring program and past research findings demonstrating the positive effects associated with mentoring programs, a core finding of the paper is that professional older mentors are better than young mentors. Then, the a priori conclusion is that older mentors have better industry connections.

The mentoring program

The program that was subject to the impact evaluation is a mentoring program named "*Access of young people to salaried employment in the agricultural sector* (French: *Accès des Jeunes à l'Emploi Salarié dans le Secteur Agricole - AJESSA*). This program aims to support young graduates in the field of agriculture to access decent jobs in the sector. The program started in February 2020, and consisted of a combination of capacity building and support from a professional/mentor. First, participants are helped in defining their short- and medium-term career goals, and in building their capacity to fully realise these goals. Capacity building focuses on digital skills, job search skills, and interpersonal skills. In the second stage, each participant was paired with either a junior professional (full-time work experience equal or less than eight years – junior model) or a senior professional (more than eight years of full-time work experience – senior model) for support in the process of getting a job. The junior and senior models were determined by the median number of years of experience of available mentors. Mentees were matched with mentors who were working in their desired occupation area and/or industry.

Mentees were recruited through a call for applications posted on the website of the implementing organisation, in the various social networks, and in the various branches of the National Agency for Employment (ANPE). Mentors were recruited through a call for applications and by approaching them to request their participation in the mentoring program. Mentors had at least three years of work experience. On average, mentors were 34 years old with a university degree. Most mentors (54) lived in Benin, but some (13) lived and worked outside Benin.

At the outset of the program, all mentors and mentees were required to attend a training/orientation session. Orientation sessions were held separately for mentors and mentees. Sessions included background information about the mentoring program, clear role description, and group discussions about topics, such as what mentees hoped to gain from their experience. After completing the orientation session, each mentoring dyad was required to meet as much as possible (for a minimum of two hours) per month. The support of the mentor was a flexible and intuitive relationship during which the mentor provided guidance to the mentees to improve their employability and ultimately find a job. Suggested conversation topics included realistic previews about careers and industry, searching for a job and networking, and life after graduation.

The duration of the program was one year, including the capacity building sessions and the mentor's support. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there were some challenges which required a temporary halt to the program's activities (from March to October 2020), and minor adjustments were made to the planned program. In fact, fewer meetings were conducted with mentees for their capacity building. The capacity building sessions were planned throughout the program period, according to the needs of the mentees, but were finally spread over two months (November–December 2020) when the activities resumed in November 2020. As a result, the capacity building sessions were organised at the academic level, while ensuring respect for the barrier measures imposed by the government. In addition, contacts between mentors and mentees also required adaptation due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, for mentors living outside Benin, communication was only conducted through email, Skype, Zoom, and WhatsApp. The entire intervention program was free of charge to participants.

Random assignment

In this study, the assignment was done at the individual level by agriculture graduates. The process of assigning participants was carried out in several stages, with the aim of randomly forming three groups of participants (control group N_0, junior mentoring group N_1, and senior mentoring group N_2) for the experiment. Participants were selected through a nationwide call for applications. The announcement encouraged the participation of young women to have a good representation of this category. The applications received ($S_0 = 1,424$) were screened for eligibility in two stages. First, the completeness of the applications was checked. For example, applications with missing information or data (e.g. field of education, age, employment status, etc.) were excluded from the process. As a result, 110 applications were eliminated at this stage. Next, the eligibility of the remaining applications was checked using the following criteria: age (applicants must be between 18 and 35 years old); field of study (applicants must have graduated from a formal institution providing agricultural training); current employment status (applicants must be unemployed and actively seeking employment). At this stage, 183 applications were eliminated. After screening, the sampling frame for random assignment of applicants to groups was obtained, with a total of 1,131 applications. Therefore, a stratified random assignment was used for the constitution of the treatment and control groups. The gender and academic levels of applicants were used as strata variable. Then, using a random number generator, candidates were randomly assigned to one of three groups, namely: the control group N_0, the junior mentoring group N_1 (junior model), and the senior mentoring group N_2 (senior model). The final composition of each group considered the representativeness of gender and academic levels. Indeed, in this study, it was assumed that individual attributes (mainly gender and academic level) as well as mentoring models were likely to have an impact on the likelihood of getting a job. Therefore, the equally sized groups for treatment and control were planned to have 300 participants assigned – with 100 participants in each of the three groups. However, due to the profiles of the different mentors (junior vs. senior) available, 113 participants (N_1) were finally assigned to Treatment 1 (junior model), 79 participants (N_2) to Treatment 2 (senior model), and 99 to the control group (N_0). The participants in the treatment groups (N_1 and N_2) received the mentoring program, while the control group (N_0) did not receive assistance. However, to keep the control group in the experiment, the program coordination team organised periodic meetings with them.

Data collection and empirical strategy

Data collection

This study was granted permission to be conducted by the National Institute for Statistics and Demography (INStaD). There was no review by an ethical review board, as none of the associated

organisations maintain such a board. However, the project team elaborated an ethical protocol for this study before the program started. Consent was sought from participants involved in the study. Apart from the consent received from participants when applying for the program, during the inception workshops with beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries, the program was explained in detail, and beneficiary participants confirmed their consent to take part in the study. However, it was explained to non-beneficiaries that they would not benefit from the program for this cohort, but for the next one, after the completion of the first cohort.

The first step of data collection was the baseline survey conducted in February 2020 before the mentoring program started. The baseline survey collected data from 291 trial participants. The data include sociodemographic and academic characteristics and employment status. The COVID-19 pandemic caused a suspension of the mentoring program's activities for six months (March–October 2020). Thus, when the program resumed in November 2020, the baseline information on the employment status was updated to consider any changes in the participants' situation.

In the second step, throughout the mentoring program, follow-up data were collected monthly, using a questionnaire to capture the employment status of participants. This study defines employment as having a permanent job as of the month prior to the follow-up survey.

Finally, upon completion of the mentoring program, mentees received invitations to take part in a mentoring review workshop or a panel discussion as part of the closing of the project that served as the foundation for the mentoring program to collect qualitative data. By gathering qualitative data from mentees, the objective of these invitations was to capitalise their experience in the mentoring program. In total, 12 mentees attended the mentoring review session, and four mentees were selected to take part in a panel discussion that lasted an hour. Mentees were from diverse academic backgrounds and gender identities to reflect the program. During these meetings, the interviews were conducted by an external person who was not connected to the mentoring program. The mentees were advised that their responses would not affect their future involvement in the program. Interviews were semi-structured and focused on the following key questions: How did your participation in the program compare to or differ from your initial expectations? Do you consider yourself to have benefited from being a mentee, and if so, in what ways? If you do not feel you benefited, what was lacking for you? These questions were designed to meet the research aim of understanding the program outcome. Two note-takers took very detailed notes and recorded specific quotes.

Baseline balance checks

The test of comparison was performed on observable characteristics (sociodemographic, economic, and academic characteristics) to check the balance between the treatment and control groups for each mentoring model. To this end, for each group (treatment and control), means were calculated for the quantitative variables, followed successively by tests of equality of variances and tests of comparison of means (student's t-test). In addition, for the qualitative variables, proportions and absolute frequencies were calculated, followed by Chi^2 tests. Variables for which there is a significant difference between both groups (treatment and control) were later used as control variables in the impact estimation model, to discuss their effect on the variable of interest.

Impact estimation strategy

Both quantitative and qualitative data were fully analysed. Under full compliance, the difference in an outcome variable between treatment and control groups is the average treatment effect of the mentoring program (ATE), and it can be interpreted as the average treatment on the treated (ATT) in the population. However, due to the presence of no-shows and dropouts in the intervention, the study follows the standard approach described in the literature and considered the estimation of two parameters of interest: Intent-To-Treat (ITT) and effective Treatment-On-Treated (TOT). By

estimating ITT, for each mentoring model, the research evaluates the impact of offering the mentoring program using the following mix effect logistic regression model on panel data:

$$Y_{i,t} = \alpha + \beta T_i + X_i + \delta W_{i,t} + \varepsilon_{i,t} \qquad (1)$$

$Y_{i,t}$ represents the outcome variable for individual i at time t. The outcome variables were measured for 291 participants, 113 for Model 1 (junior to junior), 79 for Model 2 (senior to junior), and 99 for the control.

T_i is the treatment indicator variable for an individual i. It is equal to 1 if individual i has been assigned to the treatment group, and 0 if individual i has been assigned to the control group.

β is the parameter of interest relevant for policy, it measures the difference in outcome between the treatment group and the control group. It is the causal estimate of the impact of participation in the mentoring program (assumed here to be constant). According to Alzúa, Cruces, and Lopez (2016), this coefficient is a relevant parameter for policy; it measures how much impact the program would have if the policymakers offered it.

$W_{i,t}$ is a vector of control variables measured at the start of the mentoring program that can improve precision, and account for differences between the treatment and control groups, that may be due to chance. The $W_{i,t}$ vector includes sociodemographic, economic, and academic variables (observable characteristics) that showed a significant difference between the treatment and control groups in the baseline.

X_i is a vector of fixed effects of the mentoring program. Moreover, the random effects are not directly estimated as model parameters but are instead summarised according to the unique elements of variance.

$\varepsilon_{i,t}$ is the random error term.

Moreover, as participants decide whether to take up the program or not, when the program is available, receiving the treatment or not becomes an endogenous variable. Therefore, as suggested by Angrist, Imbens, and Rubin (1996), the effects of receiving treatment will be estimated, which is the impact of the TOT. In generating TOT estimates, it is important to define "participation" in the program as a treatment. The research team defines graduate participation in the mentoring program as those who participated in Component 1 (capacity building) and Component 2 (support of mentors). Therefore, to estimate TOT effects, a dummy variable was created, which takes the value of 1 if the individual receives both components, regardless of assignment, and 0 otherwise. For this variable, the random assignment is a valid instrument, since it is unrelated to the outcome variables, but strongly related to whether a participant receives the program. TOT estimation follows an instrumental variable approach in which participation in the mentoring program (T) is instrumented by treatment status (Z):

$$\begin{cases} Y_{i,t} = \alpha + \beta T_i + X_i + \delta W_{i,t} + \varepsilon_{i,t} \\ T_i = \alpha + \lambda Z_i + X_i + \delta W_{i,t} + \varepsilon_{i,t} \end{cases} \qquad (2)$$

Finally, to account for the heterogeneity of effects across subgroup of participants, this study follows the same estimation framework for ITT and TOT parameters given in Equations (1) and (2) – after interacting the gender of mentees (men vs. women) with the treatment status variable and the covariate of interest. This policy variable is related to the efficiency of the targeting approach.

However, data from qualitative evaluations were analysed using a broad inductive approach (Hamilton et al. 2019). The two note-takers independently examined the qualitative data several times to pinpoint key themes. They then gathered to discuss the themes. Each of them identified a few smaller themes that emerged from the data and organised them into larger thematic categories. Any disagreements regarding contents and labels of these larger themes were resolved through negotiation and consensus. Following the debate, they read the data again and re-coded it in accordance with the common patterns that emerged. At this point, no new themes emerged.

Results

Validation of random assignment

Table 1 gives the comparison of the treatment and control groups on sociodemographic character-istics for both treatments. Overall, the two groups are balanced for both treatments, except for gender (Treatment 1) and age (Treatments 1 and 2). The treatment and control groups, therefore, appear less balanced for Treatment 1. Variables for which the treatment and control groups are unbalanced were used as control variables in the impact estimation.

Impacts of mentoring on the likelihood of getting a job

Overall impacts on the likelihood of getting a job

The main expected outcome from the mentoring program was access to jobs through the improve-ment of skills and the support of the mentors. Table 2 presents the main results for the outcome of interest (employment). For the junior mentoring model – support of a junior professional to agricul-tural graduate seeking jobs – the estimated impact for the ITT and TOT were positive but

Table 1. Comparison of treatment group to control group on sociodemographic and academic characteristics

Baseline characteristics	Treatment 1 (Junior model)			Treatment 2 (Senior model)		
	Control (N = 99)	Treatment (N = 113)	p-value	Control (N = 99)	Treatment (N = 79)	p-value
Percentage of men	66.67	52.21	0.033*	66.67	67.09	0.953
Age (means)	26	27	0.023*	26	28	0.000**
Percentage of graduates living in North area	31.31	38.05	0.230	31.31	44.30	0.049
Percentage of graduates living in Central area	9.09	11.50	0.393	9.09	11.39	0.318
Percentage of graduates living in urban area	84.85	75.22	0.082	84.85	83.54	0.812
Percentage of graduates with DEAT	34.34	47.79	0.656	34.34	24.05	0.932
Percentage of graduates with BSc	40.40	30.97	0.897	40.40	34.18	0.811
Percentage of graduates with MSc	23.23	19.47	0.966	23.23	39.24	0.412
Percentage of graduates with PhD	0	0	-	0	1.27	0.244
Percentage of graduates with a major in crop production	50.51	43.36	0.326	50.51	36.71	0.461
Percentage of graduates with a major in animal production	18.18	30.09	0.197	18.18	18.99	0.366
Percentage of graduates with a major in nutrition and food sciences	8.08	6.19	0.368	8.08	13.92	0.255
Percentage of graduates with a major in management of forest and natural rangelands	14.14	10.62	0.367	14.14	10.13	0.472
Percentage of graduates with a major in rural engineering, fisheries, and aquaculture	2.02	2.65	0.275	2.02	3.80	0.269
Percentage of graduates with a major in agricultural economics and extension	6.06	7.08	0.271	6.06	15.19	0.191
Percentage of graduates with father having primary school level	26.26	21.24	0.591	26.26	25.32	0.683
Percentage of graduates with father having secondary school level	36.36	47.79	0.501	36.36	39.24	0.489
Percentage of graduates with father having university school level	18.18	11.50	0.325	18.18	20.25	0.504
Year of graduation (means value)	2016	2016	0.516	2016	2016	0.817
Percentage of participants who graduated at TVET	37.37	51.33	0.848	37.37	25.32	0.679
Percentage of participants who graduated at FSA/UAC	21.21	15.93	0.495	21.21	24.05	0.945
Percentage of participants who graduated at UNA	11.11	7.08	0.430	11.11	15.19	0.953
Percentage of participants who graduated at FA/UP	15.15	16.81	0.721	15.15	21.52	0.932
Percentage of graduates who attended public universities	94.95	94.69	0.933	94.95	97.47	0.390
Percentage of graduates with professional experience	26.26	27.43	0.849	26.26	39.24	0.065
Percentage of graduates with pre-employment experience (internship)	68.69	67.26	0.825	68.69	77.22	0.206

Notes: P-values for significant differences (at 95%) are topped by at least one asterisk: * for $p < 0.05$ and ** for $p < 0.01$; DEAT = Diploma of Tropical Agricultural Studies; TVET = Technical and Vocational Education and Training; FSA/UAC = Faculty of Agri-cultural Sciences of the University of Abomey-Calavi; UNA = National University of Agriculture; FA/UP = Faculty of Agriculture of the University of Parakou.

insignificant (Table 2). Furthermore, mentee age positively influences the likelihood of getting jobs in the agricultural sector for both ITT and TOT.

Further, in the senior mentoring model – support from a senior professional to an agriculture graduate seeking a job – the findings showed that the average gain of offering the mentoring program is positive, and statistically significant for access to employment in the agricultural sector (Table 2). This treatment effect represents a 15.3 per cent increase with respect to the control mean. Regarding the TOT estimates, the magnitude of the effect increases as expected. The access to jobs, for those who received the treatment, increases by 16.4 per cent with respect to the control means (Table 2). In particular, the findings detected a statistically significant positive impact of the senior mentoring model on the access to jobs from ITT and TOT estimations, with a treatment effect larger than the effect of ITT estimations. Compared to the junior mentoring model, in general, one could conclude that the senior mentoring model has a positive impact on the likelihood of getting a job among agriculture graduates.

Table 2. Impact of mentoring models on the likelihood of getting jobs.

Parameters	Treatment 1 (Junior model)	Treatment 2 (Senior model)
Intention to treat (ITT)		
ITT estimate	0.022 (0.017)	0.153 (0.021)**
Gender	−0.020 (0.017)	N/A
Age	0.014 (0.002)**	−0.0003 (0.003)
Mean control group	0.447	0.534
Number of observations	2071	1734
Treatment of the treated (TOT)		
TOT estimate	0.003 (0.012)	0.164 (0.031)**
Gender	−0.015 (0.057)	N/A
Age	0.014 (0.002)**	0.001 (0.014)
Mean control group	0.532	0.667
Number of observations	2071	1734

Notes: P-values (at 95%) are topped by at least one asterisk: * for $p < 0.05$ and ** for $p < 0.01$; standard errors in parentheses; N/A means not applicable; regressions include controls for gender (Junior model) and age (Junior & Senior models).

Heterogeneity of employment impacts by gender

The findings highlighted the heterogeneity of the mentoring impact across gender in mentoring models. Table 3 reports that in the junior model of the mentoring program, women benefit more from the program. According to the TOT estimates, the likelihood of getting a job was 8.5 per cent for this cohort. However, in the senior model of the mentoring program, men benefit more from the program. However, compared to the junior mentoring model, the senior model

Table 3. Impact of heterogeneity in employment by sex.

Parameters	Treatment 1 (Junior model)		Treatment 2 (Senior model)	
	ITT	TOT	ITT	TOT
Men				
Impact for men	−0.019 (0.021)	−0.048 (0.0132)**	0.167 (0.026)**	0.187 (0.021)**
Age	0.015 (0.003)**	0.015 (0.010)	−0.004 (0.003)	−0.002 (0.010)
Control mean	0.513	0.588	0.544	0.679
Number of observations	1251	1251	1180	1180
Women				
Impact for women	0.094 (0.026)**	0.085 (0.0127)**	0.131 (0.034)**	0.119 (0.059)*
Age	0.013 (0.005)**	0.0132 (0.0158)	0.006 (0.005)	0.006 (0.024)
Control mean	0.346	0.554	0.512	0.641
Number of observations	820	820	554	554

Notes: P-values (at 95%) are topped by at least one asterisk: * for $p < 0.05$ and ** for $p < 0.01$; standard errors in parentheses; regressions include controls for age (junior and senior models).

had more impact for both genders separately (TOT-Men = 18.7 per cent and TOT-Women = 11.9 per cent).

The mentees' responses during the qualitative study demonstrated the beneficial effects of mentoring on an increase in job search self-efficacy, career development, and the relevance of receiving psychological/emotional support (Table 4). In terms of impact on their self-efficacy in the job search, many mentees mentioned increased confidence in different aspects of job search process. For instance, one mentee stated:

> I have always lacked self-belief and confidence, but this mentoring program has helped me a lot. I have learned to think positively and seize any opportunity that present to me, in an effort to be a better person, to make myself more marketable.

Most of the mentees explained how mentoring helps them develop professional connections and expand their network. Additionally, they recognised a number of job-seeking behaviours that improved their self-efficacy. For example, several mentees mentioned that they worked with their mentor, and went through several interactions on their resume and cover letter during the capacity building sessions – as well as during the relationship with their mentor. The hiring criteria used by employers were discussed by other mentors.

In terms of the positive impact on career development, mentees consistently expressed that the mentoring relationship gave them valuable insight into their future careers. One mentee, for example, stated:

> Having a mentor offered me the opportunity to discuss my career goals with someone who was familiar with my career choice. I had the honour of learning about my mentor's past experiences, both successful and unsuccessful. This helped me understand the lessons that my mentor has learned through her career.

Similarly, one mentee said:

> The mentoring scheme offered me some direction and guidance, as well as some unique but applicable ideas for my future career. I think that the mentoring program can be an enriching experience, in addition to the academic courses received at school.

Additionally, mentees acknowledged their gratitude for their mentors' psychological and emotional support. Many mentees expressed their anxiety about the future to their mentors and received reassurance. For example, a mentee was reassured when his mentor shared, "*I went through the same things during my transition from school-to-work*". Another mentee added, "*My mentor was so kind that he shared his work-life story which made me realise how hard working, persistence in life, and openness can be a steppingstone to better life in the future*".

Although the mentoring program received excellent feedback overall during the qualitative survey, one mentee indicated that her experience was less than ideal due to infrequent contact with his mentor. She stated, "*I have come across instances where my mentor has not heeded my repeated requests*". She further said:

> … I could not completely engage with him as my career choice and aspirations were not in line with his. I feel I would have benefited more from this mentoring scheme had I been matched to a mentor with experience in the career I was interested in.

Table 4. Summary of mentee responses.

Theme	Example(s)
Self-efficacy in job searching	Assistance with job searching, networking, resume-writing, cover letters, and interviewing techniques; self-assurance in one's abilities to use social network for job search; confidence in one's ability to impress employers during interview; self-belief.
Career development	Exploration of career options; discussion of career goal; career coaching; learning from mentors' achievements and failures; devoted time and consideration to mentee's future career.
Psychological/emotional support	Build reassurance about the uncertainty of the situation; build confidence about life after school; sharing professional life story with mentee.

Discussion

The goal of this research was to evaluate the impact of mentoring on the likelihood of getting a job in the agricultural sector. The findings showed a positive and statistically significant impact of the senior mentoring model on the likelihood of getting a job in the agricultural sector. The impact for the senior model could be explained by the fact that senior mentors might have more experience and a larger network to support the mentee in the process of getting a job. This includes identifying potential employers, preparing resumes and cover letters, and preparing for interviews (Getachew and Gobena 2016). Of particular note, mentor's active advocacy, networking, and provision of insider information strongly contribute to a mentee's self-efficacy and resultant job success (Mubuuke et al. 2020). A previous study showed that job search self-efficacy also fosters positive job search behaviours and ultimately predicts employment status (Hamilton et al. 2019). It was apparent that the mentor's role modelled positive career behaviours, shared stories, and experiences, and gave their mentees emotional encouragement and support. Therefore, the implications of senior mentoring model in the context of Benin is more valuable where some intakes in agricultural training institutes belong to lower strata of the society. They find it difficult to guide the next generation because of their lack of knowledge about job searches and the expectations of employers. The existence of a mentoring system can help in supporting graduates in their transition to the labour market. This can ultimately result in more absorption of the agriculture graduates. The institutionalisation of formal mentoring may help Benin and other sub-Saharan African countries to boost their economy. It is, therefore, suggested that these results should be considered by policymakers and institutions supporting the transition from school to work.

The study also demonstrated that the senior mentoring model has a favourable impact for genders (men and women) independently, with a stronger impact on men. This finding shows the importance of gender-sensitive mentoring programs and their positive impact on the access to jobs in the agricultural sector. Indeed, men and women face different constraints in the process of getting a job. The challenges include labour market failures, skills mismatch, reduced availability of jobs sought by graduates, lack of social capital, geographic location, and family responsibilities (Baah-Boateng 2016; Elder and Koné 2014; Ismail 2016). These constraints are shaped by contextual factors such as social norms and institutions that govern the roles of men and women in the household, economy, and society (Chakravarty, Das, and Vaillant 2017; Moore 2015). In the literature, generally, young women are more likely to experience barriers to employment than young men (Huma 2016). However, a recent study in Benin shows that in the agricultural sector, men experience more constraints than women (Kaki, Dossou et al. 2022). Hence the contribution of mentoring to ease gendered constraints in the process of getting jobs in the agricultural sector. Therefore, this study suggests that future mentoring programs need to be inclusive in terms of gender, to improve access to jobs in the agricultural sector.

Although the senior mentoring model increased the likelihood of getting a job in the agricultural sector by 16.4 per cent, there is still room for improvement. There was an instance where the mentor did not respond to the mentee's constant reminders, due to a poor initial match. Several studies found that matching mentees and mentors who have shared backgrounds (DeWit et al. 2016; Eby et al. 2013) is an important ingredient in an effective mentoring program. It was noted that the matching process in this mentoring program would benefit from some development. Problems were due to the limited number of mentors available; it was not always possible to exactly match the career paths and aspirations of mentors and mentees. Key suggestions to improve the mentoring program have been reported in the literature – such as training of mentors, sensitisation, and formulation of mentoring guidelines (Bhatia, Navjeevan, and Dhaliwal 2013; Kupersmidt and Rhodes 2014; Stukas, Clary, and Snyder 2014). Some of these suggestions were in resonance with findings from this study. Indeed, in a study by Radlick et al. (2020), training of mentors was also suggested. Thus, there is a need to implement and operationalise the mentoring guideline. Although, the institution that implemented the mentoring program under evaluation has had a mentoring guideline, this has to be updated and

largely disseminated among interested stakeholders to support mentoring processes in similar contexts. There is also a need to improve the formulated guideline based on the experiences of mentors and mentees. In addition, sensitisation of students or graduates about the benefits of mentoring is important. Allocating mentors to graduates seeking jobs to support them in the process is a welcome move; however, for the mentoring relationships to effectively function, periodic quality monitoring and evaluation of the mentoring program is essential, another key implication from the study. This can also assist in identifying gaps where improvement is needed.

There is a possibility that job search mentoring program may be driven by donor funds/projects, and this may not be sustainable if there is no formal institutionalised mentoring program. This observation may have key implications for the implementing institution and other stakeholders that have adopted or are thinking of adopting formal mentoring programs. In the case of the mentoring program under evaluation, the public institution in charge of youth employment in Benin (National Agency for Employment, ANPE) has been involved in the program from the inception. Therefore, sustainability of the mentoring program will rely on the capacity of the government, through ANPE, to pursue after the end of external funding. The ANPE has grasped the added value of the mentoring program and is now considering integrating it into its employment programs. One approach proposed by the ANPE is to use its network of partner companies to mobilise their employees as mentors in the agency's various programs. These companies already collaborate with the ANPE to access a pool of young graduates tracked by the agency for employment or placement opportunities in these companies. This network is, therefore, appropriate to serve as a source of mentors. Secondly, the ANPE volunteered to make its infrastructure and resources available for the organisation of training sessions. The service that requires most resources in the proposed mentoring model is capacity building through training sessions. Therefore, a partnership with ANPE to use their infrastructure (e.g. meeting rooms) and resources (e.g. facilitators) is appropriate. Additionally, the organisation that implemented the mentoring program has set up a web platform to continue mentoring graduates after the external fund ended.

Conclusion and implications for policy and practice

This study assesses the impact of a mentoring program on the likelihood of getting a job in the agricultural sector in Benin. To evaluate the impact of this program, a field experiment was conducted using two mentoring models – the junior mentoring model and the senior mentoring model – for 12 months. This period allowed for the evaluation of its impact on employment. The evaluation framework followed an RCT approach. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first labour market RCT implemented in Benin with a focus on salary employment. Overall, the findings showed that the senior mentoring model had a positive impact on the likelihood of getting a job in the agricultural sector. In particular, the senior mentoring model successfully increased the employment rate by 16.4 per cent. As for the heterogeneous effects, the study found significant differences in employment by gender of beneficiaries.

In the context of global concerns regarding economic outcomes for the youth, identifying interventions that can successfully increase the inclusion of youth in economic markets is a mounting priority. This study makes important contributions to the global evidence base on mentoring. These are particularly relevant for the Benin context and sub-Saharan Africa region. There are relevant lessons from the implementation of the mentoring program for policymakers, youth-serving organisations, and researchers. This paper concludes with specific recommendations for each of these stakeholders.

Policymakers

For policymakers, particularly those in Benin and the broader sub-Saharan Africa region, long-standing developmental challenges related to growing youth populations remain a policy priority.

However, efforts to solve the economic challenges facing the youth have focused on support interventions. The results of this evaluation provide further evidence that mentoring agriculture graduates need to be part of a comprehensive policy package that addresses the youth's job search skills deficits, and the lack of social network. This study builds on evidence to suggest that providing a senior mentoring model is beneficial to agriculture graduates for professional insertion.

Youth-serving organisations

From the perspective of our findings and the above discussion, youth-serving organisations may institutionalise formal post-training mentoring based on the senior model. In particular, the National Agency for Employment has committed to use these findings to improve its work. However, the system can be improved to work more effectively through improvement/updating the formulated mentoring guideline based on the experience of mentors and mentees, and the creation of monitoring and evaluation activities concerning the mentoring processes as a means of quality control.

Evaluators: research priorities

In the context of continued investments in youth mentoring, many information gaps remain around the quality of mentoring and how best to structure it to improve its impact. Building on our own experience and the international record, we provide evaluators with a reflection on the important needs for future research. The implications for future research are summarised below.

First, restructuring the approach of our study could have achieved additional learning. Given that the overall approach to the mentoring program included two components, we could have randomised treatment in a way that allowed us to evaluate each component, with some participants receiving no mentoring, some receiving only one component, and others receiving the total mentoring package. However, this would have required significant changes to the mentoring structure and placed significant impositions on activities organisation. It would also have increased sample size requirements, training costs, and the study in general. Further, while bearing in mind the challenges that such an approach presents, we highlight the need for studies that are designed to measure various components of mentoring, which could capture the impact.

Secondly, the key hypothesis for this RCT study was that technical training on the job search process combined with the support of professionals (mentors) increases the likelihood of getting a job in the agricultural sector. A clear limitation of this approach is related to the fact that offering various training modules to agriculture graduates is usually very expensive, particularly the costs associated with payment of specialised trainers and for logistics. The high costs resulted in a relatively small sample size in this study, which lowered its statistical power. However, future research, with larger samples, and offering more training modules would require higher budgets, which may not be affordable. To reduce costs, we recommend the use of public agencies for employment infrastructure (e.g. meeting rooms) and resources (e.g. facilitators).

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