

Participant Tracer Study

Southern Iraq Job Skills Program, Basrah Employability and Entrepreneurship Program,
and Maharat Mentorship Program 2016-2020

July 21, 2021

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Summary

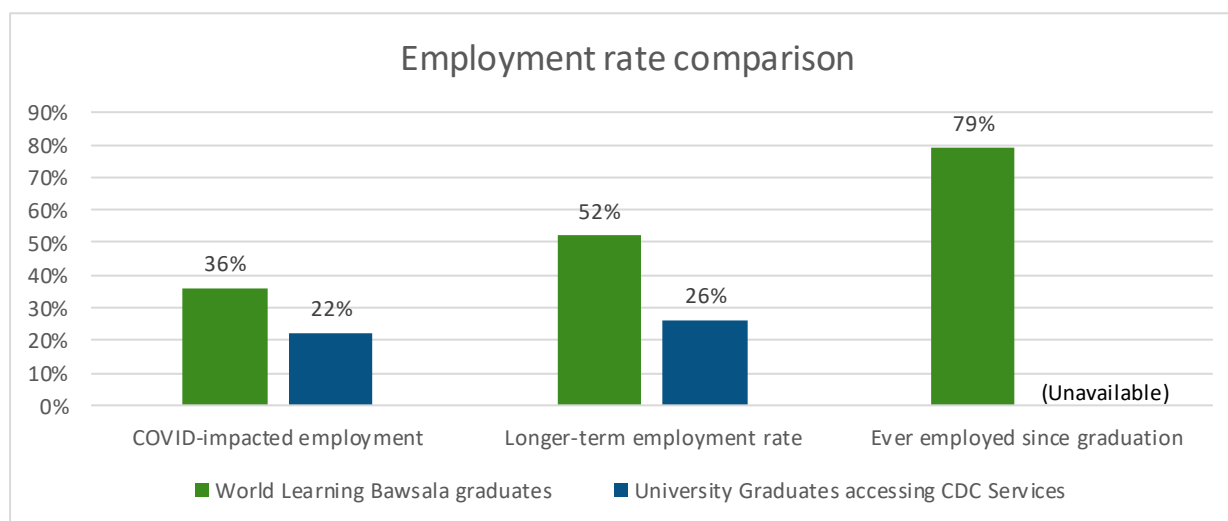
Since 2016, World Learning has run an annual career mentorship program in Southern Iraq funded by the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad, using World Learning's Bawsala Career Mentorship model. The program is a blended group mentorship and self-study program with approximately 4-5 hours of material per month for 8 months (a total of 32-40 contact hours), building job search skills and soft skills prioritized by employers. This tracer study survey reached 54 past Bawsala participants in Southern Iraq from 2016-2020, representing 31% of the total program alumni.

- 10% had not yet searched for a job, because they were still students or because they planned to start a business.
- 36% of participants reported doing something to earn money the week immediately before completing the survey, in May 2021 (during a period of COVID-19 related closures).
- 52% of participants classified themselves as currently employed in a longer-term sense.
- 68% of those who had completed their studies reported they had been employed at some point after graduation from university.
- 79% had some kind of employment or business experience at some point in their lives.
- Between 21-29% reported that they had not yet found a job (responses varied slightly depending on how the question was posed).

The employment rates of these Bawsala career mentorship program graduates compare very favorably to employment rates of other university graduates who accessed general Career Development Center (CDC) services, such as attending a webinar, using a job board, or other support. According to a recent study U.S. Iraq Higher Education Partnership Program (HEPP), 26% of university graduates who had benefitted from CDC services were employed prior to the pandemic; as of November 2020, in the midst of the pandemic, this had declined to 22%.¹

World Learning's Bawsala career mentorship graduates therefore demonstrate a higher rate of employment both during COVID-impacted closures (36% versus 22%) and longer-term (52% versus 26%), an achievement made even more significant given the very challenging economic context and social unrest in Southern Iraq. Both of these distinctions are greater than the margin of error of this survey. While Bawsala participants may be more motivated than average university students, these findings also suggest that longer-term career mentorship relationships may offer significant added benefits.

¹ <https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/Career%20Services%20Evaluation%20Full%20Report.pdf>



It is also clear that participants appreciated the positive impact that the Bawsala program had in their lives. 98% of respondents cited one or more specific ways that the program helped them find a new or better job. The largest proportion of respondents gained better communication and social skills, improved their CV and cover letter, gained better goal-setting skills, became better at participating in job interviews, and/or gained better planning and problem-solving skills. On average, respondents identified 6 specific benefits they received from the program, out of the 11 possible positive options (a negative option, “it did not help me”, was also offered first in the list but only selected by 2% of respondents).



World Learning is pleased to present these tracer study findings from the Southern Iraq Job Skills program, to inform future use of the Bawsala model and other career mentorship programming.

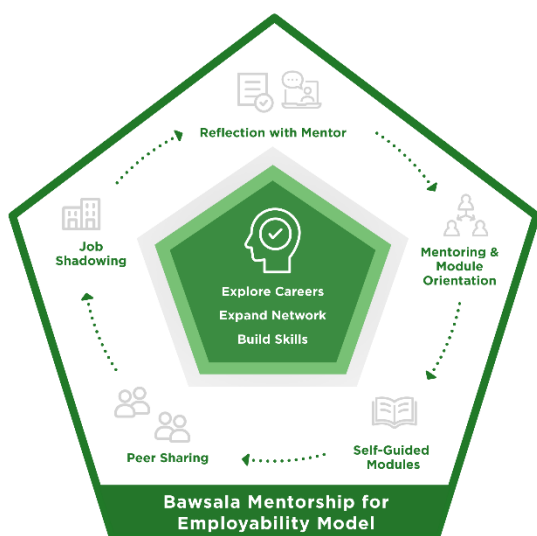
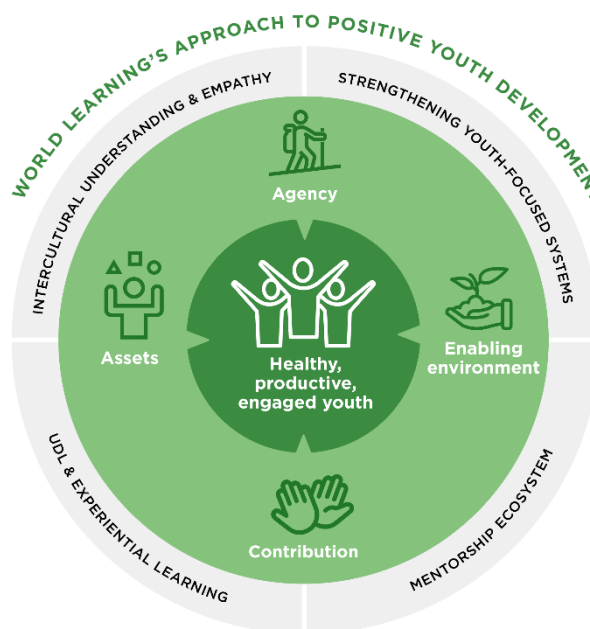
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Introduction and Overview

This report summarizes the results of a tracer study undertaken with past participants of the Southern Iraq Job Skills Program, Basrah Employability and Entrepreneurship Program, and Maharat Mentorship Programs, all funded by the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad and implemented by World Learning from 2016-2020. All of these programs have used World Learning's Bawsala Career Mentorship program curriculum and methods.²

Bawsala organizes young people into small groups of 10-15 youth each, matched with a mentor who is usually a young professional currently working in a growth-oriented industry sector identified by the program. This approach is part of World Learning's effort to build a mentorship ecosystem, strengthening the enabling environment for **positive youth development** (see graphic). Youth themselves are also encouraged to extend the benefits of the program to other youth, through informal peer mentorship and sharing of program advice and materials.



The mentor groups meet together on a regular basis to introduce each new curriculum module, out of a sequence of eight modules. These meetings are intended to be held in person; however, during much of the 2020 program they were held on Zoom instead, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In between meetings, participants complete some self-study materials and receive feedback and guidance from their peers and mentor. The curriculum requires about 4-5 hours of study per module, for a total of 32-40 contact hours. The curriculum is designed to build soft skills prioritized by employers in the context, and job search skills, with an additional module to introduce entrepreneurship, as outlined below.

² The Bawsala Career Mentorship Program was formerly called Maharat but rebranded in 2019.

World Learning's Bawsala Soft Skills & Employability Skills Curriculum



The focus of this tracer study is the implementation of the Bawsala career mentorship model in the region of Southern Iraq. Southern Iraq, in particular the city of Basra, is seen as an economic driver of the country, dominated by the oil, gas, and petrochemical sectors as well as shipping and transport.³ Yet, the benefits from these natural resources are captured primarily at the national level or siphoned off through corruption and patronage, rather than being distributed to meet regional needs, leading to significant local unrest.

Among the issues afflicting Basra and the surrounding governorates is a very high youth unemployment rate. National official youth *unemployment* figures range from 25-36%; however, there are no reliable figures for youth sub-populations regionally or by education level. It is widely recognized that well-educated youth face particularly “high levels of unemployment and social discontent.”⁴ The shock of COVID-19 has also resulted in increased unemployment and poverty rates.

While accurate employment rate information about specific groups of youth in Iraq is difficult to obtain, a recent evaluation of career development centers in Iraq documented at least a 71% unemployment rate among 2017-2019 university graduates,⁵ contrasted to the general youth statistic of 25-36% unemployment cited above. That university report also contrasted the *employment* rates of graduates

³ <https://gpgovernance.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Economic-Drivers-of-Youth-Political-Discontent-in-Iraq-The-Voice-of-Young-People-in-Kurdistan-Baghdad-Basra-and-Thi-Qar.pdf>

⁴ Ibid, p. 12

⁵ <https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/Career%20Services%20Evaluation%20Full%20Report.pdf>, p. 14

who had benefitted from Career Development Center (CDC) services under the U.S. Iraq Higher Education Partnership Program (HEPP)—finding a 26% employment rate among university graduates before the pandemic and 22% during the pandemic, compared to graduates who had not been supported by CDCs, who had a 17% employment rate pre-pandemic, 16% employment during the pandemic. The study included students who had used any CDC service, including attending a webinar, using a job board, or more customized services. While this CDC support resulted in some improved outcomes, it is clear that university graduate employment rates overall are extremely low, reflecting a widespread problem of educated youth inactivity—a problem Southern Iraq shares. The same study reports long job search periods, with only 18% of graduates employed within three months of graduating. The report remarks, “among those graduates who eventually secure jobs, the average time that it takes to find a job after graduation is 5.6 months. However, considering that 75% of graduates are still unemployed, this greatly underestimates the duration of unemployment.”⁶

Bawsala participants are comparable to the beneficiaries of university Career Development Center services included in the above study, because both groups of students show personal motivation to seek out career guidance and intentionally prepare for their job search. Bawsala participants also live in a region that is affected by youth unemployment and related social unrest. Bawsala participants may be somewhat different from general CDC beneficiaries, because they have committed to a longer 8-month program; and the duration and intensity of that program in turn is likely to have a greater impact on participants.

Taking into consideration these similarities and differences, it is significant that the findings of this tracer study show a markedly higher rate of employment among Bawsala participants than among graduates who have benefitted from Career Development Center services more generally in Iraq. This suggests that the more intensive, longer-term, and personalized support offered by the Bawsala model may help achieve improved labor market outcomes even in a difficult labor market context.

This report details these findings, presenting information about the Bawsala participants and sampling, demographics, employment rates, type of work and earnings, program benefits from participants’ perspective, and additional qualitative remarks.

Participants and Sampling

Prior to conducting the Bawsala tracer study, a complete list of program alumni was established, which included 177 past participants. An annex to this report summarizes the programs’ typical selection criteria. All participants were re-contacted for the tracer study, with a target sample size of at least 60 among the 177 past participants. After multiple rounds of outreach by email and through the program’s Facebook groups,⁷ the final sample included 54 past participants (31%), yielding a margin of error of +/-11% at a 95% confidence level. All agreed to participate based on an informed consent statement approved by the

⁶ Ibid., pp. 18-19.

⁷ Further personal outreach, such as by phone, was deemed inappropriate due to the security issues and personal attacks some participants had faced in 2019 and 2020 related to the program’s American affiliation.

World Learning/SIT Institutional Review Board (IRB). The large majority of participants responded to the survey in May 2021, with a few additional responses in June 2021. This period was significantly affected by COVID-19 related closures, specifically restrictions of economic activities within confined spaces—as was the case off and on throughout 2020 and early 2021.⁸

The below table summarizes the characteristics of the different cohorts and program years from 2016-2020, as well as the characteristics of the sample of 54 respondents.⁹ Overall, females are slightly underrepresented in this sample (44% of the sample vs. 51% of participants); thus, throughout this analysis female responses are weighted 1.16 and males 0.875 to obtain averages more representative of the entire participant population.

	2016 Basrah Entrepreneurship and Mentoring Program/Maharat Mentorship Program	2017 Basrah Entrepreneurship and Mentoring Program/Maharat Mentorship Program	2018 Basrah Entrepreneurship and Mentoring Program/Maharat Mentorship Program	2019 Basrah Employability and Entrepreneurship Program	2020 Bawsala/Southern Iraq Jobs Career Mentorship Program	Total Participants
Location(s)	Basrah	Basrah	Basrah	Basrah	Basrah, Dhi Qar, Maysan, Al Muthanna	
Study Modality	In-person monthly meetings with paper self-study guide	In-person monthly meetings with paper self-study guide	In-person monthly meetings with paper self-study guide	In-person monthly meetings with paper self-study guide	In-person and then Zoom monthly meetings with online Canvas self-study activities	
Number of Participants	25 (52% female)	25 (52% female)	30 (53% female)	30 (60% female)	67 (45% female)	177 (51% female)
Tracer Respondents ¹⁰	5	2	11	10	26	54 (44% female)
% of Participants	20%	1%	37%	33%	39%	31%

⁸ <https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/iom-iraq-covid-19-response-overview-12-26-april-23-may-2021>

⁹ Note that this table does not include the 2021 Southern Iraq Jobs Career Mentorship Program, because that program is still underway and therefore not eligible yet for a tracer study of graduates.

¹⁰ 6 participants submitted two tracer study responses. When this occurred, the first response was used for analysis whenever the other was submitted significantly later such as 2 weeks later—in some cases it appears that participants forgot they had submitted already, or that they wanted to show a change in employment status; the original response considered to be more accurate for group comparison. The exception to this is for one participant who submitted twice within a few minutes, in which case the second response was retained, assuming the respondent intended to correct something in their initial entry.

Comparison groups

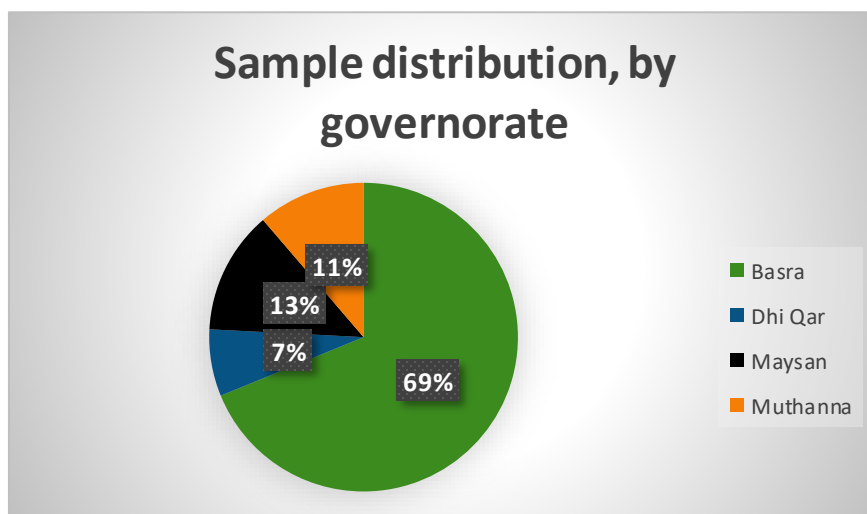
The 2020 program was also originally designed to include a randomized controlled trial (RCT). To accomplish this, the team doubled its recruitment and initial selection targets. However, at the time when random selection was planned to take place for assignment to “treatment” and “control” conditions, there was significant instability in the region, with protests and in some cases personal attacks on individuals associated with American programming. It was determined that random selection and other features of the planned RCT could not be pursued without some risk to participant and staff safety.

Since randomized treatment and control groups were not possible, the recent study of the comparable HEPP program in Iraq, described in the introduction, presents an important counterfactual.¹¹ The HEPP program, funded by the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad and implemented by IREX, supports Career Development Centers (CDCs) at universities throughout Iraq. Students who access CDC services may be different from the average Iraqi university student since they clearly demonstrate personal initiative and motivation to gain training and advance their employment prospects. These characteristics are also present for Bawsala program participants—making these roughly comparable groups for understanding the impacts of different types of employment support interventions. It should be acknowledged, however, that Bawsala participants may have even more motivation than general CDC beneficiaries on average, since Bawsala participants have committed to participating in an 8-month program. These similarities and differences should be taken into account when interpreting the results of this tracer study.

Demographics

The average age of the sample, at the time of programming, was 22, with a range from 19-24. There is no significant age difference between males and females.

69% of respondents come from the Basrah governorate, where the major city of Southern Iraq is located; this corresponds to the geographical distribution of all program participants (70% from Basrah); the program did not expand to the three other governorates until the 2020 cycle.

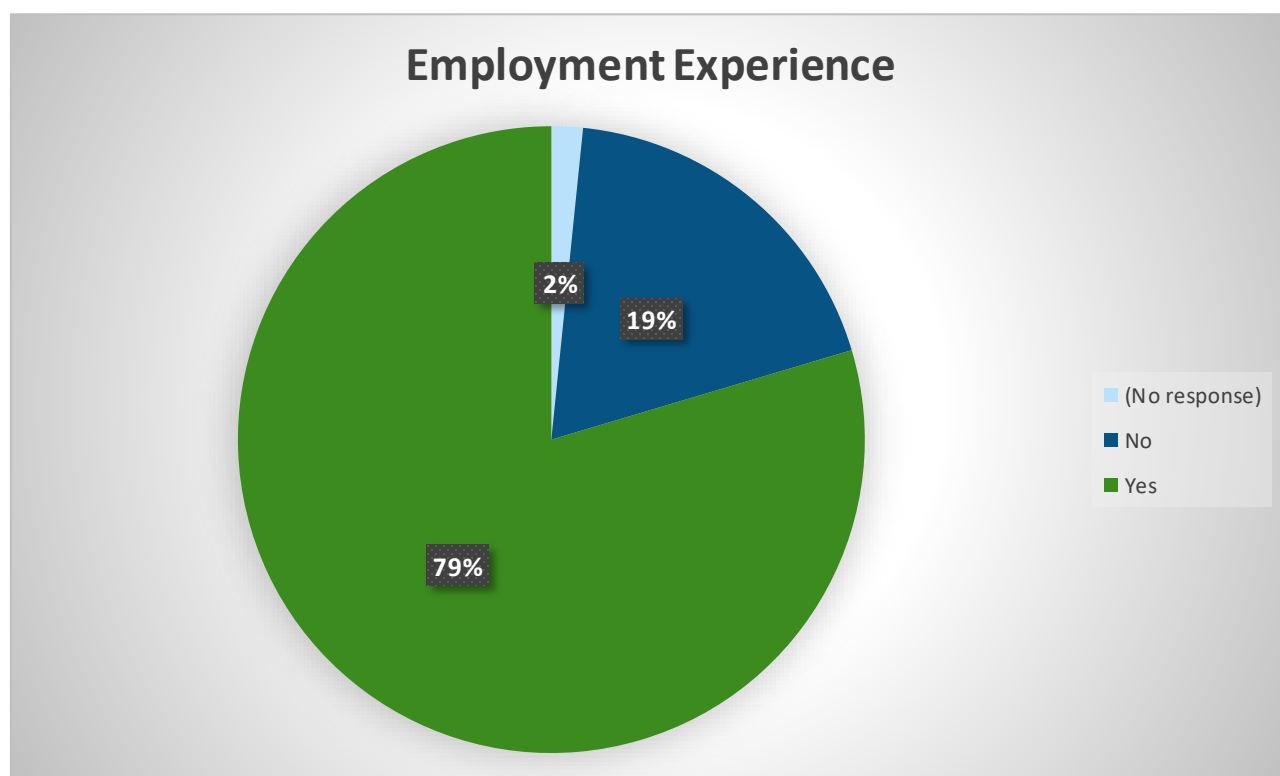


¹¹ <https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/Career%20Services%20Evaluation%20Full%20Report.pdf>

While the majority of Bawsala program participants are in their third or fourth years of university, and most had obtained their initial university degrees by the time of the tracer, 40.3% of respondents reported that they are currently attending classes that will lead to earning a degree from a technical vocational training institute, or a college or university. This includes 32% of pre-2020 participants who are engaging in further education or training beyond their initial university degree.

Employment

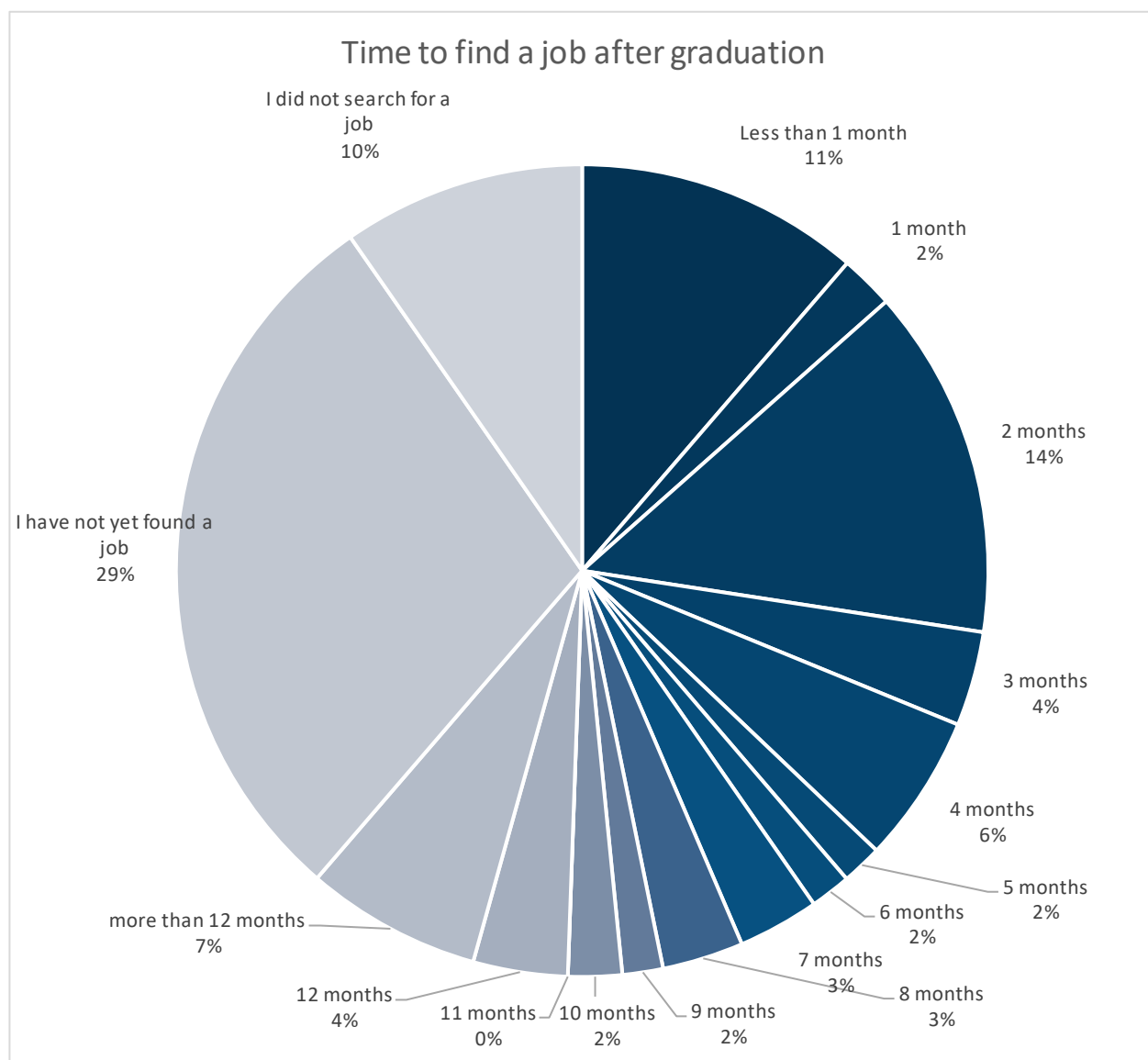
79% of program participants have employment experience, responding to the question “have you ever earned money from a job or a business at any time in the past or present?”



The survey further asked about current employment status in several different ways.

Duration of job search to obtain the first job

A first question focused on the amount of time required to find the respondent’s first job. 10% of respondents indicated that they did not search for a job yet, primarily because they are still students. Another 29% had searched but had not yet found a job. The rest, 61%, found a job at some point after graduation.

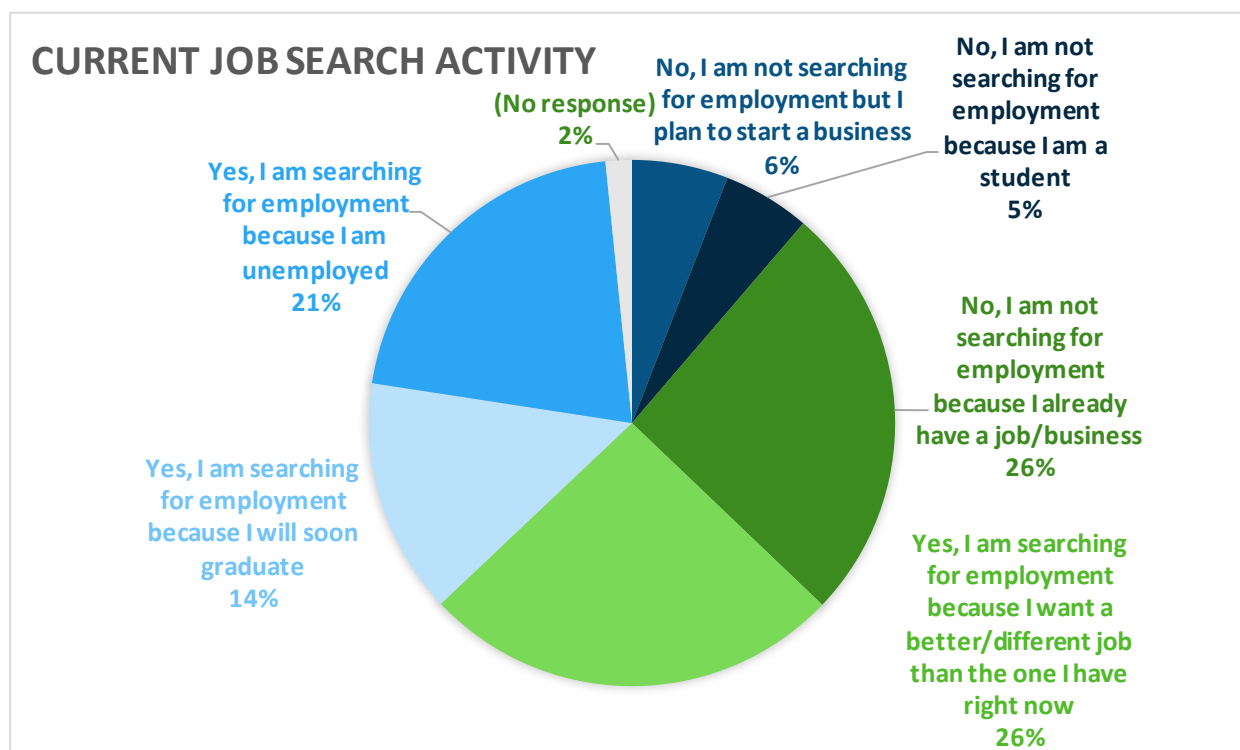


Time to find a job varied for Bawsala participants. It took an average (mean) of 5.0 months with a median of 3.2 months, ranging from those who were already working before graduation to those for whom it took over 12 months from graduation to their first job.¹² Overall, 27% of participants were employed by 2 months after graduation, 50% were employed by 10 months after graduation, and 61% by more than 12 months after graduation. Removing those who had not yet searched for a job at all, the overall employment rate was 68% at some point after graduation.

¹² There was no significant difference in job search time between males and females.

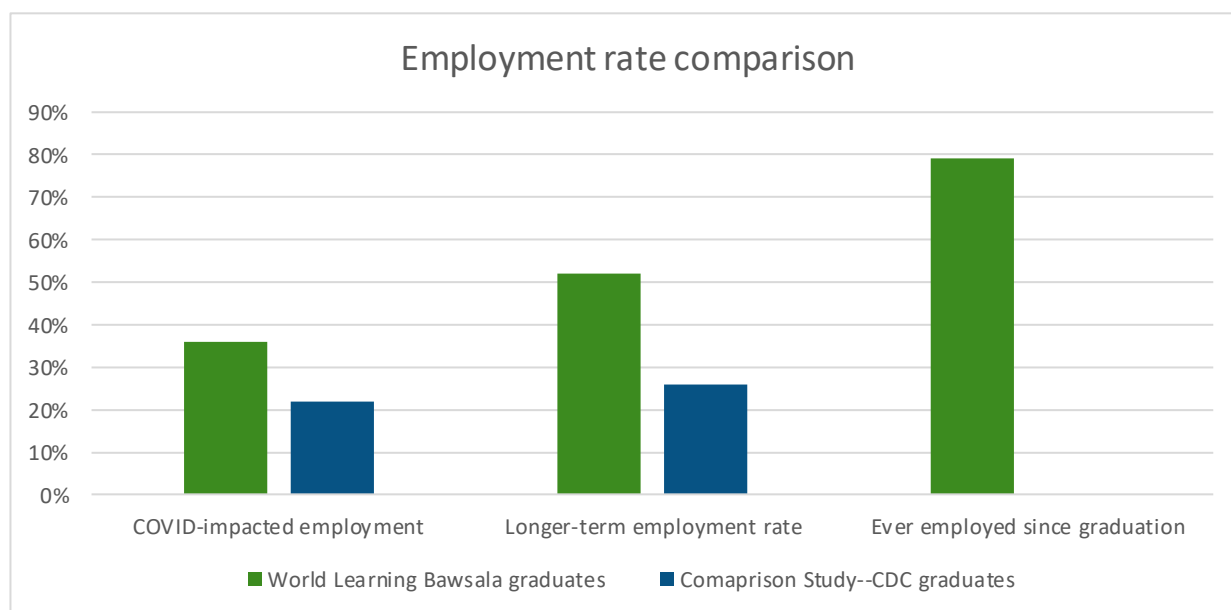
Current economic activity

Current economic activity gives a slightly different picture. 52% of respondents indicated they were employed (pictured below in green), with about half of them content with their current job or business, and the other half seeking better employment. An additional 21% reported that they were searching for employment because they were unemployed, and 6% indicated that they were planning to start a business rather than searching for employment. Another 14% indicated that they were searching for employment because they will soon graduate while 5% gave their status as students as a reason for *not* searching for employment.



While in the previous question, 52% indicated they were employed, their week-to-week activities may have been affected by other factors, including coronavirus-related closures. Only 36% replied positively to the question “in the last week, did you do anything to earn money?” This may also represent an undercount, since in the Iraqi context, this question may be interpreted as restricted to business earnings, casual work, or self-employment for income generation (e.g. “earning money” is different from “earning a salary”).

Even these more conservative employment figures for Bawsala graduates demonstrate a higher rate of employment than general CDC graduates, however, both during COVID-impacted closures (36% versus 22%) and longer-term (52% versus 26%).



Type of Work and Earnings Level

Of the respondents currently employed, 40% reported helping in a household business, 30% were running their own business, and 46% were employed by others. About 1/3 of respondents engaged in two or more of these activities at the same time. Additionally, there seemed to be some participants who were working on business activities that were not yet generating revenue.

The average (mean) weekly earnings of those who reported working in the previous week was 267,800 IQD (US\$183 as of July 2021). The range was from the lowest two reported earnings of 0 IQD and 30,000 IQD to the highest two reported earnings of 700,000 IQD and over 1 million IQD (over US\$685 per week) with a median of 169,000 IQD (US\$116). For comparison, a common entry-level salary for local companies is IQD 200,000 (US\$137) per week, while foreign companies (such as oil & gas companies) may pay significantly more.

Table 1: Distribution of Bawsala alumni weekly earnings, in IQD

IQD/week	Percent of Sample	Cumulative Percent
.00	6.0	6.0
30,000.00	6.0	11.9
50,000.00	4.5	16.4
70,000.00	4.5	20.9
80,000.00	4.5	25.4
100,000.00	10.4	35.8
110,000.00	6.0	41.8
150,000.00	6.0	47.7
170,000.00	13.5	61.2

180,000.00	4.5	65.7
400,000.00	9.0	74.6
450,000.00	6.0	80.6
500,000.00	10.4	91.0
700,000.00	4.5	95.5
Over 1,000,000	4.5	100.0

On average, respondents worked 5.3 days a week and 7.7 hours per day, showing that full-time work was the norm. Some reported working up to 7 days a week and up to 12 hours a day. Part time work (3-4 days a week) was uncommon but evenly distributed among males and females.

Program Benefits

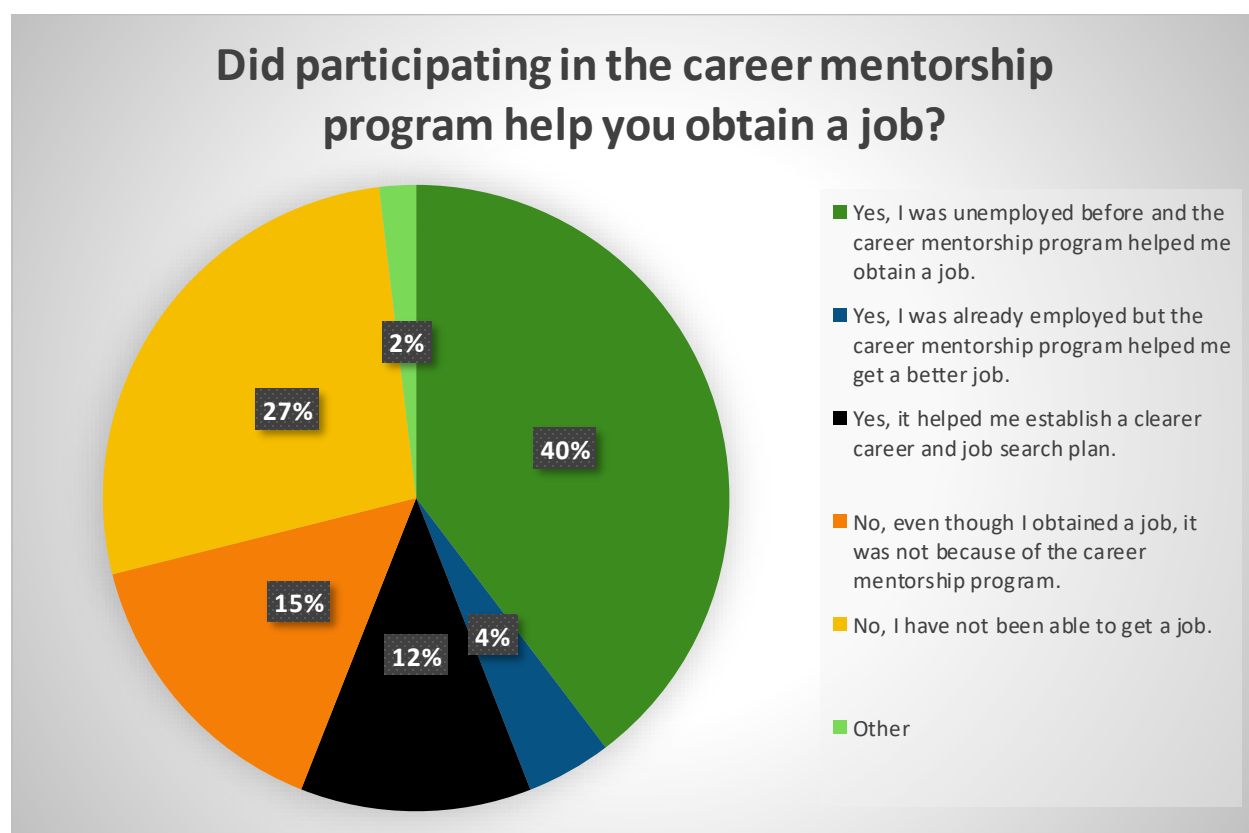
98% of respondents cited one or more specific ways that the World Learning career mentorship program helped them find a new or better job.



The largest proportion of respondents gained better communication and social skills (67%), improved their CV and cover letter (61%), gained better goal-setting skills (57%), became better at participating in job interviews (54%), and gained better planning and problem-solving skills (52%). A significant group, 44% of participants, said that they learned how to better manage their stress or other emotions, improved their professional networking skills, and developed a better career plan or job search plan. On average, respondents identified 6 specific benefits they received from the program, out of the 11 possible positive options. A negative option, “it did not help me”, was also offered first in the list but only selected by 2% of respondents.

Relationship to obtaining employment

56% of participants agreed that participating in World Learning’s career mentorship program directly helped them obtain a job, including 40% who were unemployed before the program and obtained a job as a result of what they learned, 4% who were already employed but obtained a better job, and 12% who made concrete improvements to their career and job search plan that have only been delayed by COVID-19 and/or by the need to complete their studies. An additional 15% remarked that they obtained a job but it was not directly as a result of participating in the mentorship program.



As remarked on earlier questions, 27% noted that they have still not been able to find a job. The current 2021 Southern Iraq Job Skills program plans to undertake further outreach to these individuals to include them in career fair and mentorship activities, to support them in their continued job search.

Qualitative Remarks

A participant from the first World Learning program in the region, the 2016 Basrah Entrepreneurship and Mentoring Program/Maharat Mentorship Program, wrote that it was “one of the best experiences I had in my studying career.” These positive sentiments were echoed by many other survey respondents.

One young man wrote, “The experience of the career mentorship program was an exceptional experience. I developed my skills a lot. I got a pre-graduation job interview and accepted the job. Since then, I had ambition to develop myself. Now, I am 25 years old, and became the Director of the Health, Environment and Safety Department at [foreign oil company] in Basra.” Another employed graduate wrote, “It was a great experience, it helped me a lot to develop my skills in searching for work and seizing opportunities, and since that time I have been looking for another program to develop my job vision and set my goals for the future.”

Even those who had not yet found a job talked about how the Bawsala program helped them. A young woman reflected, “So far, I have not found a job, but this does not mean that the program did not help me, but there are other circumstances that prevented me. Job opportunities for my field are almost non-existent due to the health situation and the Coronavirus pandemic.” Another faced similar challenges due to COVID-19, writing, “It made me understand the nature of work, how to write a CV and other skills, but I don't want to work yet because of the coronavirus.”

For some participants, the program actually set them on an entirely new path—in a context where parents are very influential in the choice of field of studies, Bawsala can offer an experience of self-discovery that can ultimately lead to a more fulfilling career. A young man wrote, “This program made my vision clear and complete, which made me change my future plans because they were not related to my goals.”

Others discovered that they needed further training to pursue their career goals. “During my participation period,” explained one young woman, “I was a student and I am still, but the program helped me with everything related to work. Currently, I have a work plan and a job that I want target, but it is sensitive and needs study and work, so I am currently studying in preparation for it to get all needed soft and technical skills. You have become part of the future of dozens of ambitious Iraqi youth, thank you.”

Respondent comments also included important recommendations for improving the program. A young man from the 2018 cohort recommended that the program “increase the activities about starting a business and don't focus on getting a job alone”—a change that was in fact made beginning with the 2020 program cohort. Another remarked, “the most important things that I would like to share with you is to focus on teamwork and real interviews for the participating teams, and test them to practice the role.”

Overall, participants expressed gratitude for their experience and a wish that more youth could have such an opportunity. “It was a great program. I hope as many students as possible should have the opportunity to participate. It was a great opportunity!,” wrote one. Another offered his encouragement, “Our community is better because you are part of it, thank you all.”

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this tracer study, it appears that the more intensive Bawsala Career Mentorship program model has been more effective at helping participants obtain employment than participation in general university career development center (CDC) activities in Iraq. The Bawsala program serves a similar core population of motivated university students of mixed social and economic backgrounds in a region of Iraq affected by high unemployment and social unrest. Bawsala participants may be somewhat more motivated than the average university CDC beneficiary, since they have committed to an 8-month program, but the Bawsala applicant pool is made up of the same university student population as CDC beneficiaries who are seeking out career guidance and support.

Yet outcomes are not the same: World Learning's Bawsala career mentorship graduates demonstrate a higher rate of employment both during COVID-impacted closures (36% among Bawsala alumni, versus 22% among CDC beneficiary graduates) and longer-term (52% versus 26%), an achievement made even more significant given the very challenging economic context and social unrest in Southern Iraq. Both of these distinctions are greater than the margin of error of this survey.

The offerings of CDCs and the Bawsala program have some similarities, but also important differences. Like university CDCs, Bawsala includes trainings on soft skills, employability skills, and the job search process. It also includes guest speakers and workplace exposure opportunities, and direct student advising on CVs and cover letters. It should be noted that not all university students access this full range of CDC services. And the Bawsala program in its current format in Southern Iraq does not include internship and job placement services, unlike some CDCs.

The most important features that set Bawsala apart are the program's duration and cultivation of supportive mentorship and peer relationships. Bawsala fosters a longer-term mentorship relationship with a young working professional, who guides a group of youth through more in-depth sustained work on developing employability and soft skills over time. These are core elements of World Learning's model, which promotes the development of a mentorship ecosystem as part of an enabling environment for positive youth development.

The successes of this career mentorship program model should be considered by government, education, and international development actors in Iraq as they consider how to best promote youth employment.