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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Prime Minister's Youth Program, Youth Empowerment, Social Policy, Sustainable Development, Pakistan.	This study aimed at finding the perception of graduates of the University of Sargodha concerning the role of PMYP in youth empowerment and sustainable development. In line with Empowerment Theory (Rappaport, 1987; Zimmerman, 2000) and the Critical Social Theory of Youth Empowerment (Jennings et al., 2006), a qualitative, descriptive, and interpretive design was selected. Qualitative interviews with 27 graduates who took part in one or more PMYP component were selected using an interview guide and data was collected and analyzed by using thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Three broad themes developed: participants' multi-dimensional understanding of empowerment and PMYP, the impact of PMYP on skills, confidence and employment, largely indirect, and a consistent list of recommendations from the participants. It concludes that while PMYP has successfully contributed to empowerment in education and access to digital technology, it has not been transformative due to structural gaps in employment linkage, outreach and awareness of sustainable development goals. It recommends that enhancing monitoring and evaluation by conducting program effectiveness review periodically can enhance outcomes for youth empowerment.
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Introduction

Pakistan's policy formulation has been shifted towards the youth empowerment for the sustainable development of the country. More than half of the population is under the age of 30 in Pakistan and their active involvement in the economy and society is well recognized to be pivotal to

the country's future economic and social development. However, the demographic dividend has yet to bring about the expected benefits, as high youth unemployment, unequal access to education and skill formation and lack of opportunities to enter into the formal job market remain significant challenges for youth to participate in any meaningful manner in national development (Imtiaz et al., 2020).

In response, the Government of Pakistan launched the Prime Minister's Youth Program (PMYP), comprising of several components that involve the distribution of laptops, providing skills development training, placement of interns, provision of youth business loans, and remuneration of educational fees with the stated objective of youth empowerment and promotion of sustainable development (Government of Pakistan, 2022). Since its inception, the program has engaged a significant number of young Pakistanis making it one of the country's most visible interventions for youth development. Although large in scope and visible, there is relatively little research that explores the experience and understanding of PMYP among the youth it is intended for. The bulk of the available evidence focuses on program design, scope, or output metrics and not on the beneficiaries' own understandings of empowerment, relevance to their needs, and impacts (Ahmed & Saleem, 2021).

The goals set forth in PMYP's mission were clearly designed with this focus in mind: bridging the gap between school preparation and job readiness. The program aimed to promote employability by providing market-oriented technical and vocational education; foster an entrepreneurial culture by making financing available to these entrepreneurs; and broaden access to quality education, especially for students from disadvantaged areas. The internship placements were structured to equip young graduates for the real life challenges of the workplace, and the placement program was designed to explicitly link to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals: SDG 4 Quality Education, SDG 8 Decent Work and Economic Growth, and SDG 10 Reduced Inequalities. The principle behind the design of PMYP was to turn the demographic weight into a demographic dividend by providing skills, resources, and opportunities to the youth to participate in national development in a meaningful manner.

Most of the literature on PMYP focuses on the outcomes of PMYP at the national or administrative level, rather than investigating in detail how PMYP works in particular institutions or communities. There has been relatively little research that focuses on the benefits of PMYP for a state university's graduates, particularly in relation to their lived experience of and use of these benefits; or on whether the national-level goals of PMYP are achieved at the level of individual academic and professional pathways. This is a localized deficit because young people are a direct measure of the success of state interventions to facilitate a smooth transition from education to work, or to serve as a broad subsidy whose outcomes are hard to measure. This can assist policymakers and university stakeholders to improve current youth-focused platforms and develop new interventions that will be relevant to the life experiences of graduates.

There is a strong experiential and psychological dimension to empowerment and sustainable development which is particularly relevant here, as the dimension of opportunity is interpreted and

internalized by the individual (Rappaport, 1987). Thus, one needs to be sensitive to participants' interpretation of the program's delivery as well as the nature of the program itself.

This study aims to fill this gap on the perceptions and lived experiences of University of Sargodha graduates who enjoyed PMYP benefits. Specifically, it explores their definitions of youth empowerment and sustainable development, the role that PMYP can play in these, the effect that it has had on their skills, confidence and employment prospects and what changes they think would make PMYP more effective and reach more people.

Literature Review

Youth empowerment is generally viewed as a multi-level process, ranging from psychological to organizational and community level (Zimmerman, 2000). Empowerment is defined psychological level as feeling in control, feeling competent, and feeling self-efficacious; and on the community level as feeling involved in the shaping of community outcomes. Kabeer (1999) elaborates on this idea, suggesting that empowerment is essentially the sphere of people's strategies for making life choices. This has influenced human rights, youth, and gender-oriented research in South Asia.

Youth development programs have been increasingly associated with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at the global level, especially SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) (UNDESA, 2018; UNESCO, 2019). The definition of positive youth development scholarship emphasizes that skills building is best achieved through ongoing mentorship, community involvement, and structural support, in addition to a single, stand-alone resource (Catalano et al., 2004; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003).

In Pakistan, youth development schemes like PMYP, Kamyab Jawan Program, and National youth development framework have been trying to tackle youth unemployment and skill gaps among youth (Government of Pakistan 2021, 2022). Evaluative studies of the components of PMYP are still in their infancy but increasing. It was reported that the Laptop Scheme enhanced digital skills and participation of university students, and Higher Education Commission (2021) reported measurable improvements in student academic performance were associated with the scheme. The findings from the research on the Youth Business Loan component indicated that it had a positive effect on entrepreneurial intention but it was observed that the loan processes were challenging and not accompanied with adequate follow-up mentoring (Javed & Anwar, 2020; Javed & Rehman, 2022).

Meanwhile, a number of research studies identify structural barriers that constrain the potential transformative impact of these types of programs. Studies by Khan and Aslam (2020) and Ali and Jalbani (2021) have revealed that institutional outreach is weak and many youth development programs in Pakistan are focused on individual capacity building, while rural young people have many challenges to accessing government youth programs. Ali and Gulzar (2021) also report the same phenomenon of lack of alignment between the skills being generated by these programs

and the requirement of the labor market, in line with other studies by the International Labor Organization (2020) in South Asia. Gender barriers to participation have also been identified, for instance, Qureshi and Ali (2020) have reported that the social norms and mobility of young women limit their involvement in government-sponsored youth programs.

While there is useful evidence on the design of PMYP and the outputs that have been measurable, these sources are not frequently written from the point of view of the beneficiaries. Only a handful of studies have examined the understanding of empowerment among the participating young Pakistani graduates from a qualitative perspective, and assessed the relevance and effectiveness of the program from their point of view, alongside their articulation of what would make it more effective. This study fills that void by focusing on the perspectives and experiences of PMYP beneficiaries, both individually and with regards to the structural equity aspect of youth development programming, by drawing on Empowerment Theory (Rappaport, 1987; Zimmerman, 2000) and the Critical Social Theory of Youth Empowerment (Jennings et al. 2006).

Material and Methods

This study followed descriptive and interpretive research design, which was used for exploring the perception and experiences of the role of PMYP in youth empowerment and sustainable development among graduates of University of Sargodha. A qualitative approach was determined because empowerment and development are experiential and context-dependent, and can best be understood by the participants' own description of the experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The research population consisted of the graduates of the University of Sargodha who took direct involvement in any one of the following schemes of PMYP either in the Laptop Scheme, Internship Program, Skills Development Program, Youth Business Loan Scheme or Fee Reimbursement Scheme. The participants were selected through purposive sampling until the thematic saturation was achieved, with 27 participants being selected. Semi-structured interviews using a pilot-tested interview guide were conducted and audio recorded with permission of the participants and verbatim transcribed.

Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis was utilized to analyze the data and involved six phases: familiarization with the data, initial coding, identification of themes, review of themes, theme definition and naming, producing the report. Coding was done inductively, themes were identified within the participants' narrative data rather than being a priori categories. The source of trustworthiness was obtained by following Lincoln and Guba (1985) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, with the prolonged engagement, verbatim transcription, and detailed description of the research context. The study was conducted after obtaining ethical approval from the University of Sargodha and informed consent from all the participants in the study. Data were kept confidentially, anonymized throughout, and reported using pseudonyms.

Results and Discussions

Thematic analysis of the twenty-seven interviews generated three major themes which are discussed below with illustrative participant verbatim and situated in relation to the existing literature.

Theme 1: Perceptions about Youth Empowerment and Social Policy Framework in Pakistan

Participants provided a rich and multi-dimensional vision on youth empowerment, which included education, skills development, economic independence, confidence and social participation. Most of the respondents did not see PMYP as a typical welfare benefit program but rather as a tool that may create a long term stability in the educational and socio-economic life. This perspective is similar to Zimmerman (2000) who conceptualizes empowerment as having three aspects: psychological, organizational, and community; and Kabeer (1999) who sees empowerment as a broadening of choices.

"Youth are in a position to make improved decisions when they get access to education, technology and information. PMYP laptop made me study on my own and enhance my skills. Not being dependent on others, with regard to basic resources, is also empowerment."

Participants' perceptions of empowerment were different depending on what component of the PMYP they were involved in. The benefits of laptop Scheme were defined by digital literacy and access to education; interns by workplace exposure and boost in their professional confidence; skills development trainees by a closer connection to empowerment and employability and income generation. A number of participants referred to PMYP as being able to be used for both education and employment purposes.

"PMYP concentrates in educating youth and making them skilled. Laptop scheme helps in research and study. It also tries to enhance employability. The other goal is the motivation of youth. PMYP promotes development."

Not everything was seen as a positive; however, there were respondents who thought that the program's intent was good but it was lacking in direction from the start.

"PMYP is an initiative to empower the youth, however, it must be results oriented. The laptop program is advantageous. Training should however be part of the objectives. PMYP promotes education. It needs better follow-up."

Interestingly, although participants had a general awareness of what sustainable development meant, and a general awareness of what long-term economic stability, equal opportunity and poverty reduction meant, few made a specific link between PMYP and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. This indicates that while the program's conceptual framework re-

lates to SDG 4, SDG 8 and SDG 10, there is not a clear articulation of this relationship, which would increase the program's capacity to build development-oriented civic awareness (UNDESA, 2018). The results align with Khan and Aslam (2020) who determined that village youth's awareness and access to government schemes is constrained by limited institutional communication.

Theme 2: Impacts of PMYP on Youth Empowerment

Responses from participants were generally positive regarding the impact of participation in PMYP, with many reporting improvements in digital literacy, technical skills, academic productivity and professional confidence. The benefits of these improvements were particularly significant for Laptop Scheme and Skills Development beneficiaries who reported a greater sense of independence in doing academic work and learning independently.

"I consider youth empowerment as giving the youth a chance that enables them to be independent and productive citizens of the society. The presence of a laptop assisted me in doing homework and acquiring online knowledge. In the absence of such support, a number of students are restricted."

The impact of the program on employment and income generation, however, was said to be "indirect" and "preparatory" in nature, but not immediate, and not lasting. Some of the participants made it clear that the laptop scheme was helpful but did not equal paid employment.

"Although the program did not create direct income opportunities for me, the laptop was instrumental in the continuation of my education, as well as my acquisition of digital skills, which will facilitate future employment. The impact was indirect, yet it was still beneficial as it raised future opportunities."

This seems to be a common structural mismatch among the respondents, reflecting the larger structural mismatch between skills provision and durable employment outcomes as pointed out by Ali and Jalbani (2021). Who found that many youth programs in Pakistan focus on individual capacity building rather than on structural labor market barriers while Gulzar and Ali (2021) observed the mismatch between skills provision and durable employment outcomes amongst Pakistani graduates. In the community, PMYP was mentioned primarily as an educational awareness and digital engagement tool, rather than as a driver of socio-economic change. The participants also observed rural-urban disparities and gender barriers as challenges for equitable access to the programmatic benefits, which are consistent with Khan and Aslam (2020), and Qureshi and Ali (2020). Through an analysis of these structural gaps, using Critical Social Theory of Youth Empowerment as a framework (Jennings et al., 2006), it is understood that there is a conflict between the program's stated aims of inclusiveness and the unequal distribution of benefits.

Theme 3: Youth Empowerment and Future Framework: Moving Towards the Sustainability

The group of respondents came up with a comprehensive list of consistent recommendations that focused on enhancing employment connections, increasing rural outreach and post-program support. Many highlighted the need to take the awareness campaign beyond to the students in remote and low-income areas where knowledge of the PMYP components may not be available or may be late.

“PMYP can be more inclusive by reaching out to more marginalized communities. For example, rural areas can benefit from information campaigns. Simplified application processes can help. Digital literacy assistance can be provided. Special quotas can help disadvantaged students. Inclusion is an engaged process.”

Some of the respondents also specifically cited the lack of a system of follow-up after program benefits as a key constraint.

“One of the most prominent issues I identified in PMYP was the lack of follow up. After obtaining the laptop, there was no additional instruction. Skill development was not facilitated. Numerous students were not able to use the laptop proficiently. Awareness sessions were absent. The program could benefit from greater structure.”

Participants also wanted to see the creation of structured mentoring, career counselling and employer partnerships that ensure training and internships lead to long-term jobs; as well as gender-inclusive programming to help tackle mobility challenges and security concerns that prevent young women from participating. These recommendations are very similar to previous calls in the literature for multi-channel outreach (Junaid & Hassan, 2022) and for including sustainable development education in the program orientation and training materials (UNDESA, 2018).

Conclusion

This concludes that the Youth Program of the Prime Minister has indeed made a significant contribution in the empowerment of University of Sargodha graduates in aspects of digital access, technical skill development as well as improved academic and professional confidence. These are outcomes that align with the theory of empowerment (Zimmerman, 2000), and show real, although not equally, movement towards the program's declared goals. The study reveals the critical structural weaknesses at the same time. Skills provision and lasting employment, program follow-up support, rural/urban access, gender barriers to participation, and program awareness of SDGs are all limiting factors that hinder the transformative capacity of PMYP. From the Critical Social Theory of Youth Empowerment (Jennings et al., 2006), this indicates that PMYP needs to move beyond offering 'nominal opportunities' to actually challenge the structural factors that shape who can access and benefit from these opportunities.

Recommendations and Suggestions

- Improve connections with employment, through formalized job placement support after skills training and internships, and with industry associations and private sector employers.
- Create post program support structures mentoring networks, career counselling, alumni involvement, entrepreneurship support, to ensure program benefits yield long-term results.
- Commence a multi-channel awareness-building approach that engages and reaches rural and low-income youth through radio, television, print media in local languages and community-based sessions.
- Incorporate gender-responsive programming including addressing mobility, safety and family related barriers that affect young women's engagement.
- Explicitly include sustainability awareness and SDGs topics in orientation and training of the PMYP content to ensure that beneficiaries understand the link between the PMYP and national and global development goals.
- Enhance monitoring and evaluation by conducting program effectiveness review periodically and by following beneficiaries' outcomes.

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