



Exploring experiences of TVET graduates' work-integrated learning in a rural ecology: the case of TVET colleges in KwaZulu-Natal

Phiwokuhle B. Ngubane^(a) *Dumisani W. Mncube*^(b) *Oluwatoyin Ayodele Ajani*^(c) *

^(a) *Educational Foundations and Management, University of Zululand, KwaDlangezwa, South Africa*

^(b) *College of Education, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa*

^(c) *Languages and Social Science Education, University of Zululand, KwaDlangezwa, South Africa*



ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 16 April 2024

Received in rev. form 10 June 2024

Accepted 23 July 2024

Keywords:

Work-based education, sustainable learning, rural ecology, vocational education, training

JEL Classification:

I20, I23, I25

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the experiences of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) graduates in rural ecology with work-based education (WBE), commonly known as work-integrated learning (WIL). The study was conducted at two campuses of Umfolozi TVET colleges in northern KwaZulu-Natal, focusing on post-graduation experiences. The National Certificate Vocational (NCV) qualification, introduced in January 2007, was the focal point, offered at Levels 2, 3, and 4 of the National Qualifications Framework, equivalent to Grades 10, 11, and 12. NCV graduates were selected as participants to explore their encounters with work-integrated learning during employment. Employing a qualitative case study design, the study utilized purposive sampling to identify six participants. Findings revealed systemic challenges faced by NCV graduates, particularly concerning the alignment of the curriculum with the needs of TVET students from rural areas. Additionally, it was noted that college management appeared unaware of the severity of the challenges encountered by students in securing in-service training opportunities. These findings underscore the need for educational institutions and policymakers to address curriculum alignment issues and enhance support mechanisms for TVET students, particularly those from rural backgrounds, to ensure the effectiveness of work-integrated learning initiatives.

© 2024 by the authors. Licensee SSBFNET, Istanbul, Turkey. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Introduction

The escalating unemployment rates, particularly among South Africa's youth and graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds, pose a significant concern, as evidenced by Statistics South Africa's Quarterly Labour Force Survey. Notably, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) graduates face considerable challenges, with a reported unemployment rate of 33%. This predicament primarily arises from the inadequate provision of in-service training and job opportunities within TVET colleges, thereby compromising graduates' readiness for the workforce. Despite the private sector's emphasis on the necessity of relevant skills, there exists a notable absence of legislation mandating work-based experience as a prerequisite for graduation from TVET colleges, highlighting a substantial gap between educational policy and industry expectations (Moleke, 2019; Mncube, 2020).

Furthermore, the majority of TVET college graduates hail from rural areas and harbour expectations of acquiring work-based experience, only to encounter limitations within institutions ill-equipped to facilitate their entry into the labour market. This is exacerbated by the predominance of marginalized Black African youth in TVET colleges, many of whom face economic constraints and are at heightened risk of unemployment. Consequently, the failure to integrate this population into the labour market exacerbates the vulnerability of the higher education sector, posing a risk of systemic collapse (Paterson et al., 2017; Field et al., 2014). The surge in TVET college enrolments further complicates the scenario, as colleges struggle to align their programs with the needs of local industries, particularly in rural settings, where opportunities for in-service training and employment are limited (DHET, 2013c; Bourn et al., 2016).

* Corresponding author. ORCID ID: 0000-0001-6545-0203

© 2024 by the authors. Hosting by SSBFNET. Peer review under responsibility of Center for Strategic Studies in Business and Finance.

<https://doi.org/10.20525/ijrbs.v13i5.3366>

Addressing these challenges necessitates a comprehensive approach that not only enhances the quality of in-service training but also aligns TVET programs with the demands of rural economies. This requires a re-evaluation of enrolment strategies to ensure that intake aligns with the capacity of local industries to absorb graduates for in-service training or employment. Additionally, collaborative efforts between educational institutions, industries, and policymakers are critical to expanding career exploration opportunities and work-based learning experiences for TVET students, particularly in rural areas where professional institutions and industries are scarce (Ajani, 2019). Through such concerted endeavours, the TVET sector can better equip graduates with the requisite skills and experiences to navigate the challenges of the contemporary job market and contribute meaningfully to economic development. This study aimed to critically explore TVET graduates' experiences during work-based education, and also post NCV certification in a rural ecology and the implication for employment prospects. This study addressed the critical issues of the graduates' experiences of work-integrated education or work-based education in local industries, and also the work-based education or vocational training assisting graduates to navigate routines of gaining employment opportunities.

Literature Review

Conceptualisation of Rural Ecologies

Rural ecology deals with the issue of establishing a balance between the rural population and local natural resources (Čustović, Kovačević, & Tvica, 2014). Ecological education is tailor-made to equip graduates to live in harmony with the environment. South Africa's rural ecologies remain disadvantaged compared to their counterparts in urban areas in terms of resources and opportunities. TVET colleges located in rural ecologies face difficulties related to limited work-based experiences for students, and that leads to pessimistic attitudes that unwittingly contribute towards vocational education becoming ineffective and producing limited educational results. The Department of Higher Education is constitutionally mandated to provide quality education relevant to the local context. The question of rural vs urban contexts should not matter 24 years into democracy. The work of Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) is critical of the government's lack of intervention in the restructuring of TVET education for easy access and relevance to rural students and communities. He posits that the government, through the DHET, should have eliminated this rural-urban epistemological divide by focusing on the production of knowledge and work-based opportunities that serve the objectives of sustainable rural development.

The majority of students graduating with vocational national certificates (NCV) are not finding employment, partly because employers are sceptical of the value of the NCV qualification (With many tongues, 2010). The main source of frustration is the weak nexus between theory and skills-based training for these graduates. Indeed, graduates face many challenges; some directly affect teaching and learning, while others point to a lack of experiential learning (With many tongues, 2010). In the main, vocational training provided in the rural ecology remains substandard compared to its urban counterpart, and this is not sustainable for rekindling the rural economy and kick-starting sustainable development (Barlow & Stone, 2011). Most graduates inadvertently suffer from the aftermath of knowledge deficiency and marginalisation based on their faulty training (Peterson et al., 2017). As such, in consequence, potential employers force graduates to declare where they did their in-service or vocational training in order to discriminate against those with questionable in-service certificates.

Work-Based Learning in TVET Colleges

The integration of compulsory work-based experience into the curriculum of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges across South Africa is a fundamental component of these institutions' educational framework. According to the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET, 2013a), the inherent learning opportunities provided by work-based experience are considered essential for students. This underscores the imperative for students to approach work-based learning with seriousness, utilizing their theoretical knowledge acquired from college-based instruction to enhance their vocational and occupational competencies. Work-based learning thus emerges as a distinct and interdisciplinary field, operating outside traditional subject frameworks and characterized by its unique norms and practices (Costley & Armsby, 2007).

Moreover, the emphasis on work-based experience aligns with broader educational paradigms that advocate for experiential and applied learning approaches. These approaches emphasize the importance of hands-on experience and practical application of knowledge to foster deeper learning and skill development (Kolb, 1984; Jarvis, 2006). By engaging in work-based experiences, TVET students have the opportunity to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world practice, thereby gaining valuable insights and competencies that are crucial for success in their chosen fields (Saha et al., 2020). Furthermore, work-based learning offers numerous benefits beyond the acquisition of technical skills, including the development of critical thinking, problem-solving abilities, and interpersonal skills (Billett, 2009; Fuller & Unwin, 2010). Through meaningful engagement with industry partners and workplace environments, students are exposed to diverse challenges and contexts, allowing them to develop a range of transferable skills that are highly valued by employers (Boud & Solomon, 2001; Eraut, 2004). Additionally, work-based learning fosters a sense of professionalism and work ethic among students, preparing them for the demands and expectations of the workplace (Boud & Solomon, 2001). Thus, work-based experience plays a crucial role in shaping the holistic development of TVET students and enhancing their employability prospects in the competitive job market.

The Value-Based Approach

The value-based approach to education emerges as a pivotal aspect in delivering quality education that aligns with the demands of the contemporary labour market (Peterson et al., 2017). This approach emphasizes the integration of workplace values and practices into educational processes, aiming to equip students with the skills and competencies valued by employers. As advocated by Arani, Alagamandan, and Tourani (2004), the provision of work-based qualifications represents a significant stride toward fulfilling the objectives of the value-based approach. These qualifications entail learning programs that extend beyond institutional settings and into the workplace, enabling students to acquire practical experience and industry-specific skills. Employers place considerable value on candidates with such work-based learning experiences, recognizing their readiness and relevance in the labour market (Peterson et al., 2017). Work-based learning encompasses activities undertaken by students for experiential purposes, often without monetary compensation, with the primary objective of skill enhancement and learning (Chisholm, 2008). This form of learning can take various forms, including internships, apprenticeships, and project-based assignments, all aimed at providing students with hands-on experience in a real-world context. According to Lester and Costley (2010), the critical criterion for inclusion of activities within a work-based learning program is their capacity to serve as vehicles for learning, rather than their perceived economic or social value. By engaging in work-based learning, students have the opportunity to develop practical skills and competencies that are directly applicable to their chosen fields, thereby enhancing their employability and career prospects.

Furthermore, work-based learning offers students a platform to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge acquired in academic settings and practical application in real-world contexts (Billett, 2001). This experiential learning approach fosters the development of critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication skills, essential for success in the dynamic and fast-paced labour market (Boud & Solomon, 2001). Moreover, work-based learning encourages students to reflect on their experiences, identify areas for improvement, and continuously adapt and develop their skills in response to evolving industry demands (Eraut, 2004). Thus, work-based learning emerges as a valuable pedagogical approach that enriches students' learning experiences and enhances their readiness for the workforce.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study draws upon the experiential learning theory, which has its roots in the works of renowned scholars such as John Dewey, Jean Piaget, and David Kolb. Dewey (1938) emphasized the significance of learning through active involvement or "learning by doing," wherein individuals engage in workplace-based experiences to acquire knowledge. Sidorsky (1977) further elaborated on this concept, highlighting the importance of individuals engaging in predicting and controlling their experiences, thereby actively shaping their learning process. Piaget's theory of adaptation, comprising assimilation and accommodation, provides a framework for understanding how individuals incorporate new information from their environment into their existing mental schemas (Satterly, 1987). Kolb's Experiential Learning Model expands on these ideas, positing that learning involves four key elements: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Tennant, 2006; Malale & Sentsho, 2014). According to this model, effective learning occurs when individuals progress through each stage, starting with a concrete experience that serves as a basis for reflection. Through reflection, individuals assimilate information, develop abstract concepts, and subsequently test these theories through active experimentation. This model has been widely applied in various educational contexts, including vocational and general education, to facilitate deep learning and skill development (Dochy et al., 2011; Cherry, 2014).

Educators have devised various strategies to enhance the process of experiential learning, including facilitating students' critical reflections on their experiences, promoting holistic learning experiences, and providing coaching and mentoring during the learning process (Cherry, 2014). Dewey (1910) and Boud (2000) emphasize the importance of reflection in the learning process, defining it as an active and careful consideration of one's beliefs or knowledge in light of supporting evidence. Boud (2000) expands on Dewey's definition by incorporating experience into the reflective domain, highlighting the role of reflection in enabling individuals to critically examine their actions, understand their motivations, and assess the impact of their actions on others. Overall, this theoretical framework provides a comprehensive understanding of how experiential learning processes unfold and underscores the importance of reflection in facilitating meaningful learning experiences.

Justification for the Theory in this Study

The experiential learning theory provides a robust theoretical foundation for exploring the experiences of TVET graduates' work-integrated learning (WIL) in a rural ecology context, as outlined in this study focusing on TVET colleges in KwaZulu-Natal. Firstly, the theory emphasizes the importance of active engagement with the environment, aligning with the practical nature of WIL where students directly apply theoretical knowledge in real-world settings (Dewey, 1938). In the rural ecology context, where the environment may present unique challenges and opportunities, the experiential learning approach allows graduates to navigate and make sense of their experiences within this specific context.

Secondly, Kolb's Experiential Learning Model offers a structured framework for understanding the learning process, which is particularly relevant in the context of WIL where students engage in a cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Tennant, 2006; Malale & Sentsho, 2014). This model guides the exploration of how TVET graduates' experiences during WIL contribute to their learning and skill development within a rural ecology context. By

examining each stage of the learning cycle, the study can elucidate the transformative nature of WIL experiences and their impact on graduates' readiness for the workforce.

Furthermore, the emphasis on reflection in the experiential learning theory aligns with the study's focus on understanding TVET graduates' reflections on their WIL experiences in a rural ecology setting (Dewey, 1910; Boud, 2000). Through reflective practice, graduates can critically evaluate their experiences, identify learning outcomes, and make connections between theory and practice within the context of rural industries and communities. This reflective process enables a deeper understanding of the complexities and nuances of WIL in rural environments, shedding light on the challenges and opportunities encountered by TVET graduates during their transition to the workforce. Overall, the experiential learning theory provides a comprehensive theoretical framework for investigating TVET graduates' experiences of WIL in a rural ecology, offering insights into how practical experiences shape learning outcomes, skill development, and readiness for employment in specific contexts. By applying this theory, the study aims to contribute to the existing literature on WIL in TVET education and inform future educational practices and policies tailored to rural settings in KwaZulu-Natal and similar regions.

Research and Methodology

Grounded in a qualitative case study design, this research delved into the lived experiences of graduates during work-based education as part of in-service training within TVET colleges. Recognizing the potential of qualitative case studies to provide nuanced insights into research inquiries, Barbour (2004) and Yin (2017) advocate for their relevance and potency in exploring complex phenomena. By adopting a case study approach, this study aimed to elucidate the philosophical underpinnings of how the TVET sector integrates work-based education into its curriculum. Drawing from the interpretive paradigm, which emphasizes understanding the reality of research subjects, Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011) highlight qualitative research as a unique method that nurtures specific approaches to inquiry and problem-solving. In this context, the interpretive paradigm guided data collection from TVET college graduates and professionals overseeing work-based learning (WBL).

The research employed purposive convenience sampling to select participants, comprising two campus managers, two senior lecturers, and two final-year students who had completed the program. Through semi-structured interviews, these participants provided narrative accounts of their experiences during the supervision of work-based learning and elucidated students' perceptions and benefits derived from this experience. Ethical considerations were paramount, with participants required to sign consent forms outlining their rights before participation, and pseudonyms were used to protect their identities, as recommended by Rand Afrikaans University (2002), and espoused by Cresswell (2016) and Maree (2014). The thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns or themes within the data, aligning with Maguire and Delahunt's (2017) assertion that thematic analysis is essential for elucidating the rationale of the study and organizing data effectively. Maree (2014) underscores the role of thematic analysis in generating themes from research interview questions and organizing and summarizing data, facilitating a comprehensive understanding of experiences and challenges related to work-based education within the TVET context.

Presentation and Discussion of Findings

This section presents analysed data to interpretively understand TVET graduates' experiences in undertaking vocational training in their local institutions, as situated in rural ecologies. Themes have been generated and used, with pseudonyms for excerpts from some of the participants.

TVET graduates' experiences of work-based education

The initial theme derived from the data analysis in this study revolves around the experiences of TVET graduates regarding work-integrated education (WIE) and its efficacy in securing relevant employment within the sector. Within the TVET sector, the incorporation of WIE or work-based learning (WBL) into each program is aimed at augmenting the quality of qualifications and overall learning experiences, while also providing prospective employers with tangible evidence of candidates' capabilities. Insights gleaned from graduates, champions, senior lecturers, and campus managers shed light on the significance of WIE and its role in facilitating employers' identification of suitably qualified candidates for employment post-NCV completion. The qualitative data generated regarding graduates' experiences yielded compelling evidence linking WIE to their employment prospects. These findings were further substantiated by senior lecturers and champions working with NCV graduates, who were able to share anecdotes about the in-service training undertaken by graduates within their respective companies. These narratives underscore the tangible impact of WIE in equipping graduates with practical skills and experiences that enhance their employability within the sector, thereby bridging the gap between academic learning and real-world application. Some of the participants expressed:

"I was lucky to receive an in-service training from one of the B&B facilities responsible for providing service to tourists both from Africa and abroad. I approached this institution because it was reputable and highly organised. When I got there, all hell broke loose. The manager assigned me the responsibility of working at the front desk for the first two weeks. She later posted me to work as a laundry supervisor, and this duty was not what I was intended for. This was at first weird, and I tried to complain, but I was ignored for the entire in-service training. This training was something I never expected" (Amahle).

“My experience was very interesting; I approached a civil engineering company to give me an opportunity to do my in-service training. This company specialises in road construction and maintenance. In my entire training, the mentor assigned to me was highly professional to work with. She managed to understand that I am a student, and I needed support in a specialised training” (Priority).

Another participant, Pieter expressed his gratitude for the opportunity he initially received for in-service training at a clothing store in Richards Bay, given his qualification in office administration. However, his experience took an unexpected turn when a new supervisor assigned him to work as a merchandiser instead. Initially viewing this as a temporary assignment, Pieter later realized that the supervisor had no intention of allowing him to fulfil his role as an office administrator. Feeling disheartened by this deviation from his career aspirations and the lack of resolution despite reporting the issue to his senior lecturer and champion, Pieter ultimately felt disillusioned and undervalued, leading him to question the significance of his work-based education (WBE) certificate. Sandile, another participant further explained:

“To tell you the truth: for starters, finding the in-service training was mamout task. This is what happened. In 2018, the second semester, I was posted to the ICT department. My time was worthwhile: most of the staff members and managers were supportive. I remember that I was allowed to work in different sections within the ICT unit: from data processing, computer programming, and information technology management. Everything was well coordinated; they prepared me for the real world of work. I was very fortunate” (Sandile).

All participants in the study reported receiving practical experience aligned with their academic training, a sentiment corroborated by Mr. Mthombeni, the senior lecturer overseeing placement. His assertion emphasized the college's proactive approach in establishing direct liaisons with local companies to facilitate work-based education (WBE) or work-integrated learning (WIL) opportunities for students. However, instances of student complaints posed challenges for intervention, as noted by Mr. Teddy, the college principal, who acknowledged the unfortunate reality of students enduring difficulties during internships due to strained relationships with managers and professionals. Kanwar, Balasubramanian, and Carr (2019) underscored the prevalence of victimization and biased attitudes toward students within the TVET sector, emphasizing the need for proactive measures to prepare students to navigate such challenges professionally (Ajani, 2018). Furthermore, participants highlighted the arduous process of securing internships, describing it as a daunting task influenced by economic realities faced by industries.

Sibiya and Nyembezi (2018) echoed similar concerns, emphasizing the juxtaposition of industry hardships and the obligation to impart skills to students, which often results in students grappling with limited opportunities for WBE experience. The workplace dynamics encountered by graduates varied, with mentors playing a pivotal role in fostering professional conduct and confidence among students. While some mentors were supportive in imparting necessary skills, others fell short, undermining students' learning experiences by assigning tasks unrelated to their qualifications, such as rotating an office administrator to work as a merchandiser. Remarkably, participants also recounted experiences of discrimination and maltreatment from employers, characterized by derogatory comments and assignments perceived as demeaning. Despite these challenges, Mr. Mthombeni and Mr. Teddy dismissed allegations of racism and abuse by employers, attributing them to unsubstantiated claims. However, the lack of genuine concern from employers raises questions about the continued viability of TVET colleges' internship programs. The ensuing section delves into employers' attitudes toward interns' qualifications, which left graduates bewildered about the value of their credentials.

WBE/WIL preparing NCV graduates for work experiences

The second thematic element arising from the data analysis pertained to the availability of job prospects post completion of work-based education (WBE) programs. Graduates expressed uncertainty regarding employment opportunities, reflecting the broader challenges of job scarcity in South Africa. Upon completing their WBE programs, participants encountered diverse pathways in their quest to secure employment opportunities and navigate daily routines. This uncertainty underscores the significance of work-based education in preparing graduates for the workforce and addressing the pressing issue of unemployment. Following the attainment of the National Certificate Vocational (NCV) qualification, graduates found themselves poised to access work opportunities aligned with their vocational specializations. Drawing from their experiences post-graduation, participants provided insights into the employment landscape for TVET college graduates. Interviews with key stakeholders, including Mrs. Fumani and Mr. Mthombeni, corroborated the sentiments shared by graduates Priority and Sandile, highlighting the multifaceted experiences encountered by individuals transitioning from work-integrated learning to the job market (Ajani, 2019). Some of the participants had these submissions:

“I completed the NCV in 2018, and in 2019 did my in-service to earn my trade. After six months it was time for a reckoning, time to look for a job in the field of civil engineering. Guess what happened: there were zero opportunities for people like us, period. Most of these companies would only give you an opportunity if you could work at the minimum rate” (Priority).

“Computer science as a field of study has very limited opportunities for people with NCV certificates. In my situation, most companies were not willing to employ me. I attended more than five interviews without success. The internship I did at the Municipality came later but gave me a better chance because finally one IT firm in Richards Bay invited me. At first they wanted to ascertain if my training was authentic. They were impressed and hired me on a fulltime basis after I had stayed at home for a while” (Sandile).

In recent years, South Africa has grappled with a decline in job opportunities, a stark reality highlighted by Statistics South Africa (Stats SA). Participants in interviews acknowledged the impact of this scarcity on their employment prospects, attributing it not to their National Vocational Certificate (NVC) qualifications, but rather to the fragility of the job market itself. Contrary to popular belief, Sibiyi and Nyembezi (2018) challenged prevailing notions concerning the career trajectories of many Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) graduates, suggesting a need for nuanced examination. TVET college personnel expressed pessimism regarding the prevailing job market conditions, with Mrs. Fumani and Mr. Mthombeni underscoring the severity of the situation: "Companies are closing down, and opportunities are hard to find" (Costley & Armsby, 2007). A significant number of participants lamented the plight of colleagues and friends who, despite obtaining qualifications, remained unemployed and resorted to seeking opportunities on the streets. The champion echoed these sentiments, highlighting the struggle of most students in securing permanent or contract positions within local companies. Various studies, including those by Kanwar, Balasubramanian, and Carr (2019) and Field et al. (2017), attribute this challenge to deficiencies in training and curriculum alignment, which hinder access to internships in many firms. Additionally, the predominance of NCV graduates in sectors such as retail and the informal economy exacerbates the issue, further limiting avenues for formal employment (Sibiyi & Nyembezi, 2018). Participants expressed frustration with the lack of support in their job search endeavours, often resulting in futile attempts and financial strain. This sentiment underscores concerns among stakeholders regarding the perceived quality of government-funded educational programs. There is a shared apprehension that unless improvements are made to program quality, many youth may opt for unattractive or inadequately prepared programs, ultimately facing adverse consequences such as restricted job opportunities or ill-preparedness for their chosen career paths. Such sentiments underscore the urgent need for comprehensive reforms to address systemic challenges within the TVET sector and enhance graduates' employability prospects. Some participants argued that:

"Honestly, ever since I completed my NCV programme and internship, nothing has happened – just ngibhuza ekhaya (staying at home doing nothing) with my certificate. There was even one company that I went to that wanted to hire me. After realising that I did NCV, they asked me to leave my CV, and promised to call me should an opportunity arise. Today I am a living testimony of the kind of environment out there today. News bulletins echo this reality as if it's a fiction, but our economy is in the ICU, and no one is prepared to resuscitate it at all" (Amahle).

"Woza emzansi, ungafunda uze uzibulale kodwa amathuba awakho (Come to South Africa, you can study all you care, but there are no job opportunities for us), full stop. I have my official diploma, but I have never used it at all. Currently, I am working as a security guard to make ends meet. Rather than feel sorry for myself as a young professional, I decided to venture into security just to keep myself going, but I am not discouraged from looking for opportunities in office administration" (Pieter).

Many participants in the study acknowledge the harsh reality confronting TVET graduates, who find themselves in a precarious position due to the scarcity of job opportunities requiring trade tests and vocational training. This grim situation engenders frustration and disillusionment among young and recently graduated students, who perceive a lack of meaningful intervention to alleviate their predicament (Costley & Armsby, 2007). Participants express a sense of being misled into pursuing these qualifications, only to discover a dearth of opportunities upon completion. They contend that the government bears significant responsibility for reevaluating program designs and enticing investors to stimulate job creation. However, Mr. Mthombeni and Mr. Teddy, representing TVET colleges, refute these criticisms, asserting that their institutions adequately deliver the National Vocational Certificate (NVC) program, and attributing limited government efficacy in this regard (Costley & Armsby, 2007).

This challenging scenario can be traced back to the economic volatility experienced during the Zuma government, which has exacerbated the job market's fragility. The aftermath of this period has left a lasting impact, constraining opportunities for recent graduates seeking gainful employment (Costley & Armsby, 2007). Despite calls for governmental intervention and program redesign, the prevailing sentiment among participants suggests a deep-seated frustration with the lack of tangible solutions to address the fundamental issues underlying graduate unemployment in the TVET sector. This impasse underscores the urgent need for comprehensive policy reforms and targeted interventions to revitalize the economy and create avenues for meaningful employment for TVET graduates.

NCV certificate to pursue higher education and exposure

Another avenue pursued by graduates is to further their education by enrolling in higher education institutions to acquire additional qualifications and expand their professional networks, thereby enhancing their employability prospects. While graduates recognized the value of the National Certificate Vocational (NCV) curriculum and work-integrated learning (WIL) experiences in shaping their employment opportunities, they also acknowledged the need for supplementary measures. Participation in WIL programs not only equip graduates with practical skills but also facilitates networking opportunities with potential employers within their respective sectors (Costley & Armsby, 2007). The findings indicate that exposure to WBL/WIL often motivates participants to pursue further studies, with many tertiary institutions offering pathways for NCV graduates to advance their education. This sentiment is echoed by Amahle, who stated:

"Our background is the biggest barrier towards studying towards higher qualification. Once you graduate, more opportunities are available to proceed to universities or technikons to further your career. Indeed, every NCV graduate aspires to study at a university because of the opportunities available for such a student. We work hard to get a good grade in order to impress universities" (Amahle).

For some individuals, the primary objective is to pursue further studies to gain entry into universities, while others who lack the financial means capitalize on the networks forged through the National Certificate Vocational (NCV) experience to secure permanent or alternative employment opportunities. Matenda (2019) highlights the transformative role of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) in empowering students to unlock their potential and access higher education institutions. Consistent with this perspective, graduates adopt varied pathways, leveraging the NCV qualification either for tertiary education admission or for securing stable employment. Priority, an engineer, exemplifies this dual trajectory:

“During my spell at the civil engineering firm, I was exposed to endless opportunities to showcase my expertise to my immediate supervisors, and to my employers. In this interaction, I used to question them on many issues as part of my learning opportunity, but I was also trying to sell my skills as a potential committed employee” (Priority).

“As you can imagine, the company gave me the opportunity to showcase my skills. That was very significant for me, and to my best knowledge, I was able to do my best. But working closely with experienced colleagues somehow gives you the opportunity to ask many questions about what is expected of you to get noticed. and later be given the opportunity to work in this sector. But also, you are able to get to know other sectors aligned to your skills and experience” (Sandile).

Networking opportunities emerge as a primary focus for National Certificate Vocational (NCV) graduates, who leverage work-based learning (WBL/WIL) experiences to impress employers and position themselves favourably for future employment opportunities. Mrs. Fumani, serving as a champion, underscores that the path to employment is the predominant choice among graduates, with only a minority opting for further education. This emphasis on integrating learning into work experiences aligns with the evolving paradigm in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), as advocated by Kanwar, Balasubramanian, and Carr (2019), wherein TVET programs are reconfigured to accommodate lifelong learning principles. Indeed, this approach represents a transformative shift in TVET training, offering graduates valuable insights and skills acquisition within industrial settings.

Using the NCV for self-employment

The participants continued to reflect on other available options after graduating with an NCV. Entrepreneurship is taught at the TVET sector in passing as part of the Business Studies in the Economics and Business Management (EBM) and it is not made practical for students to consider it as an option once they have exited the sector. Considering the unemployment levels in this country, most participants used this qualification to start a small business. In other words, self-employment is the common trend post NCV qualification, but this significant alternative option gives those with critical skills a realistic chance of earning income. Mangestu (2017), in contrast to the high attention paid by the sector to self-employment, found that students instead preferred paid employment to self-employment. The engineering sector, clothing and textiles, for example, were identified by many participants as gateways to self-employment. Priority is given to students who graduated with an engineering NCV certificate and was able to explore available options outside formal employment post NCV qualification and started to open her backyard mechanic business. Several participants expressed their views to include

“I specialise in civil engineering work, as you can imagine. I did my internship with one of the most respected companies in this sector. After struggling for almost a year looking for a job opportunity in this sector, I decided to register my own engineering firm with government’s SETA. This direction has opened more opportunities to increase my base beyond the township to where my skills are needed. My NCV qualification helps me to tender for government jobs of different kinds with the civil engineering sectors” (Priority).

“Well, we as a TVET sector have to provide career guidance for graduates. At times we invite CEOs of companies and experts to workshop with our graduates about available options after the completion of their NCV programme. As you can imagine, there are various sectors in hospitality, transportation, engineering, agriculture and many more that have the potential to absorb or allow entrepreneurs to strive” (Mr Teddy).

According to participants, graduates take this route as a last resort, considering the rate of unemployment in many sectors. That is why Kraak, Peterson and Boka (2016) refer to this as divergent unintended outcomes across different sectors, and the lack of opportunity leads to chaos and desperation for graduates. Those in the hospitality sector were taking advantage of available opportunities in transportation, catering and servicing, the most popular private sectors, and also in tourism. It was clear that this option is a difficult one, as many of these graduates need start-up funds to be self-sufficient, and they have to start from scratch. Few graduates access skills funds from SETA to gain exposure and other opportunities that would not have been available if the support was not made available to them.

Conclusions

This article provides an in-depth critical synthesis of results based on the findings obtained from the fieldwork. It is clear that WBE is not effectively implemented because the programmes and pedagogies are not aligned with rural ecologies. On most campuses, it is just a paper exercise/theoretical assessment. A criticism of the NCV was confirmed by respondents in that in sending students out for workplace exposure, many industries seem not to understand how in-service training should be provided to support student education. The college managers stressed the importance of WBE for students. However, poor planning and management of curriculum by college management results in the vision for WBE, action plans and college WBE strategy not being fully

implemented. Another alarming finding was the lack of monitoring and evaluation of WBE. As WBE is part of the NCV curriculum structure, it must be assessed and monitored. The shortage of host-employers was another reason for the failure to fully implement the NCV. WBE is designed specifically for students, little or none is done to enforce WIL programmes for Lecturers especially those in Engineering Studies field. With technological advancement, lecturers must be on par or keep abreast with such developments for them to be relevant. Since the NCV curriculum is relatively new, training is necessary for implementers to learn how the component works. Lack of full support from college management and WBE officers in the central office makes implementing this component extremely difficult.

Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) holds significant importance for Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) lecturers, serving as a bridge between theoretical knowledge and practical application in vocational education (Kruss & Letseka, 2009). Engaging in WIL experiences allows TVET lecturers to gain firsthand insight into industry practices, technological advancements, and employer expectations, enhancing their pedagogical approaches and curriculum development strategies (Kruss, McGrath, & Petersen, 2011). By participating in WIL initiatives, TVET lecturers can better align their teaching methodologies with the evolving needs of the workforce, ensuring that students are adequately prepared for the demands of the job market (Wadesango, Machingambi, & Maphosa, 2017). Furthermore, WIL enables TVET lecturers to establish valuable partnerships with industry stakeholders, fostering collaboration and knowledge exchange that enriches both academic and practical domains (James, Kraemer-Mbula, & Souitaris, 2012). Lecturers should have opportunities to question their specific practices based on their experience. The notion of power and privilege should be changed to service needy rural students. A history of neglect characterises the realities of skill deficiency, classism and other forms of prejudice. By questioning and examining dominant worldviews and ways of seeing leadership in these TVET colleges and introducing alternative perspectives of employment opportunities for TVET college students, such as a living-systems paradigm, students can begin to expand their understanding of vocational education. As the WBE component and the TVET sector are new, constant training must be conducted to assist college employees to fully understand the sector as a whole, as well as the NCV components. According to Ajani (2023), the significance of regular and appropriate professional development enhances classroom practices of educators and also the students' performance.

Another concern that was evident from the findings is that WBE officers based in central offices are not visible on campuses to give necessary support to the campus management and WBE champions. It was evident that there is a need not only to maintain strong ties with existing host-employers, but also to ensure that new host-employers are recruited to help address the shortage of places for students to do their workplace learning. The study recommends that there should be a clear vision for the implementation of WBE in the rural context, and that the vision should be communicated to all role players to ensure effective implementation of the programme.

Acknowledgement

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, Methodology, Data Collection, Formal Analysis, Writing—Original Draft Preparation, Writing—Review And Editing by authors with equal participation. All authors have read and agreed to the published the final version of the manuscript.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Ethical review and approval were obtained for this study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

- Ajani, O. A. (2023). Exploring the Alignment of Professional Development and Classroom Practices in African Contexts: A Discursive Investigation. *Journal of Integrated Elementary Education*, 3(2), 120-136.
- Ajani, O.A. (2018). Needs for the in-service professional development of teachers to improve students' academic performance in Sub-Saharan Africa. *Arts and Social Sciences Journal*, 9, 330. <https://doi.org/10.4172/2151-6200.1000330>.
- Ajani, O.A. (2019). Understanding Teachers as Adult Learners in Professional Development Activities for Enhanced Classroom Practices. *AFFRIKA Journal of Politics, Economics and Society*, 9 (2), 195-208. <https://doi.org/10.31920/2075-6534/2019/9n2a10>.
- Arani, M.R.S., Alagamandan, J., & Tourani, H. (2004). Work-based learning: A practical approach for learning to work and working to learn. A case study on decision-makers' professional development in Iran. In: *Challenges in Teaching & Learning in Higher Education*, Edited by Victor M. S. Gil; Isabel Alarcao & Hans Hooghoff, Portugal: Portugal University Press, pp.131-146.
- Association for Career and Technical Education (ACTE). (2015). *National Policy Seminar (NPS) Report*, March 2-4, Washington, DC.
- Barbour, R. (2014). Analysing focus groups. In U. Flick, *The SAGE handbook of qualitative data analysis* (pp. 313-326). London: SAGE
- Barlow, Z., & Stone, M. (2011). Living systems and leadership: Cultivating conditions for institutional change. *Journal of Sustainability Education*, 2(1), 1-29.
- Boud, D. (2000). Sustainable assessment: Rethinking assessment for the learning society. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 27(2), 151-167.

- Bourn, D., Hunt, F., Blum, F., & Lawson, H. (2016). *Primary education for global learning and sustainability*. York: Cambridge Primary Review Trust.
- Cherry, K. (2014). *Kolb's theory of learning*. Available at: <http://www.Psychology.about.com/od/educationalPsychology/a/experiential-learning.html>. [Accessed 22 May 2020].
- Chisholm, L. (2008) The meaning of racial redress in South African schools, 1994 to 2006. In: Habib, A., & Bentley, K. (eds.). *Racial redress & citizenship in South Africa*. Cape Town: HSRC Press. 230-262.
- Chisholm, L. (2008) The meaning of racial redress in South African schools, 1994 to 2006. In: Habib, A., & Bentley, K. (eds.). *Racial redress & citizenship in South Africa*. Cape Town: HSRC Press. 230-262.
- Costley, C., & Armsby, P. (2007). Work-based learning assessed as a field or a mode of study. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 32(1), 21-33.
- Creswell, J. (2014). *Research design* (4th ed.). New Delhi: SAGE.
- Čustović, H., Kovačević, Z., & Tvica, M. (2014). Rural ecology. *Agrokémia és Talajtan*, 63(2), 433-434. doi: 10.1556/Agrokem.63.2014.2.22
- Department of Higher Education and Training. (2012). *Green paper for post-schooling education and training*. Pretoria: Government Printer.
- Department of Higher Education and Training. (2013a). *Delivery agreement 2*. Pretoria: DHET.
- Department of Higher Education and Training. (2013b). *National skills development strategy III*. Pretoria: Government Printer.
- Department of Higher Education and Training. (2013c). *White paper for post-schooling education*. Pretoria: DHET.
- Dewey, J. (1910). *How we think*. Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath.
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. New York: Macmillan.
- Dochy, F., Gijbels, D., Segers, M., & van der Bossche, P. (2011). *Theories of learning for the workplace. Building blocks for training and professional development programs*. London: Routledge.
- Field, S., Musset, P., & Álvarez-Galván, J.L. (2017). *Skills beyond school review of South Africa*. OECD Reviews of Vocational Education and Training. Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.
- Hakuna, R., Kamin, Y.B., & Buntat, Y.B. (2019). Understanding work-based learning in technical and vocational education and training in Nigeria, *International Journal of Recent Technology and Engineering (IJRTE)*, 8(1), May 2019.
- Hesse-Biber, S.N., & Leavy, P. (2011). *The practice of qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- James, G., Kraemer-Mbula, E., & Souitaris, V. (2012). Social capital and value creation in university–industry collaborations. *Journal of Engineering and Technology Management*, 29(3), 386–399.
- Kanwar, A., Balasubramanian K., & Carr, A. (2019). Changing the TVET paradigm: New models for lifelong learning, *International Journal of Training Research*, 17(sup1), 54–68. doi: 10.1080/14480220.2019.1629722
- Kraak, A., Peterson, A., & Boka, K. (2016). *Change management in TVET colleges: Lessons learned from the field practice*. Johannesburg: Jet Education Services.
- Kruss, G., & Letseka, M. (2009). *African students' access to and success in higher education: A study of Nine African countries*. Stellenbosch: African Minds.
- Kruss, G., McGrath, S., & Petersen, I. (2011). The social shaping of community engagement policy in South African higher education. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 25(3), 549–562.
- Le Grange, L. (2014). *Education research*. B.Ed. Hons reader. Stellenbosch: SUN Media.
- Lester, S., & Costley, C. (2010). Work-based learning at higher education level: Value, practice, and critique. *Studies in Higher Education*, 35(5), 561-575.
- Maguire, M., & Delahunt, B. (2017). Doing a thematic analysis: A practical step-by-step guide for learning and teaching scholars. *All Ireland Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 8(3), 3351-3365.
- Malale, M., & Sentsho, L. (2014). Perceptions of rural further education and training (FET) college students towards placement at small, medium, and micro enterprises (SMMES): The South African rural perspective. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, 5(20), 683-691.
- Maree, J. G. (2014). Poverty and life designing. In L. Nota & J. Rossier (Eds), *Handbook of the life design paradigm: From practice to theory* (pp. 233-248). Boston, MA: Hogrefe.
- Matenda, S. (2019). *The role of technical and vocational education and training in women's empowerment: A capabilities perspective*, Unpublished PhD thesis, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein.
- Mengistu, M. (2017). Graduate employability as a foundation of career decision in the Amhara State TVET system. *Ethiopian Journal of Education and Sciences*, 13(1), 1-21.
- Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S.J. (2013). The entrapment of Africa within the global colonial matrices of power: Eurocentrism, coloniality, and deimperialization in the twenty-first century. *Journal of Developing Societies*, 29(4), 331-353.
- Paterson, A., Keevy, J., & Boka, K. (2017). *Exploring a work-based values approach in South African TVET colleges to improve employability of youth: A literature review*. Johannesburg: JET Education Services.
- Rand Afrikaans University. (2002). *Department of Nursing – PHC: Clinical nursing, diagnosis, treatment, and care*. Study Guide. Johannesburg.
- Satterly, D. (1987). *The Oxford companion to the mind*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Sibiya, A.T., & Nyembezi, N. (2018). Examining factors that shape technical vocational education and training engineering students' understanding of their career choices, *Transformation in Higher Education*, 3(0), a33.
- Sidorsky, D. (1977). *John Dewey: The essential writings*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Stats SA (2019c). *Quarterly labour force survey, the fourth quarter of 2019*. Electronic database. available at: www.statssa.gov.za [Accessed November 2019].
- Tennant, M. (2006). *Psychology and adult learning* (3rd ed.). London: Routledge.
- Wadesango, N., Machingambi, S., & Maphosa, C. (2017). Perceptions of lecturers on the work-integrated learning strategy in selected polytechnics in Zimbabwe. *International Journal of Educational Sciences*, 14(1), 13–20.
- With many tongues. (2010, 16-22 April). *Mail & Guardian*, p. 4.
- Wu, W., & Luo, Y. (2016). Pedagogy and assessment of student learning in BIM and sustainable design and construction. *Journal of Information Technology in Construction (ITcon)*, Special issue: 9th AiC BIM Academic Symposium & Job Task Analysis Review Conference, 21, 218-232.
- Yin, R.K. (2017). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th Ed.). London: SAGE.

Publisher's Note: SSBFNET stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



© 2024 by the authors. Licensee SSBFNET, Istanbul, Turkey. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

International Journal of Research in Business and Social Science (2147-4478) by SSBFNET is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.