
Factors that influence the employability of National Certificate (Vocational) graduates: The case of a rural TVET college in the Eastern Cape province, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Enhancing the employability of National Certificate (Vocational) NC(V) graduates in South Africa is important. If NC(V) graduates are not employable, this has a negative impact on both the local economy and the future prospects of these young adults. Yet, national data show high youth unemployment rates which includes those with NC(V) qualifications. The factors that influence the employability of these graduates – particularly in the rural areas of South Africa – are not well documented. This study therefore explored the factors that influence NC(V) graduates' employability by means of a case study at a rural TVET college in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. The case focused on recent NC(V) graduates' perceptions of their own employability and also on input from lecturers in selected NC(V) programmes and potential employers in the study area. Semi-structured interviews were conducted. The findings indicate that negative stakeholder perceptions exist about the employability of NC(V) graduates in the study context, which was a major factor in determining these graduates' employment prospects. Furthermore, there have been no attempts to strengthen relations between the particular vocational institution and the local employment industry included in the study. The TVET college was hampered by poor planning, while prospective employers had limited awareness of the NC(V) curriculum and its objectives. These factors underscore the dissatisfaction among rural stakeholders with the employability of NC(V) graduates in the study context.

KEYWORDS

Employability; NC(V) graduates; vocational education; TVET college

Introduction

Recent statistics indicate that, in the first quarter of 2019, approximately 6.2 million people in South Africa were recorded as being unemployed, while the statistics in the second quarter showed that the figure had risen to 6.7 million (StatsSA, 2019). Rogan and Reynolds (2016) contend that poor employment prospects (especially for black students) result from an inadequate schooling system in South Africa. Such a lack of educational preparation for employment has a knock-on effect on post-school skills acquisition and development, even though post-school education is often seen as a vehicle for gaining employment. The TVET colleges are not immune to this knock-on effect: obtaining a qualification from such a higher education institution does not necessarily translate into automatic employment for NC(V) graduates of their programmes. National data highlight the current high levels of youth unemployment (StatsSA, 2019), even for those with vocational qualifications (Pauw, Bhorat, Goga, Ncube & Van Der Westhuizen, 2006). Vocational education is meant to form a cornerstone of the national economy, as it is intended to provide the skilled artisans that should drive economic growth and sustainability in the production and service sectors (Mukora, 2008; Field, Musset & Álvarez-Galván, 2014). Problems related to the employability of vocational education graduates are even more acute in rural settings, where employment opportunities are limited and the scale of local economies is much smaller than in urban environments. Notional policy envisaged that the NC(V) would resolve these issues, at least in part.

The NC(V) programme was introduced in South African TVET colleges in 2007 and is listed as one of the 10 National Qualifications Framework (NQF) levels in South Africa.¹ In part, the aim of the NC(V) curriculum is to develop skills as outlined by the National Skills Development Strategy III (DHET, 2014:9). However, South Africa is challenged, on the one hand, by a shortage of skilled personnel, with nearly 829 000 vacant posts waiting to be filled (Sharp, 2014) and, on the other, by a high rate of unemployment prevalent among the youth (Needham & Papier, 2011).

The NC(V) curriculum was designed partly to deal with the skills shortages caused by the migration of skilled workers to other developed nations. McGrath, Badroodien, Kraak and Unwin (2004) suggest that there is a need for South Africa to attempt to retain skilled individuals within its borders while at the same time increasing workplace learnerships. Yet the programme does not seem to have attracted interest from school-leavers, businesses and the public at large owing to a lack of communication and of links to employability (Umalusi, 2009).

1 NQF Levels 1 to 4 are equivalent to school Grades 9 to 12 and include vocational training. NQF Levels 5 to 7 are more relevant and are equivalent to diplomas and technical qualifications, whereas NQF Levels 8 to 10 are equivalent to university degrees (Republic of South Africa, 2008). The Level 4 certificate, which is basically equivalent to Grade 12, is rated as the lowest qualification for gaining access to jobs and industry, ranking below even diplomas and technical qualifications.

Taylor, Servage and Hamm (2014) highlight the trend that students choose to follow an academic rather than a vocational education as a result of factors that include the impossibility of being accredited for the National Senior Certificate (NSC) qualification, which then forces students to start at NC(V) level 2.² In addition, the low national throughput rate of 4% as recorded in 2009, and 34% in 2014 (a substantial improvement but not meeting the average national target of 57%), translates into a high failure rate, a low graduation rate and a high dropout rate (at around 6%) (DHET, 2015). These factors add to possible negative stakeholder perceptions about the NC(V) programme and contribute to the factors influencing graduate (non-)employability.

The alignment of the NC(V) curriculum to the NQF levels has, in addition, a limited bearing on the rural setting in which the study was situated. Although no single vocational subject or course accounts for the formation of employability skills, the integration of all the NC(V) subjects makes the acquisition of those skills possible.³ The Eastern Cape rural town where the reported study was conducted is not immune to the triple challenges of inequality, poverty and unemployment that are being experienced nationwide. The local TVET college consists of four former colleges that were merged and has a total student population of 3 370. On the campus where the study was conducted, 840 students were registered, of whom 370 had enrolled for the NC(V) programme. These students were divided among the Generic Management (n = 120), Marketing Management (n = 152), and Information Technology (n = 98) subprogrammes.

The infrastructure of the town is rural and underdeveloped, with limited industry capacity to absorb NC(V) graduates. Livestock subsistence farming is common in the area, which relies mostly on this form of agriculture as its contribution to the local economy. It might be expected that this agricultural focus would feature in the programme

2 The NC(V) comprises three levels (L2, 3 and 4 of the NQF), which is an alternative learning pathway to Grades 10, 11 and 12 of the academic schooling system (DHET, 2013). All the NQF Levels 2, 3 and 4 consist of three fundamental subjects, namely English First Additional Language, Life Orientation, and Mathematical Literacy or Mathematics, in addition to four vocational subjects. In order to be certificated at the exit L4, students must have satisfied the basic requirements of passing the seven subjects for each level and also the compulsory Integrated Summative Assessment Tasks (ISAT), which constitute the practical component of the vocational subjects. Since the NC(V) is equivalent to the further education and training (FET) phase in public schools (L2 = Grade 10; L3 = Grade 11 and L4 = Grade 12), it creates the false impression that NC(V) graduates are matriculants. NC(V) students enrol for the programmes when they have completed Grade 9 and are expected to complete the programme in three years. Most students who are recruited into NC(V) programmes are those who passed Grade 12 with a school-leaving certificate, who failed Grade 11 or 12, or who passed Grade 10 but wish to develop vocational career paths.

The qualification is positioned at the interface between basic (school) and higher education. Although it offers an alternative vocationally oriented pathway to completing secondary school, it is positioned in the technical and vocational education system, which nationally resorts under the higher education and training ministry.

3 For example, fundamental subjects such as English First Additional Language, Mathematical Literacy/Mathematics and Life Orientation add employability skills and personal attributes to students' knowledge. Each of these fundamental subjects has a specific purpose: English Language was designed to enable graduates to apply language in practice, such as writing minutes of meetings, letters and summaries; Mathematics or Mathematical Literacy affords graduates the skills of handling the finances of institutions; while Life Orientation provides graduates with the personal development skills that emanate from understanding attitudes and values.

offering of the local TVET college, as it may facilitate a closer link between the college, the community and related industries as well as offer students opportunities for practical work experience and eventual employment; yet this was not the case at the time when the study was conducted.

The town and the surrounding district also offer very limited opportunities for internships to TVET students upon completing their theoretical component of the available NC(V) programmes. Statistics show that, in the 2013 and 2014 academic years, 73% of NC(V) graduates from the programmes included in this study (Business Studies (Marketing Management and Generic Management) and Engineering Studies (Information Technology)) had not been employed, neither were they participating in the work-based experience (WBE) programme or in internships. Therefore, only 27% of NC(V) graduates from that period were working. Of those graduates who could not find placements, 53% returned to various TVET colleges and private colleges to study further in order to obtain a diploma qualification. Our intention was to investigate whether the courses included in this study matched the economic conditions of the town and district in which the study is situated.

To achieve the objective of employability, what remains as a final step is the initial entry to employment opportunities, which may not be feasible without buy-in from employers, lecturers and the NC(V) graduates themselves.

Since little is known about the factors that influence the employability of the NC(V) graduates in the study setting, the following research question informed the study:

What factors influence the employability of NC(V) graduates from a rural technical and vocational education and training college?

Even though the study took place in a particular context and the results are therefore not generalisable beyond the study setting, they do provide us with a rare insight into the factors influencing vocational-graduate employability in a rural locale – a phenomenon which is currently not well documented.

Factors influencing employability: Perspectives from the literature

Yorke (2006) defines 'employability' as a set of achievements that comprise skills, understanding and personal attributes which make individuals more likely to secure employment and be successful in their chosen occupation to the benefit of themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy. Employability therefore does not depend on the acquisition of a single skill and/or knowledge set, but is rather a multilayered concept influenced by a variety of stakeholders, including the individual candidate and prospective employers, as well as the educational content, context and opportunities. Employability is multifaceted in that it may be internal (it involves the academic performance, ambitions and confidence of students) (Hooley, 2017; Harry, Chinyamurindi & Mjoli, 2018) and/or

external (it involves institutional reputation, credibility and the demand in a field of study) (Paterson, 2017).

The factors that influence employability can be conceptualised as those that relate to (a) the individual graduate, (b) the educational policy, (c) curriculum design and implementation, and (d) the role employers and industry play in developing graduate employability – in addition to the complex interaction between these factors. This conceptualisation is in line with the findings of other studies on the factors that influence employability. In a Malaysian study, Dania, Bakar and Mohamed (2014) identified graduates' self-concept, participation in career-development opportunities, and industrial training as the most notable factors in the acquisition of employability skills. Munishi (2016) found that poor foundational education, ineffective curricula, incompetent lecturers, a lack of general knowledge and a lack of career guidance, coupled with unfavourable educational policies and reforms, were factors that contributed to vocational graduates not developing employability skills in the Tanzanian context.

Graduates have a responsibility to develop skills that will eventually enable them to find employment. Low, Botes, De La Rue and Allen (2016) list the individual employability skills that are required to enter the job market as:

- Communication;
- Problem-solving;
- Decision-making;
- Analytical and critical thinking;
- Synthesising information;
- Teamwork; and
- Interpersonal and continuous learning.

Hoyles, Wolf, Molyneux-Hodgson and Kent (2000) add to these necessary skills for employability:

- Basic literacy and numeracy skills;
- Management skills; and
- Work ethic.

With the advent of the so-called Fourth Industrial Revolution, such skills are becoming ever-more important in fast-changing workplaces that increasingly rely on mechanised (and digitised rather than human) interfaces and demand employee flexibility (World Economic Forum, 2017). Both employers and graduates expect that such skills will be developed during their education to enable the latter group to find suitable employment (Rosenberg, Heimler & Morote, 2012).

Despite the explicit introduction of skills-for-employment into vocational education programmes, studies have shown that graduates are not always able to operationalise such

skills in a workplace context (Roshan & Shrestha, 2016). Graduates' inability to do so limits their employability and may lead to an overall negative perception about the employability of such graduates.

Graduates' ability to operationalise and translate learnt knowledge and skills into the workplace is therefore a factor that is likely to influence their employability. Graduates may also create self-bias in their employability and employment by choosing specific kinds of job they would like to be offered, based on the expected salaries and their attitudes to work (Sirat & Shuib, 2012). This could mean that, if graduates are too selective in their job search, they may remain unemployed, with little or no prospect of employment because of their narrow skill set (Pauw et al., 2006).

Educational policy is a further factor that may influence graduate employability. In South Africa, measures to empower NC(V) graduates with employability skills should be considered as a national imperative towards social justice and concretising South Africa's democracy. Through the formulation and development of sound policy, the government is expected to establish and encourage a stronger and more cooperative relationship between education and training institutions and the workplace (DHET, 2013) so that employers can give direction regarding what is required by industry.

The TVET sector, for its part, must ensure that NC(V) graduates exit their study programmes as employable. Such an employability factor should be aligned to government policies that should be enacted to drive industries towards increasing employment opportunities (Berntson & Marklund, 2007) and subsequent inclusion for these graduates. Yet, employability skills development in vocational education still does not emphasise the development of creativity and innovation (Rampersad & Patel, 2014) as part of a holistic learner-centred pedagogical approach (Pegg, Waldorf, Hendy-Isaac & Lawton, 2012). According to Wittekind, Raeder and Grote (2010), the higher the qualifications graduates possess, the greater the employment opportunities they have. As the NC(V) qualification is at the NQF exit Level 4, it is only equivalent to a Grade 12 qualification, even though graduates may have obtained valuable vocational skills. This is clearly insufficient to enhance employability.

These persisting challenges are deeply rooted in a curriculum design that is considered to be obsolete and heavily reliant on theory without offering genuine practical activities (Tymon, 2013); instead, students simply participate in simulation exercises during their practical lessons. The NC(V) curriculum appears also not to have been designed to offer apprenticeship possibilities that would provide appropriate theoretical training, practical skills development and the work experience required by employers (Taylor, 2011). Often, job advertisements state that candidates should have a minimum of two years' experience in order to qualify for possible selection. For this reason, a lack of practical experience has become a hindrance to NC(V) graduates who are seeking to obtain initial employment. This situation may be exacerbated by the belief that the national curriculum produces vocational graduates of low quality, as was reported by McGrath and Akoojee (2009).

The needs and perceptions of prospective employers also have to be factored in when considering the employability of graduates, because employers put in place measures that aim to attract and assemble the most productive workforce, for which they require competent and experienced individuals. Internships and apprenticeships are often ways in which employers contribute to future graduate employability, and they often serve as a long-term recruitment mechanism. In systems where these mechanisms are not well developed, Weligamage (2014) argues, even though graduates may have the appropriate qualifications to enhance their employability, they may lack the practical work experience that has to supplement employability skills and would put them in a better position to seek and gain employment.

But negative perceptions make prospective employers reluctant to appoint inexperienced graduates either temporarily or permanently. The status quo of NC(V) graduates' lack of employability remains problematic because of employers' preferences for recruiting graduates who have gained workplace experience: they value experience more than formal credentials (Wolf, 2011). The reality is that employers prefer to offer employment to graduates with NQF Level 5 and higher; given this preference, NC(V) graduates who have only an NQF Level 4 qualification are perceived as being less qualified, which is supported by the negative perception that NC(V) graduates' qualifications are below the minimum requirements for employment.

Research methodology

This study focused on an exploration of the factors that may influence NC(V) graduate employability in a rural South African setting. A case study methodology was employed in this study, as it afforded us the opportunity to explore and describe a phenomenon using a variety of data sources (Baxter & Jack, 2008). A series of semi-structured interviews was conducted with a sample of six NC(V) graduate returnees to the college involved in the National Accredited Technical Diploma (NATED) programmes (n = 6), three NC(V) lecturers (n = 3), and four local employer representatives (n = 4). The interviews were conducted with the six NC(V) graduates, the three NC(V) lecturers and the four local employer representatives at a rural TVET college in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. The participants included graduates of Business Studies (Marketing Management and Generic Management) and Engineering Studies (Information Technology). The rest of the participants were selected from the lecturer cohort and business employer representatives operating in the local municipality. Purposive sampling was used to select the participants for the interviews (n = 13). The interviews were recorded and transcribed, after which the coding of the data was done and themes and categories were developed by means of content analysis (Saldaña, 2013).

The use of interviews as a data-collection method was important because it allowed for deeper probing in order to obtain rich data. In order to get a broader sense of analysing data, content analysis is defined as a technique applied in making replicable and valid inferences

from texts to the functionality of its contexts (Krippendorff, 2004). In this study, the four stages of content analysis as described by Bengtsson (2016) were followed, including:

- Decontextualisation;
- Recontextualisation;
- Categorisation; and
- Compilation.

At the beginning or the first stage, the researchers need to familiarise themselves with the data, meaning that they have to read the transcribed text repeatedly to get a sense of the whole phenomenon. The researcher is then able to link the problem in the manner that it was observed through the participants' responses, which ultimately leads to findings and possible solutions. Bengtsson (2016) shows that further reading is undertaken together with the complete list of meaning units, and it has to be borne in mind that all aspects of the data are important, including unmarked texts. The researcher has to focus firmly on the information that aligns to the research aims and discard that which is of lesser value. At this stage, the categories are well created or formulated, while the meaning units have to be condensed (Bengtsson, 2016) without obscuring or eliminating the main or core message. It therefore becomes appropriate to group responses according to each question, which makes it possible for themes and categories to be identified accurately. The aim of the researcher should be to explore the manner in which the participants made sense of their experiences and to transform such experiences into consciousness (Bengtsson, 2016). In the process, the researcher has to reduce the levels of bias.

To strengthen the findings in this study, document analysis complemented the interviews. Bowen (2009) defines document analysis as a systematic procedure conducted with the aim of reviewing or evaluating documents that may have been produced in printed or electronic material form. O'Leary (2014) recommends an eight-step planning process for document analysis, a process that was followed in the present study. Such planning process includes:

- creating a list of relevant texts to explore;
- considering how texts will be accessed, with attention being given to linguistic or cultural barriers;
- acknowledging and addressing biases;
- developing appropriate analysis skills;
- considering strategies for ensuring credibility;
- knowing the data one is searching for;
- considering ethical issues, e.g. the confidentiality of documents; and
- having a back-up plan if documents are unavailable.

The reason for using document analysis is to evaluate documents in a manner that will ultimately produce and develop empirical knowledge (Bowen, 2009). The documents we

included were derived from the Business and Engineering Studies and Marketing, Generic Management and Information Technology NC(V) programmes. The inclusion of these documents confirmed whether all six NC(V) graduate respondents qualified for second admission to the NATED programmes. The last documents to be considered for document analysis were progression and/or promotional policies, because these addressed the issue of qualification for another grade.⁴

The participants' rights were protected, their informed consent was obtained, and institutional permission and ethical clearance were also obtained.

Results and discussion

Our initial conceptualisation of the factors that may influence vocational graduate employability – including (a) the individual graduate, (b) the educational policy context, (c) curriculum design and implementation, and (d) the role of employers and industry – was used to structure the results and discussion.

Factors related to the individual graduate

The data suggest that there is a continuing lack of available information on the potential contribution that NC(V) qualifications can make to the job market, as the following student response indicates:

I think people are still uneducated about the NC(V) or the value of the NC(V) certificate..⁵

Graduates would appreciate acquiring knowledge and skills during their TVET college studies not only to help them survive, but also to give them the wherewithal to become astute business people, as indicated in the response below:

My studies would assist me to open my own company, becoming my own boss and having people work for me. As an entrepreneur, I would be able to create and design business ideas, develop items that can be sold to the public or companies and make a profit.

4 Although the progression policies at the vocational institutions do not directly deal with employability, they do implicitly highlight the predicament NC(V) graduates are faced with, as these graduates do not qualify for many positions that require a vocational qualification. In order to qualify for such positions, they need to improve their qualifications, which necessitates their reregistering for the NATED programmes that, on completion, lead to a national diploma. In addition, NC(V) graduates are unable to gain access to workplaces for the purpose of on-the-job training, which is often viewed as a determinant of employability (Wolf, 2011). For these NC(V) graduates, it is considered quite important to register for NATED programmes that allow them workplace experience; and, to achieve this, they must have completed NC(V) L4 with all seven subjects passed, including three fundamental and four vocational subjects.

5 Note: English was not the first language of many of the interviewees. Their responses were captured and reported here verbatim, and may therefore not be linguistically correct.

The responses by graduate participants suggest that they feel they are doomed to failure. They pin their hopes on returning to the vocational institutions to register for the NATED programmes as the only means of survival. Graduates expressed anger towards the system and the curriculum, leading to the sentiments expressed below:

For a person to go there it is a waste of time and you spend three years doing something that is not recognised by department and companies. Officials in the department say I'm not qualified to be employed by the department because I'm having Grade 12.

I won't encourage anyone who passed Grade 12 to enrol for the NC(V).

I didn't see any opportunities.

I realised that there is not much job opportunities available for people who have completed NC(V) L4.

I didn't see any opportunities; there are fewer adverts indicating L4 qualifications.

However, they still maintained that NC(V) programmes remained relevant and distinguished them from their counterparts who completed the National Senior Certificate (NSC) in public high schools. But they did advocate additional programmes to reduce the mismatch between the skills they acquired and those demanded by the local job market:

NC(V) should not be dismissed. Instead, it should continue with more programmes being added, such as basic nursing, and this could allow students to have more options and be employable.

Akoobhai (2015) reported that 94% of the students concerned felt that workplace experience should be included as part of the NC(V) programme after their work-based learning experience. This idea was also present in the responses received from the interviewed graduates:

We would rather choose the NATED because they qualified with N6 plus the experience spent preparing for the trade test certificate and the experience is that it happens in [the] real work environment, where companies want to see quality production.

This view of the graduate participant aligns with that of McQuaid (2006), who argues that graduates can enter the workplace with the wrong skills and too little spatial mobility, leading to a spatial–skills mismatch problem. For this reason, NC(V) graduates will either remain lingering around their communities or return to the TVET colleges. This, according to Burchardt (2005), leads to early adult life often being beset with frustration, disappointment and reduced confidence in the strength they would have brought into the labour market because their career aspirations have not translated into prospective employment opportunities.

Factors related to educational policy

Among the stakeholders interviewed, including the NC(V) students, the NC(V) lecturers and the employers' representatives, there are questions as to who is responsible for ensuring that NC(V) graduates possess the skills and knowledge necessary for employability. Proposals were put forward to suggest that the role of skills acquisition remain each country's responsibility to achieve through national policies that strengthen the ability of workers to adapt to changing market demands (ILO, 2010) and that this may not exclude NC(V) graduates as prospective seekers of employment.

The South African Department of Trade and Industry's growth strategy for the country includes a focus on broadening participation, equity, and access to redress for all economic citizens, particularly those who were previously marginalised (DTI, 2007). However, the findings of the present study suggest that these policy goals have not been met in the particular context where the study was conducted. In order to enhance NC(V) graduates' employability, it is suggested that the companies and businesses in the local district municipality that are interested in doing business with the government should at the very least have NC(V) graduates in their employ. This would ensure that NC(V) graduates find employment opportunities locally rather than having to relocate, as is suggested below:

Every government institution should be forced to take a number of NC(V) graduates to actually employ some of them as part of their intake on a year-to-year basis; and also that government should be the first to identify capability of their students.

None of the government departments and private-sector employers indicated at any stage of the interviews that they create job opportunities for the NC(V) graduates. The intention of the DHET (2013) to create a stronger and more cooperative relationship between education and training institutions and the workplace appears to be a positive move, but the reality is that it is difficult to find workplaces for the NC(V) graduates. The benefits of a post-school education and training system that is responsive to the needs of individual citizens and of employers both in the public and the private sectors, and achieves broader societal and developmental objectives, appear to be no more than an ideal, a pipedream, at present.

Factors related to curriculum design and implementation

The lecturers interviewed indicated that neither the government nor potential employers understood what the NC(V) was about:

... this means that government departments have no clue as to what is happening in the NC(V) programmes.

... seemingly, some employers have no idea about NC(V); they don't understand what L4 is, unlike when you talk of Report 191 (NATED).

Employability skills were particularly hard to acquire in the studied context because – as the graduates themselves pointed out – the materials for practice and for assessment purposes were not timeously available, meaning that practice became a once-off event, as indicated below:

The ISAT, which is the practical component to hone the skills required, is instead used for an examination component serving the progression purpose only.

Lecturers are bearing the burden of teaching students under these difficult conditions and it would seem there is not sufficient time to teach all the theoretical and practical components. While lecturers have to be commended for trying, that initial training for a single lifetime qualification may not be enough, because the education and training systems of the future require flexibility and should be preparing graduates for lifelong learning (ILO, 2018). This view is completely undermined as long as, during students' practical activities, simulation remains the only method of keeping students abreast of current industry practices and also accumulating marks. As a result, students feel short-changed because they cannot undertake real practical assignments on their own. This was evident from what a student respondent pointed out:

We observe, with little chance for us to work on the computer, as to learn how to fix the computer.

Lecturers concede that it is practically impossible for NC(V) students to do the theory and practical components simultaneously, given the demands of the NC(V) curriculum. Low national NC(V) results (between a 5% and a 7% pass rate recorded between 2011 and 2013, according to the DHET, 2012) add to the problem of negative perceptions of the NC(V) curriculum, leaving graduates with limited future job prospects and the aspiration to re-enrol for NATED programmes instead, as stated by a student:

We would rather choose the NATED because they qualified with N6 plus the experience spent preparing for the trade test certificate; and the experience is that it happens in a real work environment where companies want to see quality production.

King and McGrath (2004) asserted that the TVET sector is diverse in its character and has the potential to integrate young people into the world of work, but concluded that the lack of resources leads to cuts in the volume of training provided in public institutions. As a result, the inadequacies affect the quality of the training owing to insufficient teaching and learning methods that may be used for the practical teaching; these inadequacies also affect the skills needed for the world of work (Dasmani, 2011).

Factors related to the role of employers and industry

Employers are conscious of their business reputation, but also emphasise the need to minimise costs and ensure a profit. To establish good institutional relations regarding NC(V) graduates' employability, a work setting that enables learning must be devised to enable graduates to

meet the requirements and needs of the employers for a flexible and adaptive workforce (Singh & Singh, 2008). Prospective employees would also benefit from this arrangement in that they would network with relevant human resource officers, who could offer free services such as creating professional curricula vitae for candidates and also providing advice on how to answer interview questions (Dacre & Sewell, 2007). This, unfortunately, is not the case for the NC(V) graduates in this case study, as employers pointed out a disjuncture between the training background and the actual workplace learning environment when placing students. For example, one employer noted:

We have students who passed [the] Human Resource (HR) programme [and] we end up letting them do [the] cashiering duties of cashier or [till] operator of our supermarket.

Such a disjuncture calls for the TVET college to consider making adjustments that would enable students to spend longer periods in workplaces gaining real practical experience rather than being put through simulated exercises in a classroom. Employer representatives revealed the weaknesses of the curriculum, and also the government's failure to communicate and articulate the objectives of the NC(V) programmes. Employers are core stakeholders in the employability setting and, in this regard, they may not wish to employ graduates from a programme they know little about – which is another aspect of the employability problem. According to Wyatt and Oswalt (2013), employers value professional maturity among undergraduate students. However, since the exit L4 of the NC(V) curriculum is equivalent to a Grade 12 qualification, employers may be reluctant to offer such graduates employment because of a suspicion of less professional maturity that could cloud any abilities, knowledge and skills that NC(V) graduates may possess.

Employers' lack of understanding of what NC(V) programmes entail poses a permanent barrier and places a stigma on the NC(V) graduates, which leads some of them to re-register for the higher-level NATED programmes instead. According to Hooley (2017), a better comprehension of employability presents graduates with a chance to acknowledge their potential and the skills, attitudes and knowledge required by society, including those required by prospective employment workstations. In response to this challenge, NC(V) graduates need to ensure that they possess knowledge of the employment sector and, as one lecturer put it, they must be able to understand what the roles are that employers need in the sector. Seemingly, contrary to this, there is a persistent preference by employers in the study for NATED qualifications, as noted below:

The reason why I encourage those L4 students to register for NATED is that they should have the L4 and a diploma in order to improve their employment opportunities.

McGrath, Needham, Papier, Wedekind, Attwal, Calitz and Van der Merwe (2010) evaluated lecturers and suggested that they should act as brokers or facilitators of social-capital networks.

This implies that they must link their students to local employers and former graduates who are currently employed. The NC(V) graduate returnees to the college were extremely inspired to enhance their own employability status by registering for the NATED programmes which, in their view, are a notch above the NC(V) programmes. This accounts for their decision to return to the same campus to further their studies. This view was given credence because lecturers encouraged these NC(V) graduates to register for the NATED programmes after completing the L4.

Considering the interplay between the different factors

For employability skills to be maintained, the gap between employers and graduates, lecturers and graduates, and employers and lecturers' perceptions must be minimised through working together on projects and assignments, giving talks to graduates, and offering longer practical training (as suggested by Singh & Singh, 2008). That students master employability skills is important, but NC(V) graduates cannot achieve this piecemeal or as a once-off project. Another advantage of providing longer practical training (as described by Singh & Singh, 2008) is that it would educate prospective employers about the existence of the NC(V) programmes, which is important in view of employers' lack of knowledge about the NC(V).

Clarke (1997) also emphasises the importance of close cooperation and collaboration between educators, employers and government institutions so as to help with developing relevant teaching and training programmes that seek to serve the needs of communities. In addition, lecturers should be given considerable latitude in structuring their curricula, classroom design and instructional approaches, according to Stasz (1997) and Spill and Tracy (1982). However, this is not the case with the current NC(V) programmes offered by the TVET college that is the subject of this study: instead, it limits the lecturers' ability to create meaningful linkages between the classroom and the workplace. This may account – at least in part – for the current disjuncture between the demands of the centralised national vocational curriculum and the context-specific employer requirements. As a result, NC(V) graduates perceive NATED qualifications as a better option for gaining employment.

The objective of the vocational education system should be to produce capable employment-seekers, but the unavailability of jobs creates a negative perception among NC(V) graduates. Gewer (2009) argues that the TVET colleges are not the appropriate platform for granting graduates the placement opportunities that are considered necessary for the students to receive the required experiential training – the foremost component that leads to employment. Placement opportunities for NC(V) graduates would certainly serve as tangible or concrete proof that they have gained experience; but, currently, the industry in which they need to be placed has expressed its reservations about the NC(V) programme.

In this study, it was found that most government departments lack the knowledge and understanding of what NC(V) is about, and, consequently, stand in the way of graduates

because potential employers doubt that NC(V) graduates are employable. In the light of this, and with the support of their lecturers, NC(V) graduates should guard against underselling themselves to potential employers (Cryer, 1997).

NC(V) graduates, for their part, also need to acquire and develop skills in such areas as communication and interpersonal relations during their time at college. The current study has found that potential employers provided enough evidence which supports a preference for the NATED-programme graduates as opposed to the NC(V) graduates. As indicated above, although the NATED-programmes are theory-based, the practical component is completed in the workplace and is monitored by potential employers. The approach is different in the NC(V) programmes, where the practical component is carried out in the classroom or in the workshop of a TVET college and is monitored by lecturers – and all of this without the knowledge or scrutiny of potential employers or the industry at large. In these circumstances, the TVET colleges will have to do more to win the confidence of society and the public by building the capacity of graduates.

In this respect, lecturers and vocational institutions need to heed the call by the government, as stated in the DHET Research Agenda (DHET, 2014), which proposes that partnerships between government departments and other employment stakeholders be arranged, while the TVET colleges should assume the more active role of workplace learning environments. This would align well with what the South African Department of Trade and Industry's growth strategy for the country supports, including a focus on broadening participation, equity, and access to redressing poverty alleviation for all citizens (DTI, 2007). However, the findings of this study suggest that these policy goals, announced in 2007, are a long way off from having been met in the particular context where the study was conducted. Work-based learning may become a viable vehicle towards increasing the employability of NC(V) graduates. During the interviews, the representatives of potential employers suggested an array of separate training involving a combination of theoretical and practical components: first, theoretical input at public vocational institutions, after which the baton of training should be passed on to private or state-owned entities for the completion of the practical training component.

As indicated above, the current situation at the vocational institutions exposes certain weaknesses in practical experience. The DHET (2013) expressed the same view, indicating that the situation is unfortunate because graduates from TVET colleges locally and nationally, as well as graduates from universities, cannot easily be absorbed into workplaces because they lack practical workplace experience. The DHET's (2013) view is that workplace learning must be seen as an integral part of qualification and programme design and not a separate element. The DHET (2013) proposes that the government should make available opportunities for apprenticeships, learnerships and internships in the public service at the national, provincial and municipal levels, in state agencies such as the defence force and the police, in public educational institutions, and also in state-owned enterprises. In the broader context, this would afford all these institutions the space and time to observe and evaluate the skills that the NC(V) graduates have acquired during their time at the vocational institutions.

Conclusions

This study explored the factors that may influence the employability of NC(V) graduates from a rural TVET college in the Eastern Cape province, based on the interplay between the individual graduate, the educational policy context, curriculum design and implementation, and the role and attitudes of employers and industry. The results of the study affirm that different stakeholders (including students, lecturers and prospective employers) possess limited knowledge about and/or negative perceptions of the NC(V) programmes included in the study. This severely limits graduates' employability and subsequent career possibilities. A key aspect of the problem seems to be the lack of linkages between the college and the surrounding industries and prospective employers, which limits the opportunities for learning towards career development, the gaining of work experience, and the chances of applying subject knowledge and skills in the workplace.

Potential employers in the study confirmed what McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) stated about employer attitudes preventing the placement of NC(V) graduates. The rural context of the study adds to the graduates' already limited prospects, because inequality, poverty and unemployment are making it difficult for businesses to survive, let alone to offer employment opportunities. The essence of employability is that graduates are equipped with sufficient knowledge, skills and competence that lead to their personal, social and economic well-being as advocated by human capital theory (OECD, 2001).

While the successful completion of their studies is viewed as an achievement for these graduates, they nevertheless remained excluded, hamstrung as they are by inequality and deprivation (Wang, 2013). In turn, such inequality and deprivation create the danger of entrenching poverty. It seems that, in the context studied, the vocational education system is failing in its mandate to produce employable employment-seekers.

Moreover, there seems to be a complex interplay between the factors that may influence the employability of TVET graduates. These factors include the individual graduate, the educational policy context, curriculum design and implementation, and the role and attitudes of employers and industry. Our findings suggest that improving the employability of vocational graduates in a rural context demands the adoption of a holistic view of the factors that influence such graduates' job prospects, and that any possible intervention would need to be context-sensitive and involve multiple stakeholders rather than having a singular focus on only the individual graduate, the policy and/or curriculum designers and implementers, or any prospective employers.

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