

Editorial

JOVACET SPECIAL ISSUE 2024

Research towards the continuous improvement of TVET in South Africa: Building the local knowledge base

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Background to the Special Issue

This special issue of JOVACET arose out of a targeted programme of research (the TVET Research Programme) undertaken in the public TVET college sector over a five-year period from 2019 to 2023 that was initiated by the national Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) and supported by the National Skills Fund (NSF). The Institute for Post-School Studies at the University of the Western Cape led and coordinated a research partnership of seven public universities and four private research entities, a partnership that yielded over 30 research reports during the five-year period. A concept document at the outset of the programme laid a foundation for the research, stating its aims and objectives, key national issues and debates, recent contextual information on the TVET college sector, and salient issues in the international vocational education domain that aligned with the objectives of the proposed research programme.

In various countries, efforts to improve the attractiveness of a vocational pathway for youth and adults have raised questions about the relevance, purpose, and content of vocational education and training, and debates on these matters have recognised the need for a sustained research programme to shed light on some of the sector's critical questions. Hence, the themes and topics devised by the research programme partners attempted to address the dearth of much-needed data on the TVET college sector in South Africa. Some topics had been the subjects of past studies that needed updating, while others had to establish a baseline from which to move forward. Furthermore, the programme acknowledged the past 25 years of research in the field and the many lessons learned from engagement with the global academic community, being mindful particularly of policy-borrowing and international research endeavours in South Africa.

The broad aim of the TVET research programme was stated expansively as being: ‘to build a significant local body of knowledge to inform TVET policymakers, practitioners, prospective employers, and learners and their communities, about the input, practices, performance and outcomes of public TVET colleges, with a view to enhancing knowledge and understanding for the planning and delivery of interventions towards continuous improvement’. Specific objectives that informed the programme’s deliverables were to: improve information on the TVET college system, establish sustainable research processes and methodologies, link research to policy and practice and to build additional research capacity.

The five-year TVET Research Programme presented a unique opportunity to bring together policymakers, government officials, research practitioners and TVET providers to address a coherent and comprehensive agenda that spoke to focused policy needs as well as wider research interests. As a collaborative research undertaking that involved multiple partners, there was extensive knowledge-sharing and many lessons learned over the course of the programme. In drawing the programme activities to a close, DHET dedicated its annual research colloquium in November 2023 to the output of the research projects that had been completed, at which the various researchers presented their findings. It was agreed that as many presentations as possible would be written up as journal articles, be subjected to peer review and then published together in a special issue of JOVACET in 2024.

Contents of the Special Issue

Owing to the tight time-frames for this publication and the pressures faced by our hard-working academics and researchers, there was simply insufficient time for many prospective authors to turn their presentations into articles despite their best endeavours. In light of the submissions already received and being processed, the editorial committee decided to press ahead and honour the commitment to publish the special issue in 2024 (albeit up to the very last hour!). We are therefore very pleased to publish the articles that appear here, and salute these authors for getting to the finishing line under extreme duress.

The research colloquium referred to above, occurred under the rubric ‘Making TVET colleges institutions of choice’, and was privileged to host two international TVET experts as keynote speakers. Dr George Afeti, an expert on TVET in Africa, who has worked extensively in South Africa, and Mr Steve Bainbridge, formerly of CEDEFOP and an expert on European models of TVET, provided excellent African and international perspectives within which to situate the local South African research that had been produced in the research programme. Both speakers graciously agreed to further develop their keynote addresses into papers for this special issue and we publish them here as ‘thought pieces’ that enable the specifics of our project-based articles to be located within broader comparative contexts.

Research in South Africa and particularly in Africa has shown strong associations in official policies between TVET, employment, and economic prosperity, notwithstanding academic

debates (not entered into here) with regard to TVET that is viewed mainly from an economic, human capital development paradigm, a vis-à-vis perspective that focuses on personal growth and community benefits. Dr Afeti's paper notes the worrying (and rising) youth unemployment trend in Africa and the critical need for employable skills in the face of increasing demands for higher level technical skills. While emphasising a multi-faceted approach to skills development, Dr Afeti prioritises a good basic education with Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects to serve as the foundation for artisan development and a modern economy. He cautions, however, that context is crucial, as the realities of employment could vary greatly across countries; hence, he says, the need for relevant training based on sound research evidence – a sentiment that resonated strongly with the purpose of the TVET research programme.

Moving further afield onto the wider global stage, Mr Bainbridge's paper reflects on VET reform in Europe, through the so-called 'Copenhagen process' since 2002, and the notion of 'cooperation' that proved key to sustaining reform. In that context, European member states and other social partners came together at a high level to agree on VET objectives and priorities to be addressed over five to ten years. This cooperation received constant monitoring through regular reporting, revisiting of targets, and revision of objectives as necessary. The author holds that the process has benefited European countries by producing common instruments and principles. More importantly, and relevant also to TVET in Africa, the application of a cooperative approach has 'raised the profile of VET in other policy areas'. This keynote paper emphasises the principles of partnership, resources and keeping up the cooperation momentum 'to create effective partnerships and networks at the national, sectoral and local levels in order to bring about VET reform'. While in South Africa much has been done at the national and local level to achieve cooperation with sectors important to TVET development, there is still much to be done to bridge the siloes that exist in the education and training system and to achieve stronger and more meaningful levels of cooperation among TVET parties on the African continent.

Turning to the more specific research projects of the research programme, of which there are five, two submissions are industry-related and focus on substantive matters in TVET: that of employment outcomes and college-industry partnerships. In the first of these, Friderichs, Rogan, and Needham report on their study of the participation of women in TVET college programmes and their career prospects after completion. Annual statistical reports of DHET show that women are no longer under-represented in vocational education, and that the numbers of women enrolling are even exceeding that of male students. It had been the case in earlier studies that male students had tended to dominate the field of engineering studies, but the authors note that this has changed in recent times.

Friderichs et al., therefore, look beyond enrolment numbers to investigate whether the increased *enrolment* of women in TVET programmes has also meant the increased *employment* of women. Their tracer study reveals, sadly, that women TVET completers still face significant discrimination in the labour market, earning around 22 per cent less than men, in addition

to lower employment rates. While it is encouraging that more women are finding post-school learning opportunities, and in fields previously male-dominated, the authors argue that these strides are yet to be translated into ‘parity of employment opportunities and earnings’.

In the second article with an industry focus, Njengele, Engel-Hills, and Winberg’s article echoes the theme of cooperation expounded on in Bainbridge’s keynote address, in a study of partnerships between TVET colleges and industry employers. The White Paper on Post-School Education and Training (DHET, 2013) enjoins national Sector Education and Training Authorities to act as facilitators between companies in their domains, and TVET training providers, in the interests of enabling college students and lecturers to obtain relevant exposure to workplace practices in their fields. Despite this and many other policy initiatives aimed at encouraging industry–college partnerships, there is still a long way to go in this regard. This research identified elements of mutually beneficial partnerships and successful emerging practices that would be beneficial to probe further for purposes of building a wider culture of cooperation and mutual benefit between employers and colleges.

The theme of the next three research articles is ‘quality’ in TVET: the first relating to quality teaching and learning; the second to a quality management system for TVET lecturers; and the third interrogating the idea of a ‘quality’ TVET lecturer.

Papier and Mawoyo invert the lens prevalent in South Africa generally that focuses predominantly on the negative aspects of TVET colleges; for instance, with regard to low pass and throughput rates and other perceived ills. Their article reports on a project that deliberately sought out ‘successful’ colleges, using as a proxy for this the colleges that consistently reflected high pass rates in official annual statistics. The objective of this research was to identify positive teaching and learning practices/models that were considered to be enhancing student outcomes. A meta-review of the literature on successful VET teaching and learning was conducted as a basis for further investigation through qualitative fieldwork. The empirical evidence confirmed many of the elements of institutional quality identified in the literature, and showed that despite the constraints of resources and other challenges, many colleges and lecturers were doing their best to provide students with good quality learning experiences that were producing successes.

Next, Paterson, Keevy and Vally concretise the notion of quality by considering TVET colleges’ quality performance system of appraisal in relation to the continuing professional development (CPD) of college lecturers. The authors contend that a performance management system is ‘intended to support an improvement in lecturer quality and accountability, strengthens student graduation rates and feeds national human resource development for sustainable employment’. Their data gathering and analysis informed the iterative development of a systems model based on causal loop analysis (CLA) which enabled the multiple relationships and feedback loops to be represented visually, and offering a platform for further research towards improving the management system for college lecturers.

Finally, on this theme, Wedekind, Russon, Liu, Zungu and Li further engage in problematising the concept of quality in TVET with regard to a 'quality lecturer', a much over-used term in policy discourse. Since the institution of prescribed college lecturer qualifications through national policy in 2012, college lecturers in South Africa are obligated to obtain relevant TVET teaching qualifications. Using Bourdieu's conceptual framework of 'fields', the authors argue that the quality of vocational teachers depends on vocational educators being able to 'look both ways' (Barnett, 2006)¹, since they straddle the fields of education and industry. Consequently, college lecturers need training/exposure in the industry relevant to their field as well as the specialised pedagogic qualification, and that focusing on only the educational aspect while ignoring the industry aspect will ultimately have little effect on building overall lecturer quality.

In conclusion

The output of the five-year research programme has been communicated via various means and platforms; for instance, through well-attended regular online seminars as projects were completed, in an accessible repository housed by DHET, in face-to-face colloquia, in papers published in various journals, and now in this special issue of JOVACET. We are grateful to the researchers who contributed to this special issue, DHET, and the NSF, for entrusting us with disseminating the results of these research endeavours. We trust that it will find purchase in the sectors for which it holds most relevance and act as a springboard for further research.

JOVACET continues to shine a light on TVET and Adult Education scholarship, but it has not been without tremendous effort, and the goodwill of our authors, peer reviewers, editorial board and committee members, and the many readers with a vested interest in the growth and development of our academic space.

Thank you one and all for your unwavering support.

1 Barnett, R. 2006. Vocational knowledge and vocational pedagogy. In M Young & J Gamble (Eds.). *Knowledge, curriculum and qualifications for South African further education*. Cape Town: HSRC Press.