

**TECHNICAL AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AS A STRATEGY FOR REDUCING
UNEMPLOYMENT IN NIGERIA IN THE 21ST CENTURY**

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ABSTRACT

The issue of unemployment is a big development problem in Nigeria, especially among the youth, as their entry into the labour market is hindered by poor linkages between schools and jobs, low levels of work experience, and lack of adequate enterprise support and technological developments. This conceptual paper discusses about the role of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) as a strategy to address unemployment in the 21st century in Nigeria. Adopting a narrative desk-review approach, the paper will rely on recent scholarly publications that have appeared since 2020 and policy documents and institutional materials published primarily between 2020 and 2026. Anchored by Human Capital Theory and Skills-Mismatch perspective. The paper suggests potential avenues for TVET to support employment generation by developing occupational skills, apprenticeship, entrepreneurship and self-employment, work-based learning, digital competence and enhanced school-industry relationships. The employment value of TVET however, hinges on the quality, relevance and recognition of the skills gained, not on enrollment. Existing equipment, lack of funds for these initiatives, industry linkages that are not strong, inadequate training for teachers, the social perception of vocational education as less important than university education, split skills programmes, weak graduate access to finance and a lack of soft and digital skills. The paper recommends curriculum updating, competency-based training, provision of more apprenticeships, industry involvement, effective implementation of the Nigerian Skills Qualifications Framework, incorporation of digital and green-skills, facilitation of entrepreneurship growth, career guidance, equitable participation and systematic tracking of graduates' subsequent experiences. The paper concludes that TVET need to be moved out of its niche as a residual educational programme to its place in the framework of Nigeria's employment, productivity and economic diversification policy.

Keywords: entrepreneurship, employability, skills development, technical and vocational education.

1. INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is also endowed with a large youth population with high human resources potential to transform the economy, but the ability of the economy to take advantage of this potential for productive employment remains a concern. The issue is not only that people lack certificates – it's that many of today's job seekers lack the technical skills, attitude on the job, digital skills, business acumen and experience that employers are seeking. This worry has grown even greater due to the restructuring of jobs. The changing nature of working and new services, production systems, climate change and digitalisation are affecting the skills required for employment and entry to the labor market. Hence, learning and occupation have become increasingly significant in the education system so that it is gradually more and more needed.

Technical and Vocational Education and Training provide an important response which emphasizes on learning occupational knowledge and skills. Theoretically, TVET can equip learners with skills for construction, electrical installation, auto maintenance, welding/fabrication, hospitality, agriculture, ITC, renewable energy, fashion/garment production, manufacturing and other service (skilled) jobs. It can also enable self-employment if coupled with entrepreneurship, financial literacy and tools and links to market. In the view of the National Board for Technical Education (NBTE), the Nigerian Skills Qualifications Framework (NSQF) is a way of developing, categorising and acknowledging competencies earned from both formal, non-formal and informal learning processes in order to provide concrete avenues for skills acquisition and progression (NBTE, 2026).

This orientation is also manifested in the development planning in Nigeria. The promotion of TVET was explicitly identified as a way to create sustainable employment for the youth who are out of work and underemployment in the National Development Plan (NDP) 2021-2025. The Plan also linked skills development with general economic diversifications and youth employment/poverty alleviation policies (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2021). But policy activity concerned with skills development has also continued in more recent policy. The stakeholders were involved in the development of a National Policy on Skills Development in 2024 which was supposed to harmonise curriculum and training programmes more to the needs of the labour market and provide young people with skills in practice and skills of the 21st century (Federal Ministry of Education, 2024).

1.1 Statement of the problem

Nigeria continues to have high rates of unemployment and underemployment that continue to hinder inclusive economic development. The shift from education to the labour market for young people is challenging for many because of a lack of alignment between the competences needed by the labour market and the competences they have developed during their studies. This is particularly important when there is a focus on examinations and work experience in the workplace is limited. Under these conditions it might not be sufficient to find a job by having a qualification.

The situation is exacerbated by the impression that vocational education is a second choice pathway. The relationship between social mobility and attending university in their community is still firmly entrenched in many families' perception of social mobility, with technical employment being seen as less prestigious. This mindset can impact upon young people's decisions on their enrolment, investment and engagement in skilled careers. At the same time, lack of workshops, outdated equipment, a shortage of qualified trainers and poor maintenance systems in some TVETs, and limited opportunities for students to have work experience are also significant challenges.

1.2 Purpose and Objectives of the Paper

The purpose of this paper is to examine Technical and Vocational Education and Training as a strategy for reducing unemployment in Nigeria in the 21st century. Specifically, the paper seeks to examine the concept of TVET and employability; explain relevant theoretical perspectives; review recent evidence; identify contributions and challenges; and propose strategies for improving employment outcomes.

1.3 Research Questions

1. What is the meaning and scope of technical and vocational education and how does it relate to employability?
2. How do Human Capital Theory and the Skills-Mismatch perspective explain the role of TVET in reducing unemployment?
3. What does recent literature reveal about the contribution of TVET to employment, entrepreneurship and skills development in Nigeria?
4. What challenges limit the capacity of TVET to reduce unemployment in Nigeria?
5. What strategies can strengthen the employment outcomes of TVET in the 21st century?

1.4 Significance of the Paper

The paper is relevant to the education policy makers as it underscores the importance of having education as part of the country's employment and productivity policy, and not a separate education sub-sector. Lack of policy coordination can lead to policy overlaps between skills programmes and the relationship between training, certification and labour market demand can be weakened.

The paper is equally relevant to the curriculum developers and TVET institutions. It highlights that the curriculum needs to be based on authentic tasks in work and current technologies and occupational standards. The discussion can be used to reinforce practical learning, entrepreneurship, digital skills, work-based experiences in institutions.

The paper emphasizes the need for CPD for teachers, instructors and trainers. Pedagogical skills and up-to-date information about the occupation are required for the instructor. They should be able to implement processes, supervise practical activities, evaluate competence and relate classroom learning with workplace requirements.

2. METHODOLOGY

This paper is conceptual and theoretical which is the narrative approach of the desk-review. Peer-reviewed journal articles, policy documents and institutional files were analysed on recent topics of TVET, employability, skills development, youth employment and labour-market transitions. Only literature published between 2020 and 2026 were included, and official policy documents were used if they contained relevant institutional and/or policy information. Sources were chosen due to their direct involvement with Technical and Vocational Education and Skills development, employment, entrepreneurship, curriculum relevance and Nigerian context.

The materials reviewed were sorted into five thematic areas that included the conceptualization of TVET and unemployment; theoretical explanations of skills and employment; evidence on TVET and employability; challenges to effective TVET implementation; and approaches for enhancing employment outcomes. There are no human participants, questionnaires, interviews or statistical tests used in the paper. It, on the contrary, collates and integrates existing evidence to build a sound argument on the role of TVET in Nigeria's employment system.

3. CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

3.1 Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET)

Technical and Vocational Education and Training is an all-encompassing term for education and training that impart occupational knowledge, skills, attitudes and competencies needed for the engagement in specific trades, occupations and productive economic activities. Learning focus is on learning that is demonstrated in action. TVET can be delivered in schools, technical college, polytechnic and skills centre; apprenticeship program, at workplaces or in the formal or non-formal environment.

TVET is not only about the trades of the workshop in Nigeria. This may include engineering-related skills, building and construction, agriculture, hospitality, fashion and garment manufacturing, business-related skills, digital technologies, renewable energy and new skills in general. Therefore, the new agenda for TVET needs to include the current occupation as well as new job opportunities from economic diversification and digitalisation.

The Nigerian Skills Qualifications Framework is highly significant because it provides a competency based approach to the recognition of skills and knowledge of the individual, without regard to training or learning taking place in the classroom or workplace. National Skills Qualifications are competence-based, as well as being work-related and measuring performance and knowledge, says NBTE. This can facilitate transferability and endorsement of the abilities acquired in practice, and progression for young people and adults (NBTE, 2026).

3.2 Unemployment and Employability

Unemployment happens when one is willing and able to work but is unable to find work and is actively looking for a job. But, in a pragmatic analysis of Nigeria's labour challenge, we are also interested in the issue of underemployment, the nature of jobs in Nigeria, labour productivity and access to decent and sustainable means of living in Nigeria. The individual with an irregular work schedule who does not have access to the hours or income required to not be officially unemployed might have a labour-market problem.

Employability is about the knowledge, skills, attitudes, behaviours and experiences that help people make a positive contribution to the workplace, whether that is entering the workforce, working well in the job, or advancing and adapting to workplace change. The combination of technical skills, along with communication and teamwork, problem solving, digital literacy, entrepreneurship, and financial awareness and workplace discipline can be a major driver in enhancing employability through TVET. The aim should not only be to equip workers for their first job, but to also produce flexible workers who

can also continue to participate in the economy in new ways as technology and job requirements change.

3.3 Skills Development in the 21st Century

Technical and transferable skills are key to success in the 21st century workforce. Digital tools are becoming part of occupations that were previously regarded as purely manual. Construction workers may need to work with digital measurement and design tools, artisans are using social media and online payments more than ever to communicate with customers, farmers are using mobile technology and data, and technicians are interacting with computerised equipment, as well as digital payment and customer-management systems in the hospitality industry. Thus, modern TVET should combine the skills of the occupation with digital, entrepreneurial, communication and problem solving skills.

The International Labour Organization (2024) most recently identified the need for skills systems that facilitate transitions in the labour market and advocated for increased links between education and the world of work, increased investment in the digital and green transitions, and increased the number of quality apprenticeships. This is especially relevant to Nigeria, since a training system that is out of touch with the occupational demand can generate “skills mismatch” instead of alleviate it.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

4.1 Human Capital Theory

This paper has two theoretical approaches: the Human Capital Theory and the Skill-Biased Theory. The Human Capital Theory is the first theory to be discussed in this paper. Theory is based on the idea that education and training constitute investments made in the knowledge, competencies and productive capacity of people. Becker's first papers began the justification of investments in education and skills from an economic perspective; they indicated that this investment would increase productivity and would impact on earnings, employment and economic growth. In a modern setting of Nigeria, TVET can be seen as an investment of time and resources to acquiring occupational competence.

The human capital theory can be applied directly to TVET because it allows to understand the factors that affect the labour market. Employers are looking for employees who are able to do jobs safely, effectively and at an acceptable level. If the individual is able to perform those tasks, a training program may increase the chance of that ability, and the practice of the tasks may result in an increase in productivity. A skilled workforce at national level will aid in industrialization, infrastructure development, technology utilization and enterprise development. The theory then provides a financial case for the

public and private investment in workshops, trainers, tools, training and assessment based on competency.

4.2 Skills-Mismatch Perspective

The second approach is known as Skills-Mismatch. A mismatch occurs when the knowledge and skills of the workers do not align well with the required skills of employers and/or the economy sectors. Mismatch may occur horizontally (person trained in an area that is different from the position they are filling) or vertically (person's skill level is above or below the skill level required in the position). In Nigeria this mismatch can be exacerbated by the use of an obsolete curriculum, lack of industry involvement and technological advancement.

The Skills-Mismatch perspective says that increasing enrolments in TVET may not contribute to lower levels of unemployment. Working with obsolete equipment, on low-demand jobs or in jobs where workers do not have an opportunity to work in the real world, may result in fewer jobs, and more certificates. Students who have been trained on older equipment, jobs that have lower demand, or on jobs that they will never work out in the world can earn more certificates and fewer jobs. The policy message is that TVET should be demand-driven and should be continuously updated and re-connected to employers' and TVET sector needs.

5. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

5.1 TVET and Youth Employment in Nigeria

Television Education (TE) in recent literature has still been considered as an alternative solution to the problem of unemployment and poverty amongst the youths of Nigeria. Vocational and Technical Education (VTE) can contribute to reducing poverty and offering employment opportunities for the youth provided it is tailored to marketable skills and employment opportunities (Kareem et al., 2024). Likewise, Wami (2024) sees TVET as a possibility for alleviating unemployment and underscores the importance of enhancing skills development and employment-focused approaches.

The role of TVET, however, needs to be interpreted in terms of the pathway from training to work in the relevant context. Training can provide the skills that are needed for jobs, but graduates need to have where they can apply the skills. This can take a variety of forms such as industrial attachment, apprenticeship, internship, placement services, entrepreneurship incubation and start-up support and employer networks. These bridges are very important even for the technically well equipped graduates to help them pass from education to work.

5.2 21st-Century Skills and Employability

While technical ability is still a necessity, today's jobs demand more than just technical skills. Olasunkanmi and Ogunniran (2022) conducted a study on the utilization of 21st century skills and employability of Technical and Vocational Education students in the Federal College of Education (Technical), Akoka Lagos. They confirm the importance of TVE students' skills such as problem solving, communication, working cooperatively and adjusting to the demands of employment.

It is assumed that the employability skills shouldn't be an add-on to the TVET curricula. Being able to communicate with customers, estimate costs, manage records and time, and deal with unexpected problems should be a job requirement for a welder, electrician, auto technician, fashion designer, or ICT Technician. These skills can be what either makes or breaks an individual's ability to keep customers and create a viable business following technical skills training.

5.3 Industry Links, Apprenticeship and Work Based Learning.

The learning through real work is one of the best aspects of vocational learning. Through Apprenticeship the learner has the opportunity to observe the work of the skilled worker(s), to perform the work, to receive immediate feedback, and to learn about the standards in the workplace. Quality apprenticeships are recognized as a key tool to support transitions into work by the ILO (2024). In the case of Nigeria, it might be advantageous to increase the strength of apprenticeship, since it can be found in many occupational communities in the country.

5.4 The creation of enterprises and self-employment opportunities.

In a labor market that won't provide employment for everyone that wants it and can do it, the concept of self-employment is crucial. TVET can lay the foundation for creation of enterprises since a large number of vocational job occupations can be transformed to small business. An electrician may establish a service-based business, a fashion trainee can start a line of clothing, an Auto technician can start a car repair shop and an ICT trainee can provide digital services.

However, enterprise survival isn't the only solution to the problem of having technicians. The students should get knowledge about business planning, costing, bookkeeping, marketing, customer relation, procurement and financial management skills. Having the tools and start-up capital is also significant. Therefore, the emphasis should be on hands-on enterprise projects, rather than motivational speeches, with students building a product or service, completing a cost analysis, identifying target markets, doing a market test and keeping financial records, in the TVET.

5.5 Digital transformation and TVET.

In the 21st century there is an increasing digitisation of work. The provision of employment in information technology intensive or information technology enabled employment is therefore, imperative to have a learner who is equipped with TVET institutions. Digital competence is not a thing of computer literacy. It may involve digital design, online communication, digital payments, data management, cybersecurity awareness, equipment diagnostics, e-commerce and the utilization of all working software.

Likewise, Nigeria's TVET regulatory framework is evolving to meet the digital transformation. The use of technology for quality assurance and the digital solutions for TVET, initiated by NBTE, exemplifies that digitalisation is now affecting the content of TVET and quality of TVET provision. Open, Distance and Flexible (ODFL) learning may provide opportunities to those who cannot attend programmes in the full-time mode.

6. CONTRIBUTIONS OF TVET TO REDUCING UNEMPLOYMENT

First, TVET can help to make direct employability. If training meets the requirements of the profession at the time of the course and practical evidence of attainment can be demonstrated through assessment, graduates may be better equipped for entry level occupations. The National Skills Qualifications Framework offers an institutional structure for the recognition of competence and for progression (NBTE, 2026).

Television Education and Training (TVET) can contribute to self-employment and microenterprise development, Second. Entrepreneurship training and provision of tools, finance, and markets can be used to transform practical skills into marketable services and products, especially in developing countries. It can lead to self-employment and second jobs if enterprises make a success of their business and begin to employ apprentices or assistants.

Thirdly, TVET can address skills mismatch through responding to the demand of the sectors. Consultations with employers, occupational standards, tracer studies and local economic data can help training providers to determine which programmes to increase or modify. This demand orientation is crucial as the labour markets vary from region to region and from sector to sector.

Fourth, TVET can support the transition of Youth into the world of work via apprenticeship and work-based learning. Gain tacit knowledge about punctuality, safety, customer relations, team working and production standards in a real workplace, which cannot be learned in the classroom.

Finally, TVET has the potential to facilitate inclusive employment by offering alternative employment entryways for those who do not necessarily need to pursue an academic path. The flexible training and recognition of prior learning can also help adults who require reskill or upgrade of their skills.

7. CHALLENGES WHICH LIMIT THE EFFECTIVENESS OF TVET IN NIGERIA:

One of the significant challenges is inadequate funding. Workshops, tools, consumables, safety equipment, laboratories, machines, and electricity and regular maintenance are required in practical education. If these are not available, training can be largely theoretical, thereby undermining the practical benefit which TVET education offers.

Another challenge is obsolete equipment. Students might learn technologies that are not in use by the employers. The result is a gap between what schools are competent and what work is competent. The practice of replacing equipment without plans to maintain it should be avoided and equipment renewal should be tied to occupational Standards and local industry requirements.

Another issue is the capacity of the instructors. It is essential that TVET instructors have a vision of teaching and of contemporary occupational practice. Continuous professional development, industrial attachments of instructors and ties-up with firms can maintain the currentness of the teaching.

Limited linkages with industry limit learning and employment opportunities for graduates. If the employers are not involved in the curriculum development, training can lose touch with production reality. Enhanced institutional cooperation should ensure that there are structured opportunities for internships, apprenticeships, industrial attachment and employment.

There is still a huge challenge in the ability of people to perceive social issues. If vocational occupations are regarded as less prestigious than university education, academically able students may not pursue TVET and employers and communities may value skilled trades less. There should be public campaigns to promote successful technicians, artisans, technologists and entrepreneurs as contributors to the national development.

Fragmentation of skills programmes can also reduce effectiveness. Training programmes can be run by various agencies, states, development partners or private providers, with varying standards, certificates and assessment processes. National occupational standards can be used more effectively and coordinated to minimise duplication and improve recognition.

8. STRATEGIES TO BOLSTER TVET AS AN EMPLOYMENT STRATEGY

Modernisation of the curriculum should be on-going not episodic. It is important that the curricula for TVET are reviewed in consultation with employers and professional bodies since technology changes and occupational requirements and priorities change. Competency based curricula should describe the body of knowledge, ability and skill that learners are expected to know, perform and demonstrate in realistic work contexts.

Industry collaboration must be a key element of programme implementation. Employers have the opportunity to be involved in curriculum design, guest teaching, equipment specification, workplace learning, assessment and recruitment. It can be organised at industry level through the sector skills councils and other bodies.

It is important to create more quality apprenticeships. Those learning on the job should be provided with clear learning outcomes, competent supervision, safe working conditions, continuous assessment and certificate of recognition. The existing informal apprenticeship systems are not to be abandoned but can be reinforced with the combination of experienced practitioners and competency-based systems and formal recognition.

Regular industrial exposures should be part of teacher/instructor development. An instructor is not in a position to instruct on modern equipment and/or processes if the instructor has never seen them. Continuous professional development should include short industry placements, professional certification, technical workshops and communities of practice.

Embeddedness of digital and green skills throughout programmes. Pre-existing trades and programs should integrate relevant digital technologies and eco-friendly practices. This makes the learners versatile and relevant to the new emerging fields.

The implementation of entrepreneurship support from theory to enterprise practice needs to be done. Institutions to establish small business laboratories or enterprise projects in which students can produce products, set prices for services, keep accounts and market their products. Graduates should be connected with appropriate finance, incubation, mentoring and procurement opportunities.

9. DISCUSSION

The literature reviewed supports the notion that TVET can be a strategic approach for addressing unemployment, but this should be considered as a conditionality. Skills should be acquired during training that can be transferred to opportunities for using those skills. The best approach is not 'train before you work' but an approach of education-to-work training and transition system in which everyone involved, employers, education institutions, government and communities, is involved in creating the train and transition pathway.

This attitude can be understood from the theoretical approach. The Human Capital Theory is used to understand why investing in T.V Tech and Voc skills can boost Productivity and Employment. However, the Skills-Mismatch approach warns of the usefulness of training being connected to the need for the skill. Even if a programme is well funded, poor employment outcomes can be a result of not connecting training to the labour market.

This is particularly significant in the Nigerian context as jobs are created in both formal and informal employment, small businesses, and through self employment. The narrow TVET model, which focuses on placement in large formal organisations, would leave out a large part of the economy. The graduates should be equipped with wage work, entrepreneurship, contract work, cooperative enterprise, further learning.

10. CONCLUSION

This paper looked at Technical and Vocational Education and Training, a strategy to mitigate unemployment in the 21st century in Nigeria. The review shows that TVET can play a significant role in improving employability, providing a smoother transition to the labour market, industrial productivity and supporting workers for new and emerging opportunities in the digital and green economy. Its importance is more felt in a labour market where there is greater demand for formal jobs than there is supply of labour, that demands practical skills, and in jobs that require practical skills.

The ability of TVET, however, should not be exaggerated in terms of employment. It is not training that creates jobs. The relevance and quality of training, quality of industry linkages, opportunities for workplace learning, recognition of competence, and access to productive assets and economic environment are key factors that affect the effectiveness of TVET. However, funding, out-of-date equipment, teachers' capacity, lack of employer connections, social stigma, lack of programme cohesion, gender inequalities and low retention of graduates need to be tackled systematically.

11. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Ensure sustainable funding of TVET workshops, lab, tools, maintenance of safety facilities and equipment etc.
2. Do regular consultation with employer and sector stakeholders of TVET curricula to ensure programmes are relevant to the changing and evolving occupational needs.
3. Enhance and broaden apprenticeships, internships, and work-based learning that have well-defined learning outcomes and competently supervised learning and formalized evaluation.
4. Ensure Continuous Professional Development (CPD) and Industrial Exposure to TVET instructors.
5. Enhance the Nigerian Skills Qualifications Framework for better competency recognition, progression and RPL.
7. Improve digital and entrepreneurial, communication, problem solving and green skills in technical and vocational education.
8. Establish more effective career guidance, placement and graduate tracers systems and make decisions based on the outcomes of employment.
9. Link skills training to enterprise support mechanisms that offer tools, finance and mentoring to skilled graduates, and bring them to the market.
10. Promote women's access to technical jobs and break gender barriers.
11. Carry out longitudinal empirical research on the employment, entrepreneurship, income and career of TVET graduates.

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