

## **Perspectives on Technical and Vocational Education and Training: are the young people prejudiced against it??**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*In contemporary workplaces, people must adapt to the dynamics of the market. The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted this fact as people had to learn new skills, upgrade existing ones, or relocate to new jobs for sustenance. Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), offering quick skilling, up-skilling, and re-skilling opportunities to people, fits in this scenario. However, TVET's poor image relative to academic pathways is presumed to result in low enrolment in TVET. A focused-group discussion with students and recent university graduates in Bhutan revealed that while TVET's image problem exists, the image itself is a composite of other factors. In particular, the young people's interest in TVET (or lack thereof) is defined by lack of advocacy in schools for TVET, supply-driven TVET with limited*

*choices, and TVET careers accruing poor economic returns to individuals. Thus, some recommended interventions are effective social marketing and career advice services in schools, a demand-driven approach to TVET development, entrepreneurship and qualification tracks and collaborative efforts to incentivise and offer mobility in vocational careers.*

**Keywords:** TVET image, focused-group discussion, supply-driven TVET, Career advice, Entrepreneurship Education, Bhutan.

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During the 2008 global financial crisis, job losses among the skilled people were less than among the unskilled (OECD, 2012, as cited in Badawi, 2013). With global scale shocks increasing, skills protect people from the adverse effects of these shocks as well as accelerate economic rebound (Rolfe, 2020). Such events bring TVET to the spotlight as it concerns skilling people. Amid the Covid-19 pandemic, characterized by widespread livelihood and economic disruption, TVET is supplying critical skills to manage the situation as well as helping people cope with job losses by relocating them to other sectors (Hoftijzer et al., 2020). Whether people can return to their previous jobs once the pandemic abates depends on the rate of economic rebound (Trésor, 2021). However, some sectors may not make a quick rebound. The travel and tourism sector, for example, besides having experienced one of the highest job losses (Kristiana et al., 2021), is less likely to make a quick rebound. Therefore, people will need to acquire new, additional, or specialized skills to relocate to other sectors. Many of these short- or long-term coping strategies through skill acquisition and upgradation will be provided by TVET. Thus, TVET as a

higher education pathway is an important safeguard for people in dynamic job markets.

In Bhutan, a country dependent on imported labourers, the pandemic brought about major job loss, primarily in the tourism sector, one of the biggest employers in the country. The country is addressing their stresses by creating short-term and need-based training opportunities in TVET. The goals of this initiative are twofold: to help people cope with job losses and address the supply shrinkages created by the stoppage of importing Indian workers.

However, TVET as a higher education pathway has its share of challenges. TVET has a poor image, and young people regard it as a secondary option catering to the post-school educational needs of the less academically inclined students (Ratnata, 2013). The question then is: How can TVET be a relevant higher educational pathway for young people? The first step, of course, is to understand the aspirations of the young people and the motivation that drives their decision regarding post-school pathways. As part of the TVET reform exercise in Bhutan, we conducted focused-group discussions (FGDs) between May and June 2021 with school students, recent university graduates, and TVET graduates to enlist their perspectives on TVET and understand the motivation driving their educational choices. Though detrimental effects of TVET's poor image is a global phenomenon (Billett, 2020; Aarkrog, 2020; Brennan, 2014), a thematic content analysis of the FGD data revealed that lack of, or dominating academic ethos in, school-based career advice, limited choices in TVET, and vocational careers lacking incentives are stronger determinants of young people's choice of post-school pathways than the image itself. This essay discusses the findings and proposes recommendations to make TVET an

attractive higher education pathway for people after they complete basic education.

### **Lack of advocacy for TVET in schools and academic ethos in career advice**

The discussion revealed that students form their perceptions about higher education and choose post-school pathways based on the information they receive from teachers, parents, or elders. These influential social actors pass on their views of higher education to the students. While the TVET sector does not conduct advocacy for TVET in schools; the academic colleges and universities visit schools annually to market their courses, thus creating a vital pull factor toward them:

People from RUB (Royal University of Bhutan) came to our school for advocacy. They would share about the courses they offered. But TVET doesn't have anything like that; many students in school even don't know what TVET is. They don't know about future opportunities in TVET. If there were advocacy, bright people would join TVET too. These people would perform well and inspire their juniors in schools to join TVET too. We need advocacy in schools regarding TVET (university graduate).

The academic ethos of school-based career guidance, frequently provided by teachers rather than professional career counsellors, places a university degree as the most important – and often only – route to successful careers. As a result of a dearth of information about TVET and the skewed attitudes of career advisers favoring academic pathways, students are compelled to make post-school decisions without self-awareness or understanding job prospects. We observed that the university graduates

form a renewed appreciation for TVET after they graduate and understand the job market:

Having experienced that the job market is strongly skewed towards skills and having unsuccessfully tried to get a job myself, I realized marketable skills are a part of contemporary workplace. If I were given an opportunity to start my education again, I'd certainly go for TVET (university graduate).

On the other hand, student participants expressed a strong desire to go to universities for academic degrees. Their views of TVET are strongly influenced by the general notion about TVET being an inferior educational choice. While schools do not necessarily denigrate TVET, though they do not promote it either, parents exhort their children to get a university degree. “To live by the might of the pen”, an expression that describes parents’ wish for their children, underpins the strong societal orientation toward the so-called white-collar jobs and academic education as an escape from physical work typical of largely agrarian country like Bhutan. So, to the students, TVET is what they see– drudging work in construction, automobile workshops, and furniture houses – and their upbringing does not favor strenuous and challenging work they think TVET entails:

Till now, we have been pampered by our parents, and we have a comfortable life. We don't even have to cook our food; our parents do everything for us. We go to school in a car. We have grown used to an easy life. It would be difficult to take up careers in TVET...It doesn't look like I'd be interested in construction work (student participant).

### **Limited, supply-driven TVET**

The discussions’ subtext revealed that youths’ and young people’s interest are varied but within the purview of a well-developed TVET system, although they do not think

TVET can deliver those qualifications. For example, the participants showed an inclination toward jobs in information and technology because they see prospects in the sector. Moreover, the young people's idea about contemporary work is influenced by advances in technology, whereby they anticipate integration of IT in even those sectors (such as agriculture) that are currently in the traditional mold. The following quote, representing a consensus in the discussions, provides a vignette of young people's expectations:

The agriculture sector has opportunities. We import food, although we have sufficient fertile land that is underutilised. So, integrating agribusiness, e-commerce, and remote sensing technology for precision agriculture would make a profitable venture. I'd be interested if these options are in TVET (university graduate).

However, Bhutan's TVET system is largely supply-driven, dominated by TVET providers' interests. It does not address and integrate young people's interests and aspirations in TVET courses. This model of TVET developed and implemented by what Billett (2014) called the "powerful others" – including bureaucrats, policymakers, academics, and other social elites – is limited and confined to the traditional courses in engineering and construction and a few services sector trades. Therefore, students have only a few options to choose from. As the options available do not represent their interests, this creates a complex: students join academic education *en masse* and promote the impression of TVET as a narrowly focused educational pathway that restricts innovation and enterprise.

### **Unincentivised work lacking innovation and enterprise**

The young people, especially students, associate TVET with poor wages and challenging menial work.

Inadequate financial recognition for such jobs offers a significant deterrence to them. Several participants observed that if wages for vocational work is good, Bhutanese people will take up careers in TVET. One participant noted that Bhutanese, of all age groups, qualifications, and social status take up vocational work abroad where they are paid decent wages for such work:

To improve TVET, I'd suggest wages must be increased. Many Bhutanese go abroad to work and take up menial jobs because there they are paid well. In Bhutan, the wages are low; besides, companies do not give employees incentives and social security schemes. If TVET has to change, this needs to change too (university graduate).

Generally, participants showed an entrepreneurial mindset. However, they believe TVET does not offer this as TVET is concerned with equipping people with trade skills for employment in industries.

### **TVET and job opportunities during economic stress**

On the other hand, the TVET graduates in the FGDs underscored the importance of technical skills and the safeguards they offer during economic stresses. They specifically mentioned the relevance of the hands-on skills gained through TVET, not generic technical skills like engineering. The investigators observed that all participating TVET graduates were still working, although a substantial portion of workforce had lost jobs due to the disruptions that came about with the pandemic. Bhutan is highly dependent on the imported workforce, especially for the construction sector. The pandemic resulted in supply shrinkage from India, creating a demand for the local workforce. One multi-skilled construction professional said:

I would consider someone joking if he says a TVET graduate with construction skills could not find a

job; there is currently a high demand in the sector. Even employed people like us get offers to work overtime in private worksites. So there are opportunities in construction (TVET graduate).

Generally, TVET graduates did not mention TVET's standing or image as a challenge that mattered. They instead focused on the need for quality training, opportunities for qualification and career mobility, and multiskilling. Participants highlighted that an eclectic set of technical skills pays off better in workplaces.

When you say you have skills in electrical work, there are many things to do as an electrician. When you are in the workplace, you will need to do IT-related work. You touch everything. I have worked in the civil sector, plumbing, even electrical.

Multiple skills help even in getting jobs...Employers will ask you if you can do a range of work. If you say yes, you can – you get the job; if you say no, you can't – the job goes to someone who can (TVET graduate).

The TVET graduates identified the lack of linkage between higher education and TVET as a major challenge they face. TVET graduates look forward to acquiring specialised skills but are offered limited opportunities to do so. Therefore, they want a link between higher academic education and TVET. That, they believe, will help TVET graduates acquire higher-order skills not offered at TVET as well as solve some of the image issue.

## **Discussion**

Though TVET's poor image is its major challenge, it cannot be treated in isolation. Other factors, including poor advocacy and career guidance, supply-driven TVET, careers lacking in incentives, innovation, and enterprise, contribute to TVET's unattractiveness. Indeed, image and these factors are mutually reinforcing; poor image

discourages enterprising and innovative students from choosing TVET as post-school pathway, thus creating a shortage of TVET practitioners who innovate and venture into entrepreneurship.

However, as economies are becoming complex, the demand for “technical resources” (Winch, 2013, p. 96) increases. Also, the frequency of economic and livelihood disruptions by major global events, like the current pandemic, hints that the future of work is dynamic, and people will need to quickly adapt to new realities and relocate to other sectors for sustenance. TVET provides this unique platform where people can acquire skills in a relatively shorter time than academic education and pursue life-long learning through attachments, apprenticeship, and workplace-based training (Kanwar et al., 2019). Thus, government and TVET promoters must recognise the factors contributing to TVET challenges and address them innovatively. One immediate intervention required is to take TVET to the prospective TVET takers in its complete package as a pathway that provides marketable skills that can be translated into entrepreneurship and innovation. The following interventions are proposed for Bhutan, and developing countries with fledgling TVET systems in general as their challenges are common, including supply-driven model and relative unattractiveness of TVET compared to academic pathways (Tyagi, 2017).

1. Effective social marketing: Since social actors perpetuate TVET’s unfavourable image, raising awareness about the salience of TVET among parents, school teachers, and other influential individuals is necessary. Advocacy programs must showcase TVET as a viable pathway for employment and address the general public antipathy toward TVET.

2. Diversify TVET courses: The supply-driven TVET limits choices to prospective TVET takers. Therefore, TVET systems must increase the courses by carefully considering the aspirations and interests of the future TVET takers. Essentially, TVET development must be democratized by involving industries, practitioners, and young people so that TVET becomes demand-driven in terms of both the demands of the industry and economy and the aspirations of the young people and TVET takers.
3. Career counselling in schools: Professional career counselling services must be established to help students transitioning from compulsory education to post-school pathways make informed decisions based on their interests and abilities. The existing academic ethos that defines school-based career advice must be counterbalanced by appropriate, specific, and correct career information and advice regarding TVET. Career counselling must include market information, job demand and supply, and available educational and career pathways.
4. Promote innovation and enterprise in TVET: Instead of overtly focusing on trade skills to produce workers to run the mills of industry, entrepreneurship education (EPE) must be integrated into TVET curricula emphasising innovation and enterprise. EPE alone does not, however, suffice. Post-training support, business incubation, and micro-finance support must be made available to unlock TVET's potential as a driver of economic growth and self-employment. Thus, TVET's dead-end nature, lack of career mobility, and limited financial gains from vocational careers can be addressed by making TVET entrepreneurship oriented.

5. Create linkages between academic tertiary education and TVET so that there is mobility for TVET graduates to acquire higher-order skills not offered in TVET. This is also important for creating specialisation tracks. Such a link will close the gap between TVET and academic education as post-school pathways.

### **Conclusion**

TVET's relevance in contemporary workplace has been put in the spotlight during the pandemic as it is offering quick skilling and reskilling opportunities and creating a need-based workforce. However, TVET suffers perceived low social standing, which is a composite of other factors. Young people's perceptions of TVET are influenced more by these factors than by the image itself. Thus, conscious efforts must be made by the government, schools, TVET system, and other key social actors to address these factors to make TVET careers rewarding and attractive.

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