**STUDENTS VIEWS ON CHOOSING TVET, COMPLETING AND DROPPING OUT**

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**ABSTRACT**

The choice of TVET as a qualification route has perplexed educational planners for decades. Historically school-level TVET has been perceived as a second change option for the poor and delinquent. TVET pitched at the level of higher education, similarly, is perceived as a qualification route for unsuccessful university applicants. The perceptions have roots in early twentieth century education policies and have become widely accepted, to the extent that it is widely reflected in education policy.

The discourse underlying the relegation of TVET to second option tend to be based on issues related to dominant ideologies and a negative view of TVET, taking little regard for the value of TVET for socio-economic development. The discourse underlying the place of TVET within education systems is a middle class discourse of identifying alternatives to university education. It has little regard for the status of a qualification structure for working class learners.

This paper addresses policies that have emanated from the above-mentioned view, whereafter it discusses information gleaned from post graduate studies on views expressed by South African TVET students on why they enrolled for TVET programmes, why they dropped out and why they graduated. Unimpeded by university dominated ideology, students interviewed wanted to go to TVETs, they found their experiences developmental and have clear views on reasons for graduating or dropping out.

**INTRODUCTION**

Choice of educational institution is a concern that is commonly addressed, when children first enter school, when they move to high school and on completion of school. The choice of school, it is commonly believed, influences a child's life chances. The key success factors of *institutions of choice* have roots in social bias as much as they can be attributed to factors linked to quality of education. While the term *choice* is commonly used in the selection of educational institution, it is not entirely appropriate, as choice is commonly restricted geographical and financial factors. Enrolment at a neighborhood school, instead of a local school of choice is not a choice, it is the inevitable result of constraints that are out of the control of an education system's consumers. Choice constraints inevitably result in what Puckett, Davidson and Lee (2012) calls a negative feedback loop. A negative feedback loop is created by a perception of comparative inferiority that that in turn limits investment.

Puckett, *et al*. (2012) use the term *negative feedback loop* to compare TVET schools in the United States to the county's academic education. The term is equally appropriate for comparing schools located in different areas of a city, different types of institutions of higher education and, as implied by the generic use of TVET by Puckett, *et al.* (2012) for comparisons between TVET institutions and academic institutions within higher education. A negative loop not only influences investment, it potentially influences perceptions of comparative life chances, student satisfaction, and staff motivation.

This paper addresses the notion of TVET as post school educational institution choice from the critical position. Applying the option of first choice is only open to a privileged few. For the majority, many of whom *choose* TVET, choice is constrained by economic factors, often to the extent of choice being debased to the *only alternative*. A century of policy measures created by colonial and racial segregation has left TVET with a position, relative to other intuitions of higher education. Late-apartheid and post-apartheid policies, rather than elevating TVET's relative position, has had a relegating result. Yet, despite the negative loop, TVET in South Africa has expanded, both in student numbers and programmes offered.

This paper reflects on a study of what young South Africans 'think about' (Needham & Papier, 2011) TVET and what a few subsequent studies related to elements of student satisfaction have revealed. The paper uses a theoretical approach associated with a search for sound management and locates the problem, albeit loosely, in critical discourse analysis.

**TVET IN SOUTH AFRICA**

Higher and vocational education share a common point of origin in South Africa, a little over a century ago. The origins of both can be traced to courses offered by colleges that later became the University of Cape Town (Pittendrigh, 1988: 119). In addition to its shared point of origin, TVET traces its point of origin to training schools opened by emerging mining companies and stat run services like the mines and railways (Pittendrigh, 1988: 108–109). However, the growth and diversification of the systems of education and training during the course of the twentieth century resulted in the growth of universities, as one form of higher education, and TVET as another. The education and training bureaucracy that evolved in the country during the twentieth century struggled to place, what for most of the century was called technical education. The allocation of TVET to provinces following the establishment of a single department of education in the 1990s and the establishment of the Department of Higher Education and Training are but two of numerous occasions that the state moved technical education between its education departments (Van der Bijl & Lawrence, 2016:339).

The twentieth century had consequences for technical education. One of the consequences was the relegation of technical education to a form of education suitable for the poor, indigent, less able and delinquent (Gamble, 2003: 9-10), which resulted in the establishment of technical education in youth prisons, schools for indigent children and later, schools for learners with special learning needs. In 1971 the report of an investigation into national planning of education programmes (Haasbroek, 1971: 15-18) suggested technical education as 'an option for those with learning disabilities by creating a stream of special education for what at the time were called "dom normaleleerlinge (stupid but normal learners)' (Haasbroek 1971: 15–18 in Van der Bijl & Lawrence, 2016; 343).

Reducing the status of technical education to those who are poor, indigent, less able, delinquent or stupid but normal was exacerbated in the early 1980s when the de Lange Report into education, that followed in the wake of student uprisings in the 1970s, suggested that what it called 'career education' (HSRC, 1981) be made available for blacks. While the de Lange report was positive about the extension of technical education, given the removal of the colour bar and the protection of skilled work for whites, the extension was marred by as Hartshorne (1985: 150) noted at the time, 'serious reservations in black communities about the [apartheid state's] intentions'.

In addition to relegating technical education to whites who are less able and to blacks, technical education for 'normal' learners was elevated to fit late twentieth century requirements for higher education. From the 1970s technical colleges, the primary vehicle for technical education, were reformed, who chose to do so into colleges of advanced technical education (CATE), later renamed technikons and, two decades later, to universities of technology. The elevation of technical education to higher education did not result in the demise of technical education. Not all technical colleges became CATEs. Some continued to offer technical education and related qualifications.

By 1994 the comparative position of technical education was relatively well established. School level technical education was the prescribed route for those who struggled with academic subjects. Within higher education, a technical route was established, also as an alternative to those not accepted by universities. Since 1994 the post-apartheid government has introduced consistent measures to bolster technical education. Measures include renaming and restructuring technical education into technical and vocational education and training, as well as renaming technical HEIs and creating parity on higher level qualifications.

However, post apartheid restructuring of technical education did not improve its comparative position. As stated by Wedekind (2008: 8):

> [I] grew up in SA and my sense of technical education went something like this. If you want to be successful, go to school and get to university. If you are too dim witted or lazy, or have a lack of discipline or downright criminal tendencies, then there are technical schools or colleges for you – and as my students say – sorry for you!

He went on to describe how his family in Germany do not share the negative sentiment towards TVET.

Wedekind' s use of the word *sense* to describe a view commonly held, not necessary an accurate view or a view held elsewhere, clearly illustrates the *college as not a first choice* conundrum. The issue is not unique to South Africa. It has surfaced in a number of countries over the past two decades, including Zimbabwe (Nherera, 2000), the United States (Puckett, Davidson & Lee, 2012), Barbados (Harris, 2014), Zambia (Machila, Ngambi, Sikayomya & Sichula, 2015) and Africa as a whole (Mwangi & Mkaworo, 2012). The *sense* noted by Wedekind points towards inferiority, and is associated with questions around TVET graduate employability (see, for email Engelbrecht, Spencer & Van der Bijl,

2017).  The perception of TVET being 'inferior' (Puckett, *et al.*, 2012:1) creates what they call a 'negative-feedback loop', which limits investment in TVET.

The *sense* is not necessarily shared by students.  Needham and Paper (2011: 6) note that 'whilst students sociologically associate [T]VET with lower status employment, both school students and college students see [T]VET epistemologically and pedagogically as a superior form of education'. Needham & Papier (2011: 12-16) went on to illustrate that the student view of TVET is not unsophisticated.

## METHODOLOGY

This paper applies a management approach with a methodology loosely based on a on a model of critical discourse analysis (CDA) developed by Fairclough (2010).  CDA is described by Wodak and Meyer (2001: 2) as a theoretical perspective based on language and semiosis that gives rise to ways of analysing language and semiosis within broader analyses of social processes.  CDA, Wodak and Meyer postulate, exists 'in a dialogical relationship' with other social theories that can engage with its method in a transdisciplinary way.

In Fairclough (2010: 226, 235) he presents a CDA methodology which demarcates four phases:

- • Focus on a social wrong, in its semiotic aspect;
- • Identification of obstacles that stand in the way of correcting the social wrong;
- • Consideration of whether the social order can do without the social wrong; and
- • Identification of ways to overcome the obstacle.

The first three factors are used to provide an analysis of TVET.  The fourth introduces a management principle in correcting it.

## THE *WRONG* OF TVET AS FIRST CHOICE

In contrast to the perception expressed by researchers who have focused on broad sociological, financial or policy development issues, studies that have recorded TVET student perceptions of TVET is not negative, at least not about their experience and the value they obtained from a TVET education. The expression of views on the value of TVET is not as commonly expressed as views on its perceived inferiority.  The TVET choice and value conundrum therefore is therefore less of a social conundrum than a marketing one.

Choice is not a simple concept, especially when making decisions about what and where to study. Twentieth century capitalist growth created an education hierarchy, which places university education at the top.  Choice, furthermore, is an ideological concept that emanated from twentieth century capitalist economic theory related to the concept of 'free will'. Free will is the 'capacity of rational agents to choose a course of action from among various alternatives' (O'Connor, 2016).  Whether or not free will exits is itself debated. 'If there is such a thing as free will', O'Connor (2016) noted, 'it has many dimensions'.

Soliciting a choice *college or university* from any individual or social class is not asking a reasonable question.  A more reasonable question may be *what makes a person choose a TVET programme*.

Analysis of arguments on TVET as a comparative form of education is not without fault.  An element of the fault, the social wrong, expressed semiotically, reflected in literature illustrated so far, most of which has been taken from research on TVET as choice, lies in the generalisation of TVET and its

positon as a life choice.  The term (TVET) is applied differently in different national contexts and differently to levels within systems of education and training.  Asking school going youth which of the two types of institutions (colleges or universities) they prefer will, inevitably, result in a bell-curve response.

Another error in expression is in, albeit latency, suggesting that there is a linear, balanced or logical choice between colleges and universities as a place to study.  There is scant evidence indicating that the choice of place to study has a linear cause and effect, starting from a desire to go to university and leading to the negative acceptance of TVET.  While there are those who choose to follow their parents' study path 'legacy lure' is, in fact, number three in a list of Hoyt's (2018) *Top 15 Mistakes to Avoid in Choosing a College*.  The ongoing reference to universities or the collectivisation of TVET adds little value to making TVET a 'first choice', nor does it promote vocational education and training.  Identifying motivators and the social profile of people to register for TVET programmes, in contrast, provides indicators of who chooses TVET, reasons for the choice and related issues like satisfaction.

Needham and Papier's (2011:36) study of perceptions on TVET in South Africa is a case in point of a bell-curve response.  The study noted that a lack of awareness of the existence of TVET amongst school learners, in some cases a complete absence of awareness.  Those who were aware of TVET saw it as 'second choice education that would result in low-paying jobs with no career prospects'.

**OBSTACLES**

In contrast to the views of school learners, who may or may not have heard about TVET, respondents who were at a TVET college had a positive attitude towards TVET, their involvement in the chosen programme and the career potential provided. The positive attitude was attributed to the practical element of TVET programmes, which contributed towards an understanding of theoretical components.  TVET students believed, furthermore, that TVET provided better labour market entry and employment prospects because of the vocational approach and practical work place learning and experience (Needham & Papier, 2011:36).

This positive view of TVET relating to practical experiential and labour market advantage, not acquired with an academic education, is expressed by participants in a study conducted by Aynsley and Crossouard's (2010:138 in Harris, 2014:50) in Barbados and one conducted by Stockfelt (2013 in Harris, 2014:45) in Jamaica.  Participants in the Jamaican study indicated a belief that TVET provided greater economic potential,  compared to a university qualification).

Papier (2009: 24) differentiated between three categories, namely those who were idealistic and future focusse, those who were interested in occupational field and those were in a 'programme by default'.

The first category (Papier, 2009: 24; Ebrahim, 2013:9) identified a series of common reason for registering at a TVET college.  They were:

- The desire to improve their standard of living
- To find a good job
- To fulfil their dreams
- For future success
- to develop careers
- To become 'something in life'

The second category included reasons like wanting to work 'in an office' or 'work with computers', or wanting to 'become a qualified electrician'. Reasons included in the third category of studetns, being 'at college/or in the programme by default' (Papier, 2009: 24), included not being able to register at a university. It also included negative attitudes towards school and financial considerations. A significant point made by Papier (2009:24) is the 'The majority of learners interviewed knew the direction they wanted to go into and were interested in the occupational field they chose'.

More recent studies on student feelings towards TVET correlates with Papier's findings.

Ebrahim's (2013: 115-116, 125) study of experiences of students with diagnosed learning disabilities, concluded 'that self-esteem is important for students … and has a significant impact on their desire to be successful'. She noted that disabled students were made to feel that they are not suited to TVET. The criticism, they noted, acted as a motivator, not a demotivator.

Reasons for induvial decisions on entry into TVET was illustrated in a study on student attrition (Lawrence, 2016), also recently completed at a college in the Western Cape. This study was conducted on in-depth interviews conducted with a small number of building (NC(V) Civil and Construction) students. In the interviews, the desire to enter the building industry featured strongly. One interviewee specifically indicating that 'he had always wanted to be a construction worker and admired people working on construction sites', noting that 'I needed to start somewhere, and what better programme other than NC(V)?' (Lawrence, 2016:73)

The same person later said (Lawrence, 2016:85):

> *'I would personally recommend the programme to students who are currently at school and who are planning to leave when they finish grade 9. There are some minor things that the college can look at as well as the huge amount of theory work that the programme has. If that can be revised and more practical combined into the programme then I am sure many more would remain in the programme as I did.'*

From his interviews Lawrence (2016) identified support received from the college and understanding college procedures, as key reasons for programme completion. He identified the following as reasons for early programme departure:

- Feelings of isolation and low levels of satisfaction about their experience as whole, commonly accompanied by low levels of engagement with peers and college structures. This point was identified as the cause for student drop out in other students, in higher education in South Africa (Savage, 2001; Koen, 2007) and at college level on other countries (Sefa Dei, Mazzuca, Mclsaac & Zine 1997; Cook & Rushton 2009 ).

- Curriculum contents, particularly the theoretical orientation of contents.

   One of Lawrence's (2016: 63) interviewees expressed discontent as follows: 'I came to the college with the expectation of much more practical [work] in the NC(V) programme. But my experience with so much theory and so little practical was not such a nice experience of the lesson'.

- Programme administration, particularly the marks publication cycle, which interviewees felt was too long. In at least one case the lag resulted in a student not being able to obtain funding for the next year of study.

- Personal financial constraints and economic pressure. One student noted that external funding provided to him for his studies was absorbed into the extended family's consumption budget, with an inevitable negative result for his studies.

A study recently conducted on programme completion in a business studies programme at a TVET college in the Western Cape (Gaffoor, 2018:75 -79), noted that:

- 70% had knowledge of TVET and what they would be studying prior to registering and gained the knowledge from receiving career guidance.
- 89% indicated that they had struggled at secondary school.
- 78% entered TVET with the aim of using it to enter higher education.
- 91% noted that their entrance to TVET was motivated by prospective employment.
- 83% noted that TVET college assistance in finding employment after graduation influenced their decision to complete their programme.

TVET students, when interviewed, are clearly aware of choice parameters available to them. As clearly expressed are their views on their level of satisfaction as TVET consumers. Customer satisfaction is the 'perceived discrepancy between prior expectations (or some norm of performance) and the actual performance of the product as perceived after its consumption' (Tse & Wilton, 1988: 204).

**OVERCOMING THE OBSTACLE**

Customer satisfaction, Rummel and McDonald (2016) argue is one of the drivers of student retention. Rummel and McDonald (2016: 3) argue that encounters between students and college staff are service encounters. They argue that 'with each service encounter, students are continually re-evaluating their "repurchase intention" of that university. By ensuring that all aspects of campus services aid students' campus experiences, a positive evaluation will result, supporting higher retention rates'. While one view of overcoming the TVET college choice conundrum remains, maintaining a focus on wanting potential students to regard TVET as a first choice, which involves challenging a stratification process that evolved over a century. Another is to provide the most effective service to those who attend.

Provision of a good service would involve:

- Speedy registration and sound administration
- Effective and developmental teaching
- Assistance to learners

From the local studies referred to in this paper quality of teaching and student assistance is apparent. As Lawrence (2016: 87) noted, all 'interviewees felt the same way about the college student support services (SSS), expressing gratitude for their assistance and support'. Ebrahim (2013) found inclusive education practices, at the college that formed the sample of her study, to be sound.

Experiences related to appropriateness of teaching varied. Students interviewed by Lawrence (2016, 83) provided evidence of lecturers making concerted efforts to assist students when 'they had interpreted and answered incorrectly'. However, Ebrahim (2013:125) noted that students with diagnosed disabilities were made to feel that their choice of study was inappropriate. Lawrence (2016: 86-87) noted complaints about the theoretical nature of presentation of some subjects, mathematics in particular.

Service related to administration was clearly indicated as a reason for early departure, and therefore porous in terms of service quality. While the need for effective quality assurance mechanisms is not

in question, when a quality assurance cycle results in inability to register or to access funding then its effectiveness falls into question.

The value of the TVET experience permeates through Papier's (2009) report. It also emanates from Ebrahim's (2013) study and is noted by both Lawrence (2016) and Gafoor (2018).

**CONCLUSION**

Publications on student opinions of their experience clearly indicate that students know why they enter TVET programmes and what they expect to get out of it, even if the reason for entering is based solely on preceding negative experiences. This view of knowing why this alternative option is selected is, to an extent, juxtaposed to the view that TVET should be the 'first choice'. The two views are not, however, in conflict. An alternate option, be it a second or third choice, if it develops into a positive or developmental experience can become the best alternative.

This paper, applying an approach based in critical discourse analysis, traced the origin and development of TVET in South Africa and clearly illustrated that TVET has never been a first choice type of institution. Anglophone colonialism and apartheid has cemented some universities as educational institutions of first choice, a notion further entrenched by post-apartheid transformation. TVET has, however, grown, both in size and scope and has cemented itself as a preferred provider within some industrial settings. Large numbers of students, without knowledge of the debate of 'first choice' or irrespective of it, have and continue to enter TVET, to complete TVET programmes and to find work as a result. While entry into TVET may not be the first choice or even a choice based on positive grounds, student perceptions of its value is clear.

Wishing for better students or for students who regard TVET as a first choice adds little value to the debate on TVET effectiveness. Developing a debate on good service delivery, in contrast, could lead to the improvement in administration, teaching and learning and learner support.

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