

The Relevance of Technical Vocational Education and Training Skills in Meeting the Market Demand in Eswatini

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Abstract

There are several types of technical vocational education and training (TVET) skills offered to offenders who are incarcerated in correctional services worldwide, Eswatini included. The paper presents the findings about the relevance of TVET skills offered to offenders in meeting the demand of the market in Eswatini. The research questions were: What type of vocational skills have ex-offenders used after their release from custody? How have ex-offenders used the acquired vocational skills after release from custody? Based on the interpretive paradigm using qualitative approach, individual interviews were conducted with four facilitators and 12 ex-offenders who were purposively chosen. The data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis and ethics were considered. The findings revealed that the Correctional Services provides various TVET skills to offenders such as: building construction, leather crafting, auto electrical. It was established that the criteria to select the offenders to various trades was based on offenders' past experiences, their personal interests and level of education. Ex-offenders further reported that they used the TVET skills to get piece jobs, secure employment while others said they did not use the skills. Recommendations made are to: hold regular awareness campaigns about re-integration of ex-offenders to their communities and the establishment of partnerships with private sectors where ex-offenders could easily be employed after their release.

Keywords: Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Skills, Ex-Offenders, Market Demand

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Introduction

The paradigm shift from prisons to correctional centers with an overarching goal of rehabilitation and reintegration of offenders using TVET skills envisaged to change their lives and equip them with work-related skills and reduce recidivism (Vandala, 2019). However, studies have shown that there is an old divide between the custodial officers and training officers that has prioritized security over rehabilitation programmes (Ntshangase, 2015; Ngozwana, 2017; Dlamini, 2020). Moreover, Dlamini (2020) assessed the impact of correctional programmes in integrating offenders back to society and found that insufficient training apparatus, lack of finances for operational costs for TVET programmes and staff turnover were affecting the programmes offered to offenders in Eswatini. It has been noted that correctional centers experience overcrowding due to re-offending that Shongwe (2014) established to be the cause for committing crimes for survival. This is despite the effort of TVET programmes that are provided to offenders that aim at preparing them for the integration through availing opportunities that can enable them to engage meaningful work, programmes and activities that have relevance to their life outside correction (Correctional Wheel, 2020). Hence the study was conducted to assess the relevance of TVET skills offered to offenders in meeting the market demands in Eswatini. The objectives were to determine the type of vocational skills used by ex-offenders after their release from custody; and to find out how ex-offenders have used their vocational skills after their release from custody. The study will make recommendations that might improve the TVET programmes offered to offenders in correctional centers in Eswatini. Furthermore, the study might contribute to the field of study regarding how TVET skills could be provided in a manner that can benefit offenders and the other stakeholders in Eswatini. The paper is organized into the following headings: literature review, methodology, findings, and discussions before the concluding remarks.

Literature Review

Nkwanyane, Makgato and Ramaligela (2020) postulate that TVET colleges serve to impart skills and develop youth and adults with relevant skills for transition into the world of work. Technical and vocational training and education focuses on the mind, the heart, and the hand of trainees to be innovative entrepreneurs and be able to respond to the developmental needs of a society (Chakamba, 2019). The TVET skills are known to empower people with self-reliance and employable skills, therefore must strive to produce competent learners who will respond to the needs of both employers and consumers.

TVET Programmes for Offenders

The goal of the TVET programme is to reduce the rate of re-offending and facilitate smooth entry into the communities after incarceration in Eswatini correctional centres (Correctional Wheel, 2020). In the context of Canada, Mohammed and Mohammed (2015) established that reducing re-offending through vocational skills yielded positive results as recidivism was lowered among offenders who had enrolled in TVET programmes than those who did not enrol in those programmes. This could probably be the case with offenders in Eswatini correctional centres, particularly if their TVET skills could meet the market demands, which this study would establish. Mohammed and Mohammed (2015) stated that offenders in Canada were provided with vocational skills such as computer repair, cosmetology, electrical trades, floor covering, painting, upholstery, and welding. Similarly, Zoukis (2015) indicated that in New York, offenders were offered adult basic education, cell study, computer assisted

instruction to offenders who entered the Department of Corrections and Community Supervision who are without a verified high school diploma or its equivalency. Zoukis stated that vocational skills training such as building maintenance, carpentry, plumbing, radio/TV repairs and small engine repairs were provided to offenders in partnership with some industries (Zoukis, 2015). Zoukis underscored that the partnership aimed at linking the acquired skills from the correctional centre with the demand of the world of work.

In a study that Munishi and Emmanuel (2016) conducted in Tanzania about factors contributing to lack of employable skills among TVET graduates, it was found that lack of job competencies resulted from poor training from TVET institutions because of incompetent teachers and inadequate facilities. Munishi and Emmanuel (2016) found that the labour market was changing rapidly due to technological advancement therefore, the TVET college curricula ought to be aligned in a way that will serve the rapid market demands. Munishi and Emmanuel also found that TVET lecturers needed to continuously update their skills so that they can be at par with the dynamics of the market demand; and last, to provide the career guidance in TVET to help the learner career path. In view of the above, this suggests that vocational curricula infused with technology be drawn up in conjunction with partners from the world of work, TVET teachers, and students so that TVET graduates could meet the expectations of the labour market (Munishi & Emmanuel, 2016). Moreover, Zarina et al. (2016) postulate that technology use and the internet have become a necessity and seen as appropriate for the twenty-first century skills. This is also supported by Raihan (2014) who opined that satisfactory partnership between (TVET) institutions and industries would have an advantage to the provision of relevant practical skills for economic growth.

The Relevance of TVET skills to market demand

The relevance of TVET skills with the market demand cannot be overemphasized. This is in line with what Aluoch (2021) suggest that TVET institutions should work tirelessly to ensure that their trainees deliver what the consumer or employer needs when the former join the industry. This can be possibly achieved if there is collaboration among the industries and the education institutions (Raihan, 2014) that are offering vocational skills. In that way, the relevance of vocational technical skills to the demands of the market could be guaranteed. It has been indicated that TVET institutions need to reinforce links with industries as to enhance networking between academia and industries (Raihan, 2014). The author highlights the importance of partnerships by TVET institutions with the market as both can create a better understanding of each other's requirements and to recognize how they can be met through the industry programs (Raihan, 2014). The suggestions by Raihan (2014) are confirmed by the findings of the studies by Aluoch (2021) and Ngure (2015) in Kenya about the need for collaborative partnership model initiative that can bridge the existing gap between the provision of vocational technical skills and the relevance to the market industry.

In Eswatini Correctional Services, efforts to integrate offenders back into the society is done through placement, which the Correctional Wheel (2020) stipulates that an offender must be placed to facilitate the transfer of learning by engaging them with full practical. The placement of offenders to different industries is hoped to facilitate the easy means to adapt to their communities by utilizing the vocational technical skills effectively, either as self-employed or joining paid employment (Dlamini, 2020; Ntshangase, 2015). Similarly, Lindeman (2017) assessed ex-offenders' pathways post their release in Australia who had completed their TVET programs while in custody. Lindeman found that the ex-offenders were able to use their TVET skills by getting piece jobs from their peers, family members,

community members, neighbours while others got full time paid employment, which made their trades to remain relevant to the changing world of work. What Lindeman (2017) found is different from what happens in some of the Eastern Cape TVET colleges where Sixabayi (2016) found that there is a mismatch between what is offered as curriculum and what the labour market wants. This possible gap between what is expected as outcomes from the TVET and the market demand is what led to this study in the context of Eswatini.

Methodology

The study was situated under the case study design which was deemed appropriate for the research problem (Creswell, 2014). The case study design was used as it provides more realistic responses (Yin, 2009) as it focuses on gaining an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon at a specific time. Qualitative approach was used because it allowed the participants being ex-offenders, to elaborate on and unpack the information pertaining to what vocational skills they have used and how they have used them. Based on the qualitative nature of the study, non-probability sampling was used (Rahi, 2017) where both convenience and purposive sampling techniques were applied to choose the TVET facilitators and the ex-offenders who participated in the study.

Correctional facilities are highly security-controlled environments; therefore, the researcher communicated her research needs to the correctional officials who served as facilitators and liaisons in the study, also for triangulation purposes. Four facilitators were chosen based on their availability and readiness to participate in the study as per their convenient flexible time (Bryman, 2012). They were interviewed at their workplace in different times with interviews lasting for less than thirty minutes per individual. Ex-offenders were selected by the facilitators using purposive sampling that required key informants that are knowledgeable and with the experience of the TVET skills (Leedy & Ormond, 2015). Different facilitators accompanied the researcher to the homes of the ex-offenders who were available and showed willingness to participate.

The facilitators and the twelve ex-offenders gave their informed consent to participate by responding to the face-to-face individual interviews using a semi-structured interview guide that was separate for both facilitators and the ex-offenders. All the participants were males because they were previously release from a facility that kept only males in that custody. Therefore, all the facilitators were males too. The interviews were held in SiSwati, a vernacular language understandable to all participants. Later the transcripts were completed in English language for easy data analysis using qualitative content analysis (Elo & Kyngas, 2008) process. Four principles of ethical conduct for research with people – confidentiality; anonymity, privacy, and voluntary participation and right to withdraw, formed part of all research instruments, and were repeated at the beginning of each interview for each participant. Covid-19 protocols were observed during the process of data collection. Therefore, all participants shall remain anonymous, and their identities shall be protected by indicating their responses using numbers as the codes.

Findings

The findings are presented according to the two objectives that guided the study and the direct quotes are stated as evidence to support the data.

1. Determining the type of vocational skills used by ex-offenders after their release from custody

The first objective intended to establish the types of vocational skills used by ex-offenders after their release from custody. Three content areas that emanated from the data were: vocational trades/courses offered to the inmates, knowledge and skills acquired, and the evaluation of performance. The facilitators were drawn from the trades of carpentry, plumbing, electrical wiremen, and motor mechanics.

Vocational trades/courses offered

For the courses that are offered to the inmates, the facilitators reported that the trades offered to the inmates are: agriculture, auto electrical, building construction, leather crafting, electrical wiremen, carpentry, motor mechanics, metal works, panel beating, plumbing, spray painting, pottery, and upholstery. This was supported by ex-offenders who said: “I acquired engineering skills” and another stated “I did carpentry and joinery, cabinet making and wood machinist skills”. The ex-offenders reported to have gained the knowledge and skills from the trades that were provide to them while still in custody.

Knowledge and skills acquisition

The ex-offenders reported that they acquired various skills based on their interest and their experience. This is what they said:

When I got incarcerated, I was equipped with electrical installation skills. But then I changed after some time as I got interested with the refrigeration and air-conditioning trade which I enrolled for; I was selected based on that I have been equipped with electrical installation skills before (Ex-offender 03)

Another one stated,

I was selected because of my willingness to do carpentry, also based on my educational background as reading and writing were essential abilities in vocational training. In carpentry for example, one must understand measurements, how to read a tape measure and so on (Ex-offender 05)

Ex-offender 01 said, “I was selected to do upholstery because I could read and write, and I liked it because I thought I could use the skills to earn a living upon my release from custody.” The responses from the ex-offenders were confirmed by what the facilitators reported because one of them indicated that:

One major requirement is that the inmates must be able to read and write, with Grade 7 Certificate. Then they apply to enroll for the trades or courses of interest. In case the inmates did not attend school, they are encouraged to attend to basic literacy classes offered by another institute but here at the center. Also, experience in a specific trade is considered for selection of inmates to study the similar or relevant course (Facilitator 04).

The above quotes show that the trades offered seemed to be learner-centered in that the inmates were selected based on their interest, which could raise their motivation to learn and improve their performance. Although the ex-offenders had acquired knowledge of the skills they had preferred to, some indicated that they coped while others stated that they coped with difficulty. This is what the challenged ex-offender revealed:

I was faced with difficulty of reading and understanding jargon that was written in English. In leather crafting sometimes facilitators used catalogues for learning and some words were difficult for me to read and understand as my educational level is Grade 7. However, the facilitators and some of my colleagues used to assist me where I faced challenges (Ex-offender 02).

On a contrary, Ex-offender 04 said: "I was able to cope because there was a lot of practical work that was done that did not require a lot of writing, I mastered the skills with ease." This shows that the level of education could have been a factor in enabling the inmates to easily understand the trade skills and thereby boosting their performance.

Evaluation of performance

The vocational skills were evaluated to see how the inmates were performing in terms of mastering the skills. This is what ex-offender 03 said:

Facilitators used to give us theory tests every Wednesday. Again, every month end we were given tasks to complete without any supervision. The tasks were allocated three days to be completed following the instructions written on a paper. Following completion of the task, each one would be graded according to the quality of what has been produced.

In agreement, Ex-offender 06 had this to say:

If the facilitator sees that one had now mastered the vocational skills, he would be selected to work in places such as the Royal Palace. Additionally, the public would bring their assets to be repaired such as wardrobes, or even place orders for the manufacturing of different products such as coffee tables, wooden tables and chairs and other things.

The above quotations from the ex-offenders were corroborated by their facilitators who reported that:

In assessing the mastery of the skills, tests are administered to each inmate to determine their level of understanding and retention. The practical aspect is assessed by assigning each inmate a job to do without close supervision. After they complete the job, facilitators measure the level of mastery of skills by assessing the quality of the product (Facilitator 09).

It can be noted that continuous assessment using weekly tests and developing the products was used to evaluate the level of the inmates' performance and thereby ensuring their readiness for the world of work upon their release from custody.

2. Finding out how ex-offenders have used their vocational skills after their release from custody

For the second objective, the researcher intended to determine if ex-offenders were able to apply the acquired vocational skills, and whether they were meeting the market demand or even improving their livelihoods.

Ex-offender 11 stated:

I have used my vocational skills at my workplace and when I get the piece jobs provided by my facilitators, also from the community members where I stay.

However, I was not so confident because when I first arrived at the company where I work, their design technology of sofas was completely different from what I learnt at the correctional center, hence, I struggled to adjust. But with time, I ended up learning those new skills.

The use of technology is important in the field of TVET since everything has changed, therefore the syllabus must change too. Another ex-offender said:

I have not secured any employment since my release from custody...The people in my community are too judgmental as some utter detrimental words just to make your living in the community miserable. The other thing is that the working tools are expensive, I need a special grinder and sewing machines for leather crafting to start my business (Ex-offender 06)

Ex-offender 11 reiterated that: “Changes in technology causes us to keep consulting with our facilitators and other colleagues before doing any jobs, yet that is bad practice which delays the completion of our work.” On a positive note, ex-offender 07 stated that he is doing fine by saying: “I have been hired by two different schools to maintain their refrigerators and air-conditioners. Members of my community have also given me several piece jobs and I did them with success. They seemed very happy with my work.”

The above quotes by ex-offender 11 implies that the curriculum used might be dated and not having the components of technology, which could be challenging in this 21st century skills where technology has become the basis for learning. The above was confirmed by the facilitators when indicating that the ex-offenders were able to use the acquired vocational skills. Facilitator 03 stated:

I do keep constant contact with the released offenders. I speak to their customers whom they have provided services to, just to find out how they have performed using their vocational skills. So far, I have received no complaints from their customers, meaning that the ex-offenders use their vocational skills accordingly, also to improve their lives (Facilitator 03)

Nonetheless, for some ex-offenders, lack of startup capital to buy working tools made them stay longer without using their vocational skills:

I have been released from custody ten months ago. I am unemployed because I am not prepared to work for someone as the upholstery trade pays a lot of money if you own a business... currently I am negotiating with my family to help me start my business, then I can take it from there (Ex-offender 08).

Ex-offender 12 echoed:

Lack of startup capital is my major challenge as I do not want to secure a paid employment but want to start my own business. Secondly, some individuals refuse to offer me piece jobs because they fear that I might steal from them, or I might take the deposit and disappear (Ex-offender 12).

The Facilitator 01 said:

Although the ex-offenders do get the necessary skills to thrive outside in the world of work, there is not much support from the communities and organizations which can increase opportunities for securing sustainable employment that pays reasonable income...and some relapse unemployable due to stigma that causes them to cause more crimes. Another challenge is the unavailability of funding for them to acquire

the needed equipment, tools, and machinery to start their own businesses (Facilitator 01).

It became obvious that some ex-offenders were determined to establish their own businesses than securing employment, which was a positive mindset, although they were challenged to get the startup capital.

Discussion

The findings revealed that ex-offenders had acquired various trades such as leather crafting, upholstery, carpentry, and joinery which indicated that there is a wide range of vocational skills options offered to inmates while in custody. This finding is affirming what Mohammed and Mohammed (2015) exposed in Canada and Zoukis (2015) where inmates also partake in variety of trades to choose while kept in custody. It was discovered that ex-offenders were equipped with technical vocational skills and knowledge, which confirmed the findings by Nkwanyane et al., (2020) as offenders were enrolled in various trades based on their previous experience and their level of literacy. It was interesting to note that the choice is learner centered (Ngozwana, 2017) meaning that the trades served the interests of offenders in Eswatini. However, it was found that few of those ex-offenders could not easily cope, which could be because of their lower literacy levels, while other were found to cope as they used a lot of practical experience to learn the trades. The findings pointed that offenders performed well while assessed continuously to evaluate their level of producing quality products. This finding counter what Munishi and Emmanuel (2016) found in Tanzania where there is poor performance by TVET graduates.

It was found that some ex-offenders had used their vocational skills by securing employment in places related to the trades they acquired, meaning that their vocational skills could be used in relevant industries. This finding approves the finding by Lindeman (2017) in Australia where ex-offenders were able to secure employment and used their vocational skills to get the piece jobs from community members, friends, schools. However, it was established that for other ex-offenders their skills were partially relevant because they were challenged by technology. For instance, ex-offenders 11 reported to have felt less confident as he had to consult from time to time with the facilitators and his colleagues. This could imply the obsolete TVET curriculum that needs to be reviewed to infuse technology within Eswatini correctional centers. This is aligned to what Munishi and Emmanuel (2016) and Zarina et al. (2016) stated regarding the need to infuse technology in TVET curricula so as to keep up to date with the current market demand.

On the other hand, the technology challenge could mean the lack of work experience through internships and placement within different industries, to prepare offenders for the world of work. This disproves what the Correctional Wheel (2020) stipulated in Eswatini, meaning that what is written is not put to practice. Several studies have shown the importance of collaboration and partnerships (Raihan, 2014; Ngure, 2015) because such efforts could yield the relevance of TVET skills in meeting the market demands. It was further found that some of the ex-offenders could not use their vocational skills due to lack of funding to establish their own businesses by buying the necessary equipment, while others encountered issues of stigma. This implies that rehabilitation and reintegration of offenders using TVET skills needed to be strengthened, which support assertions by Vandala (2019).

Conclusion

Based on the findings from this study, it can be concluded that several vocational skills such as leather crafting, upholstery, carpentry, and others were used by ex-offenders after their release from custody. It can further be concluded that the ex-offenders used their vocational skills by securing paid employment and by getting piece jobs, thus making their skill relevant in that way. However, the study established a disconnection between what was offered and what the world of employment wants in terms of the lack of relevance to the current technology by some ex-offenders and the industry practice. This means that the TVET skills acquired by the ex-offenders in Eswatini could partially meet the market demands especially during the globally competitive world of the twenty-first century. The following suggestions are recommended to the policy guiding the correctional centers in Eswatini:

1. Hold regular awareness campaigns about re-integration of offenders to their communities to reduce the stigma attached to offending.
2. Establish and strengthened partnerships between private sector industries where ex-offenders could easily be employed or even secure the equipment to start up their businesses after their release from custody.
3. Correctional centers to develop and review their current TVET curricula and make it responsive to the needs of its learners and the industries. This is to ensure for the relevance of the skills acquired that can appropriately be used the economic growth of their country.

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