

# Opinions for Enhancing Employment Pathways for VET Graduates: A Case Study of the Mechanics' Trade Program in Lindi and Mtwara VETA Centres<sup>1</sup>.

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## ABSTRACT

This study aimed to examine strategies to enhance the employability of graduates from the mechanic trade program at VET centres in Lindi and Mtwara, focusing on bridging the gap between VET education and workforce integration. The study employed qualitative methods, including interviews with graduates and employers and focus groups with continuing trainees, and analysed the data thematically. The findings revealed that VET programs address employer needs, provide career guidance, and offer internship opportunities or industrial attachment, all of which are important in imparting hands-on skills required by the labour market. However, challenges such as discrimination, bribery, and outdated equipment were also revealed. The study recommends aligning VET curricula with industry demands, increasing collaboration between VET institutions and employers, enhancing career guidance services, introducing anti-discrimination policy changes, and anti-bribery laws, promoting gender inclusivity, and modernising training equipment. These recommendations are intended to improve VET strategies, reduce unemployment, and enhance economic output by equipping young people with market-relevant skills.

**Keywords:** Vocational Education and Training, Youth Unemployment, Employment pathways, Industry Alignment.

## INTRODUCTION

Vocational education stands as a powerful tool for driving economic growth in Tanzania (Luhala & Zhang, 2021). Sustainable Development Goal number 4 (SDG4) which aims to increase youth and adult skills, including technical and vocational, for employment, decent work, and entrepreneurship aligns with Tanzania's 2025 vision for industrial growth (Mokoro, 2023). This vision, which emphasises modern, highly productive industries, has the potential to transform the nation's economy into a middle-income one by 2025 (REPOA, 2014). The National Five-Year Development Plan II, fostering industry and human capital growth by 2025, underscores the transformative power of vocational education (URT, 2020b). The vocational education and training (VET) system remains crucial for preparing graduates for employment in both formal and informal settings, aiming to diversify the workforce and economy, encounter the growing youth population, and eradicate unemployment (VETA, 2019).

Global youth unemployment is a persistent issue demanding immediate attention (VETA, 2019). The International Labour Organization (ILO) highlights the importance of providing high-quality, internationally

recognised vocational education (VET) programs as a foundation for sustainable economic development in developing nation (ILO, 2024). Tanzania and Sub-Saharan Africa have introduced innovative educational pathways to combat poverty and unemployment, including self-employment and creative workplace thinking, despite the challenges of industrial growth and the inevitable development of VET (Luhala & Zhang, 2021).

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), Tanzania's youth unemployment rate was estimated at 5.88% in 2022. The Tanzania government reports that 2.47 million people aged 15 or older in Tanzania are unemployed, with 1.71 million more women than men (URT, 2022). One of VETA's primary objectives is to increase economic output by providing skilled labour to meet market demands (VETA, 2019). A trained labour force will support Tanzania's 2025 industrial development strategy (REPOA, 2014), which focuses on using local resources and the manufacturing sector to increase by 15% per annum. It aims to eliminate gender disparities in education by 2030, ensuring that vulnerable groups have equitable access to all levels of education and vocational training by providing skills for skilled workers and launching small businesses (URT, 2018).

With a low-skilled workforce of 85% and 12% of medium-skilled workforce, VET can be crucial in expanding the professional education pathway (URT, 2021). The unemployment rates in Mtwara and Lindi are notably higher than the national average, with Mtwara experiencing 13.7% unemployment largely due to a slow economy, limited formal job opportunities, and a heavy reliance on informal work and self-employment. As a result, VET graduates in Mtwara and Lindi face significant barriers to formal employment opportunities, hindering their contribution to national goals (URT, 2020c). The mechanic trade offers transferable skills across industries, particularly in machine maintenance and repair in the oil and gas and automotive sectors, making it a valuable focus for vocational education programs (ILO, 2019).

This study aims to enhance understanding of how vocational education can be improved to meet job market demands, thereby increasing employment opportunities for VET graduates contributing to government efforts to bridge the skills gap and decrease unemployment. Meanwhile, the insights gained will assist the Vocational Education and Training Authority (VETA) enhance teaching methodologies, strategies, and approaches, enabling graduates to acquire essential skills for employment.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Becker (2014) proposed the human capital theory, which underpinned the study. Accordingly, the competitive nature of the labour market demanded the subjects' job choices be dependent on their levels of education. To improve their expected returns, individuals put more into their human capital (Coleman, 2017). Vocational education provides learners with human capital for employment, equipping them with specific skills. Employers are driven by profit growth and increased output, so they need people with the right skills. This enabled people to work for industries or use their new skills in self-employment, leading to individual economic growth and hence better economic conditions (Teixeira, 2014).

The theory focuses on the concept that investment in education and training leads to productivity and economic growth. This theory helped us understand how VET programs and investments in human capital, such as schooling, quality training, and work attitude, affect people's earnings. It also explained why some workers made more than others, even if they had the same level of education. Vocational education in Tanzania is crucial for human capital development, providing practical employment and self-employment skills in areas like mechanics, addressing labour market needs, and reducing skill barriers. For instance, (Kailo (2020) employed the human capital theory to evaluate students' employability skills in technical, vocational education, and training institutions in Kilifi County, Kenya, based on Becker's (1962) tenets. The study also recognized the need to make vocational courses relevant in the job market, which should address system problems such as discrimination against female students, outdated equipment, and proper career guidance for students. Thus, the aspects mentioned above allowed the study to contribute to the enhancement of VET programs in Tanzania and, therefore, to students' employability and the development of the country's economy in the 2025 vision.

## **METHODOLOGY**

A qualitative exploratory study was conducted in the Lindi and Mtwara regions. Data was gathered through in-

depth individual interviews with employers and youth who had graduated from VETA Lindi and Mtwara. The study selected these regions based on the skills required in various economic sectors, including the emerging oil and gas sector, and industries like manufacturing, machinery operations, automotive services, and repair (NACTE, 2020; URT, 2020c). A total of 28 participants were involved in the study; including 10 graduates, eight employers, and 10 continuing trainees as participants in a focused group conducted in one session in each of those two colleges, each with five participants and the sample size as sufficient to achieve data saturation. Snowball sampling was applied to select VETA graduates and employers from the field of mechanics from these two colleges.

Snowball sampling was used to find and recruit the participants of the study. According to Creswell & Creswell (2018), the technique is appropriate when you are dealing with "hidden populations, where members are not easily accessible to the researcher through other sampling strategies. in this case, VET graduates in mechanics distributed across different locations in the country were hard to reach and information was passed through informal networks. By using institutional records, employer links, and key informants starting participants were located and then helped in finding others. This way, the study was able to obtain a relevant and diverse sample. Focus Group discussion participants were purposefully selected based on their experience with VET programs and their facilitation skills, making them the most relevant group to provide insights.

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide from graduates and employers to learn about their opinions or experiences regarding VET learning pathways, and a checklist was used for FGDs. Analysis of data collected through interviews and FGDS was data following a thematic analysis procedure which involved identifying themes through open coding, refining them, and comparing them. Participants were informed that their identities would be kept private. Any personal information was anonymized during the data processing process, and nicknames were used to describe the findings. For anonymity, the participants in the interview; were employers labelled as E1 to E8, graduates labelled as KII (key informant interviews) and focus group discussions labelled as FGD1 to FGD2. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, privacy, and reflexivity, were integral to the study, ensuring that participants' rights and well-being were protected throughout the research.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section describes and discusses the results of the study on vocational education and training (VET) programs. This study looks at the extent to which different VET curricula meet the demand, the relevance of the skills attained, and the struggles that graduated VETs encounter during job search. The collected data was thematically presented and discussed to show that vocational education can be improved to meet job market demands, thereby increasing employment opportunities for VET graduates contributing to government efforts to bridge the skills gap and decrease unemployment within the study area. The responses from the interviewed participants (employers, graduates) revealed two main themes: as shown in the table below;

Major Themes	Minor Themes
4.1 Strategies to enhance the transition of youth from VET programs to employment.	4.1.1 Address Employer Needs
	4.1.2 Strengthen Career Guidance Services
	4.1.3 Avail Internship Opportunities
	4.1.4 Instigating Volunteering
4.2 Understand and address Graduate challenges.	4.2.1 Job Connection
	4.2.2 Discrimination and Bribery

Source: Field Data, 2024

## Strategies to enhance the transition of youth from VET programs to employment.

The primary aim of the VET program is to equip youth with up-to-date knowledge and skills needed in the labour market. The curriculum strengthens the link between VET and industry by enhancing career guidance and support services, developing soft skills and employability, and enabling effective collaboration between youth and employers (VETA, 2023). Based on the data collected, various factors to enhance the transition of youth from VET programs to employment opportunities are elaborated below:

### Address Employer Needs

The VET program is designed to meet employers' demands, ensuring that graduates are trained with the skills and knowledge that align with industry requirements. Participants emphasised the importance of VET in meeting employer needs, and most of them shared their requirements, which was a key finding during data collection, for instance, the participants said:

*“We need creative employees who can think outside the box to produce competitive goods in the global market.” (E1, February 09, 2024), this was supported by many employers.*

*“We mostly require candidates to possess relevant skills and experience tailored to the demands of the particular industry or workplace, particularly the ability to confidently use tools available with confidence.” (E8, February 13, 2024).*

*“We want to enrol new employees anxious to learn and grow professionally and develop the necessary skills and knowledge to perform their duties effectively.” (E5, February 13, 2024, Mtwara)*

*“For instance, in welding, employers seek candidates who can operate machines such as Mig machine and use gas effectively.” (E2, February 8, 2024).*

The above findings show that most employers value creativity, job-specific skills, and a willingness to learn and use tools and equipment more effectively in their new employees. This finding concurred with Coleman (2017), who argued that vocational education should equip learners with industry- and job-related skills. VET programs play a crucial role in fostering these skills, as they provide a platform for students to develop their creativity and adaptability, which are highly valued in the current job market. However, conflicting opinions propose that VET programs are not capable of responding adequately to the dynamic nature of the current job markets. For example, (Ntallima, 2014) evidenced that VET is effective in equipping industry-type vocational skills, yet it might fail to focus on cognitive skills, including critical and problem-solving skills that are essential for the changing environment. It is for this reason that this critique postulates that graduates from VET have lower flexibility to undertake tasks in other non-vocational careers due to the focus of their training on vocation-specific technical skills. This brings the argument for VET to point out that to meet the needs of dynamic work environments, VET needs to provide graduates with both specialised know-how and over-arching competencies.

### Strengthen Career Guidance Services

Kusumastuti et al., (2023) view career counselling primarily as motivating youths to complete compulsory schooling. The participants acknowledged their institute's ability to conduct career guidance services during data collection. These services helped them choose a career aligned with their interests and values and instilled a sense of perseverance, discouraging them from giving up on their job search after completing their studies. “Trainees were asked if they got career counselling”. Continuing trainees, as they shared in the Focus group their views as,

*“During career guidance services, the institutes invite industrial employers to inform students about industry trends and the skills required for specific jobs.” (FGD1 February 8, 2024, Lindi)*

*“During career guidance services, trainees were taught the importance of volunteering after completing their studies to gain valuable experience before formally applying.” (FGD 2 February 14, 2024, Mtwara).*



This collaboration between VET institutes and employers is crucial in ensuring students have the right skills and knowledge for the job market. The above findings show that career guidance services are vital in helping trainees understand market demands, persist after graduation, gain experience through volunteering, and understand the importance of good relationships with their nearby employers. Furthermore, the study revealed that the VET institutions in the study areas conduct career counselling in two phases. The first phase, during enrolment, guides students in choosing the course that best suits their interests. The second phase, which occurs towards the end of their course duration, prepares them to compete for job opportunities in the global market by providing information about industry trends and specific job requirements. The findings aligned with (B. Adewale, O. Adisa, C. Ndububa, O. Olawoyin, 2017), who emphasised that students should be aware of their interests and the available opportunities in the real world. A career guidance service provides students with adequate information on different career paths within their chosen field (VETA, 2023).

### **Avail Internship Opportunities**

The study revealed the existence of a practical internship between trainees and nearby industries. The gathered data indicates that internship opportunities provide trainees with increased experience, however, the participants posed some limitations in its practices. In the focused group discussion, the participants (continuing trainees) shared their views:

*“Our institution offers a VET program that allows trainees to access internship opportunities with nearby industries.” (FGD1, February 8, 2024).*

*“We practice internship programs after learning the required curriculum content within the academic year. Usually, in the second term, students learn more than half of the course.” (FGD2, February 14, 2024).*

The institutions are viewed as having programs that offer formal interactions between institutions and industries. More importantly, the good relationships built through internship programs enabled graduates to work as volunteers after finishing their studies. Another participant of the FGDs claims that.

*“Some industries do not allow internship students to view trainees they come to be trained but their industries are for production only” (FGD1, February 8, 2024).*

The findings highlight the need for the challenge faced by the trainee internship. The finding aligns with (Özer, 2022), who suggests that institutions plan programs to allow multiple learning pathways apart from classroom instructions. Hands-on work at a job site requires a lot of effort and time. (Wahjono and Kristianto (2023) found that high unemployment results from a mismatch between the skills provided by vocational education institutions and the demands of the industry, contrary to vocational education's original goal of reducing the unemployment rate. Cooperation between industry and vocational education is one way to address the issue. Hence, trainees and trainers had better attend industrial attachment.

### **Instigating Volunteering**

Aside from resources, incompatibility was a barrier for individuals engaging in practical work activities. However, graduates found a solution by investing their time in volunteering in industries and workshops. This approach has proven effective in gaining practical skills and preparing for future employment. It fosters community and connection, making them feel more supported. The participants shared their views:

*“In my experience, volunteering is more important to graduate, ever since it increases competencies and practical abilities.” (KII, February 19, 2024)*

*“I have one example of my friend who completed VETA and started volunteering in a certain company for about two years. Later, she was recruited to the entire position.” (KII, February 20, 2024)*

This implies that graduates must develop tolerance and use their time and efforts to work as industry or company volunteers to keep themselves up to date; hence, volunteering creates employment opportunities. This finding

correlates with Guàrdia et al. (2021), who highlighted that volunteering significantly impacts the development of employment opportunities for graduates.

### **Understand and address Graduate challenges.**

The researcher aimed to understand the challenges facing graduates when seeking employment. Graduates shared their experiences while seeking employment by giving their views as follows.

#### **Job Connection**

Job connections are vital for VET graduates but facing biased and corrupt hiring practices, as highlighted by several graduates who, without access to fair job opportunities, one key informant noted that;

*“Connection to job opportunities is necessary because most jobs are characterised by who knows who and corruption. You can only get a job with connections.” (KII February 19, 2024)*

Other graduates 4, 7, and 9, who had given up on finding a job and chose to run a “bodaboda” business, also had a similar experience. According to (Jacobs et al., 2019) To achieve long-term career success, individuals must communicate with their stakeholders, but this was different from what key informants said because the connection is about who knows who or pay bribery. This statement emphasises that there is always a need to make a better way for employment.

#### **Discrimination and Bribery**

Discrimination and bribery remain prevalent, thus making it challenging for youths without connections to secure suitable employment. The following extracts from KII demonstrate this statement:

*“Employers offer employment to job-seeking girls on condition of having sex with them. Some employers insist on sexual payments for the girls who seek employment in their companies.” (a girl KII February 19, 2024, Lindi).*

This growing problem concerns the exploitation of female job seekers and could be qualified as a severe ethical and legal issue in particular fields: The condition of submitting to the employer's sexual advances for employment is a significant turn-off for women and a violation of their human rights. The study by Nassor and Yussuf (2021) align with the findings, revealing that 45% of respondents faced sexual harassment and 31% had infrequent interactions, underscoring the urgent need for effective intervention. Discrimination and bribery fought over the policy and enforcement standards to ensure fairness in the labour market.

The International Labour Organization's research report underscores the prevalence of sexual harassment and exploitation in the workplace, primarily targeting women as their victims (ILO, 2018). The government should implement anti-discrimination policies and anti-bribery regulations. Also encouraging digital recruitment platforms that hire only based on skills and qualifications. This can help to eliminate bribery and discrimination in employment. Public employment boards, and government-mandated transparency in hiring processes, help employers become more accountable (Kaunain, 2019).

#### **Lack of Awareness and Knowledge to Utilize Media to Access Job Opportunities**

Furthermore, there is also the issue of the lack of efficient spread and use of the available job offers among graduates. This closely resembles the information on Tanzanian youth from the World Bank Group (2019), which shows that young people face challenges in finding and accessing employment information and systems. This could involve implementing programs that focus on teaching effective job search techniques. Improving the employment system will also better prepare graduates. VETA institution graduates require support and a fair employment environment to secure job opportunities after completing their courses. This is because most of them seem unaware of or unable to use available spaces or forums to access opportunities. The following extract demonstrates this:

*“Currently, many learners who have been studying at VETA are lazy about probing for the existing jobs in the government employment system (Ajira portal), so they cannot find the offered opportunities in time.” (KII, February 22, 2024).*

This laziness in using the Ajira portal, for example, results in missing employment opportunities, worsening the problem of unemployment. These issues highlight the need for essential changes in the labour market concerning equal opportunities for all candidates during the hiring process and for trainees to assist their trainers in registering in the government employment portal.

### **Compatibility of Knowledge and Skills Acquired**

This part of the study assesses whether the knowledge and skills provided to trainees were compatible with natural working environments or industrial contexts.

### **Opinion of the participants in the program to make them transit**

#### **Curriculum Content**

The participants were asked to explain if the knowledge and skills obtained from the VET program were applicable in a real-world market setting. The following were the participants' comments during the focus group discussion, reflecting the consensus among participants:

*“The curriculum content is compatible, though there needs to be a match between the available resources used for teaching within the institution and the current machines used in the industries.” (FGD2, 14 February 2024)*

*“There is a necessity to be more resources that reduce graduates' ability to balance theoretical knowledge and practical skills related to the current industrial needs.” (FGD2, February 14, 2024)*

The knowledge and skills gained from the VET program were less fitting for industrial working practice conditions for several reasons, such as using old machines in the VET teaching process. Contrary to what was expected, most VET programs focused more on examinations and tests than simulated practical experiences. Due to inadequate educational materials, the style implemented by teachers is the provision of theoretical knowledge; thus, students lack practical knowledge to apply in practice, resulting in poor performance by graduates in the workplace (Kemevor & Kassah, 2015). The lack of educational materials contributes to excessive reliance on teaching and learning, which increases a skills gap that influences graduate employment opportunities and productivity. Public-private partnership investment by governments and the private sector is needed to renovate equipment at VET schools so that students practice with updated equipment. The students can be further allowed to work with up-to-date equipment by expanding internship programs in actual industrial settings (ILO, 2022a).

### **Students' Perceptions of VET Pathways Regarding Instructional Methods and Equipment**

The perception of students towards VET learning pathways was that the education obtained should suit their interests and needs (UNICEF, 2020). The data collected revealed different perceptions from participants, with some key insights as an example from participants: One participant shared that:

*“Individuals who accepted the VETA program had a higher opportunity to be employed or self-employed than the one who went for higher education.” (FGD1, February 8, 2024)*

The discussion agreement also emphasised that VETA programs are perceived as more effective in enhancing employment opportunities and self-employment prospects compared to higher education pathways. Also, one participant in the discussion continued to pinpoint the concern of outdated equipment in VETA programs, which remains a significant barrier to student's success in the workplace. The participant views as follows:

*“VETA programs are directed with poor equipment, some of which have been written off; hence, they cannot manage to supply the required skills and knowledge that make graduates compete effectively in the global labour*

market.' (FGD2, February 14, 2024)

During the discussion, participants expressed their views, that they saw the mechanic program as masculine.

*"Females perceived mechanics programs as boys oriented. Hence, they became fewer in VETA institutions than their counterparts."* (FGD1, February 8, 2024)

This view emphasises gender sensitivity issues, with few enrolled females and males dominating the mechanic program. The participants perceive the VETA program as helpful in increasing employment opportunities.

They also discussed providing loans through VETA programs compared to normal subjects in higher education institutions. They blamed VETA's poor equipment for limiting job opportunities. They understand the demands of the competitive global market, which necessitates high skills and knowledge to fulfil industrial requirements. Employers prioritise candidates who are proficient with digital tools and technologies, as these abilities boost productivity, foster innovation, and increase competitiveness. As vehicles become more technologically advanced and reliant on electronics, automotive mechanics must develop digital skills to diagnose and repair modern vehicles effectively. Expertise in automotive diagnostic software, computerised system analysis, and electronic control systems is crucial (Uduafemhe & Ewim, 2023). Practical training can effectively close skills gaps by partnering with industries. Germany's dual vocational education system, South Africa's Siemens and Bosch, and Australia's Toyota and Caterpillar have all implemented such partnerships (Hefler & Unterweger, 2022). These models ensure students gain hands-on experience, improve employability, and provide industry-aligned curricula and advanced equipment. The partnerships show that aligning training with industry needs can improve graduates' employment outcomes (ILO, 2022b).

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study also finds that improving employment prospects for VET graduates, especially those in the mechanics trade in VETA centres at Lindi and Mtwara, enhances relevance in the curriculum, training equipment, and gender inclusivity. More particularly, meeting employer needs like creativity, specialized skills, and the ability to learn assists the graduates meet industry expectations. Effective curriculum integration will help students align their aspirations with the job market and encourage them to pursue employment opportunities appropriately. It is essential to ensure that career guidance services are well-established and accessible for students. Additionally, having readily available and up-to-date equipment and tools plays a crucial role in skill enhancement. Ultimately, these efforts will contribute to a more inclusive and gender-sensitive workplace culture, fostering a talent pool that is diverse and competitive.

Based on major conclusions, the study recommends that VETA continue collaborating with industry stakeholders to ensure graduates are well-prepared for the changing job market demands by establishing formal volunteer programs that link graduates with industry (employers). The Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology should first harmonise the VET curricula to align with the current skills required in the marketplace and provide enough resource allocation to VET centres to ensure the availability of necessary teaching and learning materials and modernise training equipment in workshops. Thirdly, should introduce gender inclusivity policies. There is a need to adopt targeted involvements to increase female participation in male-dominated trades, such as the mechanics program. This includes offering scholarships for females, creating mentorship chances with successful female graduates, and ensuring gender-sensitive facilities. Additionally, measures must be implemented to address discrimination and nepotism; for instance, creating an anonymous reporting system for bribery incidents to ensure accountability and transparency in the recruitment system.

## LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study's limited sample size may not represent diverse locations, and regional focus may reduce generalizability and limit the study scope. Beyond Lindi and Mtwara, the implications of this research extend to other regions and vocational fields. For instance, strategies for promoting gender inclusivity in mechanics can be adapted for other trades such as carpentry, welding, and construction, where similar gender disparities exist.



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