

Efficacy of Life Skills Education in Enhancing the Employability of TVET Graduates: The Case of St. Theresa Community College, Nairobi County

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Abstract

As the demand for graduates with life skills aligned to the ever-dynamic job market continue to rise, training institutions are tasked with the responsibility of not only equipping students with the requisite work skills but also incorporating these life skills in their training programs. Although the embedment of soft skills in the training programs in many institutions has often been unstructured, unsystematic and haphazardly implemented, some institutions have successfully incorporated soft skills in their training curricula. One such example is the faith-based vocational training centers, commonly referred to as “community colleges” that offer life skills alongside work skills in their training programs. These colleges target a wide spectrum of marginalized members of the communities in urban, rural and informal set ups in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania with a view of improving their livelihood through provision of vocational and life skills that are relevant to the needs of the society. However, there is a dearth of information on the efficacy of such interventions on the improvement of livelihoods of the targeted individuals. In light of the aforesaid, this study examined the extent to which the embedment of life skills education in vocational programs has enhanced the employability of community college graduates. Adopting phenomenological approach, the study interrogated the lived experiences of the college director, teachers, current and former students on the efficacy of life skills on the employability of the graduates. Purposive sampling and snowball sampling techniques were used to select the participants. Data was collected through interviews and focus group discussions. The analyzed data were presented in form of narratives and direct quotations. The findings showed that director, teachers and students believed that integration of life skills into the vocational programs at the college enhanced the employability of her graduates and they believed that communication skills was the most important skill in enhancing employability of graduates. The study recommends the integration of life skills education in TVET curricula, collaboration of TVET providers with employers in the provision and practice of life skills and further studies on the experiences of employers on the job performance of the TVET graduates.

Key words: *Efficacy, employability, life skills, soft skills, vocational training*

Introduction

Although TVET is considered critical to Kenya’s socio-economic and technological transformation, lack of relevant essential skills curtail the job prospects of TVET graduates. Indeed, evidence shows increased concerns about students' preparation for work (African Union, 2007) Moreover, the increasing workplace dynamism has redefined employability to focus more on the soft skills possessed by the job seekers (Yorke, 2006). Tellingly, soft skills have become an inevitable requirement for job seekers (Fleischer & Dressner, 2002).

Employers no longer focus on the hard skills (technical skills) as the ultimate yardstick for gauging the suitability of the candidates for the jobs. Instead, they are continually looking for a workforce rich in soft skills (Hewitt, 2008). In fact, soft skills have often been rated first by employers seeking mature and socially well adjusted employees.

Consequently, employability encompasses a number of skills such as teamwork, communication skills, positive attitudes, self-confidence, commitment, problem-solving, decision making, time management, creative thinking, critical thinking and socialization skills (Kubler & Forbes, 2005). These are the very skills deemed as critical for graduates aspiring to work in the industry. Although employability is a multi-faceted phenomenon, several authors view employability skills as the nontechnical inherent skills that enhance a person's prospects to secure employment and attract a wide array of jobs (Harvey, Locke, & Morey, 2002). From the foregoing, it is apparent that employability skills relate more to the generic skills or personal attributes that are variedly referred to as soft skills, practical skills or life skills (Binkley et al., 2005). This paper uses soft skills and life skills interchangeably to relate to the same concept.

TVET in Kenya is provided by public and private players. Over the years, private provision of TVET has been on the rise due to inter alia, the employer preference of graduates of private training colleges over graduates of public colleges. The private TVET providers include individuals, faith based institutions and the Public Benefit Organizations (PBOs). On the faith based front, in 2006, the Catholic Church in partnership with Stitching Porticus Foundation, set up community colleges that offer Artisan and Craft courses to youth. These community colleges therefore operate as Vocational Training Centers, Youth Polytechnics or Technical Colleges.

Spread in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, these institutions are committed to offering life skills and technical skills to the poor, marginalized and underprivileged communities. They offer technical and vocational skills in particular trades identified through a community needs assessment so that the acquired skills can easily be tapped by the industries and businesses within that community. Such trades include motor mechanics, electrical, carpentry, plumbing, metal fabrication and welding, maintenance, fitting and machining, baking, tailoring and hospitality.

Problem Statement

Existing literature shows that soft skills contribute to 75% -85% of an employee's long term job success with a subtle 15%-25% success being dependent of the technical (hard) skills. However, TVET in Kenya places more emphasis on technical knowledge and skills to be imparted on trainees than on soft skills. As a result, many graduates without soft skills remain unemployed.

This explains why the soft skills gap continues to widen in the job market (Maya, 2007). However, anecdotal evidence reveals a great demand for graduates of Church sponsored youth polytechnics and institutions (Republic of Kenya, 1999). Studies on efficacy of soft skills among graduates have often relied on employer perceptions (AC Nielsen Research Services; 2000) with some employers contending that the degree subject studied is not as important as

the graduates' ability to handle complex information and communicate it effectively (Brown & Hesketh, 2004). However, studies on views of managers, teachers and graduates of TVET institutions on efficacy of life skills in enhancing employability remain scanty hence need for a study that would elucidate the same. It is in light of the above that the study examined the efficacy of life skills education in enhancing the employability of TVET graduates of St. Theresa Community College, Nairobi County.

Research Questions

The study sought to answer the following questions:

1. How is life skills education embedded in TVET programs in community colleges?
2. Which life skills are effective in enhancing the employability of graduates of community colleges?
3. How do graduates of community colleges view the efficacy of life skills education in enhancing their employability?
4. How does community college director view the efficacy of life skills education in enhancing the employability of graduates of community colleges?
5. How do teachers view the efficacy of life skills education in enhancing the employability of graduates of community colleges?

Literature Review

There are two approaches to embedding life skills into training programs: the integrated approach and separate approach. The integrated approach intermixes or fuses the life skills explicitly with vocational competencies in all aspects of training (Dawe, 2002). As such, this approach makes learning relevant hence increasing motivation to learn. However, the approach has been critiqued to likely leading to diminution of the academic standards in learning institutions. Literature discourses argue that the development of employability skills and attributes should be integrated within the curriculum. The integrated approach seems to argue that soft skills are much more difficult to be transferred in practice than hard skills. However, the transferability of these skills remains contestable when using the integrated approach. For instance, several authors hold that soft skills may not be easily transferred from classroom situation to other workplace situation (Billet, 1999).

As a panacea to this challenge, Billet (1999) advocates for using the workplaces as sites for learning soft skills. He opines that soft skills should be learnt both at educational settings and at workplaces since both settings provide conceptual and practical experiences to workers. Although assessment experts argue that soft skills assessment is a difficult undertaking, they seem to agree that the assessment should be largely performance-based (Binkley et al., 2010). A corollary to this approach is the holistic development of the learner who is rooted in both technical competencies and generic skills that reflect real experience in the workplace. This view is supported by Robles (2012) who argues that soft skills are continually developed

through practical application during one's approach toward everyday life and the workplace.

The importance of soft skills cannot be gainsaid. Soft skills are essential for new recruits in any workplace (Fleischer & Dressner, 2002). Employers seek employees who have skills beyond technical. Undeniably, soft skills such as communication skills and self confidence enhance prospective employees' chances of being selected for employment during the recruitment phase (Deloitte, 2010). Ofsted (2011) argues that soft skills are essential in improving the economic and social wellbeing of graduates. Furthermore, studies have shown that individuals with good interpersonal and self-management abilities have better career success and enhanced work productivity than those with only excellent technical skills (Samta, Afreen & Syed, 2013).

Although oral communication, teamwork, self-management, problem solving and leadership are considered important life skills in employability prospects of TVET graduates (Pool & Sewell, 2007), interpersonal skills are considered most important for workplace (Baker, 2002). In fact, Baker further argues that employers prefer employees who have generic competencies of interpersonal skills for work performance such as leadership skills, teamwork, oral and written skills. This is echoed in other studies that have shown that graduates with good interpersonal and self-management abilities have better career success and contribute more to their organizations than people with only excellent technical skills (Samta, Afreen & Syed, 2013). Similarly, Anderson and Rasmussen (2004) hold that good communication skills in English enable graduates to obtain higher statuses in the workplace.

Generally, graduates of TVET institutions had mixed ratings of the life skills they attain during training compared to those expected by employers. For instance, the study by Murgor (2013) revealed that some aspects of life skills (such as interpersonal skills and problem solving skills) were inadequately provided by TVET institutions whereas other aspects of life skills (such as creativity skills and spoken communication skills) possessed by TVET graduates were overly adequate for the job market. However, there was parity in the ability to work as a team as acquired by TVET graduates and as required by employers.

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

The study was underpinned in three theoretical orientations: consensus theory, conflict theory and human capital theory. The consensus theory emphasizes commonalities between social groups, their shared social norms and beliefs (Brown et al., 2003). It argues that the employability of graduates is enhanced by instilling generic skills at tertiary level. On the contrary, conflict theory argues that different groups (employer, academia, employees) have varying access to power and opportunities that often lead to conflicts (Brown, Hesketh & Williams, 2003). For instance, employers may fault academia for not providing adequate generic skills to the graduates. Thus the theory argues for the employers to provide workplace experience to the graduates as a measure to develop the generic skills in them. Finally, the human capital theory presumes that education or training has the potential for stimulating economic growth, technological progress and productivity through the transfer of useful knowledge and skills for better life time earnings (Schultz, 1971). A nexus of these theoretical orientations thus provides a framework for examining the efficacy of integration life skills education in enhancing the employability of TVET graduates.

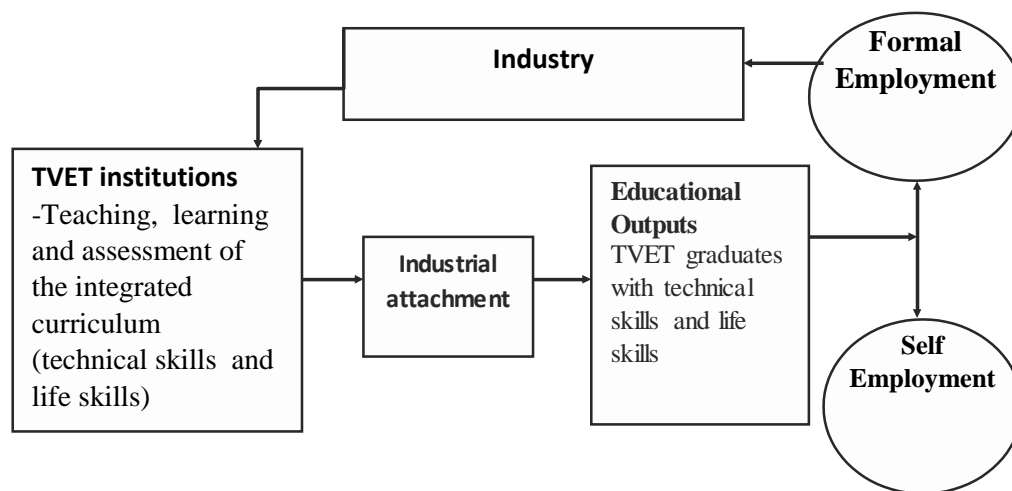


Fig. 1: Framework for Preparation and Transition of TVET Graduates to the Industry

Figure 1 shows the preparation and subsequent transition of TVET graduates to industry for formal or self employment. At the TVET institutions, students are grounded in both technical (hard) skills and life skills (soft skills) before they undertake industrial attachment. The attachment is supervised and assessed by both the industry and the TVET institution. This translates to graduates that are grounded in both technical skills and life skills. Subsequently, the graduates can either seek formal employment in the respective industry or informally set up their own enterprises.

Methodology

This was a qualitative inquiry that adopted phenomenology to capture the lived experiences and views of community college administrators, teachers, students and graduates about the efficacy of integrating life skills in enhancing the employability of the graduates. The study laid emphasis on the meanings of shared experiences (Patton, 2002). In sum, one director, two teachers and 18 students were purposively selected and five graduates were selected using snowballing. In this procedure, the researcher traced two graduates of the college who easily met the criteria for selection and this became the researcher's contact person in recruiting other graduates. Participation was strictly voluntary and information collected from each participant kept confidential. Data were collected through interviews (for the director, teachers and TVET graduates) and Focus Group Discussions (FGD) (for students). Recorded data were carefully transcribed, reduced into themes through coding and condensing the codes before eventually presenting the analyzed data in form of narratives and direct quotations.

Findings

In this section, the letters D, T S and G are used to denote responses from directors, teachers, students and graduates of the college respectively. Firstly, the study sought to elucidate how life skills education is embedded in TVET programs in community colleges. The directors explained that although life skills is taught as a standalone subject, the content is integrated in other subjects as the students are expected to apply the life skills learnt as they learn the technical courses. The life skills subject is taught in the first month of the course by a trained Life Skills teacher. The director explained:

'We link the content covered in life skills with technical skills to enable students apply the life skills in dealing with the challenges presented in the technical course (D)'

This view was echoed in the testimonies of the students that participated in the FGD and the graduates of the college. They agreed that besides attending special classes for Life Skills, the teachers also provided opportunities for students to practice the Life Skills gained in their various technical courses they pursued at the college. The FGD revealed that students were in particular enthusiastic towards learning life skills as integrated with other technical course. These views were evident in their own words, thus:

'We had three phases: First we had the theory where lecturers taught certain topic. Then we did it theoretically. Then there is the practical session, where students were put into well mingled groups to practice the skills (S1).

We actually had a life skills lesson. Apart from that lesson, the moment we entered school, everything was learning a skill for example, how you are supposed to carry yourself, how you are supposed to manage yourself, so at the end of the day it amounted to Life skill (S2).'

Secondly, the study sought to identify the specific life skills that effectively enhanced the employability of TVET graduates. Both the director and teachers were emphatic that communication skills strongly enhanced the employability of the graduates of the college. They observed:

'Communication skills are very important nowadays. You can go for an interview and the way you are going to talk will mean a lot to the person listening to you, and we really work on it (communication skills) very strongly.' (D)

'Communication skills are very important because most students joining the college don't know how to communicate. So we have to teach them communication skills before teaching other skills.' (T1)

This was echoed by the graduates of the college though expressed in different words. For instance, when asked which skills enhanced their employability, one of them opined: First of all is the skill to have the ear to listen. Then, to be appreciative and then punctuality in everything we do. Without knowing these life skills I think you are doomed for failure. Even in the interview room, these life skills apply because when I was being interrogated for work, they tested me on these skills. '(G1)

However, some graduates of the college responded differently. They argued that time management and self esteem were the strongest enhancers of their employability. One of the

graduates narrated:

'The life skills that have enhanced my employability are appreciating workmates and punctuality. You have to come like thirty minutes before to get focused because when you wake up, not every day is a rosy day. Things will not be okay. So you have to wake up and focus on your job' (G2).

Thirdly, when asked about their views about the efficacy of life skills education in enhancing graduate employability, the graduates said that besides enabling them get employed, the life skills gained during training enabled them to better cope with challenges at the workplace such as coping with emotions, interpersonal conflicts, interpersonal relationships and exercising patience. They had this to say:

'When I came for interview here (workplace), the door was open. If I had not learnt life skills I could just walk straight to the chair but I had been taught that first of all you salute them (panel), then wait they welcome you to have a sit'. (G3)

'I can tackle issues which, way back I could not because I think in my life I am so emotional, and I tend to react without second thoughts. Now life skills education has taught me how to handle these things. Life teaches you to be.' (G1)

Indeed, they held very positive views about the efficacy of life skills in improving their employability, attitude, personality and workplace relationships. For instance, the graduates shared:

'I am almost a very junior person here (workplace) but during events that are celebrated in the year, I am always given the chance to talk on behalf of workmates. That is one area that I really see they (employer) rate me highly'. (G4)

'I have been congratulated many times by the administration, and actually received a pat on my back urging me to keep the work going. They have appreciated my effort. Also we are getting well with my fellow workers'. (G5)

'Life skills education improves your personality, the way you believe in yourself. From it you can sit with potential employers and answer them to the point. During my interview, they had confidence in me- the way they asked the questions, the way

I probably carried myself in the interview...Yeah, it (Life skills) has impacted me and also helped me gain confidence. If it were not for that life skills, I wouldn't have a positive attitude to raise my self-esteem'. (G1)

Fourthly, responding on their views about the efficacy of life skills education in enhancing employability of TVET graduates, the director explained that quality training coupled with life skills enhanced the employability of the graduates. She particularly narrated an instance where a graduate confirmed that personal etiquette and good grooming helped her in securing employment.

'When they finish, they get jobs for one, two, three reasons. First they have been trained but secondly they are cleaner and that is what people like. One of them told me that you cannot imagine how people can make difference between Kibera (residence) and St. Teresa (the college). After the training a number of the graduates call and confirm they got jobs'. (D)

The director reiterated that communication skills were a major determinant of graduates' employability and employers often would source potential employees from the students in the college because of the good reputation created by former students of the college.

Communication skills are very important nowadays. You can move for an interview, the way you are going to talk it means a lot to the person listening to you and we really work on it very strongly. Most employers are happy about our graduates. Sometimes employers call us asking for our students because of the experience they have had with our former students (D).

Similarly, teachers believed that quality training backed by life skills education propelled the graduates' chances to get employed or start own business:

'Even though some do not get employed easily, they start their own businesses. There is one who finished attachment and is underway registering his business. Another graduate of this college was employed in a big hotel! Others got employed in different three star hotels and they occasionally come back to say thank you' (T2)

Summary, Synthesis and Conclusion

It emerged from the interviews with the director and students that students favored the integrated approach to teaching life skills. This finding parallels the argument that the development of employability skills and attributes should be integrated within the curriculum (Knight & Yorke, 2002). It further confirms the assertion that the integrated approach makes learning relevant hence increasing motivation to learn. This in effect equips students with skills to later apply in real life at the workplace, an argument expounded by Robles (2012). Thus, it suffices to conclude that the integrated approach to teaching life skills is efficacious in developing employability skills among students of the community college.

The findings also revealed that while the director and teachers based their views about the specific life skills that effectively enhanced the employability of TVET graduates on the point of entry to employment, the graduates' views focused on job retention. The finding that communication skills are the greatest enhancer of employability supports previous studies (Anderson & Rasmussen, 2004). Similarly, other core skills also highlighted in the literature are teamwork and self-management (Pool & Sewell, 2007) and interpersonal skills (Barker, 2002) It worth noting that although graduates mentioned time management as an important

skill in employability of graduates, it was hardly accentuated in existing discourses. The study thus concluded that the employability of graduates of the community college is enhanced by a multiplicity of core skills including communication and interpersonal skills, teamwork, self-esteem and time management. However, communication skills and self-esteem are especially important at point of entry to employment whereas interpersonal skills, teamwork and time management are essential for performance at the workplace upon employment. Indeed previous studies had shown that interpersonal and self-management abilities enhance career success and work productivity (Samta, Afreen & Syed, 2013).

Unlike in Murgor's (2013) finding of inadequacy of some life skills in TVET graduates, the graduates who participated in this study affirmed that they had developed essential life skills for employment. They cited such skills as coping with emotions, interpersonal conflicts, interpersonal relationships, exercising patience, developing positive attitude and workplace relationships all which contribute to an effective employee at the workplace. The study thus concluded that graduates of the community college strongly believed that the life skills they had acquired were efficacious in enhancing their employability.

Finally, both director and teachers singled out communication skills as the most important skill in enhancing employability of graduates. This finding corroborates previous studies that showed that the subject studied is not as important as the graduates' ability to handle complex information and communicate it effectively (Knight & Yorke, 2002; Brown & Hesketh, 2004). In addition, they were emphatic that graduates in employment occasionally called or visited the college and even voluntarily paid fees for other students, a practice they attributed to the life skills taught at the college. The study thus concluded that director and teachers of community college believed that life skills education was efficacious in enhancing the employability of graduates of the community college.

Informed by the findings of this study, firstly, TVET centers should integrate life skills education in their program in order to enhance the employability of graduates from their institutions. Secondly, TVET centers should collaborate with employers in the provision and practice of life skills to ensure an undisrupted flow of life skills from training through to workplace among the graduates. Thirdly, the findings of this study provide pertinent lessons for replication in similar TVET institutions so as to improve the employability of TVET graduates. Moreover, given that this study did not interrogate the experiences of employers on the job performance of the graduates, studies should be conducted focusing on this area.

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