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Vocational Training and Employment Opportunities in Zimbabwe: A Tracer Study

Author Details:

Blazio M. Manobo (PhD)

Catholic University of Zimbabwe

bmanobo@cu.z.ac.zw

Abstract

this study investigates the employment outcomes of Vocational Training Centre (VTC) graduates in Zimbabwe, with a focus on their employment status, occupation, and skills utilization. The study uses a tracer study design, where 121 VTC graduates who completed their apprenticeship between 2016 and 2023 were interviewed. The major findings of this study show that 71.9% of the VTC graduates find employment. The study also reveals that VTC graduates who are self-employed have a higher likelihood of specializing in cosmetology (26%) and motor mechanics (33%). The results highlight the importance of vocational training in preparing graduates for the labor market, with 82% of respondents indicating that the skills acquired from VTCs are very relevant to their current work. The study concludes that the VTC program is contributing to employment creation and recommends that the government continues to prioritize vocational training as a key strategy for promoting new enterprise development, employment, and job creation in line with Zimbabwe's National Development Strategy (NDS) 1

Key Words: National Development Strategy 1, Education 5.0, Youth skills Training, Youth Empowerment.

Introduction

The world over, countries are deliberately creating links between training curriculums and labour markets. Due to globalisation, such ties have not been limited to local labour markets only but also to regional and international labour markets. This study is founded on the need for organisations to ensure that graduates from various training institutions including the Vocational Training Centres remain relevant in the dynamic labour market whose skill and knowledge demands are continuously changing overtime as a result of technological advancement. In order to bridge the link between training curriculums and labour market demands, tracer studies have been seen to play an important role. This study takes the form of a tracer study. It aims to track down selected Vocational Training Centre (VTC) graduates from across the country and to determine the impact of employment opportunities for these graduates in Zimbabwe. The goal of the study was to determine the relevance of Vocational Skills Trainings as implemented by the government of Zimbabwe under the National Development Strategy (NDS 1).

Background to the Study

The 21st century has seen the growth of knowledge societies where economic growth is largely “dependent on the quantity, quality, and accessibility of the information available, rather than the means of production” (Oxford Online dictionary, Para. 1.). Small to medium enterprises equipped with disruptive innovations are upsetting existing markets and traditional dominant players due to their capacity for flexibility, agility, and novelty. Providing technical and vocational skills development among the youths is proving to be a major catalyst for sustainable development in the current fourth industrial revolution. Most developing countries

whose economies are heavily dependent on informal sector are adopting vocational trainings and skills development as their basis for manpower development.

Africa is faced with a massive brain drain with most graduates from colleges and universities leaving the continent for greener pastures abroad. As of 2018, Zimbabwe had a skills deficit of 93.57% in engineering and Technology, 96.91% in natural and applied sciences, 88% in agriculture, 95% in medical and health sciences, and 18% in applied arts and humanities (Government of Zimbabwe, 2018a). This is despite the fact that Zimbabwean universities and colleges graduate approximately 30,000 students every year (Moyo, 2016). The paradox of the country is that while there is a huge skills gap, the majority of the unemployed youths are graduates from tertiary institutions. There are two possible answers to the paradox. First, there could be a question of mismatch. Either, the graduates from tertiary institutions possess skills that are not relevant to the needs of the country. Or the country does not have the capacity to reward the skilled graduates leading to skills flight.

An effective vocational training system does not focus on imparting knowledge to students only but rather to mould the candidate to fit the needs of his community or work place. The demands of the workplace supersede the relevance of the perceived usefulness of the particular subject area (D’Orazio and Muhini, 2016). This calls for flexibility, adaptability and innovativeness in the vocational training curriculum. The Zimbabwean educational system has for years been fixed in line with the British education standards and for the most part, it has failed to address the skills needs of the country in the production of goods and services.

In 2018, Zimbabwe introduced the Education 5.0 in response to the 2017 National Skills Audit that showed that Zimbabwe had 38% critical skills availability. The survey pointed at the need for re-aligning and re-configuring higher and tertiary education in the country (Murwira, 2018). According to Professor Murwira, Education 5.0 for Zimbabwe refers to a heritage-based philosophy of higher education that includes five critical components of teaching and learning, community service, research, innovation, and industrialization. Central to Education 5.0 is the need to equip graduates from higher and tertiary education with relevant innovative skills that addresses societal needs. This reconfiguration and re-alignment has direct impact on higher and tertiary education but may not address the needs of out-of-schools youths who are the majority.

Zimbabwe’s formal education in Zimbabwe is mandated to the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education and the Ministry of Primary and Secondary education. While vocational training exists within these two Ministries, it is highly concentrated in the Ministry of Youth Empowerment, Development and Vocational Training. Zimbabwe has several institutions of higher learning. However, the number of youths enrolling for higher and tertiary education is limited due to crisis of depressed incomes (Magidi and Mahiya, 2021). Vocational Training Centres were created primarily to take care of the youths who fail to proceed to higher and tertiary education due to lack of fees, low pass rates, or those who drop out of school for any reason.

In 2023, upon assuming his second term as the President of the Republic of Zimbabwe, H.E. Comrade Emmerson Mnangagwa established an independent Ministry dedicated to the needs of youths in Zimbabwe. Prior to its establishment, the youth were under the Ministry of Youth Sports, Arts and Recreation. This was unbundled and a separate ministry called the Ministry of Youth Empowerment, Development and Vocational Training was established. Among the mandates of the new Ministry includes the primary responsibility to equip youth with technical and vocational skills for employment creation and self-sustenance. This emphasis on vocational training came after the realization that only 20% of young people proceed to tertiary education after completing their secondary studies. The remaining 80% constitute the majority of youths who end up ballooning the unemployment rate.

Zimbabwe has a total of 60 institutions of vocational training under the Ministry of Youth Empowerment, Development and Vocational Training (MYEDVT). The department for Vocational Training manages the operation of these centres. Over the past three years from 2021 to 2023, the centres managed to graduate 19 858, 22 380, and 12 412 respectively in various trades (Ministry of Youth, 2023). Among the functions of the VTCs include; equipping youth with technical, vocational and entrepreneurial skills for employment creation and self-sustenance; developing industry engagement strategies; developing relevant curricula for vocational and entrepreneurial skills training for the youth; conducting tracer studies to assess the effectiveness of vocational training; establishing incubation hubs at VTCs for business production and mentorship;

equipping youths with relevant pre-vocational and life-long skills for personal growth, technical and self-sustenance, and developing an entrepreneurial mindset in youths (MYEDVT, 2023) in line with NDS 1 recognition that “youth are a valuable resource especially if they are allowed to build and strengthen qualities that enable them to grow and flourish into responsible citizens” (Government of Zimbabwe, 2020).

Methodology

The study used a quantitative data collection and analysis technique. Closed ended questionnaires were used to capture data from selected Vocational Training Centre graduates through face-to-face interviews conducted by well-trained interviewers. The questionnaires were developed around the key variables of investigation of; employment situation of VTC graduates, employment rate in both formal and informal, relevance and effectiveness of learning in Vocational Training, waiting time for first employment, employer satisfaction with regard to Vocational Training graduates skills and performance levels, and possible networking opportunities between industries and training institutions.

The procedure in developing questionnaires that takes into consideration length and clarity was closely followed. The quantitative approach provided data that enabled statistical inferences. A total of 15 Interviewers were trained to undertake the study. The data collection instrument was pretested with some 10 graduates who were randomly selected at the Magaba Area of Mbare. The questionnaire was then finalised after in putting observations that were made during the pre-test. Since this was a tracer study, a sample size of 350 graduates was considered ideal to give correct estimates about the VTC graduates for the five-year period from 2018-2023 with a 95 percent confidence interval and an error margin of 5 percent.

Findings of the study

Zimbabwe has managed to chunk out a total 2,891,660 graduates under the Vocational Skills Training program since the commencement of the National Development strategy 1 (Government of Zimbabwe, 2023). This study managed to interview a total of 121 graduates who completed their apprenticeship between 2016 and 2023. While the age and sex distributions were not taken as key variables during the study, their inclusion gave an insight as to which age group is likely to be enrolled at the Vocational Training Centres. From the findings, around 41 percent of the interviewed graduates were in the age group 25 to 29 years of whom 43 percent were males and 38 percent being females.

The study adopted the International Labour Organization’s definition of employment which states that a person is employed if he/she is aged 15 or over and has done at least one hour's paid work in a given week, or who is absent from work for certain reasons like being on annual leave, sickness, maternity among other reasons. Of the interviewed VTC graduates 71.9 percent were in productive employment either as employees or in self-employment while 28.1 percent were still to find employment.

In terms of employment status and the graduate’s area of specialisation, the majority (31.7%) of those who were employees had specialised in motor mechanics at college making the automotive course the most preferred skill in most VTCs. Also for those in self-employment but having employees around 33 percent of them had specialised in motor mechanics. For those who were in self-employment but with no employees around 26 percent had specialised in cosmetology. This makes cosmetology the most preferred skill among women.

Among the VTC graduate employees, the majority (61%) of them had attained a national foundation certificate. The pattern was the same for males while for females the majority (55%) were national certificate holders. On employment contracts, 37 percent of graduates were permanently employed while 34 percent were on fixed term contract. 27 percent of VTC graduates who were interviewed were in the automotive industry followed by those in the construction and other industries category at 17 percent, respectively. The graduate employees were cross tabulated by their industry of employment and type of contract at their work places. At around 67 percent, the hotel and catering industry had the highest proportion of VTC graduates who were employed on permanent basis. The clothing and textile industry had the highest proportion of VTC graduates who were employed on contract basis again at 67 percent. For the VTC graduates who were employed on part time basis, hairdressing had the highest proportion at 50 percent.

Most of the graduate employees (61%), were residing in urban areas at the time of interviews. 73 percent of graduate employees who participated in the study took less than one year to secure first employment after the completion of their training. Of these, 76 percent were employed in their area of specialisation. Around 26 percent were in the mechanical industry followed by those in the clothing and textile and cosmetology industries all at 17 percent. The study further showed that the majority (54.3%) of the VTC graduates in self-employment took less than a year to set up their business.

Additionally, the study showed that most of the VTC graduates (55.9 %) who were not in employment at the time of interview cited limited employment opportunities in their areas as the main challenge being encountered in trying to secure employment followed by those who indicated lack of work experience (21%). 82 percent of the interviewed VTC graduates indicated that the skills were very relevant to the work they are currently doing or were once engaged. Only 5 percent of the respondents cited that the skills acquired from the VTCs were not relevant. The VTC graduates (35.7%) who were employed in other fields other than their area specialisation cited better salaries being offered as a luring factor. This was followed by those who indicated that they were no job opportunities in their area of specialisation at close to 29 percent. However, 98 percent of the interviewed VTC graduates confirmed that they would recommend others to take up courses offered by the VTCs.

Discussion

Youth employment creation is key to Zimbabwe's NDS 1 objective of promoting new enterprise development, employment and job creation. The study has shown that vocational training program graduates have a better chance of finding employment than graduates from higher and technical colleges due to the VTC focus on teaching practical skills that are directly applicable to a specific job or industry. This means that graduates of vocational programs can often start working immediately, whereas college graduates may require additional training or on-the-job experience. Zimbabwean job market requires practical skills that only the VTCs can offer unlike the theory-based traditional education curriculum that was inherited from the colonial system (Kanyongo, 2005).

The second major finding from this study was that vocational programs are designed to prepare students for entry-level positions in their chosen field. This means that they are ready to start working as soon as they complete their training, whereas college graduates may need to complete internships, fellowships, or other additional training programs. The program of internships or student attachment as used in Zimbabwe while being a noble program, often the students are not exposed to the real world of work. The majority of these student end up doing administrative work for the organization or being messengers, a situation that is completely divorced from their profession (Mabhanda, 2016).

The third lesson from this study is that graduates with vocational skills are proving to be in high demand across various industries. Most of the graduates find their way into both formal and informal employment where they have proved to be highly useful. For example, trades like electrical work, plumbing, and building are always in demand, as they are essential for maintaining the infrastructure of buildings and homes. In contrast, some college degrees may not be as in-demand or relevant to current market needs. Most entrepreneurs in informal production sectors like Mbare-Magaba in Zimbabwe received their training from Vocational training centres than colleges. Furthermore, as one graduate testified, graduates from universities are now going back to VTC for skills training after completing university education.

Another reason why vocational skills training has higher impact on employment opportunities for young people is that the VTC programs are often shorter and less expensive than college programs. This makes them more accessible to individuals who may not have the financial resources to pursue a traditional college education. The investment one makes to acquire college education is sometimes several times higher than that for VTC program making the VTC skills training a high investment with lower establishment costs. For a country like Zimbabwe with higher out-of-school youth demography, shorter courses with less operational costs will benefit the country in a huge way.

Again, VTCs provide specialized knowledge for specific industries. Vocational programs focus on teaching specific skills and knowledge related to a particular trade or industry. This specialized knowledge can make

graduates more attractive to employers who are looking for candidates with expertise in a specific area. The fact more than 72% graduates from VTCs find employment in their first year of graduation means that their skills are targeted to specific industry. Due to new technology and innovative ideas coming up, traditional skills often are relegated to the periphery in preference of new emerging technology. Courses like Solar installation and maintenance, Cell phone repairs, and digital marketing have just become demanded and the VTC flexibility has enabled them to design short courses that the market is willing to absorb.

The study also showed that 48% of graduates are into self-employment. Vocational training programs typically involve hands-on training, which allows students to gain practical experience and build a portfolio of work. The skills training is augmented with entrepreneurial training to enable graduates to manage their own enterprises. Zimbabwe has shifted from being an industrial powerhouse to a nation of vendors (Mlambo, 2027). The provision of hand-on skills forms the foundation of small business enterprise formation by the youth. In the absence of a formal employment, the graduates from VTC have been found to be capable of creating their own small businesses.

The success of VTC graduates to secure employment has been linked to employer connections: Many vocational programs have strong connections with local employers and industry partners, which can lead to job opportunities for graduates. These connections can be especially valuable for individuals who are new to the workforce or looking to transition into a new field. For example, most hotels and restaurants in Zimbabwe employ at least one graduate from a VTC, while in most cases, relationships are formed at the time of student attachment. Sometimes employers may prioritize hiring candidates with vocational skills because they can start working immediately and require less training and onboarding time. This can be especially important for businesses that need to fill immediate staffing gaps or respond to changing market demands.

Students choosing VTC training have higher opportunities for employment since the training programs offer flexible scheduling options for students, such as part-time or online class attendance, which can be appealing to young people who have work or family commitments. While online vocational training has not been very popular in Zimbabwe, the advent of Covid 19 has ignited the need for distance learning which the VTC have embraced. Some employers may perceive vocational skills as more valuable than college degrees because they demonstrate a specific set of skills and knowledge that are directly applicable to the job.

Recommendations

Vocational Training Centres should keep live databases of their graduates which should be occasionally updated. The database should also be shared with the Ministry's VTC Directorate as well as the Monitoring and Evaluation Unit. The study had challenges locating graduates for this survey. Keeping a live database would enhance data security. Most graduates are given official government qualifications given by the Higher Education Examination Councils (HEXCO). Possession of such a qualification has enabled graduates to seek employment outside the public service and in other countries. The absence of a database means that employers may not be able to verify the authenticity of such a qualification and hence the possibility of fake graduates and certificates.

There is need for Vocational Training Centres to continuously update their curriculum so that it remains in tandem with industry requirements. A national skills audit should be conducted to inform areas which are lacking in skills to inform the VTC's curriculum. Income is normally closely linked to skills demand. So for VTC's to earn fair incomes there is need to balance the supply and demand of certain skills hence the need for a skills audit. Unlike in Higher and Tertiary Education where the process of approval of courses go through protracted procedures, VTC syllabus creation is currently flexible making it possible to quickly adjust to market demands for specialized skills. The lack of an effective formal employment market is an opportunity for VTCs to quickly address skills gaps for industry through the provision of short courses.

The Zimbabwe labour market is currently volatile. There is limited mobility of graduates across areas of specialization which is suggestive of the fact that the programmes being offered by the Vocational Training Centres are highly specialized. The low percentage of graduates failing to switch to other trades demonstrate

the need to offer programmes that equip graduates with multiple skills. The VTCs should consider equipping their graduates with alternative skill before one leaves the centre. While graduates are allowed to enrol for another skill, it may be beneficial for the VTCs to multi-skill their graduates. For examples, automotive graduates may be exposed to agricultural engineering skills during the period of training as an alternative professional root. This will offer opportunities for graduates who fail to get employment in their area of professionalism.

There is also need for VTCS's and industry associations such as Confederation of Zimbabwe Industries (CZI) to form synergies to enhance smooth recruitment of graduates when they leave college. Synergies with industry association does not only provide avenues for employment but it also helps opens up avenues for industry to provide guidance on special skills gaps that the VTCs should try to address. The same relationship could be sought from the Zimbabwe Manpower Development Fund (ZIMDEF) through creating apprenticeship models of training. ZIMDEF is mandated by law to provide support to vocational skills training which currently it is not providing adequately. This will help the youths with no access to formal higher education to benefit from the Fund which currently is a preserve for those who have passed their secondary education and have joined higher and tertiary

Conclusion

This tracer study sought to determine the employment status of VTC graduates and to establish the occupation of VTC graduates in relation to the area of study. The study has shown that vocational training is essential to Zimbabwe fight against unemployment, inequality and poverty. The current training though limited in terms of the number of youths graduating as against youth out of school, has high impact. There is need to increase the number of Vocational training Centres in all district to ensure the country has adequate skilled youths for emerging industries. In this regard, the VTC as institution of learning should be flexible enough to include new skills on demand by the market. Zimbabwe needs more youths participating in economic development and skills development is one major variable for the attainment of Vision 2030. The study is essential in developing projects and yhprograms for vocational training for the ministry of Youth Empowerment, Development and vocational training.

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