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# Reclaiming Vocational Learning: Africanisation, Critical Pedagogy, and Epistemic Justice in the Global South

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This special issue emerges from a shared concern that technical and vocational education and training (TVET) has too often been treated as a narrow instrument for employability, skills supply, and economic productivity. Across South Africa, Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Guinea-Bissau, and wider Global South contexts, vocational education continues to be framed as a response to unemployment, skills shortages, and labour-market demands. While these concerns are important, they do not exhaust the meaning, purpose, or possibility of vocational learning. When TVET is reduced to a pipeline into work, its deeper educational, political, epistemic, and humanising purposes are diminished.

The contributions in this special issue collectively challenge this reduction. They ask what becomes possible when vocational learning is reclaimed as a site of Africanisation, critical pedagogy, epistemic justice, and social transformation. They refuse the idea that TVET students are merely future workers, that lecturers are merely deliverers of technical content, that curricula are neutral containers of skills, or that African languages and Indigenous knowledge systems are peripheral to vocational learning. Instead, the issue insists that TVET is a contested space where knowledge, identity, labour, language, ecology, gender, agency, and power are continuously negotiated.

The call for this special issue invited contributors to move beyond compliance toward conscientisation, and beyond instrumentalism toward humanising praxis. It asked how academisation, credentialism, and standardisation shape or constrain TVET's transformative possibilities; how Africanisation and Indigenous knowledge can be embedded in vocational pedagogy; how multilingualism and translanguaging challenge epistemic hierarchies; and how student voice, activism, ecological justice, gender justice, and Global South comparisons might reimagine the future of vocational education. The articles gathered here respond to these questions in rich, diverse, and often provocative ways.

The issue begins by naming the larger crisis. The opening set of articles critiques the dominance of human capital theory, employability discourse, and academisation in shaping vocational education. Isaac Ntshoe and Rivalani Xenon Masonto's article, "Recontextualising TVET for Epistemic Justice in Decolonial Global South Spaces," offers an expansive conceptual framing for rethinking TVET beyond narrow labour-market responsiveness. It argues that TVET must be recontextualised through social and epistemic justice, productive capabilities, knowledge, and reflexivity. In doing so, it provides an important theoretical opening for the special issue by foregrounding the need to rethink not only what TVET does, but what it is for.

Francis Muronda's article on Zimbabwean polytechnic education extends this critique through the lens of peacebuilding. Using the 4Rs framework of redistribution, recognition, representation, and reconciliation, the article argues that Zimbabwe's polytechnics cannot fully contribute to positive peace while they remain trapped within human capital assumptions. Its proposal of a fifth R, reconfiguration, speaks powerfully to the broader purpose of this special issue. Reclaiming vocational learning requires more than reform; it requires a reconfiguration of theory, curriculum, pedagogy, and institutional purpose.

Nceba Nyembezi and David Bogopa further develop this argument in "From Employability to Emancipation." They argue that TVET must be reconceptualised through ecological, gender and social justice lenses. Their article is significant because it shifts the debate away from whether TVET produces employable graduates toward whether it cultivates critically conscious, ecologically responsible, and socially just human beings. Similarly, Ronnie Risimati Maceke and Nkarhi Excellent Mathebula's article, "Beyond Employability," insists that vocational education must move beyond narrow economic outcomes and become a vehicle for social transformation and sustainable development. Together, these articles establish the central claim of the special issue: TVET cannot be reclaimed unless its purpose is freed from economistic reduction.

Rosemary Farayi Masaire and Joseph Mesuwini's article on graduate unemployment in Zimbabwe adds another dimension to this critique. Rather than treating graduate unemployment as a simple skills mismatch, they locate it within epistemic injustice, academicisation, and the marginalisation of informal-sector knowledge. This is a crucial intervention because it challenges the assumption that formal education systems fail merely because they do not align with formal labour markets. In many Global South contexts, informal economies are not marginal spaces of failure; they are central sites of knowledge, innovation, survival, and livelihood. To ignore them is to reproduce epistemic injustice.

The second movement of the issue turns to the question of lecturer formation, academisation, and vocational knowledge. Lucky Maluleke and Antony Tolika Sibiya's article, "Losing Practical Skills Through Academic Credentialisation of Lecturers in Public TVET Colleges in South Africa," directly confronts one of the most contested debates in South African TVET: the relationship between academic credentialisation and practical occupational expertise. The article argues that the academisation of lecturer qualifications risks weakening the practical and industry-based knowledge that has historically been central to vocational teaching. Its contribution is important because it refuses easy answers. It does not reject lecturer development, but warns that professionalisation can become damaging when it marginalises artisanship, occupational identity, and workplace knowledge.

Ezekiel Majola and Makhosi Madimabe-Mofokeng's article, "Re-Politicising TVET Lecturer Training in South Africa," responds to this debate by arguing that lecturer formation must be understood as an

epistemic, ethical, and political project. Drawing on Freirean humanisation, Ubuntu ethics, and epistemic justice, the article conceptualises the TVET lecturer as a transformative intellectual rather than a technician of skills delivery. This argument does not deny the importance of technical competence. Rather, it insists that technical competence must be joined to critical consciousness, relational care, dialogical pedagogy, and epistemic decolonisation.

Joshua Jacobs and Heloise Sathorar's reflective article on South Africa's first Advanced Diploma in Technical and Vocational Teaching provides a practice-based account of what humanising lecturer development might look like. Through design-based research, collaborative reflection, and dialogical engagement, the article shows how lecturer professional development can cultivate transformative agency. It is a vital contribution because it moves the issue from critique to pedagogical possibility. It demonstrates that lecturer formation can become a space of reflection, vulnerability, relationality, and praxis.

Sulaimon Adewale and Ntokozo Dennis Ndwandwe's article on Lagos TVET teachers as street-level bureaucrats adds a comparative Global South perspective to the lecturer debate. Their study shows how teachers navigate leadership directives, academic-style certification pressures, resource constraints, and the practical needs of students. The article complicates the idea of teacher agency by showing that discretionary practice is often both a resource and a symptom of systemic abandonment. In this way, it reinforces one of the special issue's key themes: frontline vocational educators are not neutral implementers of policy—they are mediators of contradictions.

The third movement of the issue turns to curriculum, Africanisation, and Indigenous knowledge. Josephine Y. Towani and Vaughn M. John's article, "Decolonial Pedagogies and Africanisation in TVET," examines the NCV curriculum in South Africa as a contested site of power, knowledge, and social possibility. Their study shows that while policy intentions may gesture toward inclusion and responsiveness, the curriculum often continues to reproduce Eurocentric knowledge forms, constrained pedagogical agency, and weak alignment with local realities. Yet the article also identifies moments of resistance, adaptation, and possibility. Africanisation appears not as a fully realised institutional project, but as an emergent orientation toward relevance, lived experience, and epistemic plurality.

Kholofelo Moshobane's article on the integration of African Indigenous knowledge systems in TVET further develops this argument. It argues that decolonial debates have focused largely on universities while leaving TVET at the margins. This neglect is significant because TVET is deeply implicated in the production of practical, technical, and community-based knowledge. The article calls for Indigenous knowledge systems to be integrated into curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment, not as decorative additions, but as legitimate knowledge systems capable of advancing epistemic justice and sustainable development.

Terungwa James Age and Masilo France Machaba's article on TVET mathematics education offers a powerful example of what African-centred curriculum reconstruction can mean in practice. Through an Ayatutu-based theoretical framework, they challenge procedural, examination-driven, and decontextualised mathematics education. Their article argues that TVET mathematics should be grounded in vocational practice, community problem-solving, multilingual reasoning, moral agency, and epistemic justice. This intervention is important because it shows that decolonisation is not only a broad philosophical demand; it can reshape specific subjects, concepts, assessment practices, and pedagogical relationships.

Tolulope Ayodeji Olatoye and colleagues' article on land use change detection, food sovereignty, and decolonial pedagogy further extends the curriculum debate into ecological and agrarian justice. By positioning students as co-researchers who use geospatial analysis to interrogate land alienation and food systems, the article shows how technical skills can be repoliticised. Land is not treated merely as a technical input, but as a site of history, power, dispossession, and community survival. This contribution is especially important because it demonstrates that vocational learning can connect

technical competence with ecological consciousness, food sovereignty, and social movement knowledge.

The fourth movement foregrounds language, naming, and epistemic access. Lutendo Nendauni's article, "Against Deficit Naming," argues that TVET learners are often constructed through labels such as "low-skilled," "non-academic" and "second-chance learners." These labels are not innocent descriptors. They shape how students are seen, how lecturers relate to them, and how institutions imagine their intellectual capacities. By bringing labelling theory, critical discourse analysis, and epistemic injustice into conversation with Ubuntu and Freirean pedagogy, the article shows that rehumanising TVET requires a struggle over language itself.

Tshepang Jacob Moloi, Aaron Mpho Masowa and Thapelo Mokgadi's article on Sesotho morphology as a pedagogical translanguaging resource offers an empirical account of how African languages can support conceptual understanding, metalinguistic awareness, and learner participation. Their study challenges the assumption that English is the only legitimate language of vocational learning. It shows that Sesotho is not merely a home language or informal communicative tool; it is a cognitive, epistemic, and pedagogical resource.

Xolani Khohliso and colleagues' theoretical article, "Whose Knowledge Counts?" extends this argument by showing that the dominance of English in TVET is a curriculum justice issue. When teaching, assessment, and certification reward only English-dominant performances, African language reasoning becomes unofficial, informal, or inferior. The article's call for African language-mediated teaching, multilingual learning materials, and assessment reform is therefore not simply a language policy recommendation. It is a call to redistribute epistemic power in TVET.

The fifth movement of the issue centres students, well-being, activism, and community. Jennifer Malgas-Esau and Christine Winberg's article on women TVET students' voices in life skills education uses the capability approach to examine well-being in relation to health, personal, social, and financial realities. The article shows that life skills education often fails when it treats students through prescriptive, individualised, and deficit-based assumptions. By foregrounding the experiences of mature women students, it argues for a curriculum that recognises resilience, trauma, poverty, care responsibilities, and the capabilities students need to live lives they have reason to value.

Nolukhanyo Metula and Gcina Mtengwane's article on #TVETMustRise places TVET student activism within South Africa's broader Fallist landscape. This is a necessary intervention because scholarship on #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall has often centred universities, while TVET student activism remains under-theorised. By positioning #TVETMustRise as part of the wider struggle for recognition, access, dignity, and epistemic justice, the article insists that TVET students are political subjects and knowledge agents, not passive recipients of policy reform.

Anna Maria Barnard and Mpho Mildred Dichaba's article on NGOs and vocational education's possibilities turns our attention to community-based adult and vocational learning on the Cape Flats. Their study shows that outside formal compliance structures, vocational education can generate belonging, structural consciousness, and practitioner wisdom. This article is particularly valuable because it reverses the usual direction of learning. Instead of asking how NGOs can be formalised into state systems, it asks what formal TVET can learn from community organisations already practising humanising, dialogical, and contextually responsive education.

The sixth movement of the issue expands the discussion beyond Southern Africa. Clara Carvalho and Maria Antónia Barreto's article on Guinea-Bissau examines the movement from Freirean praxis to fragmented skills provision in a fragile state context marked by informality, weak governance, and donor-driven reforms. The article's historical attention to post-independence Freirean educational experiments is especially important for this special issue. It reminds us that emancipatory vocational education is not a new invention; it has historical roots that have often been displaced by technocratic and instrumental skills agendas. The article's analysis of NGOs, informality, and labour-market

misalignment complicates simplistic claims that expanding TVET supply will automatically produce stable employment.

The final two contributions extend the conversation into broader scholarly and policy spaces. The book review of *Technical and Vocational Teaching in South Africa: Practice, Pedagogy and Digitalisation* (Dlamini et al., 2024) reads the volume through the lens of this special issue's concern with repoliticisation, humanising pedagogy, and epistemic justice. It recognises the book's contribution to foregrounding pedagogy in TVET, while also noting the need for deeper engagement with Africanisation, Indigenous knowledge, multilingualism, and decolonial transformation. The conference report on ICTVET 2026 locates the special issue within wider continental and international debates on entrepreneurship, youth employment, digital transformation, inclusive TVET, and research collaboration. Read together, these closing pieces remind us that the struggle over TVET is unfolding simultaneously in classrooms, colleges, communities, policy platforms, conferences, and scholarly texts.

Across the special issue, several cross-cutting insights emerge. First, the articles show that the problem of TVET is not only a problem of resources, policy implementation, or labour-market alignment. It is also an epistemic problem. TVET has been shaped by hierarchies that privilege academic over vocational knowledge, English over African languages, formal over informal economies, Eurocentric over Indigenous knowledge systems, and employability over humanisation. Reclaiming vocational learning therefore requires epistemic justice.

Second, the special issue demonstrates that academisation is deeply ambivalent. It may raise status, create pathways, and professionalise the sector. Yet it may also erase vocational specificity, marginalise practical expertise, impose academic hierarchies, and detach TVET from its social roots. The question, then, is not whether TVET should be academic or practical, but how it can become intellectually rigorous without becoming epistemically colonised.

Third, the issue insists that Africanisation must be more than symbolic inclusion. It must reshape curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, lecturer formation, language policy, and institutional culture. Africanisation is not a decorative gesture toward culture; it is a structural challenge to the coloniality of knowledge.

Fourth, the articles remind us that students and communities are not merely beneficiaries of TVET reform. They are agents, knowers, activists, co-researchers, mothers, workers, unemployed graduates, informal innovators, language users, and community members. Their lives must not be treated as background context to technical learning. They are central to what vocational education means.

Fifth, the issue shows that humanising TVET requires relational pedagogy. Freirean dialogue, Ubuntu ethics, translanguaging, practitioner wisdom, reflective lecturer development, and student voice all point to the same conclusion: vocational learning becomes transformative when it recognises people in their fullness.

Finally, this special issue argues that TVET must be judged not only by whether it produces workers for existing economies, but by whether it enables students, lecturers, and communities to question and transform those economies. In contexts of unemployment, inequality, ecological crisis, gendered exclusion, linguistic injustice, and colonial knowledge hierarchies, vocational education cannot remain neutral. It either reproduces the world as it is, or it becomes part of the struggle to remake it.

To reclaim vocational learning, then, is to refuse the reduction of TVET to skills supply. It is to affirm TVET as a site of epistemic struggle, pedagogical imagination, democratic participation, and social change. The articles in this special issue do not offer a single model or final answer. Rather, they open a conversation about what TVET could become when Africanisation, critical pedagogy, and epistemic justice are placed at the centre. If vocational education is to matter in the Global South, it must do more than prepare students to fit into unjust systems. It must help them read those systems, name

their contradictions, value their own knowledge, act collectively, and participate in building more dignified, sustainable, and just futures.

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