ERSC
Volume 15 No.2 September 2026
Pp 1-14 ersc@mandela.ac.za
ISSN: 2221-4070
DOI: https://doi.org/10.17159/2221-4070/2026/v15i0a2
Educational Research for Social Change (ERSC)

Recontextualising TVET for Epistemic Justice in Decolonial Global South Spaces

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Abstract

Vocational education pathways have had a narrowly instrumental and contested purpose of providing basic, practical, low-level skills for societies and economies over the centuries. Later, technical and vocational education and training (TVET) qualifications became part of differentiated and diversified education systems in both developed and developing economies, with the purpose of providing the skills required by industry, as well as serving as a tool to address equality and equity in societies. While its potential to widen educational access is acknowledged, the public good, social justice, and knowledge dimensions of this pathway have become overshadowed by technicist rationality and performativity goals aimed at supplying a workforce for the globalised neoliberal economy. This conceptual article employs productive capabilities, knowledge approach, and reflexivity lenses to examine how the curriculum and pedagogy of TVET can be reimagined to advance social and epistemic justice in decolonial Global South spaces and within the knowledge economy in a post-apartheid setting. The foci of the article are the context of vocational education, TVET in changing geopolitical spaces, market incursion in TVET, the social and epistemic justice of TVET, and the recontextualisation of the purpose of TVET in decolonial and knowledge economy settings. We argue for a reimagined purpose of TVET and its sites of delivery, the relationship between TVET and the labour market, the advancement of social and epistemic justice through TVET, and the design of curricula and pedagogy in decolonial and knowledge economy contexts.

Keywords: Contextualisation; TVET; Social and Epistemic Justice; Decolonial South; Knowledge Economy.

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Introduction and Background

The current concept of technical and vocational education (TVET), originally called vocational education, developed within particular histories, concepts, practices, and values, and has its origins in medieval and Renaissance Europe, where education focused narrowly on educating an élite group of students in the liberal arts (UNESCO, 2013). Three overlying classifications, general or academic, TVET, and differentiated curriculum, could be identified during the first industrial revolution. While academic and TVET education are single-purpose institutions, diversified education is positioned in the middle of the continuum and is "multi-purpose, combining elements of both ends of the spectrum into their programmes . . . to make schools more responsive to labour market needs and to serve a more diverse student clientele" (UNESCO, 2013, pp. 43–44).

The goal of knowledge in vocational education was specifically associated with "artisan work [which] was traditionally categorised as the lowest form of know-how, involving the manipulation of materials, in opposition to knowledge associated with fixed principles; certain 'crafts' passed from one category to the other over this long period" (Pappano & Rice, 2013, p. 480). Vocational learning, during its early days of development, involved an on-the-job phenomenon: "As early humans struggled for survival as hunters and gatherers, the younger family and clan members were doubtless inducted into what were literally 'life skills' by their elders" (Hager, 2007, p. 2).

The early 1960s and 1970s of the twentieth century, typified by the prime of post-war educational development in many countries, symbolised "the golden age for the development of vocational and technical education" (Hu, 2014, p. 107). This period experienced growing interest in developing occupational education influenced by economic development and human capital theory (HCT), which could be termed the golden age of occupational education development (Hu, 2014). The TVET system in South Africa has its origins in the early days of the minerals-led industrial revolution that unfolded in Kimberley from 1867 (National Advisory Council on Innovation , 2021).

The general education and TVET tracks symbolised policies and practices of differentiated and diversified education provision in different contexts and historical epochs. The purpose of general education has been to equip students with knowledge and skills for general purposes in society, while the TVET pathway has, in the recent past, been created to provide narrow technical and vocational skills to prepare artisans and technicians for specific careers and employment within a differentiated and diversified system. A contested purpose of the TVET sector during the early years of the industrial revolution was to serve the needs of the country's industry (Leong, 2011), while its transformation over time has been related to human development (Human Resource Development Council [HRDC], 2014; Tikly, 2013). TVET was recently perceived as a transformational tool to widen access to quality learning opportunities, especially for marginalised racial groups (HRDC, 2014). The industrial revolution placed a new emphasis on science and technology, and as a result, a number of technical schools, which were less prestigious, appeared in the nineteenth century (UNESCO, 2013).

However, widespread enthusiasm for TVET to provide the labour market with the required workforce, and the creation of opportunities for students with diverse talents, has diminished over time, raising the need to re-examine the purposes of the TVET track in the twenty-first century. Issues needing deeper scrutiny include first, the continuing perception in some countries that TVET is inferior to a general academic education obtained through traditional universities (Gaffoor & van der Bijl, 2019). Lauglo (2010, p. 3) asserts:

> *Subjects have low attraction because students realistically perceive better labour market opportunities in other occupations than those for which vocational subjects purport to prepare. . . . Curriculum change is an ineffectual tool for changing young people's occupational interests. Rather, occupational expectations and ambitions of students are shaped by perceived educational and labour market opportunity*.

Second, observations over the years suggest that individual students are reluctant to pursue TVET because employers do not seem to require TVET skills from potential employees (UNESCO, 2013). Third, observations indicate that students are unlikely to choose TVET when it is perceived, or when reality suggests, that there are no direct economic returns from this pathway (UNESCO, 2013). The unique South African situation has involved the interaction of race and class, where vocational education had different purposes for different groups in line with apartheid ideology (Badroodien, 2004, p. 26). The effect of this policy is the current unwillingness of parents and students to embrace the TVET pathway as part of the government's transformational programme to widen access, especially for marginalised groups, and to create equal participation opportunities in the knowledge economy in the post-apartheid setting.

The question that this article is probing is: "How could TVET be reconceptualised to foster the transformation goals of social and epistemic justice in the decolonial Global South, and within a knowledge economy context, given past adversarial historical policies and practices on this pathway in the post-apartheid setting?" Literature, theoretical frames, and methods are not standalone headings is this article. On the contrary, purposefully selected literature spans all sections of article. The synthesis of literature and references were selected on the basis that they provide information on the following themes critically discussed relating to the TVET pathway: historical evolution of policies and practices of TVET (the changing purposes of TVET stream in different contexts and ages, curricula and pedagogy including social realist of knowledge and emancipatory pedagogies), TVET in changing geopolitical spaces (the relationship between TVET and employers and industry), the permeation of markets into TVET pathway, social and epistemic justice of TVET pathway, and TVET pathway in decolonial and knowledge economy settings. Theoretical and conceptual frames are similarly built into the text and foreground discussions in the article.

TVET in Changing Geopolitical Spaces

Historically, vocational education and training discourses have globally been rooted in HCT, which dominated debates during the peak of the economics of education in the 1960s. Several assumptions informed by neoliberal ideology regarding HCT, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, include: education as a panacea for economic growth, therefore justifying investment in education at all levels; that countries need to invest more in education; and that education or training provides students with knowledge and technical skills, increases productivity, and improves income (Becker, 1981; Blaug, 1972; UNESCO, 2013; World Bank, 2011). HCT is a product of the industrial revolution that emphasised economic productivity (Anderson, 2009), from which TVET derived the instrumental purpose of "providing the necessary human capital required by industry" (Tikly, 2013, p. 5). The criticism against human capital policies is that they have, throughout history, undermined questions of "what is taught, where it is taught, how it is taught and even who is teaching it" in vocational education (EI, 2008, p. 1, cited in Wheelahan & Moodie, 2016, p. 17).

However, the human capital approach, even at that time, was criticised for offering a simplistic relationship between skills, employment, and economic growth and thus inadequately accounting for inequality and marginalisation (Tikly, 2013). This simplistic notion of economic development has, however, been broadened by redefining education as a public good and as an instrument to address poverty and support social welfare, including the well-being of women and marginalised groups, as a basis for stimulating growth and human development (Tikly, 2013; World Bank, 2011). A concern has been raised that, despite the widespread belief in investing in human capital through the TVET pathway, students are unlikely to do so if the economic benefits of this investment are not apparent. There has also been discontent about the demand-side issue of HCT, which assumed that employment and growth would ensue once the supply side was correct. This assumption has been challenged by subsequent observations of the rapidly changing nature of labour markets and the limited opportunities that exist for both skilled and unskilled workers in developing economies (Department for International Development, 2008; Hanushek & Wößmann, 2007). On the relationship between

investment in education and HCT, UNESCO observed that even if individuals could invest in education, "the inability to transform that investment into employment commensurate with the skills and qualifications achieved would tend to discourage other individuals from making such an investment" (Winch, 2013, p. 102).

The TVET pathway, as a sector to promote social justice in differentiated and diversified systems, requires reconceptualisation within geopolitical spaces over time. This pathway has, in the recent past, been perceived as a system imported from colonial systems to colonised countries. Its purpose has, according to this perspective, been to produce individuals and students who can serve the economic interests of former colonial countries. Notable critiques of TVET in postcolonial contexts include Foster (1965), who not only questioned vocationalisation and labour markets, but also argued that "the academic or vocational divide created under colonialism remained intact in the post-independence period and that academic qualifications were perceived to lead to more and better opportunities in the labour market" (Tikly, 2013, p. 5).

A thorny question has been whether schools, especially those in predominantly agricultural societies in Africa and Asia, prepare students with practical, agricultural, and technical skills required to transform their societies, where "the formal sector of the economy could only absorb a very small proportion of the economically active population" (Foster, 1965, p. 145). For example:

> *In Ghana, missionary societies, colonial governments, and the new independence government had frequently been attracted by the apparent logic of this position and used schools in this instrumental way. These failures were that pupils are very realistic and are able to determine what is in their best career interests, regardless of the orientations schools seek to provide. (Foster, 1965, p. 145)*

Foster's argument, which he termed the vocational fallacy, was that schools had been used by pupils as an entrance to the modern sector of the economy and to avoid limited prospects in many rural areas. A profound observation was that "in the schools [it is] not likely to have a determinative influence on the occupational aspirations and destinations of students as long as parents and students perceived the function of education described above" (Foster, 1965, p. 151). In addition, critiques of vocationalisation (Blaug, 1973) argued that TVET could not remedy the problem of educated unemployment. This claim was supported by Tilak (2003, p. 55), who argued that this pathway "cannot prepare students for specific occupations and reduce mismatches between education and the labour market; academic streams promise higher wages than vocational streams; accordingly, demand for vocational education might not exist." It has been further claimed that vocational schooling has the potential to create "a sense of second-class citizenship among both teachers and taught, which militates against effective learning" (Blaug, 1973, p. 22). These views are shared by other scholars observing the Thailand experience, where vocational curricula had the potential to provide "a second-class education and track some individuals, lower-class or lower-caste groups, racial minorities, and women away from academic education and access to jobs of the highest pay and status" (Grubb, 1985, p. 529). In observing preferences for knowledge, Pimpa (2007, p. 5) noted that people in Thailand are valued for their knowledge rather than what they produce, further arguing that "employers demand more educated people, who are equipped with new sets of knowledge and skills, to perform high value-added forms of business activities to continue to compete in the global market."

Market Incursion in TVET

Education and higher education policies and practices in general, including the TVET pathway, have been shaped by neoliberal ideology and the permeation of market ethos, priorities, and values. Evidence of this influence is the adoption of industry language concepts in education, including marketisation, commodification, and managerialism, in the policies and practices of TVET, its curriculum, and funding. This underscores a market-oriented approach where education in general, and TVET in particular, becomes "more customer orientated and competitive and using academic

degrees as unique selling propositions" (Neumann et al., 2025, p. 135). Neumann et al. (2025, p. 38) also suggest that the intrusion of markets in higher education and the TVET pathway has resulted in "academic drift [which] aims for 'more value for money' in the international market and serves as a 'cash cow' locally for universities, fostering investments and selling academic degrees."

Market intrusion hastened interest in privatisation through the introduction of New Public Management (NPM), which refers to "a sustained set of reforms from the 1980s onwards that marked a shift away from the traditional form of public administration" (Hood, 1991, cited in Shepherd, 2018, p. 1670). NPM emerged from two main ideological strands. The first is the "ideology of the New Right or new institutional economics, marketisation or neoliberalism. The second is managerialism; these two represent 'connections between two different streams of ideas' that may or may not be fully compatible" (Hood, 1991, p. 5). "These broadly correspond to two dimensions of NPM, the minimisation of the role of the state in relation to society and attempts to improve the performance of the public sector" (Shepherd, 2018, p. 1671). Markets introduced public management approaches in the 1970s. These approaches underscored performance management, accountability, efficiency, competition, performance-related pay, and the adoption of business reforms aimed at improving efficiency and productivity (Ball & Youdell, 2007; Pollitt, 1990).

Market influence in education became noticeable with the introduction of HCT, signifying the "rise of individualism in Western countries and the pursuit of basic characteristics of neoclassical economics, that is, individuality, rationality and self-interest" (Besley & Peters, 2007, p. 154). Currently, the TVET pathway is a designated qualification to provide skills and knowledge demanded by the labour sector, and students are expected to take the opportunity to acquire the requisite skills and knowledge. On the relationship between HCT and vocational education, Edeji (2024, p. 7) argues that "people acquire employment and grow into specialisation within the industry and are rewarded with high wages at the end of vocational education." Furthermore, HCT requires that training be integrated into a skills development and growth strategy, embracing various areas of economic and social policy across government departments (HRDC, 2014; UNESCO, 2013). Marketisation in higher education has increased the appetite for privatisation, where education, including TVET, is increasingly seen less as a public good serving the entire community and more as a private good that serves the interests of the individual, the employer, and the economy (Ball & Youdell, 2007).

Policies and practices of TVET in South Africa have undergone three very different contexts and ideologies: colonial and imperialist policies and practices, apartheid and separate development ideology, and, more recently, post-apartheid transformational ideology within the context of a globalised knowledge economy. In this country, vocational education dates to the nineteenth century in the Cape Colony, introduced by missionaries for the purposes of "civilising Africans and coloured people" (Kallaway, 1984, p. 17). The policy of TVET was shaped by the "government's industrialisation strategy as part of efforts to entrench the economic power of the white population and oversee the establishment of an Afrikaner industrial class in the 1920s" (Trade & Industrial Policies, 2016, p. 5). Technical and occupational training in South Africa has therefore been influenced by its colonial and apartheid past, which has left lasting legacies (Badroodien, 2004). Vocational education during the apartheid context was shaped by issues of social order, educational inferiority, and assumptions of low intelligence (Badroodien, 2004). After the 1994 democratic elections, renewed enthusiasm on the part of government, researchers, and the general population emerged for giving attention to technical colleges (Madileng, 2022). The lack of willingness of parents and students to follow the TVET pathway in the South African context could be attributed to the history of this track, which has consistently been intersected by issues of race, indigence, social and educational inferiority, and mental backwardness (Badroodien, 2004). Indigence and inferiority became part of broader social debates "about the 'useful citizen,' social order, and notions of the presumed social and work skills that workers, particularly males, needed in urban areas" (Badroodien, 2004, p. 26).

Major shifts have emerged regarding perceptions of the role of the TVET pathway and conceptualisations of its curricula within a transformed differentiated higher education system and

society following the reconfiguration of higher education in the post-apartheid era. In this context, TVET is considered a qualification designated to create opportunities for students unable to gain university entrance, but also as a pathway to produce students with skills required in the current knowledge economy. It is assumed that this new role of the TVET sector can only be realised by adequately trained lecturers. The role and conceptualisation of TVET have broadened beyond perceptions that this pathway involves learning exclusively. This new conceptualisation of TVET has been summarised in the Department of Higher Education and Training's (2013, p. 9) *Policy on Professional Qualifications for Lecturers in Technical and Vocational Education and Training*, which proposes that this pathway should include "learning about the subject, learning about how to teach the subject, learning about applications of, and relevance of the subject in the workplace." Gamble (2013, p. 22) argues that while the initial formulation of vocational pedagogy as "learning by doing" remains relevant, "an adequate knowledge base on which 'doing,' 'making,' and 'creating' rest has become a crucial curriculum requirement, hence the call for improved teaching and learning in TVET."

Social and Epistemic Justice of TVET Pathway

Broadly, access to information, diversity, recognition, social justice, and epistemic justice are closely related, making it necessary to recognise different assemblages of knowledge and diverse ways of knowing in order to create a more just society (de Sousa Santos, 2015). According to Bell (1997, p. 1, cited by Lee, 2011, p. 2), "social justice includes a vision of society in which the distribution of resources is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure." Social justice focuses on liberation for all people, while social injustice refers to the intentional examination of oppression; social justice therefore provides a platform to determine whether goals such as inclusive education, equity, and diversity are advanced or not (Leibowitz et al., 2017). Inclusion and diversity therefore call for perspectives that recognise "different geographical locations, genders, physical abilities, racial groups, languages and epistemic locations" (Pratt & de Vries, 2023, p. 3) in discussions of TVET. Epistemic location calls for scholars investigating TVET, for example, to be epistemically positioned in the Global North and or Global South (Pratt & de Vries, 2023). Roland (2020) maintains that to develop a capacity for educational transformation, the focus should be on both injustices, meaning oppression, and social justice, meaning liberation (Giroux, 1983; hooks, 2006).

TVET has been part of social justice discourse in high-income countries that have dual, differentiated, and diversified apprenticeship systems, including Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, since the 1960s (Lipsmeier & Münk, 2022, cited by Gonon & Bonoli, 2025, p. 105). TVET was envisioned to defend equal opportunities for all, regardless of whether they had vocational or general education in Switzerland (Gonon & Bonoli, 2025). Wheelahan (2007, 2016) argues that social justice in Australia is based on two interrelated premises. The first is expanding access to higher education for working-class students. The second is reversing competency-based training as the sole mandate of TVET qualifications and underlining the significance of disciplinary knowledge as a component of TVET qualifications.

Epistemic justice, on the other hand, focuses on addressing forms of unfair treatment associated with issues of knowledge, understanding, and participation in communicative practices (Bengtsson, 2022; de Sousa Santos, 2015; Fricker, 2007). Epistemic injustice relates to injustices pertaining to knowledge. Fricker (2007) coined the term "epistemic injustice" to refer to a specific kind of injustice that undermines and wrongs a person's capacity as a knower. Justice is therefore more than an outcome but is done for reasons of justice, implying that it has moral value (Fricker, 2013, cited by Bengtsson, 2022). Fricker (2007) proposed two interrelated elements prevalent in epistemic practices, namely testimonial injustice, and hermeneutical injustice. Testimonial injustice denotes unjust weakening of a speaker's capacity as a source of knowledge because of individual preconceptions held by the listener. This prejudgment becomes an impairment to the full and correct transmission (Graham et

al., 2017). Social struggles in postcolonial settings are captured in terms of epistemic struggles, epistemic justice, or epistemic othering (Graham et al., 2017; Icaza & Vázquez, 2013; Restrepo, 2014).

One of the identified concerns about TVET discourses is that differentiation, standardisation, and narrow accreditation frameworks limit dialogical or contextualised approaches that afford students spaces for reflection on their realities and to link their learning to wider social struggles (Majola, 2024; Majola & Geduld, 2025). It is argued in this regard that the standardisation of outcomes and narrow accreditation frameworks have inhibited the use of dialogical approaches that create spaces for both teachers and students to reflect on what they do and learn (Majola, 2024; Majola & Geduld, 2025).

Embedded in this framework, the current organisation of the National Certificate Vocational curriculum reinforces the hierarchy between vocational and academic qualifications, where the former remains inferior because its mandate is the provision of skills and is therefore distinct from the offering of theoretical and abstract knowledge in university curricula (Majola, 2025). Accordingly, the current TVET curriculum is criticised for resting on obsolete reasoning that favours formal academic knowledge over practical skills rather than addressing the complexities encountered by TVET graduates (Majola, 2025).

It is noted that while much emphasis has been placed on the significance of epistemic justice for social justice, discourses on epistemic justice remain marginal in discussions of career guidance and development. It is argued that the generation of knowledge about injustices rooted in knowledge production and institutional practices undermines a person's capacity as a knower (Bengtsson, 2022). Bengtsson argues further that differences in being deemed credible as a knower affect an individual's self-construction of careers, status in working life, and participation in society. Epistemic justice approaches therefore contribute to both the intellectual and ethical dimensions of social justice, necessitating the examination of both overt and covert injustices of knowing manifested in knowledge of career development and career guidance practice; epistemic justice in career guidance recognises that knowledge resources of career development are constructed and shared in theory and practice (Bengtsson, 2022).

Positioning TVET Pathway in Decolonial and Knowledge Economy Settings

TVET has had different purposes in different historical epochs and contexts, including serving competing social, political, ideological, and economic interests of various stakeholders and bodies in particular contexts, and advancing equity, especially for marginalised groups. Recently, TVET provision has also become part of differentiated curricula in many countries. This part of the article explores alternative lenses and approaches to TVET in decolonial spaces to advance social and epistemic justice on the one hand, and the irreversible realities of the knowledge economy on the other.

One of the alternative strategies in discourses of contextualising education in Global South contexts is Freirean (1970) critical pedagogy, popularised by authors writing on the significance of promoting social justice in colonial contexts, including Giroux (1983), hooks (2006), Cooper (2015), and Leibowitz et al. (2017). There is currently a belief that critical pedagogy, steeped in neo-social constructivism, could be a relevant tool to recontextualise the TVET programme by de-emphasising its narrow technical training in favour of much broader critical engagement (Majola, 2025). This position endorses the view that "aligning TVET with the capabilities approach means designing curricula that develop learners' agency, voice, and adaptability, preparing them not only for work but also for active citizenship" (Vaughan & Walker, 2012, quoted in Majola, 2025, p. 6). Adoption of the Western knowledge in the curricula of the Global South and in South Africa creates, a sense of "hierarchy of superior and inferior knowledge and, thus, of superior and inferior people" for many students (Grosfoguel, 2007, quoted by Vorster & Quinn, 2017, p. 38).

The notions of agency, critical reflection, and reflexivity have become particularly central in discourses on education in the decolonial Global South. In the context of recontextualising the TVET pathway, it is necessary that teachers and students, as agents of change, develop the capacity to draw on their

human reflexivity and play an active role in questioning curriculum theories and practices of TVET (Archer, 2007, cited in Council on Higher Education [CHE], 2017). Subjective reflexivity refers to the need to encourage agents, including teachers and students in the TVET sector, to play an active role in reshaping past and present discourses of TVET in the decolonial setting (Archer, 2000, cited in CHE, 2017). Critical reflection refers to the ability and capability of teachers and students to critically reflect on the content taught and learned in particular contexts (CHE, 2017; Quinn & Vorster, 2016; Zembylas, 2006).

In addition to well-documented and widely used critical pedagogy, there is an inadequately explored capabilities perspective in general, and productive capabilities in TVET debates in the decolonial and knowledge economy, in particular. The human capabilities and social justice approach underscores "aspects of the TVET debate, namely inclusion and diversity" (Tikly, 2013, p. 24). More importantly, there has recently been support for capabilities approaches to offset the limitations of human capital theories that dominated TVET debates for a long time (Wheelahan et al., 2015; Wheelahan & Moodie, 2011; Sen, 1993; Tikly, 2013). It is argued that while capabilities and social justice are relatively new and seldom used, this approach can offer a fresh way of conceptualising TVET in relation to human-centred development, extending aspects of dominant approaches while addressing emerging agendas (Tikly, 2013).

Productive capabilities approaches are particularly useful because they appreciate and embrace the freedom of the person doing the work and are therefore broader than the "productive abilities" inherent in HCT in TVET discourses (Sen, 1999, cited by Moodie & Wheelahan, 2018, p. 11). In particular, the capabilities perspective challenges the longstanding dichotomy between perspectives that privilege context and knowers' dispositions in decolonial settings, and the realities of the contemporary knowledge economy that emphasise the centrality of knowledge in higher education offerings. More importantly, productive capabilities address concerns about the narrow, instrumental skills and technicist curriculum design of the TVET pathway. The focus in productive capabilities approaches broadens previous perspectives by arguing that students need to be prepared for careers within vocational streams that are broad fields of practice rather than specific jobs, and to provide them with the knowledge and skills required to contribute to their field of practice, as well as to their families and communities (Wheelahan et al., 2015; Wheelahan & Moodie, 2011). It recommends the creation of "vocational streams and productive capabilities, which focus on the broad-ranging knowledge, skills and attributes that individuals need for a number of occupations within an industry" (Wheelahan et al., 2015, p. 3). Productive capabilities can also be used to consider the aims of vocational education, its interconnectedness with the labour market and broader social and economic policies, the role of social partners, how it is delivered, and the types of institutions required to support it (Wheelahan & Moodie, 2016). As Tikly (2013, p. 4) argues, "rather than being universal in nature, capabilities are defined in relation to context, and can potentially contribute to economic, social, political, environmental and cultural development." Significantly, the productive capabilities approach is broad enough to shape the purpose of TVET because it takes into account the labour market, broader social and economic policies, the role of social partners, modes of delivery, and the institutional arrangements required to support it (Wheelahan & Moodie, 2016).

An important distinction between employability and categories of capabilities supports marginalised groups in making real choices in their lives in relation to the aims and purposes of the TVET pathway (Schröer, 2015). These categories are: capability for education, referring to freedom of choice of training programmes; capability for work, signifying freedom of choice to undertake the job one has reason to value; and capability for voice, referring to the freedom to express one's wishes, expectations, and desires (Schröer, 2015, cited by Moodie & Wheelahan, 2018). The productive capabilities approach is therefore inclusive of multiple perspectives to examine and enhance social and epistemic justice in the TVET pathway by centralising agency, reflexivity, and critical pedagogy to determine inherent injustices, as well as the knowledge base of its curriculum.

Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this theoretical and conceptual article was to examine how TVET could be reconceptualised to foster the transformation goals of social and epistemic justice in the decolonial Global South and within the knowledge economy, given the adversarial historical policies and practices associated with this pathway in the post-apartheid setting. The literature suggests that the purposes of TVET have shifted constantly across different historical periods and contexts. Notably, the TVET pathway has become part of globally differentiated and diversified systems comprising the academic education stream, offered by universities and focused on general conceptual knowledge, and the TVET stream, which offers more technical and vocational education aimed at providing students with specific occupational skills required by the labour market. However, we share the scepticism expressed in the literature (Blaug, 1973; Tikly, 2013) regarding the assumption that the vocational stream necessarily provides students with the skills required by industry and employers. In support of these scholars, we argue that employers do not necessarily prefer students with vocationally specific skills and that industry often favours students with general education backgrounds because these provide broader employment opportunities across a wider range of occupations than those typically associated with the vocational stream.

Similarly, the assumption that youth unemployment could be remedied simply by increasing funding for the TVET stream, and the rhetoric surrounding curriculum change as a tool for transforming students' occupational interests, are untenable unless employers' perceptions and attitudes towards prospective employees also change. This position is reinforced by experiences in countries such as Germany and Finland, where public perceptions have shifted substantially and employers value vocational skills as highly as, or even more than, academic qualifications. We further note concerns regarding simplistic accounts of the relationship between skills, employment, and economic growth, which often fail to adequately consider issues of inequality and marginalisation (see Tikly, 2013).

It is argued, in support of scholars such as Badroodien (2004) and Gaffoor and van der Bijl (2019), that current misgivings about TVET, especially among the majority of historically marginalised Black communities in postcolonial African countries, should be understood against the backdrop of colonial and imperialist legacies. In addition to these colonial and imperialist histories, reservations about TVET should also be understood in relation to apartheid policies and practices, including the ideology of separate development, within the post-apartheid context. We further share concerns raised in the literature (Hood, 1991; Shepherd, 2018; Tikly, 2013) regarding the continued reliance on HCT and neoliberal ideology in TVET discourses in the post-apartheid setting, despite evidence of their inherent limitations. Conversely, it is argued that a recontextualised TVET system oriented towards social and epistemic justice in the decolonial Global South should be theorised within broader geopolitical contexts of colonisation, imperialism, neoliberal ideology, transformational imperatives in post-apartheid society, and the current realities of the knowledge economy.

Critical pedagogy, reflexivity, and capabilities frameworks subsumed under emancipatory pedagogy and praxis, as proposed by scholars such as Giroux (1983), hooks (2006), Cooper (2015), Leibowitz et al. (2017), and Majola (2025) are particularly compelling in underscoring students' agency and voice in educational provision, including TVET pathways in decolonial contexts globally and in South Africa. We also share the concerns raised by authors such as Majola (2024) and Majola and Geduld (2025) that national frameworks tend to constrain dialogical engagement, and that recognising the agency of both teachers and students is critical for reforming TVET at the national level in South Africa. These perspectives create a useful platform for debates on recontextualising the TVET stream towards social and epistemic justice. More importantly, the propositions emerging from these frameworks regarding the recognition of diverse geographical locations, genders, physical abilities, racial groups, languages, and epistemic locations in debates on recontextualising TVET for social and epistemic justice, as suggested by Pratt and de Vries (2023), are sustained. These frameworks provide valuable lenses for diagnosing injustices, particularly epistemic injustices that undermine students' agency and capacities

as knowers. In addition, we observe that while considerable work has been undertaken in the area of epistemic and social justice in curricula, relatively little attention has been given to epistemic justice in career guidance. Emphasis in the TVET stream is often placed on narrow skills provision required by industry, with limited intention to empower students to become co-creators of employment opportunities.

The productive capabilities framing is particularly helpful in offsetting limitations of approaches that either overemphasise, or minimise the significance of context and students as knowers in TVET debates. This framing also addresses challenges associated with overreliance on HCT, underplaying the changing purposes of TVET in different geopolitical spaces, exaggerating the binary between knowledge offered in general education and TVET pathways, and disregarding the significance of knowledge in the TVET curriculum as a tool to enhance social and epistemic justice. We particularly share Wheelahan and Moodie's (2016) concern that human capital practices by their nature underplay critical ontological and epistemological questions of what is taught, the context in which it is taught, how it is taught, and who teaches it—all of which are critical in reimagining vocational education for social and epistemic justice. Thus, critical ontological and epistemological questions raised, human capabilities and social justice approaches advanced by some scholars (Wheelahan et al., 2015; Wheelahan & Moodie, 2011; Sen, 1993; Tikly, 2013) account for inclusion and diversity in discussions on recontextualising TVET for social and epistemic justice.

We find Wheelahan's (2016) view helpful, that widening access and moving beyond competency-based training in the Australian context has expanded access for the working class, while emphasising that disciplinary knowledge in TVET qualifications remains critical regardless of context. Wheelahan et al. (2015) further remind us that graduates do not necessarily require one designated TVET qualification, but rather knowledge from a variety of qualifications. This perspective is critical in reconceptualising TVET to advance social and epistemic justice in the knowledge economy.

We conclude that recontextualising TVET for social and epistemic justice should be situated within particular historical and changing geopolitical contexts of the decolonial Global South and the realities of the global knowledge economy in South Africa. Further increased funding for the TVET stream is a blunt strategy to promote social and epistemic justice. It is concluded the common belief that the sector provides students with occupational skills needed by employers in the post-apartheid setting, is unlikely to change perceptions about the inferior status of this pathway unless the demand for technical and vocational skills is created. We conclude that, contrary to current thinking, students may not necessarily acquire relevant knowledge and skills from one designated qualification, as is often assumed in South Africa, but may instead acquire such knowledge and skills from a wide range of qualifications.

Lastly, emancipatory pedagogies and praxis including productive capabilities are powerful strategy to reconceptualise and redefine the purposes of TVET, particularly its curriculum, in specific contexts. This approach has the capacity to empower marginalised groups in the TVET sector to play a meaningful role in society in the decolonial context. The redefined purpose of TVET from a capabilities perspective is therefore likely to accelerate the realisation of a transformational agenda encompassing social and epistemic justice while enabling these groups to function effectively in the knowledge economy in South Africa.

Our article provides new insights into debates on how TVET may be recontextualised to enhance social and epistemic justice in particular geopolitical contexts of decoloniality and the knowledge economy in the post-apartheid setting, and in the Global South more broadly. The article therefore advances the theme of the special issue seeking to reclaim vocational education for social and epistemic justice in the Global South. Two lessons not learnt in developing TVET in current contexts are the failure to recognise the effects of the ever-changing nature of markets in countries, and the crude account of the relationship between skills and economic growth. The article therefore offers a unique conceptual frame that privileges both emancipatory pedagogy and ontological and epistemological dimensions of

knowledge in its quest to recontextualise TVET stream for epistemic justice in decolonial global South spaces.

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