



RETHINKING POSTSECONDARY, TECHNICAL AND VOCATIONAL TRAINING FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract: For years, governments, administrators and policy makers emphasise the need to provide postsecondary youth who possess little or no educational qualifications, opportunities to gain marketable skills and occupational competencies. Skills development factors heavily into many country's poverty reduction and development thrusts. In Trinidad and Tobago, a number of craft and technical/vocational training programmes have as such, been established to facilitate the increased employability of these 'at risk' individuals. While there exists international research on a range of areas associated with Technical/Vocational Education and Training (TVET) among the educationally disadvantaged, few local research efforts have specifically evaluated the implications of the current TVET framework to the sustainable development of the country. This paper seeks to fill that informational gap. In particular, the paper assesses the degree of alignment between the design and objectives of one major postsecondary, technical/vocational training programme and the occupational needs of the country. Moreover, this paper reviews the overall effectiveness of this training initiative in terms of its stated objectives of achieving increased employability and marketability of its graduates. Ultimately the researcher points to possible deficiencies in the current arrangement of post-secondary, technical vocational training and its servicing of the nation's 'at risk' youth.

Keywords: technical; vocational training; youth employment; human capital development.

INTRODUCTION

Many claim that Technical/vocational Education and Training (TVET) plays a crucial role in producing and distributing the knowledge that modern societies require for productivity and survival (Boodhai, 2009; Supersad, 2000; UNESCO, 2001). For example, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) is often cited as identifying technical/vocational

training as an appropriate 'instrument' for nations to promote worker employability and sustainable development, through the enhancement of human capital (Supersad, 2000, 2006). Technical/vocational training is therefore viewed, as an effective response to ensuring that certain disadvantaged groups in society have plausible opportunities to secure decent work.

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Internationally, the youth rank among these disadvantaged. Global figures indicate that young people aged 15 to 24 represent nearly half the world's jobless although they account for only 25% of the 'working age' population (ILO, 2004). Within Trinidad and Tobago specifically, the 15–24 year old cohort accounts for 45.2% on the nation's unemployed, though they represent only 21.6% of the total labour force (Central Statistical Office, 2008).

The ILO further estimates that approximately 70 million of the world's youth are currently out of work, seeking employment and available for hire (Brewer, 2004; ILO, 2002). Not surprisingly, socially disadvantaged youth generally experience even greater difficulties in securing employment. The ILO further projects that over the next ten years roughly 450 million new jobseekers will emerge globally.

The increased demands for workers possessing higher levels of education and skills translate into strong employment growth for the more educated individuals and the reverse for the less educated (Bills, 2004). Labour market and human capital studies reveal that education and training, therefore, represent critical investments into an individual's future productivity and employability (Becker, 1993; Davenport, 1999). In recognition of the role that skill levels play in youth unemployment, many governments around the globe identify education and training as essential preconditions to enable young people to enter the labour market.

TECHNICAL/VOCATIONAL TRAINING IN TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

In Trinidad and Tobago, the roots of technical/vocational training can be traced to 1906 when the Board of Industrial Training was established to provide the technical training needed to generate skilled

craftsmen (Supersad, 2000). After many Caribbean nations gained Independence, they found themselves confronting the stark reality that there was a non-existent supply of the technical skills needed for economic development and survival (Sangster, 1990). As a direct result, priority was given to the establishment of technical training institutions to satisfy this obvious need.

In Trinidad and Tobago, the first full time technical institute was established in 1943 in the form of the Junior Technical School of San Fernando (Supersad, 2000). Its success served as the impetus for the establishment of the San Fernando Technical Institute and the John Donaldson Technical Institute in 1954 and 1964, respectively.

In an effort to continue to satisfy the economy's need for not only master craftsmen, but also a cadre of workers with the competencies to assist skilled technicians, the Ministry of Education's Draft Education Plan 1968–1983 proposed the creation of a new type of school within the formal education system (Supersad, 2000). These newly arranged institutions emphasised both academic and technical/vocational courses.

Over time, a further evolution of the technical/vocational training arena in Trinidad and Tobago occurred. Outside of the technical/vocational training that exists in the formal school system, a number of informal, private and state sponsored training institutions emerged to service post-secondary youth. These institutes facilitate the training and development needs of the thousands of young persons who annually emerge out of the formal education system without attaining adequate certification (Sangster, 1990; Supersad, 2000).

The Government of Trinidad and Tobago has actively increased the numbers of

postsecondary, technical/vocational training opportunities available to this nation's unemployed and under-skilled youth. Many of these programmes are geared toward the delivery of pre-craft and craft training to young persons with little or no marketable skills or educational qualifications. Examples of these initiatives include the Youth Training and Employment Partnership Programme (YTEPP), Helping You Prepare for Employment (HYPE), Multi-Sector Skills Training Programme (MUST), the Civilian Conservation Corp (CCC), On the Job Training (OJT) and the Youth Apprenticeship Programme in Agriculture (YAPA).

TODAY'S REALITY

The Government of Trinidad and Tobago has actively sought to position this nation to assume 'developed country' status by the year 2020. The Government has proclaimed openly that the overall objective of this plan is to:

"...create an environment where citizens can enjoy an enhanced quality of life in the areas of education, health, housing and personal security, comparable to the highest standards obtained in modern societies" (Trinidad and Tobago. Ministry of Planning and Development, 2004, p.1).

Education and training appear, therefore, to hold prominence in the Government of Trinidad and Tobago's plans. To this end, the 2009 fiscal year saw the State expending approximately \$1,694.2 million TTD for programmes and projects geared toward developing a solid educational foundation within the society. Additionally, \$483.6 million TTD were spent on youth training and development initiatives. (Trinidad and Tobago. Ministry of Social Development, 2009, p.80).

Despite the ever increasing expenditure in the education and training

sectors, some challenge the value added by these government sponsored initiatives. Criticisms have been levelled that these programmes simply mask the unemployment rate of the country. Commentators have suggested that the job opportunities created by these initiatives can be more appropriately described as "handouts and temporary employment at low wages" (Trinidad Newsday, 2007). The suspicion is that these initiatives are really, social welfare programmes designed to keep the grass-root population occupied rather than facilitate true social mobility.

Of critical note is the report of the Cabinet - appointed Task Force to Coordinate Monitoring and Evaluation in the Social Sector, that cautioned that these youth training programmes may have a "tendency to generate certain undesirable consequences" (Trinidad and Tobago. Ministry of Social Development, 2007). Of specific concern to the members of this Taskforce was the possible 'learned helplessness' that sometimes accompanied these initiatives.

With the introduction of stipend payments to participants of these training programmes, there is growing recognition that some individuals simply migrate from programme to programme and never truly entering the employment arena. The data appear to point to the possibility that these initiatives can therefore dampen productivity.

Moreover, a number of structural and operational deficiencies continue to plague the TVET framework of Trinidad and Tobago (Boodhai, 2009; DAH Consulting, 2008; Ministry of Social Development, 2007; Parris, 2010). These challenges include:

- A proliferation of training providers and programmes that largely reflect a duplication of training opportunities and organisational/operational arrangements.

- A critical overlap of the clients targeted, the teaching or training resources and training facilities sourced.
- TVET programmes compete amongst themselves, to the extent that there is growing evidence of poaching of trainees and teaching staff from one programme to the next.
- Little or no rigorous implementation of national standards for quality control of programme content, delivery and curricula.
- Many of these programmes were conceptualised and established years ago in response to specific needs and mandates. Since then few have undergone robust reviews of their underpinning objectives.
- Systems for effective monitoring and evaluation are non-existent within many programmes.
- The country's labour market continues to highlight persistent vacancies among some occupations and surpluses in others.
- Within the individual TVET initiatives, the attrition rates range between 17% and 25%.
- There continues to be a negative public perception, image and status of TVET in Trinidad and Tobago.

TESTING THE PUDDING

In order to accurately evaluate the effectiveness and relevance of postsecondary, technical vocational training initiatives on the lives of 'at risk' youth in Trinidad and Tobago, this study opted to critically evaluate the empirical evidence from one of the country's most longstanding TVET programme. Through this assessment the author provides a realistic sketch of TVET's applicability to the country's sustainable development.

For this study, 14 Focus Group Discussion (FGD) sessions were coordinated. Eight (8) focus group sessions were held with trainees from North, South and Central Trinidad, as well as from Tobago. These group discussions ascertained trainees' experiences, perceptions and opinions as they related to their postsecondary, technical/vocational training. In a like manner, six (6) focus group sessions were also conducted among youth who had dropped out of the selected technical/vocational programme in North Trinidad, South Trinidad, Central Trinidad and Tobago.

In order to perform a holistic, comprehensive review the study additionally utilised the strategic plan, mission and vision statements, reports, handbooks, manuals and brochures of the selected postsecondary, technical/vocational programme as comparison for the expressed needs and expectations of trainees. As a secondary step, the institution's course offerings were compared to the needs of the Trinidad and Tobago economy, to determine its alignment to industry demands. Moreover, the study performed a series of Independent Sample T - Test to measure the likelihood of trainees

- 1 finding employment
- 2 finding higher tiered occupations and
- 3 securing higher wages than other 'at risk' youth with no additionally training.

THEMATIC ISSUES RAISED IN THE FG SESSIONS

Motivation for training

Youths who participated in postsecondary, technical/vocational training highlighted that there were a number of motivations for pursuing TVET. The most common reason for pursuing training appeared to be associated with personal development.

In this regard, respondents indicated that they wanted to broaden their knowledge base for some personal, non-occupational reason. As such, some trainees were not specifically interested in technical/vocational training as a mechanism for attaining skills that could lead to employment within the wider job market. Though some trainees were not greatly concerned about the employment aspect, the responses, point to an economic consideration for the desire for technical/vocational training.

“I find that hairdressers so expensive these days and I like doing things with my hair so I say I should learn to do it properly....”

“We have a real old car. It working but barely and I don’t have the funds to really fix it up so I feel if I get some training I could fix it up myself.”

“I want to learn to cook so I could show off my skills...I living on my own now so I can’t keep buying food.”

Another motivation voiced by a number of participants within the discussion was that technical/vocational training represented a means of keeping themselves mentally and socially occupied while they awaited some transition in their lives.

“I was home doing nothing so I come and did a course.”

“I was looking for something to do before going and repeat my CXC subjects. Something to just keep me occupied and cool my mind before going back to the serious book work.”

“...to fill the time between finishing school and getting a job.”

Of note is the fact that only a few participants admitted that they intended to use

the training that they pursued as a stepping stone to wage employment.

“I didn’t get too many subjects in school so I needed something that I feel could bring in the money for me. So I can get a job that I could do as a career.”

“I wasn’t sure what I should really do but I figure I should make sure and do a trade that I can survive off of.”

Analysis of the recorded focus group sessions further revealed that for most respondents, the knowledge and skills gained as a result of the technical/vocational training was a backup strategy for employment and not necessarily the primary focus of the training. The interviewed youths believed that in the event that they were unable to secure traditional employment they would be able to survive in the short term as a result of their training.

“Having a skill is very important because if you can’t get a job you can use what you learn to make some money in the mean time.”

“Once you have a skill you never really unemployed.”

In the long term, it was further confirmed by some respondents that self-employment and micro-enterprise were their ambition. Once again, the common belief appeared to be that the use of these skills for entrepreneurship would be in supplement to their ‘real’ jobs.

Technical/vocational choice

While some participants indicated that they were interested in specific technical/vocational areas for various reasons, a predetermined interest was not reflective of a noteworthy amount of the interviewed youths.

Notably, since most participants were not greatly interested in the employability of the skills pursued, the actual courses enrolled in appeared to be selected in an extremely ad hoc manner.

“I just pick a course from what they had.”

“I wanted to do a trade but I wasn’t sure what I would like so I did fabricating, welding, food preparation and woodworking.”

“I wanted to do Hairdressing but the class was full so I did dress making instead.”

TVET expectations

The data suggest that almost unanimously participants expected the postsecondary, technical/vocational training to fill some gap in their life as it related to technical ‘know how’. Participants expressed the firm belief that there would only be utility to training if its final outcome was the mastery of the techniques and processes relevant to the specific technical/vocational areas. This view was held despite the fact that participating youths admitted they were not absolutely aware what some technical/vocational areas entailed, even in generic terms.

“I only have an idea about how and what it (the technical/ vocational area) like, so I feel that if I do training like this I would come out with that gap filled. I mean I should really understand everything that it call for.”

Training articulation

These youths placed a great deal of trust in the tutoring staff of these programmes. The belief appeared to be that since these men and women are ‘experts’ in their individual areas, they should be able to point trainees in the direction of the next step in their technical/vocational training.

“The tutors suppose to know ...they should be telling you to go here, then there to advance your training.”

“They would show you the start...explain and show you what is the next step if you want to extend what you have learnt.”

Value of TVET certification

When the discussions moved toward the value placed upon the successful attainment of an official certificate at the end of training, a few common views emerged. Specifically, many (if not all) respondents claimed to recognise the general merit of possessing the official certification. For these young adults, the certificate represented irrefutable proof that they were knowledgeable to perform given task competently.

“The certificate very important since it shows what you can do. Employers like to see the paper before they give you a job.”

“If I didn’t get a certificate I would feel like I wasted my time and energy. Like I can’t even learn a skill that needs me to use my hands instead of my brain.”

Despite this appreciation for an official certification, the discussion revealed that attainment of this final document was not critical for their survival or future. Among respondents who claimed to be only interested in the technical/vocational training for personal development, there was no need to use the certificate for employment and thus its valuation was less than originally conceived. Among those focused upon the labour market, there was a view that they could still gain employment without it.

“A certificate only really important if you looking for work in the area and even then you could just go on a site and the

foreman would ask you to do X, Y and Z and if you can do it you get hired.”

Personal benefits

The analysed data pinpoint that for many participants, the enrolment and pursuit of these technical/vocational courses serve to increase their self confidence and esteem. A common view among respondents was the belief that despite their past, low academic achievements, their postsecondary, technical/vocational training allowed them to once again believe in their individual ability to gain and retain knowledge. All respondents indicated that they felt a great deal of pride in showcasing their competencies and skills.

“Now I can show off my skills for people who never thought I could do anything like that.”

“I feel so good when my friends and them asking me for help to do something and I know what to do and how to do it.”

“It feels real cool because at least I reach somewhere. I learn something new.”

Another pattern to emerge out of the focus group sessions was the increased technical/vocational clarity reported by many of the interviewed participants. These young persons confirmed that for many of them, they only possessed a vague notion of what the individual technical/vocational areas entailed prior to enrolment within these courses.

The study’s findings indicate that participation within the postsecondary, technical training allowed trainees to truly determine if their interest in the specific areas was strong enough to be sustained over time. This knowledge thus allowed participants

to do some internal evaluation about their future goals and objectives.

Society’s perceptions

Despite the pride and self confidence expressed by participants the study revealed that many of them did not feel that society extended to them the same levels of respect and appreciation. Many respondents indicated varying degrees of frustration and marginalisation as a result of society’s perception that they were incapable of contributing to the nation.

“Society see you as a dunce (unintelligent) if you doing a trade. All people talk about is who has passes in this and that.”

“Although I didn’t do so well in school ... at least I still trying to do something positive. People don’t see that.”

“They does want you to feel like if going for a trade is because you stupid. Like they don’t realise you still have to read and write and understand in order to do a skill too.”

INSTITUTION – TRAINEE ALIGNMENT

When the official goals and operational framework (as supported by documentary evidence) were compared to the expectations and opinions expressed by the study’s ‘at risk’ youth some mis – matches and successes were identified. Table 1 summarised these findings.

LABOUR MARKET BENEFITS

Utilising the data from the institution’s Tracer Study of Graduates 2000–2007, the study evaluated the statistical differences between ‘at risk’ participants and ‘at risk’ non-participants’ employment status,

Table I Comparison of institutional objectives and client's needs

Issue	Youth's perception	Institution's goals/structures
Career Guidance (Mis – Match)	Through a system of 'trial and error' youths identify appropriate technical/vocational matches.	No official/formal structure to facilitate career guidance.
Technical/vocational guidance (Mis – Match)	A clear desire for guidance as to the relevance and the availability of advanced training in technical/vocational areas.	No formal structure exists to facilitate technical/vocational guidance or programme articulation.
Personal development (Mis – Match)	Training is utilised for personal growth and entertainment. A mechanism to maintain social and mental connection to the wider society.	No official acknowledgement of TVET for recreational purposes or personal development.
Employment (Match)	Awareness of the labour market benefits of technical/vocational training regardless of their individual focus.	TVET seen as the most effective option for 'at risk' youth to secure employment and 'better' occupational options.
Entrepreneurship (Match)	Technical/vocational training plants the confidence and desire for self employment in the future.	Increasing the entrepreneurial endeavours among the nation's youth is a clear and sustained objective.
Certification (Match)	Certification is viewed as advantageous as a signal of one's ability and employability.	An official certificate is the ultimate indicator of increased employability.
Emotional/psychological development (Match)	The technical/vocational experience builds participants' self-esteem and self-confidence.	The technical/vocational training exposes participants to social and life skills, reinforcing positive self-image and worth.

Table 2 Results of the studies independent sample T-Test

Dimension	T-Value	Degree of freedom	Significance
Employment rate	1.006	485	0.315
Occupational tier	2.933	515	0.004
Wage level	3.566	443	0.000

occupational level and income level. In this study, the *t*-test of independent samples generated values of $t = 1.006, 2.933$ and 3.566 , respectively (Table 2).

These results indicate that there was no significant difference between the employment rates of 'at risk' youth who participated in postsecondary, technical/vocational training and 'at risk' youth who had not. Participants of the postsecondary, technical/vocational programme though did have a higher likelihood on securing higher tiered occupational levels than their 'at risk' counterparts. Moreover, there was a significant difference between the income levels of 'at risk' youth who participated in postsecondary, technical/vocational training and those who had not.

INSTITUTION – INDUSTRY ALIGNMENT

Utilising the National Training Agency's 2005 National Employer Survey, the researcher reviewed the employment opportunities or needs highlighted by employers. These employer responses were used to determine whether or not there was evidence that the skills being offered by the said TVET programme were being demanded by employers (Table 3).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The evidence confirmed that the national labour projections and demands in the

occupational areas offered by the selected training provider were extremely small. These occupational demands were also largely confined to the lower tiered, semi skilled occupations. The largest labour market projection was highlighted in the Personal Services Sector with 28% of the projected job opportunities expected to emerge in this sector. In quantifiable terms though, this 28% represented only 150 new vacancies. As such, while the technical/vocational areas offered by the selected postsecondary, technical/vocational programme, did satisfy occupational demands within the local economy, there was a mismatch in the quantities of persons trained. The research determined that the numbers of persons trained outweighed the actual quantities required by employers.

Faced, with this labour market reality there is a critical need for TVET to be more responsive to the demands of the labour market. Training institutions should actively engage representatives of the labour market and determine the occupational areas in demand.

Overall, the comparison of the programme's official objectives and focus, against the expectations and needs of its clients, identified a few areas that warrant revisiting in light of the sustainable development needs of Trinidad and Tobago. Specifically, the data revealed that despite a clear need for career guidance strategies aimed specifically at the recipients of postsecondary, technical/vocational training no systems existed within the evaluated postsecondary, technical/vocational programme

Table 3 A comparison of employers' demands and skills training offered

Courses Offered	Confirmed labour market needs	% of Labour market needs
AGRICULTURE		3
• Lawns and Landscape	√	
• Grow Box		
AUTO MAINTENANCE		2.5
• Auto electrical	√	
• Engine tune-up	√	
BEAUTY CULTURE		28*
• Beauty therapy		
• Hairdressing	√	
• Barber stylist	√	
*CONSTRUCTION		8
• Plumbing	√	
• Masonry	√	
• Joinery/furniture design	√	
• Welding/fabrication	√	
CULINARY ARTS		20.5*
• Bread, cakes and pastry	√	
• Food preparation	√	
• Cake making and decorating	√	
• Bartending/Waiter/Waitress	√	
• Catering		
ELECTRICITY/ELECTRONICS		9
• Building electrician asst.	√	
• Domestic refrigeration	√	
FAMILY SERVICES		28*
• Child care	√	
• Patient care assistant	√	
GARMENT CONSTRUCTION		1
• Dressmaking and design	√	
• Tailoring	√	
SECRETARIAL/BUSINESS SERVICES		28
• Office procedures	√	
• Typist/receptionist	√	
TOURISM		2
• Tour guide		

Note: *Percentages quoted could not be disaggregated into individual technical/vocational areas of interest

to address this demand in any structured or formalised manner.

In a similar vein, 'at risk' youth voiced a desire to be guided in terms of the avenues and opportunities for advanced training in specific technical/vocational areas. Again the study found that the institution did not possess any systems to facilitate such technical/vocational training guidance.

The bases upon the course offering within the TVET programme evaluated in this study, the youth participants are exposed to a limited number of occupational or career options. This situation may result in restricted technical/vocational awareness among these young persons and as such, may also result in their aspirations being confined to a small number of career paths. The onus may reside with training institutions to provide the resources and guidance needed for 'at risk' youth to match innate interest or ability to the labour market training opportunities.

The data confirmed that the institution's focus upon the development and reinforcement of positive personal/emotional development, social and life skills was in keeping with trainees' desires and expectation. Likewise, the analysis showed that there was harmony between the entrepreneurial development systems of the technical/vocational programmes and trainees' aspirations.

In terms of the viewpoints and understandings associated with the labour market emphasis of national postsecondary, technical/vocational training and the value of the award of official certification at the end of such courses of study, this exercise highlighted a partial alignment between clients and the institution. In other words, the institution's emphasis or framework in these two areas, serviced the needs and expectations of some clients.

The data indicate that despite the institution's emphasis upon job training for increased marketability and employability among its 'at risk' participants, the technical/vocational training provided did not appear to increase these individuals' chances of securing employment. Specifically, the data highlight that there was no statistical difference between the generated employment rates among the TVET participants and other 'at risk' non-TVET participants.

Using another dimension of occupational effectiveness, the study, however, confirmed that the programme's training did provide an occupational advantage to its 'at risk' participants. Specifically, the study determined that there is a greater likelihood of these vocationally - trained graduates securing higher tiered occupations, commensurate with higher salaries, than their non-participating counterparts. This finding concurs with those of other regional and international studies (Kemple, 2004; Kennedy, 1989; Neuman and Ziderman, 1998).

Additionally, the data appear to indicate that for many 'at risk' youth there remains a strong desire to be accepted by and participate within traditional, mainstream society. The attraction of the 'white collar' jobs to these persons has implication to their appreciation and accessing of available, postsecondary, technical/vocational training opportunities. Furthermore, for TVET to assume a more effective role in the nations development thrust, concerted effort must be expended to change society's negative, tainted view of vocational training and its recipients.

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