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Best Institutional Practices in Technical and Vocational Institutes for Sustainable Development

Abstract

The conventional education system alone cannot serve the purpose of educating and skilling the country's masses. Technical and vocational education is crucial for the country's social, economic, and human capital growth. The success of the technical and vocational education system lies in its coordination with industry and in producing graduates with the skill set that is required by industry. The best practice of a technical and vocational education system is to take industry on board and understand what the market demands of them. For this purpose, STEP Institute of Art Design & Management, in collaboration with its Industry Advisory Council, conducted a study to understand the needs and demands of the market. The objective of this study was to unveil the best practices followed by a TVET institute to produce graduates with employability skills. A detailed focus group was created to collect data from the participants. The study revealed several important dimensions that TVET institutes have to work on, namely, focusing on trainees' attitude development, digitalisation, research culture, and an updated curriculum. If the institutes excel in these dimensions, they can produce graduates who are readily accepted by industry and strengthen the concept and process of demand-driven TVET.

Keywords: *Digitalisation, curriculum, trainees' attitude, skill set, sustainable development.*

1 Introduction

Technical and vocational education and training play a vital role in creating new jobs in the market. According to UNESCO, youth unemployment stands at 73 million, and there are 40 million unique annual entrants to the labour market. The market needs to create a massive number of jobs for the youth, and TVET will produce 475 million in the next decade (UNESCO 2016). The market demands dynamic and energetic efforts to develop an inclusive, knowledgeable, and trained workforce. To create a sustainable society, we need an equitable and professional workforce to cater to ever-changing market needs. The most critical factors are the inclusion of the youth in effective employment and the development of their lifelong learning skills. Unemployment is a complex issue which no single reliable indicator can explain. Many studies link unemployment to the quality and relevance of outputs of the TVET system and its compatibility with the needs of the labour market. TVET institutes are among the most critical stakeholders in this regard (Allais et al. 2021).

The skill gap is one of the major concerns of the market. The skill gap is the term used to differentiate students' skills and industry's required skills. Ruthless competition in industry

means that recruiters want to recruit professionals, not students. Industry needs a workforce trained with employability skills rather than just bookish knowledge. Compared to students with basic proficiency, learners with employability skills get employed more easily. Employability skills refer to the proper knowledge, skill, and attitude required at the workplace (Nisha & Rajasekaran 2018). Industry recruiters frequently complain about students' lack of job readiness and job-specific skills. The recruiters seek out people with skills, including job-specific and generic employability skills. The inefficiency or inefficacy of TVET institutes produces less competent graduates, causing the overall downfall of the TVET system.

One of the biggest challenges faced by TVET institutes is identifying industry-related skills and imparting those skills to students. Employers often complain that young graduates lack the required skills. The unemployment rate for young graduates is rising day by day. Fewer conventional jobs in the markets is one reason, but the lack of skills needed for a particular job is also a contributing factor to the employment, or otherwise, of young graduates. Competency is the fusion of job-specific knowledge & skills and generic skills. The pressure to develop this competency is concentrated on the educational institute. Educational institutes require best practices by providing competency-based education and focusing on employability and lifelong skills to thrive in the edge-to-edge market.

Students' careers can be established and plotted with the help of employability skills. Employability skills improve their communication, work ethics, presentation, effective team building and managerial skills, leadership, time management, interview and negotiation skills, and interpersonal skills. Thus, preparing students with soft skills can be considered best institutional practice and will enable them to participate effectively in various selection procedures and develop an overall sustainable TVET system.

2 Purpose of study

This is not a common problem in Pakistani industry, but studies have identified similar global issues, especially in the early 2000s. Various countries, such as the UK, USA, Malaysia, Indonesia, face identical issues. This study aims to identify employers' best institutional practices and skills. It seeks to understand the collaboration of TVET institutes with industry and their demands to create a sustainable TVET environment.

To this end, STEP Institute of Art Design & Management contacted various industry personnel and formed an industry advisory council. The purpose of this council was to project the perception and demands of industry regarding young graduates in detail and highlight the required institutional practices. The meeting is held annually to understand the modern demands of industry and determine what new students should learn before entering the industry.

2.1 Research Objective

The main objectives of the study are:

- To remain updated about recent trends in industry
- To identify and understand the requirements of industry
- To figure out what skills a young graduate must possess
- To anticipate upcoming trends in industry and develop policies accordingly
- To identify the best institutional practices
- Requirements of a sustainable TVET system

2.2 Research question

This study aimed to identify the best institutional practices to develop the skills that young graduates must possess to thrive sustainably in industry and assess the sustainability of the TVET sector.

2.3 Significance

The significance of this study is enormous and multi-dimensional. The study will benefit industry, educational institutes, policymakers, and, most importantly, students.

From the industry aspect, this research will advocate the recruiters' perspective. This study will help readers to understand the recruiters' detailed mindset - in their own words - and their expectations of applicants applying for a specific job. As the recruiter was part of the study, the ideas projected in the survey represent industry requirements. All participants appreciated the efforts to project their expectations in the truest sense.

For educational institutes, this study is of extreme importance as it points out why young graduates are not getting jobs in industry. This study illuminates the weakness in the final product of educational institutes and the reason for their failures in industry. The failure of the young graduate in the sector is considered as the failure of the institute, which adversely affects their business and image. This study points out the best institutional practices to enable them to produce graduates who match the desired industry profile. Therefore, educational institutes must follow the study's results and make the necessary adjustments to be sustainable entities in the market.

Policymakers can use this study to amend and develop educational policies so institutes can align themselves with the requirements of industry. The gap between industry and academia is a significant factor in the country's rising unemployment rate. Policymakers can use this study as a basis for reducing the gaps between industry and academia and to compel the education sector to produce graduates who are competent and ready to meet industry requirements in conventional and unconventional job roles.

For students and fresh graduates, the importance of this study is limitless. This study helps students to identify and understand the traits they must possess to secure a better job. The

study elaborates on the knowledge, attitude, and skills that recruiters look for during the recruitment process. Students with the appropriate attitudes, knowledge, and skills have a better chance of excelling in industry. They can opt for programmes and study pathways according to recent market trends and select educational institutes following those trends and imparting the knowledge and skills accordingly.

3 Literature review

The foundation of a successful business is built on skilled human resources. Irrespective of how many resources are invested in a business, the business will not be sustainable if its core human resource – the workforce – is not efficient, well-trained, and appropriate for the job. The market is highly competitive. Companies need people who understand and act according to market demands. Therefore, recruiters always try to take people on who are highly competitive, have the proper skill set required for the job, and possess the right attitude. In short, the employer prefers the workforce to be aware of and in possession of employability skills. Statistics show that, among the young population in developing countries, 75 million people are unemployed. The youth unemployment ratio is 2 to 4 times that of adult unemployment. This is a nightmare scenario, as the youth of any country is its backbone. Youth with the right set of skills, attitudes, and employment can change the fate of nations. The multiple reasons for this level of unemployment include illiteracy, lack of skills, an unprofessional attitude, and lack of core competencies (Kenayathulla et al. 2019).

The current era of globalisation has transformed the world. Business and industries now require people with communication skills, collaborative aptitude, problem-solving skills, and critical thinking abilities, along with formal education. According to the available literature, 80% of job applicants fail because they lack the proper skill set for the job. On the other hand, due to a lack of core competencies, 50% of the industrial stakeholders are deprived of the right candidate. The inability of the education system to produce the right candidate is one of the major failures in this context. According to the statistical bureau of Pakistan, the current unemployment rate is 6.3%. The 21st-century market and industrial demands are very different from the past. Recent events like the industrial revolution, technological advancement, globalization, and the pandemic have drastically changed the trends and needs of the market.

Recent surveys have revealed that skills specific to a particular job or industry are not enough for young graduates to thrive in the market. A combination of soft, core, and personal skills is required to fulfill employers' demands and expectations (Suarta et al. 2017). Collectively, these skills are termed employability skills. Detailed analysis of the market and recruiters' perspectives has revealed that employability skills form a bridge between education and employment – but young graduates, or students about to graduate, currently lack these skills. There are numerous definitions of employability skills, including the following:

- According to Munro (2007), “employability skills involve the ability to contribute to work efficiency in an organisation, combined with good oral and written communication skills and critical thinking, which form the foundation of academic and workplace success.”
- Bennett et al. (2000) argues that “employability skills include not only the attributes desired from prospective employees, but also the basic requirements an individual needs to be considered for employment. These skills are required to perform a task efficiently and contribute to an organisation's growth."
- Zinser (2003) states that "employability skills include areas such as managing resources, communication and interpersonal skills, teamwork and problem solving, and acquiring and retaining a job.”
- Overtoom (2000) defines employability skills as “transferable core skill groups that represent essential functional and enabling knowledge, skills and attitudes required in the twenty-first century to function effectively on the job."

Education is the first milestone on the journey to employment, but must not be equated with the conventional pathway of education. In recent years, informal education, skills, and technical capabilities have also proved to be important in the ever-changing market. TVET education thus makes a significant contribution to creating semi-formal and informal jobs. Many jobs in industry do not require a formal education or degree, but do demand a specific technical skill set. The goal of technical and vocational education is to raise this workforce in alignment with industry requirements to improve the chances of employability. The basic understanding of technical and vocational education in Pakistan is to develop a force equipped with skills required in industry and prepare people to be well suited to jobs in industry (Nooruddin 2017). The basic assumption of technical and vocational education is to prepare students according to industry demand by polishing their skills and enhancing their capability to meet the demand of various fields. The role of TVET in a country's social and economic development is crucial. Literature highlights technical and vocational education as a master key to employment. TVET is the education system that prepares students for the future; therefore, TVET is seen as the most sustainable education system as it meets the changing needs and demands of industry and grows accordingly (Jallah 2004). In the current global scenario, TVET is one of the key strategic options for developing education in all countries.

Employability capabilities have additionally been chosen as the most favourable element by employers, acting as a performance indicator for employers in hiring a new worker. In the employer's view, the employability of students will assist the enterprise in fighting demanding situations and can help to resolve any or all issues encountered. A previous study proved that employers rated the importance of employability extremely highly (Husain et al. 2014). As such, competencies in trouble-shooting, managing devices, presentation, and the ability to work in a group are notable characteristics that employers look for as crucial competencies in students. Ultimately, employers want graduates capable of assisting them in dealing with modifications, who are skilful in solving matters related to technical or non-

technical issues, and are able to work independently. Demanding situations now depend on college students' knowledge of international scenarios and business focus.

The perception of the technical and vocational education system of Pakistan is vague. It was believed that the institutes had no relevance as far as industry was concerned; the primary reason for this lack of significance is the disconnection between industry and academia. Concepts like career counselling or placements were not very popular (Alam 2015). Identifying this gap compels researchers to suggest that the only way to meet global standards and market conditions is to produce products by implementing the latest knowledge and technology. This arrangement requires a lot of skills and training worldwide; therefore, Pakistan has to upgrade its technical and vocational education system to support skills development and the innovative capacity of youth. Many other developed countries of the world are investing heavily in upgrading skills to prepare a demand-driven workforce.

TVET education is now influential in training and developing a workforce, especially at entry level and for mid-career positions in science and technology (Alam 2015). TVET providers impart knowledge and skills to students with degrees and certificates and enable them to hold technical positions in the market. TVET providers thus have a significant role to play in developing students' employability skills. Opting for industry-driven TVET and producing a market-driven workforce is new for a developing economy like Pakistan. Until fairly recently, the primary technical and vocational education provider in Pakistan was the government education sector, which is famous for its centralisation, bureaucracy, and lengthy administrative processes. Converting to a quick, change-oriented, innovative approach is therefore relatively complex and time-consuming.

Eight employability skills have been identified that fulfil different dimensions of competency and sustainable development. The eight employability skills are learning, technology, communication, teamwork, problem solving, initiative & enterprise, planning & organising, and self-management.

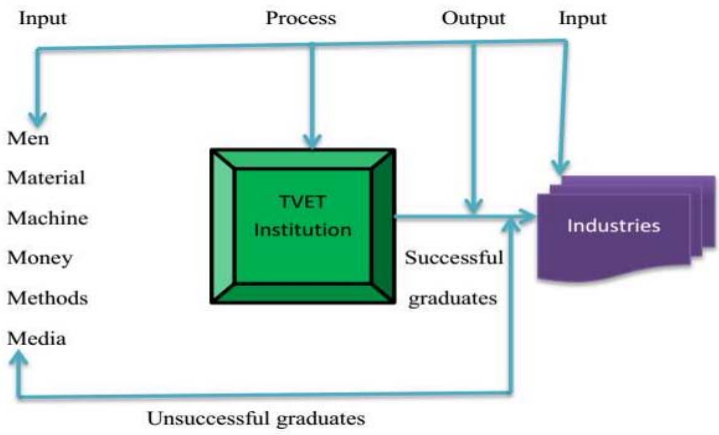

Figure 1: Output of TVET are the inputs of industries

The World Bank suggests that producing qualified, industry-compatible graduates and a demand-driven workforce is the accurate measure of the quality and reputation of the technical and vocational education institute. The core competency of technical and vocational education is the development of a demand-driven workforce with the right skills to cater to the industry's needs. Human capital development is a rigorous process requiring various analyses and endeavours. Therefore, TVET institutes must collaborate with industry as they are the primary consumer of TVET graduates. There are multiple reasons why collaboration with TVET institutes makes sense. Crucially, developing partnerships will help TVET institutes to develop and improve research facilities and identify opportunities and potentials for commercialisation. Identifying new skills and arranging opportunities to master much-needed skills will reduce the gap between demand and supply. Making joint efforts to produce an employable workforce by sharing knowledge and expertise is another benefit of collaboration, as each side can countervail and alleviate the other's weaknesses to strengthen the overall TVET system (Raihan 2014).

4 Methodology

This study aims to identify the best practices of educational institutes to develop the skills required by employers. The purpose of this study is a collaboration of educational institutes with industry and seeks to understand their demands. For this purpose, STEP Institute of Art Design & Management contacted various industry personnel and formed an industry advisory council. The aim of the council was to project the perception and demands of industry regarding young graduates. An annual meeting focuses on understanding the modern demands of industry and identifying what new students need to learn before entering industry. The study deployed qualitative research design, one of the best methods to understand people's perceptions and mindsets. In-depth analysis of feelings, attitudes, behaviours, thoughts, and perceptions helps the researcher to gain broad and detailed exposure to the phenomenon (Lewis 2015). Industry personnel were drawn from 4 different fields, including fashion design, textile design, interior design, and graphic design. The technique used for data selection was purposive sampling (Sharma 2017).

Purposive sampling is a technique in which the researcher chooses the participants for data collection according to his purpose and needs. The sample was selected based on the strengths of the recruiter's profile. A minimum of five years experience and affiliation with reputed organisations were the parameters of selecting the sample for the recruiter and industry personnel. A focus group was conducted to collect the data. Focus group discussion is a technique where all study participants are present in an open setting with a moderator. The agenda of the group is discussed openly, and participants are able to share their views freely (Deliens et al. 2014). All industry personnel and recruiters were called in for focus group discussion. Data collection followed a semi-structured interview guide which serves to streamline discussion whilst focusing on groups. If participants veer off from the original agenda, the moderator intervenes with semi-structured questions to realign participants with the actual agenda.

The focus group discussion was recorded and transcribed with the participant's permission. Short notes and important points were collected during the discussion by the researcher. Thematic analysis technique was used to analyse the data using Nvivo software. Thematic analysis is one of the most commonly used methods to analyse qualitative data (Clarke et al. 2015). During thematic analysis, the various nodes and sub-nodes are developed by analysing the data. Later these nodes are merged to form significant themes.

Ethical considerations were carefully kept in mind while conducting the research. All participants were informed in advance about the mode and purpose of data collection. The session was recorded with the permission of the participants. They were not forced to answer any particular question at any point. Any question or action which might adversely affect participants' sentiments was avoided.

5 Thematic analysis

The following themes have been identified and suggested during the industry advisory council meeting.

5.1 Updated curriculum

Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) must prepare college students to live and work in the 21st century. The curriculum needs to be updated accordingly in Technical and Vocational Educational and Training institutes. This is one of the best practices that educational institutes can follow to attract students and produce competent graduates. It is essential to make twenty-first-century competencies an integral part of TVET curricula. TVET institutes should make every effort to improve twenty-first-century skills in order to prepare graduates in the interests of high employability. A solid academic foundation is required to help graduates thrive in industry. The industry advisory council sees the updated curriculum as a top priority. Pakistan’s education system is inefficient and an effective updated curriculum is clearly problematic, with revisions taking decades to be introduced. Outdated curricula and conventional teaching practices lead to students’ average performance, both locally and internationally. As one of the respondents suggested:

> *"Our institutes are still teaching the decades-old curriculum. Innovative, updated curricula and teaching practices are followed around the world, but our system is standing still."*

The curriculum is the pathway to developing professional knowledge and skills that facilitate the flow from theory to practice. The updated curriculum provides a base ground for effective education and training of students. Pakistani education institutes need a revised curriculum to produce graduates with industry-required skills and techniques. As one of the respondents said:

"Our graduate knowledge is outdated, unaware of the latest trends and skills required in industry. A prospective employee who is unable to meet the job requirements or customer demands is of no use to the industry."

Educational institutes and policymakers must prioritise these aspects and update the curriculum regularly according to local and international market needs. The educational institutes can be a bridge between industry and policymakers to develop common ground for curriculum development according to current and future demands.

5.2 Digitalisation

The world is a global village. The current digital era has transformed the market and customer demand orientations. The skill sets needed for work and life have changed significantly due to the digital revolution. Utilising digital technologies effectively is essential for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Many new technologies have entered the market, rendering old practices obsolete. The digital age requires digital skills, updated software proficiency, digital portfolios etc. Every graduate must understand new software, digital innovations and techniques to secure a good job. The recent development of EdTech, starting with the use of digital learning tools like computers or web-based training, online and offline learning management systems in the early 1990s, up to individual adaptive learning, use of Artificial Intelligence (AI), Virtual Reality (VR), and Augmented Reality (AR), in simulated and remote laboratories today, helps us to provide meaningful D-TVET solutions to overcome challenges. Every educational institute must opt for digitalisation. Educational institutes must ensure digital practices are in place and train students with updated software. As one of the respondents said:

"What are we supposed to do with a graduate who does not know how to use the software? Even if a student does not master the technique, he must at least be aware of it to some extent. This should be the prime goal of the institutes."

Technical and vocational education institutes must focus on the updated requirements of industry and train students accordingly. After all, an institute's success lies in the success of its students and the overall sustainability of the Technical and Vocational Education system. In today's world, students can learn from many sources. There are several ways to teach software, like YouTube tutorials or training videos etc. Even after learning software basics, there is still a gap. A hands-on approach is needed to address the gap in training students in the institutes. Well-planned and up-to-date practices produce not only tech-ready graduates, but also confident problem solvers. According to one respondent:

"The best thing technical and vocational educational institutes can do is to digitalise their academic and managerial systems. This will be effective for them and their students."

5.3 Research

Research is a relatively new concept in TVET institutes. The management and students of the technical and vocational education system always focus on proper skills development. However, neglecting the research process or dismissing research as the domain of natural sciences is misguided. The primary purpose of research is to investigate, explore and innovate. All these factors are essential to the sustainability of the technical and vocational education system. Research culture must be developed in the institutes of the technical and vocational education system. TVET institutes should ensure that trainers and students are involved in research activities to investigate, explore and innovate in their field. As one of the respondents said:

> *"Art is not about only skill. Research is also important. Students must be aware of the research tools and techniques to produce the required results."*

Research has a role to play in the relationship between educational institutes and industry. Industry communicates recent trends to institutes and highlights the research skills required by graduates. At the same time, educational institutes should engage in rigorous research and inform the industry about innovative practices and materials that can be used for a better and sustainable future. Technical and vocational institutes must focus on promoting research culture as it enhances the creative and innovative capacity of the graduate. As one of the respondents noted:

> *"Industry needs creative people, but creativity alone is not enough. Graduates should be innovative too, so you need research."*

To produce graduates who can thrive and grow in industry, the institute must inculcate the research habit in its graduates.

5.4 Students' Attitude

The last, but not insignificant, aspect that featured prominently in industry personnel responses was the attitude of the graduates. Skills become apparent when work begins, but it is a person's attitude that speaks first. Body language and attitude can determine whether or not graduates get the job, irrespective of how good their skills are. Industry demands people who are highly professional and ready to work, who know the importance of workplace norms and culture and are willing to bear the hardship of career growth. One of the respondents said:

> *"Industry can tolerate an untrained person but cannot bear an unprofessional person."*

Technical and vocational educational institutes must focus on students' attitudes. They must train the attitude of the students and prepare them for the workplace. Educational institutes must teach their students professional practices and behaviour during their studies. This is one of the most significant parts of employability skills and is often termed a soft skill. Besides,

institutes must train their students' soft skills to increase employability. Technical and vocational institutes must work on the professional development and attitude of the students. It has become the most desired trait that industry looks for in its employees. They want to leverage these attitudes and encourage employees to take responsibility for learning themselves while supporting the offer of resources and training to develop necessary skills. As one of the respondents commented:

> *"Institutes and graduates must remember that industry is a tough place. You need to be well prepared and strong enough to digest it. Your skills matter, but your attitude helps you to sustain yourself and excel."*

6 Conclusion

This study aims to identify employers' best institutional practices and skills. It seeks to understand the collaboration of TVET institutes with industry and their demands to create a sustainable TVET environment. For this purpose, a qualitative study was conducted. The themes highlighted were: an updated curriculum, digitalisation, research, and students' attitude. The analysis above clearly indicates that institutional best performance is based on these practices. Any institute with these practices at the highest level will produce top-notch students in the market with greater employability. These practices enable students to match the demands of the market. Therefore, an institute must follow an updated curriculum, prioritise digitalisation, research, and focus on students' attitude. These are all essential practices which require regular updates. These practices will also serve as the basis for reducing the gap between industry and academia. They can also help to develop direct connections by paying attention to industry demands, reducing unemployment through skills development, and bridging attitude gaps. Hence the institute will make itself the best choice for students, parents, employees, and industry.

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