ACADEMIC FREEDOM, INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY, AND PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE DEMOCRATISATION AND TRANSFORMATION OF EDUCATION

P. J. Majozi*
Partnerships and Linkages
https://orcid.org/0009-0009-5050-1800

T.J. Kula*
College Principal
https://orcid.org/0009-0001-9722-5518

T.E. Sibiya*
Registration Services

L. Makondo
Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching
Durban University of Technology
Pietermaritzburg, South Africa
https://orcid.org/0009-0007-1002-5120

*Elangeni TVET College
Pinetown, South Africa

ABSTRACT

In South Africa, academic freedom grants higher education institutions independence and autonomy. Section 16(1) of the South African Constitution enshrines the right to freedom of expression, which includes academic freedom and freedom of scientific research. This article explores the conceptualisation of academic freedom, emphasising its role in safeguarding both the right and its protection. Recognising that education has historically been shaped by political forces, the Constitution aims to transform society from authoritarianism to constitutional democracy, raising critical questions about the systemic organisation of education and training in a post-apartheid context. The article critically examines the intersection of academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and public accountability within the democratisation and transformation of higher education. Drawing from scholarly perspectives, it interrogates market-promoting policies in the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) sector, highlighting the tension

between neoliberal agendas and the democratic ideals envisioned for post-apartheid education. Using a governmentality lens, the article questions how public accountability extends beyond financial transparency to encompass the social transformation role of educational institutions. Adopting a Human Rights-Based Approach, the article argues that achieving social justice and socio-economic transformation in education requires moving beyond prescriptive, market-driven policies that undermine institutional autonomy. It concludes that sustainable public interests can only be realised through a comprehensive overhaul of the current system.

Keywords: Academic freedom, Autonomy, Accountability, Neoliberalism, TVET

INTRODUCTION

This article emanates from the 2024 Council of Higher Education Conference themed "Deepening the Discourse on Academic Freedom, Institutional Autonomy and Public Accountability in South African Higher Education*"*. The conference convened to provide a national platform to revive the discourse on academic freedom, institutional autonomy and public accountability. South African historical conceptions of academic freedom are premised on the T.B. Davie formulation of academic freedom, which the open universities drew upon in positioning themselves against apartheid state control (Council of Higher Education [CHE], 2008). In contemporary times, this discourse remains centered among universities because globally, academic freedom and institutional autonomy are the hallmarks of higher educational systems (CHE, 2008). In reinvigorating discussions, this article however builds upon academic freedom as enshrined in Section 16(1)(d) of the South African Constitution which affirms that everyone has the right to this freedom and its protection (Krüger, 2013). Thus, in furthering the broadened constitutional application of academic freedom, this article explores the interplay of academic freedom between institutional autonomy and public accountability to a non-traditional domain like the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) College sector.

The TVET College sector is integral to the Post-School Education and Training (PSET) system and although not previously at the centre of the academic freedom movement, the shifting organisation of how countries should model development is a global phenomenon affecting all spheres and institutions in any given nation state. The Higher Education Institutional Autonomy and Academic Freedom (HEIAAF) Task Team long raised concerns regarding the threat that market-driven policies would have in shaping the development of academic qualifications and research (CHE, 2008). Thus, as global TVET college policy models prompts colleges to become sites of workforce development for the market, critical scholarship on the other hand warns against the uncritical adoption of productivist approaches (Powell,

2012). Ngcwangu (2024: 2) particularly asserts that “the character and orientation of the skills regime are influenced by macro-level policy discourses which find expression within these meso-level institutions and policy frameworks” . This then qualifies TVET as a topical arena to extend a robust conception of academic freedom.

Considering that the developmental state locates TVET at the centre of the development matrix, South African colleges are juxtaposed between competing development priorities: addressing socio-economic needs versus catering to market demands. However, despite the notion of TVET colleges as civic actors that serve as anchor institutions that support the social ecosystem's participatory engagements (Powell, 2021), this is often overshadowed by neoliberal rationalities that prioritise market-aligned outcomes. Relating this to the scholarly recognition that productivist underpinnings have on the democratic development project, this article critically examines how academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and public accountability conceptions intersect with the South African TVET college sector. Incorporating synthesised seminal works, the article epitomises discernable neoliberal rationality within TVET college steering, advancing that achieving social inclusivity and equity requires resisting the narrow imperatives of the market in favour of broader, long-term public good.

ACADEMIC FREEDOM IN THE CONTEXT OF THE SKILLS DISCOURSE

Contextualising academic freedom in the skills discourse is underpinned by the constitutional formulation that challenges the mainstream interpretation of academic freedom that reserves autonomy for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and individual academics. Expanded, academic freedom transcends this normative understanding solely as an infringement of the HEI and the individual academic to that of social responsiveness. Noting that HEIs are obliged to support the constitutional rights of academic freedom (CHE, 2008), TVET college steering should similarly promulgate policy and practices that support social responsiveness to the broader society as PSET institutions.

However, the positioning of TVET colleges within the skills discourse often reflects a utilitarian approach that prioritises economic outputs over human development. The HRDCSA (2014) and the White Paper on Post-School Education and Training (DHET, 2013) advocate for aligning the PSET system with a developmental state agenda, yet practical implementation tends towards neoliberal, market-oriented models. This focus undermines the people-centered change envisioned in policy frameworks such as the ANC’s 2007 Strategy and Tactic policy. Moreover, it deviates from the embedded mandate ascribed in the National Development Plan’s description of a developmental state—that is a state that actively, intensively and effectively

intervenes in the structural causes of economic or social underdevelopment (Department of Planning Monitoring and Evaluation [DPME], 2017). Scholars like McGrath thus aptly cautioned against the uncritical adoption of vocational education as a panacea for development, arguing that TVET should not solely serve the labour market but also address social justice concerns (Powell, 2012). Redefining academic freedom within this discourse thus requires resisting the reduction of education to mere workforce preparation to instead promote inclusive and transformative educational practices.

Historically, South Africa's vocational education system has been shaped by political and economic imperatives, often reinforcing social inequalities. Under apartheid, formal apprenticeship systems entrenched racial disparities by privileging white workers while relegating black workers to unskilled labour (Gamble, 2021). This legacy is exacerbated under state steering that fails to consider the systemic organisation of education and training (Maringe and Osman, 2016). Powell (2012) thus raised the importance of engaging with the central questions regarding the TVET debate "training for what", "what kind of training for whom"? The CHE (2008, 30) articulated a concern regarding the "potential alliance between government and market in the name of such "goods" as efficiency and labour market supply, which may foster forms of performance accountability skewed towards narrow and short-term imperatives, rather than the wider and longer-term public". Disregarding these questions is perhaps indicative that the educational transformation process post-apartheid has been designed to be attuned to market-promoting policies at the detriment of the public interest.

A renewed conceptional understanding must demonstrate a commitment to the explicit constitutional mention of academic freedom because as Krüger (2013) asserts, it signifies that there are lessons to be learned regarding the nature of education. Arguably, one of these lessons is that education has not been a neutral undertaking (Mathebula, 2018). Thus, reframing academic freedom within the skills discourse necessitates a fundamental shift from serving and maintaining the powers that rule the country (Mathebula, 2018) to a transformative agenda underpinned by human development.

INSTITUTIONAL AUTONOMY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE SKILLS DISCOURSE

The Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA) corresponds with the constitutional "*everyone*" assertion because it premises that developmental processes must be grounded on human rights (Thapa and Singh, 2019). The government, in steering transformation, is responsible for planning, funding, quality assurance and legislative amendments. The HEEIAF Task Team have previously contended with questions regarding whether the HEI steering conflicted with

democratic educational principles. Similarly, as part and parcel of the education system, TVET steering also needs to undergo the same assessment. Therefore, a critical examination of TVET reforms should determine how progressive this educational system is – that is, to diagnose what the TVET system purposes education for, and its policy outcomes (Thapa and Singh, 2019). Globally, higher education reforms, particularly in Anglo-Saxon countries, are often seen as neoliberal interventions that threaten institutional autonomy (CHE, 2008). In South Africa, the government's market-responsive approach to TVET reform, aligned with the DHET, contradicts the broader social transformation goals. While strong state involvement is deemed essential to address historical inequities (CHE, 2008), it is crucial to scrutinise whether the current approach truly supports the constitutional imperative of democratisation. The developmental state agenda faces significant challenges, as highlighted by Fine's critique of state steering impediments. The energy-mineral complex, as illustrated by the DPME (2017), constrains the state's ability to assert sovereignty over market forces, thereby limiting its developmental interventions. This lack of sovereignty undermines efforts to achieve social justice because cooperation in policy co-opts how HEIs function in their role to democratise society (CHE, 2008), TVET colleges included.

This contradiction is particularly evident within the educational context, where epistemic injustices persist. Epistemic injustice, as defined by Fricker (2007), refers to the harm inflicted on individuals in their capacity as knowers, particularly through testimonial injustice where someone's credibility is unfairly discredited and hermeneutical injustice where they are denied access to understanding or interpreting their experiences. In the TVET context, Ngcwangu (2015) critiques how global financial institutions, particularly the World Bank, shape educational policy, often at the expense of local epistemic justice. The neoliberal rationality embedded in policy formulation leads to a disconnect between educational outcomes and the democratic promises made to TVET completers (Selane and Odeku, 2024), who, in a culture that purports skills mismatch, are often made to feel that their personal failings are attributes of the systemic failures. Moreover, the governance of the educational sector has been predominantly shaped by Western methodologies that do not align with the socio-political realities of Sub-Saharan Africa (Ukwanda, 2017). This epistemic dissonance where the dominant knowledge frameworks exclude or undervalue local ways of knowing perpetuates inequality in knowledge production and validation (Maistry and Walker, 2017), further marginalising TVET completers who struggle with pathway outcomes due to a perceived skills mismatch. Despite the ambitious goals outlined in the NDP, policy frameworks often fail to address the structural factors that hinder meaningful social transformation (Fisher and Simmons, 2012; Vally and Motala, 2014; Ngcwangu, 2019).

In this context, honouring democratic social order necessitates the self-governance of the state to ensure an autonomous determination of TVET policy (Tikly, 2013). The 1997 White Paper emphasises that academic freedom requires protection from external interference. Yet, as Powell (2016) argues, TVET policy remains entrenched within a productivist logic, neglecting broader developmental aims. To truly transform TVET, it is essential to move beyond the narrow focus on employability (Powell and McGarth, 2014) and recognise the holistic needs of learners, industry communitiesand/or the broader society (Majola, Powell and Jordaan 2024).

PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE SKILLS DISCOURSE

The concept of public accountability within the skills discourse also requires re-examination. The White Paper's narrow definition of accountability as financial reporting fails to address the broader governance issues central to the national development agenda (CHE, 2008). As noted by the HRDCSA (2014), a developmental state in a democratic South Africa is not solely informed by business growth alone. There are other socio-economic considerations that encompass a democratic developmental state such as popular democracy, social inclusion, job creation, economic restructuring for mass participation, improved healthcare and education, poverty eradication, public service delivery, social protection, pro-poor growth and sustainable livelihoods (HRDCSA, 2014). However, as Thapa and Singh (2019) accord, the human capital approach remains silent about associated social returns.

Maringe and Osman (2016) convey that the barriers of transformation must be identified and managed. The pitfalls of the human capital approach have been extensively articulated in scholarly literature and the democratic developmental state further substantiates accountability as encompassing social justice and human development rather than mere workforce alignment (Powell and McGrath, 2014) for productivity and economic returns. In reflecting upon the purpose of education in driving a skills-based society, Maringe and Osman (2016) state that this is an indication that the human capital approach remains based on subjugation as opposed to the principles of human emancipation. Thus, in managing barriers, Maringe and Osman (2016) contend that meaningful transformation of the PSET rests on ideological change. Therefore, the inclusion of student voices and perspectives is imperative to promote epistemic justice and prevent further exacerbation of inequalities of marginalised groups (Maistry and Walker, 2017; Majola et al., 2024). This inclusivity can have substantial implications in challenging neoliberal rationality and further addressing the epistemic injustices embedded in policy frameworks and redefining accountability to reflect democratic, human-centered education.

DEMOCRATISATION AND TRANSFORMATION IN TVET COLLEGES

Globalisation

After World War II, states formed alliances to promote peace, security, production, and economic stability (Moos, 2017). Central to globalisation was the rise of 50,000 massive transnational companies that, driven by shareholder loyalty, pressured governments to shape financial policies, communication, politics, and culture. This global shift fostered neoliberal and marketplace politics within public governance, embodied by the New Public Management (NPM) approach (Moos 2017; Hansen, Lindholst, and Greve 2020). NPM aimed to integrate private sector management strategies into public services (Lapuente and Van de Walle, 2020).

In South Africa, the transition from apartheid to democracy coincided with the global rise of neoliberal capitalism, pushing the state to adopt market-driven policies (Ngcwangu 2014, 2019). The apartheid regime's privatisation of state functions set the stage for the post-apartheid government's adoption of the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) policy, replacing the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) (Ngcwangu 2019; Needham 2019). Critics argue that this shift signaled a departure from redress and inclusive development, and this became a defining point in South African governing rationality as the country would instead become aligned with global neoliberal reforms that emphasise privatisation and marketisation (Hansen et al., 2020).

The assimilation of neoliberal policy position remade the South African democratic government to become an interventionist for economic development (Woods 2018). Locating this disconnection is imperative particularly because transnational agencies, global structures and discourse emerged as more important and relevant than nation states in providing ideas on governance (Moos, 2017). When this shift from "government" to "governance" happens, Swyngedouw (2005) argues that it profoundly restructures the parameters of political democracy leading to a democratic deficit because it privileges economic imperatives over democratic processes. This effectively shifts power from the hands of the many to the few through these governance arrangements, changing the development priorities.

Neoliberalism and Academic Capitalism

A Foucault-Brown conception of neoliberalism holds that it is more than an ideology but a governing rationality that extends market logic to non-economic spheres, including education, thereby transforming it from a public good to a market commodity (Woods 2018; Van der Walt 2017). Akala (2021) argues that higher education in South Africa increasingly aligns with

market needs, exemplifying how neoliberal policies permeate educational practices. TVET colleges, similarly, positioned as skills providers for economic competitiveness, have been shaped by neoliberal rationality, influenced by the historical legacy of colonial models (Makole, Moeti, and Ntshangase 2023). This alignment contradicts the transformative aspirations of post-apartheid education, as neoliberal agendas prioritise market-driven outcomes over human-centered development (Powell 2012).

The decentralisation of governance within TVET, such as the establishment of college councils, was intended to grant autonomy (Wedekind, 2010) but instead transferred management responsibilities to local institutions, the classroom and individuals, perpetuating NPM's market-oriented logic (Moos, 2017). Despite claims of empowerment, this form of decentralisation often undermines genuine public deliberation on educational priorities (Tikly, 2013). This is because even with TVET College Councils at the helm, issues of public domain which should encompass a public debate to inform valued capabilities, have already been meted out by meta-governance forces. This is substantiated by scholars that further elaborate on the influence of global market forces on education which constrains the democratic agency of institutions and individuals. Noting that the embedded market forces determine the knowledge and skills required in that economy (Akala, 2021), it is evident that skills arise as part of a decision-making process that workers or government do not form part of (Ngcwangu, 2015).

Critiques and Alternatives

A significant critique of neoliberalism in education is its erosion of democratic governance. While South African educational reforms emphasise skills for economic productivity, this instrumentalist approach contradicts the constitutional commitment to transformation and social justice (Krüger, 2013). Neoliberalism, by commodifying education, restricts the capacity of TVET colleges to serve as transformative spaces that empower marginalised communities. Instead of fostering democratic participation, these reforms often reproduce economic inequalities, reinforcing colonial patterns of governance (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; McGarth **Ramsarup, Zeelen, Wedekind, Allais, Lotz-Sisitka, Monk, Openjuru, and Russon** 2019; Akala 2021).

Relating to the Foucauldian understanding of the 'conduct of conduct' to the decoloniality project, the increased encroachment of market forces in setting the rules of the game (Swyngedouw, 2005), systematizes TVET to be a conduit of the knowledge and norms as "hewers of wood and drawers of water" (Vally and Motala, 2014). Though under a different guise, the economic growth development trajectory retains superiority (Akoojee, 2016) and this

TVET instrumentalism is equated to secondary colonialism (Akala, 2021) as it seeks to produce the ideal citizen for its system of power (Woods, 2018). South African education thus continues to be plagued with issues of access and determination of self beyond subordinate positions and inferiority (Mathebula, 2018) as neoliberalism alters the political system which in turn, alters the political subject to fit into an economic order (Woods, 2018).

By adopting a HRBA, education can better address historical injustices by ensuring universal entitlement regardless of socio-economic background, location, class, or ethnicity (Thapa and Singh, 2019). However, implementing HRBA in TVET not only requires structural changes (Maistry and Walker, 2017), but an awareness among government, parliament, policymakers, planners, implementers and citizens (Thapa and Singh, 2019) that moving beyond the mere adoption of neoliberal efficiency metrics is required to genuinely prioritise educational inclusion.

Revisiting the lessons from East Asian development highlights the importance of a state-led developmental model that balances economic growth with social equity (Mkandawire, 2001). Adopting this approach within TVET could enable a more balanced and inclusive educational system, reflecting the transformative goals of post-apartheid policy. As South Africa navigates these global pressures, it must reclaim education as a public good rather than a commodity, resisting the neoliberal encroachment that undermines democratic and inclusive transformation.

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES AND DISCUSSION OF NEOLIBERLISM IN TVET COLLEGES

Neoliberalism, more than just a political ideology, functions as a pervasive rationality that permeates various spheres of modern life, including education (Woods, 2018). Despite no economist or educationist openly endorsing neoliberalism in education (Van der Walt, 2017), its influence is evident in the South African TVET college sector. This section examines how neoliberal governance rationality manifests in TVET through performativity, competition, and the cultivation of student individualism.

Massification

Massification refers to the significant increase in education enrolments (Adetiba, 2019). The 1995 White Paper on Education and Training underscored the government's commitment to broadening access to education for historically disadvantaged groups (Adetiba, 2019). Similarly, the NDP aimed to increase TVET enrolments to 1.25 million by 2030 (DHET, 2013).

However, despite these commitments, the sector has struggled to meet enrolment targets. Powell, Muronda, and Tini (2024) found that low enrolment patterns in TVET colleges do not reflect a lack of student interest. Instead, the problem lies in the rejection of four out of five NSFAS applicants due to enrolment capping. This capping, driven by fiscal austerity measures linked to neoliberal policies (Ngcwangu, 2019), restricts access despite significant demand.

The South African College Principals Organisation (SACPO), in its submission to the Commission of Inquiry into Higher Education and Training, reported that while the DHET nominally adheres to an 80:20 funding ratio, actual allocations have dropped to as low as 62 per cent (DHET, 2017). Further exacerbating this situation has been the bursary cuts (DHET, 2017) and the prioritisation of the university education sub-system which has significantly reduced per-student NSFAS aid for TVET students (World Bank, 2023). Ngcwangu (2015) highlights how international financial institutions like the World Bank and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) have advocated for reduced state funding of TVET, favouring private provision. This shift reflects an economisation of education, where social protection mechanisms like NSFAS are weakened, promoting a market-driven approach where individuals are responsible for their own educational investments (Brown, 2015).

Such neoliberal logic perpetuates inequality (Brown, 2015), as evidenced by the user-pays principle that underpins access to TVET. While free education policies nominally aim to redress historical injustices (Vally and Motala, 2014), in practice, the prioritisation of private funding creates a system where only those who can afford to pay, gain access. This reality contradicts national goals to widen educational opportunities for marginalised youth (Powell et al., 2024) and perpetuates social stratification, where massification serves less as a democratising force and more as a mechanism for distinguishing winners from losers (Brown, 2015).

Student Individualism

Student individualism in TVET is rooted in the Human Capital Theory (HCT), which frames individuals as economic agents who enhance their value through education and skills acquisition to improve employability (Woods, 2018). TVET's primary aim is to prepare students for self-employment amid high unemployment, leveraging its widespread presence to reach youth across the country (Akoobhai and Bambo, 2024). As part of this strategy, DHET has established 17 entrepreneurship hubs in partnership with the Small Enterprise Development Agency (SEDA) and incorporated entrepreneurial education into the curriculum to foster entrepreneurial skills (Akoobhai and Bambo, 2024).

These initiatives, however, align with the neoliberal notion of individual entrepreneurial freedoms, rooted in the assumption that human well-being is advanced through the market (Van

der Walt, 2017). Presenting such policies as empowerment masks the reality that individuals are increasingly viewed as human capital, responsible for their own economic outcomes (Woods, 2018). In this neoliberal framing, citizens are expected to be self-governing and rational, tasked with investing in their own futures (Swyngedouw, 2005). While neoliberalism purports to minimise state intervention, it paradoxically requires the state to create markets in areas traditionally seen as social goods for itself (Van der Walt, 2017). Consequently, the state becomes capitalism's "necessary other" by sustaining market-driven educational structures (Jessop 2002, cited in Swyngedouw, 2005).

Under this paradigm, students transition from being citizens in a political democracy to consumers within state-created markets (Moos, 2017), bearing full responsibility for their socio-economic status. Allais (2012) critiques this shift, highlighting how vocational education and skills training, presented as self-help solutions, often mask deeper structural inequalities. While entrepreneurship education can potentially empower students, evidence from developing contexts such as Nigeria shows that entrepreneurial training alone cannot overcome systemic barriers without complementary support, like financial access and conducive policies (Akoobhai and Bambo, 2024).

Moreover, global evidence underscores the importance of state intervention for successful TVET outcomes. In countries like Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and Germany, strong state involvement has been key to high employment rates among TVET completers (HRDCSA, 2014). In contrast, in South Africa, entrepreneurship-focused initiatives have not been matched by sufficient support for small and micro-enterprises (SMEs) (Powell, 2021), despite TVET students being positioned as future SME operators. This disconnect risks perpetuating inequality, as neoliberalism's emphasis on market solutions undermines collective social responsibility (Ngcwangu, 2019). Aligned with the Capability Approach (CA), addressing these challenges requires removing structural barriers that limit students' freedoms to live fulfilling lives (Powell, 2012). Moreover, the Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA) underscores that everyone has the right to protection against unemployment, as per Article 23 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Yet, the neoliberal policy framework, by prioritising private over public interests (Van der Walt, 2017), threatens the goal of building an inclusive society through entrepreneurship hubs.

TVET College Performance and Competition

Devolution, as discussed earlier, involves the state delegating responsibility and accountability to DHET and its PSET institutions and students. Through new governance techniques, TVET college funding follows the principle of money follows choice (Lapuente and Van de Walle,

2020). This market-oriented approach assumes that enabling citizens to choose between various service providers will foster competition and improve service quality (Hansen et al., 2020). Consequently, students can select from a range of educational institutions (e.g., public and private universities, TVET colleges, private colleges, and Community Education and Training Colleges).

However, as noted by Hood (cited by Lapuente, and Van de Walle, 2020), NPM reforms were designed to foster competition to increase efficiency and reduce costs, especially under fiscal constraints. In practice, this has led to the creation of quasi-markets where autonomous citizens are positioned as consumers who choose from the 50 publicly funded TVET colleges. Funding for these colleges is performance-based, focusing on metrics that attract school-leavers.

This competitive model is problematic. While massification theoretically promotes access to education, in reality, access is influenced by performance indicators such as institutional attractiveness and individual ability to secure funding. As Lapuente and Van de Walle (2020) observe, NPM's emphasis on internal markets within the public sector often results in competition between colleges rather than collaboration. Consequently, TVET institutions end up competing for NEETs (youth Not in Employment, Education, or Training) to secure funding, rather than focusing on their broader mandate of inclusivity and skills development.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOUTH AFRICAN TVET COLLEGES POLICY AND PRACTICE

Globally, TVET remains rooted in HCT, which prioritises supplying skilled labour to industry, often at the expense of addressing broader human development goals (HRDCSA, 2014; Wedekind 2014; Ngcwangu 2015; Papier 2020). This outdated productivist paradigm limits the potential of TVET to address social inequalities, as it positions vocational education purely as a tool for economic growth rather than social transformation (Ngcwangu, 2019).

Strategic Policy Shift

A fundamental national strategy would involve reassessing the relationship between the productivist paradigm and TVET graduate outcomes. Policymakers must move beyond the narrow focus on skills for economic growth and redefine educational values (Ssesanga, 2004) that align with South Africa's constitutional mandate. This would involve reconciling policy frameworks to better integrate social and economic goals, moving beyond merely responding to industry needs.

A second strategy would be to redefine TVET's purpose to support inclusive growth (Akoojee, 2016), as outlined in key national policies (NDP, Growth Path, Industrial Policy Action Plan, and the Human Resources Development Strategy for South Africa) (DHET, 2013). As Powell (2021) highlights, achieving social transformation requires rethinking economic rules and the role of skills development. Integrating the HRBA and the CA could provide a more holistic policy framework. However, these approaches must be critically evaluated, as CA alone may not adequately address power imbalances affecting access to opportunities (Ngcwangu, 2019). To further this strategic shift, establishing a think-tank dedicated to developing new conceptualisations of skills planning is essential. This think-tank should draw from global case studies, like Chile's transition from economism to social transformation, to craft context-specific approaches to skills development. It should also challenge traditional best practices, which often perpetuate outdated development models.

Operationalising Cooperative Governance

Finally, cooperative governance must move beyond mere coordination of governance-beyond-the-state arrangements towards meaningful integration of diverse stakeholder voices. This includes prioritising the perspectives of TVET students – especially those unemployed or engaged in informal work – to develop more inclusive and contextually relevant policies (Ngcwangu, 2024). Engaging students directly can help expand accountability and ensure that policies are responsive to the real-life challenges faced by TVET completers.

As former Minister Dr. Nzimande emphasised, education must foster critical and ethical citizenship, equipping individuals to actively participate in South Africa's political, social, and cultural life (DHET, 2013). This vision necessitates transforming TVET into a public good rather than a market commodity. However, within the current HCT framework, which prioritises economic outcomes, the human dimensions of development remain overlooked (Thapa and Singh, 2019). As Powell (2021) notes, COVID-19 highlighted the consequences of an education system overly aligned with industry demands, lacking the flexibility to address social issues. Therefore, reimagining skills development to include community-responsive knowledge and locally relevant skills is essential for achieving social transformation.

CONCLUSION

This article was undertaken to deepen the discourse on academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and public accountability. In extending our knowledge, the paper situated these

concepts within the skills discourse to critically examine the democratisation and transformation of South African TVET colleges. Building upon the Constitutional affordance articulated in Section 16(1)(d), this paper advanced that academic freedom was a collectively held right rather than an exclusive privilege and as such, that academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and public accountability are foundational principles that should underpin all PSET institutions. Critiquing the governance-beyond-the-state arrangements, the paper underscored how meta-governance structures undermine state determination and in turn, influence TVET college steering to compromise institutional autonomy, constraining educational institutions' accountability to the national development goals.

In its critical analysis of democratisation and transformation in TVET colleges, the discussion emphasised the interlink between globalization, neoliberalism and academic capitalism. Exploring discernable elements of neoliberalism within the TVET college sector, it demonstrated that neoliberal governance, driven by market-oriented policy reforms, intentionally shifted the sector towards competitiveness rather than social responsiveness. Ergo, TVET colleges are positioned as economic instruments instead of public good educational spaces that promote holistic human development. A significant implication of this shift towards market-driven policy are the economic rules that restrict state intervention in responding to the broader socio-economic challenges, thereby reducing the transformative education practices.

Noting that the ongoing tension between different philosophical perspectives on what constitutes a developmental state has implications for TVET policy, this paper however upheld that there can be no varied interpretation in the instance whereby democratic intent is unconstitutionally seized by other rationalities that are contrary to the national priorities. Thus, the paper posited that TVET, at the centre of the developmental matrix, should align its educational strategies to encompass constitutional imperatives that serves broader society as opposed to solely meeting market demands. In addressing these challenges, the paper recommended that a national strategy aimed at a systemic overhaul be adopted to ensure that social responsiveness, that is advocated in policy, translates into actionable and transparent changes that are in the interests of the public.

Following this position, a notable emergent implication is the need to reconceptualise the purpose of TVET education. Policymakers should critically engage the underpinning productivist paradigm that gridlocks TVET to economic outcomes. Rather than focusing exclusively on skills for employability, there is a pressing need to develop a holistic framework that balances human development with skills for both economic and social transformation. Such a framework would not only broaden the scope of TVET, but also better align it with the constitutional mandate. Strengthening institutional autonomy is another crucial consideration.

A more decentralised governance model that empowers TVET colleges to align their curricula with local community needs would enhance institutional accountability and responsiveness to societal challenges. By allowing greater flexibility at the institutional level, colleges could better address the specific economic and social realities of the communities they serve, thereby fostering a more contextually relevant and socially embedded form of technical and vocational education.

In addition, integrating stakeholder perspectives is essential to enhance policy relevance and efficacy. Policies should actively incorporate the voices of students, educators, and community members to ensure that TVET planning reflects the lived realities of TVET completers and the communities they serve. Including marginalised voices will deepen democratic participation in educational decision-making, thereby promoting a more inclusive approach to skills development and educational planning. Furthermore, establishing a skills development think-tank dedicated to continuous policy innovation would help address the dynamic and evolving nature of skills demands. This body would critically assess existing models and explore global best practices that align with South Africa's developmental goals, drawing insights from international experiences while contextualising them to local realities.

The scope of this paper incorporated synthesised seminal works and thus, future research should focus on examining the effectiveness of market-driven policies to provide the pertinent empirical cases to substantiate the claims made. A natural progression of this work would also be to evaluate the implementation of the TVET policies, particularly exploring translating social responsiveness from discourse into practice. In addition, more information about alternative governance models is required to better understand the implications of participatory frameworks and how these approaches can be leveraged to better support TVET transformation. A greater focus on how TVET students perceive their educational experiences would provide insightful findings on whether the current reforms contribute to meeting their aspirations and changing their socio-economic realities. Moreover, comparative studies examining international examples, such as the Chilean model of transitioning from economism to social transformation, could provide valuable insights into the feasibility of alternative democratic configurations, structures and processes to enhance TVET governance in South Africa. By integrating these policy recommendations and exploring these research avenues, TVET colleges can move closer to fulfilling their transformative potential, advancing both social justice and economic inclusivity. Aligning TVET practices with a holistic development agenda will not only enhance institutional relevance, but will also contribute to building a more equitable and just society.

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