



Introducing occupational qualifications in the South African Technical Vocational Education and Training Colleges: The challenges

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Abstract

The introduction of occupational qualifications to replace the pre-2009 qualifications in the Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) sector is a site of intense conversation. In these debates are ensconced serious challenges related to the adoption and implementation of these qualifications. A plethora of recurrent themes such as the logic behind this curriculum change, the TVET colleges' preparedness to implement the new qualifications, availability of resources, inter alia, are recurrent themes embodied in these debates. The debates have also illuminated how the socioeconomic challenges directly and indirectly affect the TVET sector curricula. The TVET curricula have not been insulated from the impact of these negative developments in the country. The attempt to respond to these negative developments by introducing occupational qualifications has turned out to be Kafkaesque for many TVET colleges in South Africa. Of particular interest are the challenges that confront the TVET colleges as they implement this new curriculum. According to the study from which this paper draws, many TVET colleges are struggling to implement the occupational qualifications. Guided by the dilemmatic spaces theory, applying a qualitative case study, and using interviews and documentation analysis to gather data from the sampled subjects, the study found that many TVET colleges encountered a lot of challenges in implementing the occupational qualifications. The study identified a lack of relevant occupational qualifications, a lack of places for work integrated learning, a lack of resources, and a lack of qualified lecturers as the major challenges that militated against the introduction of occupational qualifications. These findings underline the importance of engaging in careful curriculum planning, design, and development when introducing a new curriculum.

Keywords: implementation challenge, curriculum change, occupational qualifications, NATED (report 191) programme, pre-2009 qualifications

Introduction

Introducing occupational qualifications in the Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges in South Africa has exposed the challenges some education and training institutions encounter. There are serious challenges embedded in adopting and implementing

occupational qualifications in the TVET sector (Makole et al., 2023). The adoption and implementation of occupational qualifications has not been insulated from the socioeconomic deficiencies inherited from the discriminatory-segregatory apartheid epoch, the times of uncertainties, an unfavourable micro-macro environment, inter alia, recurrent challenges that bedevil this kind of curriculum transformation processes. The challenges become more pronounced in colleges located in the former rural Bantustan areas also known as Bantu homelands. The Bantustans were territories reserved for Black South African settlement during the apartheid era (Powell, 2012). These settlements were often overcrowded, lacked resources, and had poor infrastructure with no meaningful industrial activities, leading to widespread poverty and marginalisation that still impacts negatively on their ability to make meaningful transformation (Mutereko & Wedekind, 2016). This socioeconomic discrimination endured by the Bantustan people cascaded into the learning institutions with the Further Education and Training (FET) colleges being characterised by poor infrastructure, lack of resources, and poor quality education and training; a stark contrast to the White-only privileged FET colleges (Mutereko & Wedekind, 2016). The challenges become dire when the intricacies of the political economies whose ideologies border on the periphery of capitalism, socialism, and liberal market economies are factored in. According to the study from which this article draws, many TVET colleges, especially those located in the former rural Bantustan-homelands areas of South Africa, encountered challenges that militated against the introduction of the occupational qualifications. This stands in the way of the directive by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET, 2024) which ordered all the public TVET colleges to phase out the pre-2009 qualifications (legacy qualifications), starting with the N1–N3 programmes, and introduce occupational qualifications. It is also in contrast with the vision of the National Development Plan, which envisaged a public TVET system that was central in driving youth employment, entrepreneurial and job creation opportunities by crafting vocational, technical curricula and skills programmes that could be responsive and innovative (National Planning Commission, 2012). Although this curriculum change is still in the implementation stages, there is a large body of literature on the development and implementation processes of occupational qualifications curriculum, and the external socio-political and economic challenges, but less literature on the internal curriculum processes. There is also specialist literature emerging on the political economy of education, which is helpful in the understanding of the challenges that affect the implementation of occupational qualifications. This paper argues that the challenges that militate against the implementation of occupational qualifications are mere symptomatic technical implementation problems signalling the underlying problems routed in the political economy framework—and that rushing to label these challenges encountered as implementation problems is a diversion that seeks technical solutions for problems rooted in the political economy. Firstly, the paper will give a brief background to the introduction of occupational qualifications, give a cursory glance on the occupational qualifications from a South African perspective, and then outline the framework that guided this study in order to put the article's argument into context.

Background to the problem

The DHET (2024), on the advice of the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) and the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO), decided to phase out the pre-2009 NATED qualifications, identified as “not responding” to the skills needs of the country, and replace them with the occupational qualifications. The DHET, SAQA, and QCTO argued that most of these legacy qualifications had failed on their goals. The DHET further argued that the occupational qualifications curriculum would respond favourably, to the local labour market needs, to particular requests from Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs), and to employers’ needs. The DHET published implementation and transitional arrangements for all pre-2009 qualifications (under the SAQA Act, 1995) in a determination of the sub-frameworks, which was comprised of the National Qualifications Framework published on 24 December 2020 (Quality Council of Trades and Occupations [QCTO], 2024). The registration end date for these qualifications and unit standards registered on the Occupational Qualifications Sub-Framework was 30 June 2023; the last date of first-time learners enrolling for these qualifications was 30 June 2024 and the last date of achievement for the enrolled learners was 30 June 2027 (QCTO, 2024). In response to this, the QCTO reconstructed programmes offered at TVET colleges into occupational qualifications. The question is: “Are these TVET colleges ready for this kind of curriculum change?”

Some of the TVET colleges have struggled to implement the occupational qualifications (DHET, 2023). DHET found that in 2023, only 15 out of the 50 public TVET colleges were already in the course; six colleges had already phased out N1 from 2022 and before. The DHET also found that some TVET colleges had planned to phase out N1–N3 programmes in January 2024 and that some colleges had absorbed lecturers teaching N1–N3 subjects into other programmes because they had not yet introduced the new qualifications. It was found that in most public TVET colleges, the rolling out of these occupational qualifications had not taken traction (QCTO, 2020). These developments as presented by DHET (2023) and the QCTO (2020) indicate that a myriad of challenges has met the implementation of occupational qualifications. The next section of the paper will give a cursory glance at these occupational qualifications.

Occupational qualifications: A cursory glance

According to Clarke (2011), an occupational qualification is a qualification associated with a trade, occupation, or profession resulting from work-based learning, and consisting of knowledge unit standards, practical unit standards, and work experience unit standards. It involves the integration of industry-recognised occupational qualifications into the curriculum, focusing on aligning training with real-world job requirements, utilising strong partnerships with employers, and ensuring adequate practical training through work-based learning to prepare students for immediate employment upon graduation (Shalem et al., 2004). Developing an occupational qualifications curriculum involves combining all the required theoretical inputs and simulated practice at a college or training centre with on-the-job experience in the workplace in a single, integrated learning programme. In South Africa, the QCTO (2020) developed occupational qualifications which contain three components:

knowledge and theory, the practical skills, and work experience. These occupational qualifications are designed to integrate knowledge, practical skills, and workplace learning into the curriculum, through the incorporation of work-integrated learning (WIL). An institution must accredit an occupational qualification which is registered with the SAQA. These are the qualifications whose implementation is a nightmare to some TVET colleges. This article will illuminate these challenges through the dilemmatic spaces theoretical lens. The next section gives a brief discussion of the dilemmatic spaces theory.

Applying the dilemmatic spaces theory

The study on which this paper draws, was underpinned by the dilemmatic spaces theory. The theory was used to identify and describe the challenges that are encountered during the introduction of occupational qualifications in the TVET sector. According to Fransson (2016), the dilemmatic spaces theory should be used for a better understanding of challenges that affect learning processes in the education sector. The concept of dilemmatic spaces in a teaching situation concerned aspects of control and was affected by expectations from both people and curricula (Westerholm & Lindqvist, 2023). The theory posits that learning institutions encounter different practical dilemmas that might not only be caused by the subject content but arise from the environment, which ends up affecting teaching and learning (Fransson & Grannas, 2013). The theory frames dilemmas in teacher training as relational, contextual, and ever present rather than being isolated events (Westerholm & Lindqvist, 2023), meaning that a teacher needs not only to be trained, but has to receive continuing training to ensure competent curriculum delivery. The theory of dilemmatic spaces enhanced an understanding of important aspects of the nature of challenges encountered in learning institutions (Fransson, 2016). This study adopted the dilemmatic spaces theory as a framework for understanding curriculum implementation challenges and responses in TVET colleges, especially those located in the disadvantaged rural areas of South Africa. The study chose this approach because it presents a distinct and realistic understanding of the challenges associated with introducing occupational qualifications, allowing for a deeper understanding of the challenges encountered by education and training institutions in South Africa. The article will use this theory as a guide in illuminating the challenges the TVET colleges encounter as they implement occupational qualifications.

The applied methodology

This article draws from a case study which was conducted in two public TVET colleges in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa from January 2023 to April 2024. The study followed Terre Blanche and Durrheim's (2002) guidelines on how to conduct a case study. It applied a qualitative research design, sampling two public TVET colleges which were phasing out N1–N3 for purposes of interviewing the principals of these colleges, their deputy principals (academic), the academic managers, the heads of department of N1–N3, and eight lecturers (N1–N3) who had been purposively sampled. The researcher also studied various documents on the introduction of occupational qualifications to discover the challenges encountered during the processes related to the adoption and implementation of these qualifications. After the interviews and document analyses, content analysis was used to

qualitatively analyse the data. Of central interest were the core themes that the participants or documents referred to—the information or messages that they wanted to pass on. Some of the methods used included the simple counting of the interview responses and documents' stated challenges, and finding patterns in the qualitative data where many participants or contents referred to similar trends of challenges and strategies to overcome those challenges. The similar trends were developed into themes, which were analysed and presented as data. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the participants where necessary.

Research findings

Challenges encountered by TVET colleges during the implementation of occupational qualifications

The case for implementing occupational qualifications is commonly made in terms of practicability and the challenges encountered during the implementation stages and, as indicated in the introduction of this article, most literature on this subject focuses on external rather than internal challenges. Previous studies (Oosthuizen & van der Bijl, 2019) and reports (DHET, 2023; QCTO, 2020) indicated that some challenges were encountered during the implementation stages of occupational qualifications. There are also studies (Albashiry et al., 2015; Makole et al., 2023; Powell, 2012) that found challenges such as a lack of entrepreneurial knowledge and innovativeness amongst the youth. The same studies identified poor institutional management approaches and practices by leaders and managers, and lack of ownership of institutional change process by stakeholders as other challenges for TVET colleges. These studies alleged that such challenges stifled the abilities of the public TVET colleges to respond to the goals and objectives of the National Development Plan (National Planning Commission, 2012). The DHET (2019) indicated that the TVET colleges were in a difficult space regarding the introduction of occupational qualifications, signalling the prevalence of the challenges in the sector. In addition to the challenges found from other studies, the study which informs this article found other challenges that militated against this curriculum transformation. For the purposes of this article, focus was on the challenge in identifying the relevant occupational qualifications, the shortage of placements to integrate learning with work, the lack of resources, and a lack of qualified occupational qualifications lecturers. Besides these identified challenges, the study also made some disturbing but interesting findings—especially that there seemed to be some underplaying of how difficult it was to incorporate WIL as a component of occupational qualifications in the TVET colleges that bore the scars of apartheid atrocities, and to introduce WIL in liberal market economies. The situation became more matrixed and complex when the persistent times of uncertainties were factored in. Despite all these adversities, the strategic policy makers seemed to have naive optimism when giving policy directives. Although these findings may have been recorded in some studies, the naive optimism made the findings disturbing but interesting in that this could lead to clues and cues to finding lasting solutions to the identified challenges. These findings will provide a point of departure for the discussion that follows the presentation of the findings.

Identifying relevant occupational qualifications

Many public TVET colleges were struggling to identify relevant occupational qualifications. This challenge was identified by most of the interviewed participants. They indicated that this challenge was due to the prescriptions that came from DHET, prescriptions that were misaligned with what pertained on the ground at campus level. TVET colleges operate in a regulated environment, which requires them to straddle the requirements of a nationally controlled curriculum while at the same time, responding to the needs of the local industry and community. Some TVET colleges had very limited choices from the list of the occupational qualifications prescribed by the QCTO because there were few or no industries to place the students for WIL. Njongo, one of the participants, concurred with most of the study participants when he said:

The major problem hampering the introduction of occupational qualifications in most TVET colleges is the prescriptions that come from DHET. One will find that most of the occupational qualifications prescribed by the DHET are difficult to implement because those programmes do not align with what our small industries offer. It becomes difficult to have the WIL component, a critical part of occupational qualifications.

This is in line with Makole et al. (2023) who found that the new national curriculum lacked flexibility to align with industrial skills requirements. The finding resonates well with the dilemmatic spaces theory which posits that control can pose challenges to the introduction of new curricula, and teaching and learning (Fransson, 2016). The DHET prescriptions which in a way, are a form of control, provide dilemmas on qualifications identification.

Lack of places to integrate work with learning

Another challenge closely related to the first challenge, was the lack of companies to place the learners for WIL, which is a critical integral component of occupational qualifications (Shalem et al., 2004). Most of the interviewed participants identified the lack of companies to place their learners for WIL as a big challenge encountered by the TVET colleges. These TVET colleges could barely find any industries to integrate work and learning. According to the interviews, the colleges were already struggling to get places for their students' work-based exposure (WBE) and in-service training, a requirement for the National Accredited Technical Education Diploma, and introducing the occupational qualifications would only add to their woes. Mr. Dulaze said:

This part of the Eastern Cape Province does not have many industries unlike places such as Port Elizabeth and East London. Most of our industries are informal which makes it difficult for us to find a place for WIL, WBE, and experiential training.

This finding resonates well with the World Bank (2019), which observed that there was already a shortage of spaces to place learners for WBE, such that introducing occupational qualifications could only worsen the situation. The finding speaks to Mutereko and Wedekind

(2016)'s finding that WIL was a challenge negatively affecting the implementation of occupational qualifications. This aligns with the dilemmatic spaces theory, which posits that institutions encounter practical dilemmas that might not be caused by content but from the environment (Fransson & Grannas, 2013). The TVET colleges under study were located in thinly industrialised areas, environments which could hardly offer placements for WIL.

Lack of resources needed to implement occupational qualifications

Another major challenge identified by the study was the lack of resources. All the interviewed participants and some of the analysed documents identified the lack of resources as a challenge militating against the introduction of occupational qualifications. Poor infrastructure, lack of training materials/facilities, and a lack of financial and human resources were common challenges identified by the study. According to the interviewed participants, some of the occupational qualifications demanded a lot of resources to be implemented to the expected QCTO/DHET standards. The DHET and QCTO set a minimum standard which a training institution had to meet before accrediting and offering an occupational qualification. The TVET colleges needed money to finance the establishment or upgrading of the required plant/equipment, expand ground space, purchase new training material, and upskill the occupational qualifications lecturers. Most of the public TVET colleges could not afford such resources without the aid of the government, industry, or donors. Many TVET institutions, especially those located in disadvantaged rural areas, had inadequate infrastructure, outdated equipment and facilities, and a lack of modern technology. The reliance on government funding, which was often limited and inconsistent, affected the implementation of the occupational qualifications in TVET colleges located in remote rural areas of South Africa.

Alungile, a participant in the study said:

Occupational qualifications demand a lot of resources. There is a need for huge financial support for us to buy the needed materials, develop infrastructure, establish training facilities, upskill the lecturers and other things. Without these mentioned resources I have mentioned, it will be difficult to accredit any of the occupational qualifications.

This resource deficiency resonated with the DHET (2019) and QCTO (2020) reports that stated that funding and resource constraints were hampering progress in developing qualifications such as engineering. A lack of resources translates into failure to meet the requirements needed for the occupational qualification to be accredited with the QCTO. A number of campuses from TVET colleges under study indicated that it was a cumbersome exercise to accredit an occupational qualification with the relevant authorities given the costs associated with accreditation. Thus, introducing occupational qualifications became dilemmatic.

Lack of qualified lecturers

The document analysis and interviews conducted found that there was a shortage of qualified occupational qualifications lecturers in the TVET sector. TVET college lecturers need a combination of academic, lecturing, and workplace qualifications that provide them with workplace-related competency for them to be recognised or defined as qualified lecturers. One can be qualified to teach in the basic education sector if they have the pedagogy, but will be unqualified to educate in the TVET sector if they do not have workplace qualifications. The same applies to an artisan; they can have the workplace qualification but are not qualified to educate in the TVET sector without any training pedagogy. Studies have shown that very few South African TVET college lecturers have adequate academic, workplace, and teaching qualifications; some lecturers in the technical fields were recruited from industry resulting with many having workplace experience and knowledge but little pedagogical training, and others were drawn from the basic education department with no workplace experience (Oosthuizen & van der Bijl, 2019). Gewer (2010) noted that there was poor theoretical comprehension of National Certificate (Vocational) programmes by skilled artisan lecturers at the public TVET colleges because the majority of them lacked the didactics of teaching because they were recruited directly from the industrial sector. The DHET (2019) made similar findings about lecturers with little or no qualification and lacking fitness to teach occupational qualifications. The finding resonates with dilemmatic spaces theory, which suggests that failing to train educators leads to challenges in curriculum implementation (Westerholm & Lindqvist, 2023).

These were the challenges the TVET colleges encountered during the implementation of occupational qualifications. The data indicated that most, not just a few, of the colleges were having challenges in implementing the occupational qualifications. Apart from the presented challenges, there were some disturbing but interesting findings from the study. The following discussion attempts to expose these challenges through the political economy of education and dilemmatic spaces theory lenses.

Discussion

This discussion is set against a landscape marked by simmering geopolitics, global competition, shifting of global allies, fluid political terrains, contested norms, and other uncertainties that directly or indirectly affect curriculum changes in education. Some few examples include uncertainties such as COVID-19, which prevented the implementation of occupational qualifications from 2020 to 2022, recurrent floods in provinces such as KwaZulu-Natal and Eastern Cape that are destroying infrastructure in TVET colleges, the recent failure by the South African Government of National Unity parliament to pass the 2025–2026 National Budget due to the proposed 2% increase on VAT, and the United States of America cutting crucial financial aid to projects to alleviate socioeconomic problems as well as imposing high trading tariffs. The discussion is also set in context of a new curriculum being introduced because the pre-2009 TVET curriculum failed in its purpose. These legacy qualifications (N1–N6) are the same qualifications that were touted as a

solution to the country's problems (National Planning Commission, 2012; Terblanche, 2017). The South African government viewed this type of post-school education as a solution to poverty, unemployment, inequality, crime, and social justice (DHET, 2012).

Despite these efforts, the status quo remains. There is still high unemployment, poverty, crime, and inequality in the country. The DHET has made numerous policy changes that have failed to reengineer TVET colleges to upskill the youth with relevant technical qualifications required by the labour market and for job creation (Makole et al., 2023), hence the government's decision to introduce occupational qualifications. However, this curriculum change has presented dilemmas for many TVET colleges. This article argues that the challenges that militate against the introduction of occupational qualifications in the TVET colleges of South Africa are rooted in its political economy of education. For the purposes of the article's argument, a brief reference of key frameworks on the political economy and description in the post-colonial South Africa contexts is given.

The key post-colonial South African political economy frameworks

The key frameworks on post-colonial education in South Africa include the decolonial turn, the ubuntu philosophy, coloniality, the Indigenous knowledge systems, the language policy, and student movements such as the Rhodes Must Fall and Fees Must Fall. In the political sphere, there is the transformative constitutionalism and the political economy of education. The political economy of education is used to analyse how power dynamics and corruption impact education. Its framework helps analyse how political and economic factors, such as corruption, influence educational outcomes and policy development. It recognises that educational issues are politically and ideologically charged, requiring an understanding of power dynamics within the system. The South African political economy of education framework has the head of state and the minister of DHET at the top, dealing with their political allies (trade unions, business entities, civil societies, etcetera) and competing priorities (especially those that seek to correct the injustices of the political economy of the apartheid system) guided by the human capital ideology (what people believe) for purposes of improving learning outcomes (Gustafsson & Taylor, 2022). According to Gustafsson and Taylor, the fluid power within the allies leads to political settlements that may lead to poor policy crafting and implementation, misplaced priorities, and ultimately, to poor learning outcomes. The minister crafts curriculum policies and gives implementation directives that attempt to align with the human capital ideology although it may be hard to implement such policies in a liberal democracy. It has to be highlighted that, generally, political economies are characterised by poor relationships with reality and are mostly fact-averse; they have an obsession with the obfuscation of real possibilities through the pontification of populist ideologies and policies. The socioeconomic and political terrains of political economies are dominated by promises of good outcomes, even if the situation objectively projects more of bad outcomes. This often leads to the introduction of new curriculum programmes whose success might not be guaranteed. That is naive optimism (a belief that good outcomes are more likely and bad outcomes less likely, in any situation). This article, however, is quick to

highlight that acknowledging the limitations of naive optimism does not imply that the qualifications are doomed to fail. But they are not guaranteed success given the backdrop that underpins their introduction.

The challenges confronting the implementation of occupational qualifications were inherited from apartheid South Africa's political economy of education and remain embedded within the post-colonial educational landscape. With reference to the findings, the major challenge encountered by the TVET colleges was WIL because there were no well-established industries in the areas where they were located. These TVET colleges were located in former Bantustan-homeland areas (Transkei), territories still constrained by apartheid-era deficiencies. It becomes naive optimism to imagine that TVET colleges located in these previously marginalised areas can easily get placements for WIL. The article uses the case of the White Paper (DHET, 2013, Item 3.1.5) for this argument:

Since the main purpose of the TVET colleges is to prepare students for the workplace and/or self-employment, it is essential that they develop and maintain close working relationships with employers in their areas of study. Close partnerships between colleges and employers will assist the colleges to locate opportunities for WIL and help them to place students when they complete their qualifications. . . . Even in areas with a relatively low industrial base, colleges should pursue linkages with employers in small businesses and public-sector organisations such as municipalities, clinics, schools and the police. SETAs should play a role in forging relationships between colleges and employers.

The White Paper (DHET, 2013) seems to underplay the difficulty of getting placements for WBE, WIL, in-service training, and internships in the former rural Bantustan areas. The policy makes optimistic assumptions about the ability of colleges to make arrangements for placements with employers who barely exist because of a very thin industrial base. Even if the colleges were located in the relatively low industrial base like the colleges under study; the student population and industrial base is not proportional, with too many students chasing very few placements posts. This demonstrates that the failure to identify relevant occupational qualifications and to get placements for WIL is a symptom of the underlying apartheid legacy (discriminatory and marginalisation policy of under developing industries in the Bantustan areas) and not an implementation challenge. The directive may be labelled naive and creates dilemmatic spaces for the TVET colleges located in these formerly marginalised areas, a development in line with the dilemmatic spaces theory.

The White Paper (DHET, 2013), which seem to be grounded on the prescriptions of human capital theory, underestimates the difficulties of finding placements in liberal market economies, a prediction already made by literature from Australia and the United Kingdom (Allais & Nathan, 2014). Human market theory assumes that skills development benefits the individual trainee regarding remuneration, and that placements for skills development are readily available in free-market economies and also, that once students are empowered through skills training, they can easily get jobs (Allais, & Nathan, 2014). Contrary to these assertions, it is clear that colleges cannot find placements or are struggling to find placements

in these free-market economies, and that this was all entirely predicted by the revisionist theorists (Allais & Nathan, 2014), and observed by the World Bank (2019). Thus, it is surprising that scholars and strategic stakeholders in education and training are surprised and worried that TVET colleges have implementation challenges. The rush to label this “implementation problems” might be a diversion that seeks technical solutions for problems rooted in the political economy. The White Paper (DHET, 2013) shows how the naive optimist (human capital) position was prevalent regarding the implementation of occupational qualifications—to simply believe that a successful implementation was more likely in all public TVET colleges regardless of the apartheid legacies, the market economies, times of uncertainties, etcetera. Thus, taking the colleges’ accounts at their word, in some cases, it appears that the experiential route of WIL is failing despite the best efforts of the college, DHET, and QCTO, and not because of it. WIL is a social relation that is difficult to achieve in disadvantaged and less privileged colleges—not a technical one. It requires epistemological ruptures such as bridging and bonding capital and focusing on creating conditions necessary for WIL.

This article is not in dispute of the fact that there are TVET institutions (especially those located in areas where industries are well developed) that have developed partnerships with industries in their localities to place learners in different workplaces, successfully implementing occupational qualifications to the satisfaction of DHET and the QCTO. The case of the Gauteng Province where some public TVET colleges have established learner placement offices at their head offices to source work placement, and developed partnerships with their local industries where they place their learners (Makole et al., 2023) is a good example. The QCTO’s efforts of deliberately developing qualifications that can be completed through simulation instead of WIL are acknowledged. This article is aware of the government’s efforts to try and fulfil a plethora of competing priorities in trying to address the past inequalities and injustices, and that this may take a long time because it has limited resources that need to be shared amongst many beneficiaries. The article is aware of the huge resource-deficiency scar left by the apartheid political economy system, the unfavourable micro and macro environment, more socioeconomic demands against a shrinking economy, economic mismanagement, etcetera, all of which presents a mammoth task for the government to address. The article acknowledges the good intentions of the policy and directive on the introduction of occupational qualifications. The purpose of the article is to demonstrate how the policy and directive are disconnected from the ground realities—that even if there are qualifications that can be completed by simulations, some campuses in previously disadvantaged areas do not have functional simulation rooms. It is naive optimism to think that there can be a seamless transition or migration from legacy qualifications to occupational qualifications in TVET colleges located in former Bantustan areas given the apartheid deficiency legacies—unlike in areas such as Cape Town, Johannesburg, Durban, Port Elizabeth, where apartheid policies allowed industrial establishment and growth. It is imperative that the country address the challenges inherited from the apartheid political economy, and which are still embedded in its political education economy, for a successful implementation of occupational qualifications. This article proffers possible solutions to the

disturbing challenges attempting to demonstrate how such solutions might address the technical challenges identified in the findings section.

Recommendations and conclusion

This article recommends a two-pronged approach to addressing the problems that meet the introduction of occupational qualifications in South Africa: the developmental and implemental approaches. Firstly, there should be a strong focus on small, medium and micro enterprise (SMME) partnerships where funding initiatives should focus on supporting the establishment and growth of such SMMEs in the small towns and settlements located in former Bantustan areas. The funding can be coupled with economic policies that are pro-establishment and growth of these SMMEs—policies that reverse the discriminatory legacies of the apartheid system. This approach ensures sustainable outcomes, economic growth, and the development of industry-driven TVET occupational qualifications as the DHET, QCTO, TVET colleges, and the SMMEs develop qualifications that respond to the local labour markets' needs and employers' needs, building partnerships that create WIL placements. This could address the problem of choosing relevant qualifications identified in the findings section. The government could maximise the funding utilisation by directing resources towards engaging and supporting SMMEs, industry stakeholders, and TVET colleges in these smaller towns and settlements. Targeted funding should improve infrastructure, update curricula, and procure modern training equipment while supporting the professional development of instructors. This approach can also help to address the lack of resources for occupational qualifications implementation.

Secondly, the QCTO should consider different occupational qualifications implementation frameworks and standards for colleges located in severely disadvantaged areas and those located in industrialised areas, rather than a one-size-fits-all implementation approach. There should be different WIL models for rural and urban TVET colleges. The specific WIL models for rural areas could be mobile workshops and virtual simulations, where feasible, and this could help address the placement challenges.

The article also recommends that lecturers and managers of public TVET colleges in South Africa establish professional learning communities as part of staff development processes, and programmes to improve quality of technical curricular by sharing knowledge, skills, and best practices in their pedagogical approaches with international professional colleagues and experts. Creating these partnerships needs the TVET colleges to empower strategic managers with relationship building skills that can influence industries to partner with them and open up placement opportunities for graduates. Such an approach could help address the shortage of occupational qualifications lecturers. Besides all the given recommendations, the QCTO and TVET sector could also tap into some occupational qualifications success stories such as that of the Gauteng colleges. Such success stories could be used as lessons that offer guidance in the implementation of occupational qualifications. Lastly, the DHET and QCTO should allocate each college a point-person to offer professional guidance and support in the choice and implementation of occupational qualifications.

This article indicated that identifying relevant occupational qualifications, a shortage of placements for WIL, a lack of resources, and lack of qualified lecturers were the main challenges encountered by some TVET colleges, especially those located in the former Bantustan areas of South Africa. These findings were supported by other studies that also indicated that TVET colleges located in formerly discriminated and marginalised areas endured these kinds of challenges. Guided by the dilemmatic spaces theory, and applying a qualitative case study of two public TVET colleges in the former Bantustan areas, this study concluded that there were underlying problems rooted in South Africa's political economy of education. The article then suggested solutions to the identified challenges. It is believed that with proper implementation, these recommendations would bear fruit because this researcher believes that there is a need to move from the status quo and adopt robust approaches. Developing occupational qualifications must involve understanding the relationship between the political economy of education, local communities, and the TVET College. This endeavour demands a questioning and contrarian mind-set that challenges the conventional wisdom about the root causes of the challenges that militate against curriculum change. It needs a festival of ideas that tolerates the diversity of views and approaches becoming a crucible for new solutions and thought leadership. It needs mind-sets that nuance naive optimism, shifting from simply expecting positive outcomes to acknowledging potential difficulties—balancing optimism with realism. Single, unsophisticated, and unbalanced narratives are not good for resolving challenges bedevilling the introduction of occupational qualifications. We can annex these challenges by engaging in informed and innovative approaches enabled by vibrant, ethical, critical, and professional debates that enrich the discourse around the challenges that militate against the introduction of occupational challenges. The idea of remaining stagnant, poised in the status quo, is at best, naive.

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