Elevating the Status of Technical and Vocational Education and Training in Saudi Arabia: The Need for Enhancing Stakeholder Engagement and Student Motivation

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Introduction

In 2018, the Saudi Ministry of Education disclosed a new initiative for technical and vocational education and training (TVET) called Maher, meaning “skilled” in Arabic. This initiative targets select high schools across the country and aims to train students in technical skills that will help prepare them for the labor market as well as to increase the proportion of high school graduates who enroll in the postsecondary TVET track. This development corresponds with the ongoing global trend of TVET expansion, which reflects shifting patterns of youth employment. In Saudi Arabia, 23.3% of high school graduates proceeded to TVET institutes in 2018, and the number has risen significantly from just two years before, when fewer than 10% chose this track.

However, despite the expansion, the status of TVET in Saudi Arabia remains peripheral and ambiguous, as it does in many other parts of the world, with students, parents, and the community remaining insufficiently aware of the merit of TVET, for individuals and the economy. While the TVET track is available for high school students, very few enroll in this track, and high school graduates who choose TVET often do so as a last resort, only after they find themselves with few other choices. In other words, TVET is seen as a “residual category” in education: a pathway for those who have failed to take up better options such as obtaining enrollment at a public university or studying at a private university. Surveys show that the vast majority of Saudis aspire to study at universities rather than at a TVET institute, despite restrictions on access to universities partially attributable to an attempt to divert more students to postsecondary TVET.

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(1) Education is one of the key areas where adjustments in practice have been discussed and implemented to minimize the health risk brought about by the current Covid-19 pandemic. The author believes that the policy recommendations put forward by this report are worth incorporating to the further consideration of education policy under the pandemic.


As a result, despite their potential economic benefits, efforts to empower this sector are complicated by an entrenched low status. TVET institutes do not meet desired performance standards and TVET students lack motivation. Without elevating the status of TVET in Saudi society, neither an attempt to increase the number of postsecondary TVET students nor early-stage TVET initiatives such as Maher are likely to bring about their intended outcomes of lowering unemployment and increasing Saudization – policy challenges that are likely to become even more impending in the post-pandemic Saudi economy.

This report suggests two approaches to elevate the status of TVET in Saudi Arabia. First, to attract students both at the high school and postsecondary levels, TVET must be seen as a useful field of education that provides a pathway to employment. To bring about this transition, the quality of the TVET curricula must improve. In particular, the curriculum must better align with industry needs, which requires deeper stakeholder engagement. Second, to enhance the performance of TVET students, effective strategies to improve student motivation must be developed. Such strategies include the deployment of diverse performance indicators, with which students can recognize a wider range of their strengths, and career guidance programs that enable them to identify the relevance of their strengths to opportunities in the labor market. The report will advance policy recommendations based on these arguments.

**Improving the Quality of TVET through Stakeholder Engagement**

To attract students, TVET must be seen as a useful field of education that provides a pathway to employment. However, it is important to note that, apart from countries such as Germany and Austria, where employers have been directly and deeply involved in TVET since premodern times, the status of TVET has, in fact, been lower than that of university education globally. In liberal economies such as the United States and the United Kingdom, skills production has been largely left to the market instead of to public education: firms tend to train people on the job—or in the case of large companies, at their own training facilities—according to the requirements they set for employees.(7) Knowledge and skills taught in school are not always directly relevant to market

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needs: some educators downplay the role of education in preparing young people for employment in the belief that the virtue of education lies in its detachment from the world of work.\(^{(8)}\)

University education has conventionally functioned for employers as a *signal* for students’ potential professional competence: the education sector may not produce the skills precisely required in the labor market, but employers can employ those with good academic qualifications and grades assuming that they are competitive and will also do well in business. In such a system, TVET often signals students’ lower learning capacity to employers, as having studied at a TVET institute implies that the job-seeker had not been qualified for university education. Thus, in many cases, only lower-paid technical jobs are offered to TVET graduates.

Nevertheless, in recent years TVET has been attracting greater attention from policymakers globally even in liberal economies. With increased economic competition, policymakers have begun to push for more job-ready graduates and look to educational institutions to accomplish. They expect that enhanced TVET can contribute to their competitiveness by distinguishing themselves as providing added-value production in a period when production using unskilled labor at a lower cost has been moving to Asia. Today, investing in a relevant and updated TVET curriculum and standardizing quality assurance are seen as important means to give local technical workforces a competitive edge. Embedded in the global economy, Saudi Arabia cannot be an exception to such a shift if it is to successfully diversify the economy away from oil: it needs to transform its TVET sector from one that sends a negative signal to employers to one that offers qualifications for the labor market.

However, developing TVET that responds to market needs is easier said than done. Even with ambitious reform initiatives, it is not easy to change entrenched negative perceptions of employers—and by extension, students’ feeling that TVET credentials will carry negative connotations. Employers usually have limited insight into what educational qualifications represent, and therefore they have little trust in the applicability of students’ knowledge to their business requirements. Currently, Saudi Arabia has adopted a myriad of accreditation bodies

\(^{(8)}\) Such perceptions are partly rooted in the longstanding traditions in European countries and were transported to the developing world through international organizations between the 1960s and the 1980s (OECD, *Post-Secondary Vocational Education and Training: Pathways and Partnerships* [Paris: OECD Publishing, 2012]).
and several international curricula for TVET, but these qualifications and curricula must be seen by employers as relevant to their needs. This requires high levels of collaboration between the private sector and the bodies responsible for TVET.

In this regard, it is worth referring to the Norwegian TVET model. Although it is less restrictive than the German or Austrian models, where the link between training and employment is strong, Norwegian TVET maintains a high relevance to local industries through involving a wide range of economic stakeholders in the process of developing, implementing, and reforming the curricula across all institutes and not only specialized ones. The hybrid model also ensures that students learn skills both within the classroom and on the job, which allows them to adapt more readily to the demands of knowledge-based sectors. Within the classroom, students spend time learning the theoretical foundations of their specialization, and through institutionalized collaborations with local firms, they are given the opportunity to observe and practice what they have learned in the classroom.

In this model, industry representatives who are involved in the development of TVET qualifications cultivate in their curricula both relevant industry-specific skills and generic skills. The model offers some experiences that may be useful for TVET reform in Saudi Arabia, especially in relation to how the government organizations that regulate TVET can bring employers on board as stakeholders to develop TVET curricula and establish qualification standards that adequately respond to local economic needs. Based on such experiences, a model that addresses challenges in its own local context can be constructed.

(9) The Saudi National Qualification Framework (SAQF), which is promoted by the Education and Training Evaluation Committee (ETEC), aims to “set national levels for qualifications to enable classification and placement” and “articulate a common language to ensure consistency and accuracy” among such different accreditation and qualification standards in the Kingdom (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, Global Inventory of Regional and National Qualifications Frameworks 2017 [2017], https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/2222_en.pdf ). The introduction of this type of framework aims to overcome the current ad-hoc experiences with the content and quality of qualifications.


Motivating Students through Enabling Them to Recognize Their Strengths for the Labor Market

Another key challenge for Saudi TVET is enhancing its performance through improving the students’ motivation. Postsecondary TVET students are often under-motivated as they have been ushered into this pathway only because of low grades in high school. The reasons for their poor performance are many: education research indicates that students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds tend to be overrepresented in the lower school tracks. (13) Low performance can quickly lead to a vicious cycle: students are labeled as “low achievers,” lose the motivation to learn, and continue to underperform.

While conventional written assessments provided in high school often make under-motivated students aware of their weaknesses, such assessments do not provide a full reflection of their abilities. If assessments could also enable them to find their strengths in regard to TVET and identify qualifications that indicate their unrealized abilities, they are more likely to be motivated to invest in developing their skills. In other words, performance indicators can be diversified in order to overcome the negative consequence of an approach that tends to identify a ‘winners and losers’ attitude. In this sense, the introduction of TVET modules in high school that can be taken regardless of the track (i.e., science or literature) under the current secondary Muqarrarat system, is itself considered conducive to recruiting greater numbers of motivated students. (14)

It should be emphasized that if only limited numbers of assessment indicators are used in this new training setting, students will still fail to fully reach their potential. Motivate students and further engage them throughout training will require assessment methods that capture diverse abilities. Moreover, the use of limited numbers of performance indicators in TVET will also incur the risk of overtraining beyond the levels sufficient for, and relevant to, the application of taught skills to real-life contexts just for the sake of competition.

(13) Becky Francis, Becky Taylor, and Antonina Tereshchenko, Reassessing “Ability” Grouping: Improving Practice for Equity and Attainment (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020).
Thus, it will be desirable that TVET modules do not solely rely on competency-based training (CBT), which trains students in specific competencies that correspond with certain independent skills. CBT should be practiced along with different assessment methods, such as multivariable assessments, in which students demonstrate different skills in combination to complete a project: skills can be chosen in accordance with students’ strengths and the objective of the project and the assessment made in a more holistic manner; this will alleviate excessive pressures on students to excel in all the skills being taught. Instructors are also advised to use both formative and summative assessments in grading, which help calibrate both students’ learning process and the final learning outcomes.

Furthermore, some experts highlight ways in which graded assessments themselves are a double-edged sword: while they reward high achievers, they can also have a negative impact on the way many students perform. One way to overcome this uneven approach is to add noncomparative measurements of individual learning. For instance, when Norway did not use grades it evaluated what each student achieved in relation to a previous period. While a concern over the subjectivity of teachers caused concern, the approach provides more flexibility for improving students’ performance in all ability levels through focusing on what they can do rather than what they cannot do. This would give students more confidence in their own abilities.

Another way to stimulate students’ motivation is to create opportunities for them to participate and express their voices in school, both within the classroom and outside it. Educators have traditionally relied on performance indicators that are externally given to students to encourage them to work hard. However, recent studies also show positive results in educational environments

(15) Through such project-based assessment, students will also learn to use the uncodified, tacit knowledge that is necessary for applying skills to real-life contexts (Ann Kelly, “Articulating Tacit Knowledge through Analyses of Recordings: Implications for Competency Assessment in the Vocational Education and Training Sector,” in Educational Assessment in the 21st Century, ed. Claire Wyatt-Smith and J. Joy Cumming [London: Springer, 2009]).
that stimulate students’ *intrinsic* motivation.\(^{(19)}\) When students feel they are contributing to the school community and that their voices are heard, their overall motivation in school is likely to rise.

Educational psychologists have shown that motivation also emerges from the ability to envision and set future goals.\(^{(20)}\) Students are more likely to be motivated when they learn how the current schooling process contributes to their desired future trajectories. Indeed, the current low levels of motivation of TVET students are also influenced by the overall lack of knowledge about how TVET can contribute to their future career: TVET classrooms *can* be spaces in which students’ potential for professional development is harnessed through envisioning and implementing solutions to problems. In this respect, early-age career education can be useful: by providing students with opportunities to learn about careers existing in society and encouraging them to envision their future career possibilities, they will be able to find the relevance of the need for schoolwork to their future success. Ideally, qualified counselors will assist students in finding connections between modules they take as part of curricula and upcoming opportunities in postsecondary education and the labor market.

**Conclusion and Policy Recommendations**

The success of the ongoing Saudi TVET reform hinges on an elevation of the status of TVET from one in which its students are stigmatized in the labor market and employers distrust its qualifications to one that widely attracts students for its utility for job attainment, such that employers find its graduates highly employable and ready to make contributions to productive activities. This report has discussed how improving the quality of TVET through stakeholder engagement and increasing student motivation through enabling students to find their diverse abilities will be effective for such a paradigm shift to take place. As the Saudi education and economy adjust practices following the early stage of the global Covid-19 pandemic, it is advisable that these elements are considered.

Based on these discussions, this report makes the following two policy recommendations.


**Recommendation 1: Developing Education-Industry Collaboration to Improve the Quality of TVET**

The Saudi TVET sector is in need of a mechanism to incorporate industry feedback into the curriculum. Currently, many TVET institutes adopt on-the-job training schemes through partnerships with firms, but skills requirements in the labor market should also be fully reflected in their curricula. One way to learn from the Norwegian model, which excels in this field, is to establish an independent, executive national-level TVET advisory board that includes a wide range of stakeholders. Such a board could be operated by the TVET regulatory bodies in cooperation with the TVTC, and include representatives from the Ministry of Education, the Human Resources Development Fund, and the Royal Commission for Jubail and Yanbu, and could include industry specialists from private firms in important and promising economic sectors and major state-owned enterprises that have global skills networks, such as Saudi Aramco and the SABIC. It could also host a research arm that conducts necessary studies, such as analyses of the current status and challenges of Saudi TVET, advantages and disadvantages of different TVET models worldwide, and projected future skills, in order to inform the board’s decision-making process.

**Recommendation 2: Deploying Diverse Performance Indicators and Career Guidance Programs**

The use of as many diverse performance indicators as possible is advisable in TVET at both the high school and postsecondary levels. Such diverse indicators can capture a greater range of strengths and abilities of students than the conventional assessments and can help increase their motivation. Along with the mastering of each specific skill, students should be given opportunities to combine and apply skills of their own choice through project-based assessments. Moreover, if possible, a consultative, noncomparative evaluation of their individual learning should also be added to the teacher-student interaction. The optimal mix of such diverse indicators and assessment methods could also be an agenda of the TVET advisory board and its research arm, as mentioned in Recommendation 1. Career guidance programs should also be available to high school students, providing counselors to assist students to envision a future career plan and understand the relevance of their study and training to that plan. The proposed advisory
board can develop the necessary resources and conduct training programs for school counselors through cooperation with the Ministry of Education.
**About the Author**

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