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Factors Making Students to Shun Away from Vocational Training Programmes Despite Being Offered Cdf Bursary: A Case Study of Kasenengwa and Chipangali Constituencies

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Abstract- This study investigates the factors that discourage students from enrolling in vocational training programmes in rural Zambia, even when financial support is available through the Constituency Development Fund (CDF) bursary scheme. Focusing on Kasenengwa and Chipangali Constituencies, the research aimed to assess youth awareness of vocational training, identify barriers to participation despite the bursary, and examine prevailing attitudes towards vocational skill acquisition. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the study collected data from 40 youths (20 male, 20 female) using questionnaires and interviews. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative insights provided contextual depth. The findings reveal a significant paradox: while 50% of youths are aware of vocational training opportunities, participation remains low due to a confluence of negative perceptions and structural barriers. Key factors identified include limited perceived career growth and promotion opportunities (80%), a lack of new and modern specializations (85%), and societal and familial attitudes that devalue vocational work in favor of academic "white-collar" professions. Furthermore, 70% of respondents held a negative attitude towards vocational training, largely influenced by the legacy of colonial-era associations with manual labor and contemporary concerns over job security and low wages. The study concludes that the CDF bursary alone is insufficient to overcome deep-seated socio-cultural biases and structural shortcomings within the vocational education and training (VET) sector. To enhance enrolment, the research recommends a multi-pronged strategy: integrating career guidance and counselling in training institutions to reshape perceptions; revitalising and diversifying VET curricula to align with labor market demands; and implementing policy interventions to improve the remuneration and status of vocational professions. These measures are essential to harness the potential of VET for youth empowerment and national development.

Keywords- Vocational training, Youth participation, CDF bursary.

I. Introduction

Overview

Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) is globally recognized as a critical driver for economic diversification, poverty reduction, and youth empowerment (UNESCO, 2016). In Zambia, despite governmental interventions like the Constituency Development Fund (CDF) bursary aimed at enhancing access to TVET, enrolment and participation rates, particularly among the youth in rural constituencies, remain

suboptimal. This study investigates the persistent phenomenon of youth shunning vocational training programmes even when financial barriers are ostensibly removed. Focusing on Kasenengwa and Chipangali constituencies, the research seeks to unravel the complex interplay of awareness, socio-cultural attitudes, and institutional factors that influence youth participation. Understanding these dynamics is essential for designing more effective, attractive, and impactful TVET policies that align with both national development goals and youth aspirations (World Bank, 2019).

Background of the Study

The foundational role of education in societal development is unequivocal; it is the primary mechanism for harnessing human potential to fulfill moral, intellectual, and material needs (World Bank, 2018). Within this broad mandate, Vocational and Technical Education is specifically pivotal as it lays the foundation for small and medium-scale enterprises, acting as a launchpad for industrialisation and economic resilience (FRN, 2004). Alam (2008) posits that technical and vocational skills are the prime movers of a nation's socio-economic development, making investment in such human capital a critical future-oriented strategy. In Zambia, while general education enrolment has improved, TVET continues to face significant challenges, including stark gender disparities and low societal valuation (MOGE, 2017).

The historical context of TVET in Africa is profoundly shaped by its colonial origins, where educational systems were designed to serve colonial economic interests. Vocational training was primarily instituted to create a subordinate class of African manual laborers for mines, plantations, and railways, while academic education was largely reserved for Europeans (Hitti & O'Gorman, 2004). This institutionalized a powerful and enduring social hierarchy, inextricably linking manual trades with low prestige and limited upward mobility in the minds of African populations.

This deep-seated colonial legacy fostered a pervasive negative attitude towards vocational work, which has been culturally reproduced across generations. The perception of TVET as a pathway for the academically less-endowed, rather than a positive choice for skilled entrepreneurship, remains stubbornly prevalent (Bogonko, 1992). Consequently, youth and their families are often systematically steered towards academic secondary and university pathways, perceived as the sole routes to social status, secure white-collar employment, and respectable remuneration.

Compounding these socio-cultural barriers are chronic systemic deficiencies within TVET institutions themselves. The effectiveness of practical skills training is critically dependent on the availability of physical resources, including functional workshops, modern tools, and consumable materials (Berner, Lasaga, & Carrels, 1993). Widespread underfunding has led to a scarcity of such infrastructure, directly impairing the quality of hands-on learning and limiting the range and relevance of skills that can be effectively taught.

This resource scarcity undermines not only immediate skill acquisition but also the long-term sustainability and credibility of TVET programmes (Poplin, 1992). When trainees graduate without adequate practical competence due to poorly equipped training centers, it reinforces negative public perceptions and erodes employer

confidence in vocational qualifications. This creates a vicious cycle where low perceived quality justifies further underinvestment and deters enrolment from capable students.

The quality of instruction is another pivotal determinant often compromised within strained TVET systems. Effective pedagogical delivery of technical content requires instructors who are both master craftsmen and skilled educators. Burnett (1995) emphasises that continuous professional training for tutors is a fundamental prerequisite for pedagogical efficiency, enabling them to bridge the gap between theory and practice effectively in the workshop or classroom.

Without structured, ongoing in-service training, TVET instructors risk employing outdated methodologies and failing to integrate advancements in technology and industry practices (Cash, 1993; Pigors & Myers, 1984). As trades evolve, tutor skills must be regularly updated to ensure training remains relevant to the contemporary labour market. The absence of this professional development directly diminishes student outcomes, graduate employability, and the overall standing of the institution.

Furthermore, institutional leadership plays a crucial role in navigating these challenges. Effective management is essential for fostering a positive learning culture, advocating for resources, and supporting teaching staff. Knootz and Weihrich (1998) posit that experienced managers enhance performance through refined leadership styles. However, other research suggests managerial effectiveness may plateau, indicating a need for ongoing leadership innovation to address persistent systemic issues (Fernandez et al., 1995).

In response to these multifaceted barriers, the Zambian government's Constituency Development Fund (CDF) bursary scheme represents a significant policy intervention aimed at dismantling the financial obstacle to TVET access. By covering tuition and associated costs, the policy directly tackles one of the most cited impediments to enrolment, particularly for low-income youth in rural constituencies like Kasenengwa and Chipangali.

However, as scholars note, access financed by bursaries is a necessary but insufficient condition for success (Kelly, 1999; Mwanakatwe, 1973). If TVET programmes are perceived as low-quality, socially stigmatised, or misaligned with real economic opportunities, even fully-funded placements may be rejected. The bursary, therefore, tests a critical hypothesis: whether removing cost can overcome deeper, more entrenched socio-cultural and qualitative deterrents to participation.

The persistent gap between the availability of these funded opportunities and low youth enrolment underscores a critical research and policy problem. It signals that the factors discouraging participation are complex and extend beyond simple affordability. This study situates itself within this context, aiming to dissect the specific interplay of awareness, perception, quality, and social value that deters youth engagement, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of human capital development and educational equity in sub-Saharan Africa.

Statement of the Problem

Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) programmes in Kasenengwa and Chipangali constituencies have been operational for a considerable period, intended to equip youth with market-relevant skills. Despite the provision of a full government bursary through the Constituency Development Fund (CDF) aimed at eliminating cost barriers, there remains a conspicuous reluctance among the youth to enroll in these programmes. This paradox suggests that financial accessibility, while necessary, is not a sufficient condition for youth participation in TVET. Preliminary observations indicate that enrolment figures remain disproportionately low compared to the number of eligible youth, leading to underutilised training capacity and a missed opportunity for local skills development and poverty alleviation.

The persistence of this participation gap points to deeper, systemic issues that have not been adequately investigated within these specific rural contexts. While national policies promote TVET as a vehicle for employment and entrepreneurship, localised factors—including societal perceptions, institutional quality, and individual aspirations—may profoundly influence decision-making. The lack of empirical data on why youth shun these funded opportunities creates a significant knowledge gap for policymakers and educational planners. Without understanding the specific deterrents, interventions risk being misdirected and ineffective, perpetuating cycles of youth unemployment and underdevelopment.

Furthermore, the negative stigma historically attached to vocational work continues to cast a long shadow over TVET's appeal (Ijaiya, 1998). In many communities, vocational careers are perceived as inferior to white-collar professions, affecting both parental guidance and youth ambition. This socio-cultural dimension, compounded by potential concerns over job security, limited career progression, and the perceived quality of training, forms a complex barrier that financial subsidies alone cannot dismantle. The problem is thus multifaceted, intertwining economic, social, and institutional threads.

Therefore, this study addresses a critical lacuna by systematically investigating the factors that make students shun vocational training programmes despite the availability of the CDF bursary in Kasenengwa and Chipangali. It moves beyond the assumption of financial constraint as the primary barrier to explore the attitudinal, informational, and structural impediments that hinder participation. Unravelling this puzzle is essential for designing targeted, context-sensitive strategies that can enhance the attractiveness, relevance, and ultimate effectiveness of TVET as a tool for youth empowerment and community development in rural Zambia.

Purpose of the Study

The overarching purpose of this study is to investigate and analyse the key factors that contribute to the low participation of youth in vocational training programmes within Kasenengwa and Chipangali constituencies, despite the financial incentive provided by the Constituency Development Fund (CDF) bursary. It aims to move beyond a superficial understanding of enrolment gaps by delving into the nuanced interplay of youth awareness, prevailing societal and personal attitudes, and perceived institutional challenges. By generating empirical evidence on these deterrents, the study seeks to

provide a robust foundation for stakeholders—including government agencies, educational institutions, and community leaders—to formulate more effective, multi-dimensional interventions. Ultimately, the research intends to contribute to policy and practice that can enhance TVET's appeal and efficacy, thereby aligning educational opportunities with national goals for skills development and youth employment.

Specific Objectives

To assess the level of awareness among youth in Kasenengwa and Chipangali constituencies regarding available vocational skills training programmes.
To identify and analyse the factors that impede youth participation in vocational skills training despite the availability of the CDF bursary.
To examine the prevailing attitudes of youth towards vocational skill acquisition and training in the studied constituencies.

Research Questions

What is the level of awareness among youth in Kasenengwa and Chipangali constituencies concerning existing vocational skills training programmes?
What are the key factors that hinder youth from participating in vocational skills training programmes, even with the offer of a CDF bursary?
What are the prevailing attitudes held by youth towards acquiring vocational skills in Kasenengwa and Chipangali constituencies?

Significance of the Study

This study holds considerable significance for multiple stakeholders engaged in education policy and youth development. Primarily, for policymakers within the Zambian Ministry of Education and local government, the findings will provide critical, evidence-based insights into the non-financial barriers to TVET uptake. This knowledge is essential for moving beyond generic bursary schemes to develop more holistic, attractive, and effective TVET policies that address deep-rooted societal perceptions, improve programme marketing, and enhance institutional quality. By pinpointing specific deterrents—such as negative attitudes, lack of career guidance, or concerns over job prospects—the study can inform the redesign of TVET advocacy campaigns and curriculum development to better resonate with youth aspirations and market realities.

Furthermore, the study is significant for TVET institutions and administrators in Kasenengwa, Chipangali, and similar rural settings. The results will offer a diagnostic tool for self-assessment, highlighting areas for institutional improvement, such as community engagement, career counselling services, and partnerships with industry to improve graduate employability. For the academic community, this research contributes to the growing body of literature on TVET in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly focusing on the often-overlooked dimension of demand-side constraints in rural contexts. Finally, for the youth themselves, this study amplifies their voice, articulating their perspectives and concerns, which can lead to the creation of more relevant and empowering educational pathways that foster skills acquisition, self-employment, and sustainable community development.

Scope of the Study

This study is geographically delimited to Kasenengwa and Chipangali constituencies in Zambia. The focus population comprises youth within these constituencies who are eligible for vocational training programmes, including those who have chosen to participate and, critically, those who have not despite the CDF bursary offer. Thematically, the investigation is bounded by three core areas: the awareness levels of youth regarding TVET opportunities, the specific factors discouraging participation, and the spectrum of attitudes towards vocational skill acquisition. While acknowledging broader national policies and global TVET discourses, the analysis will be grounded in the local socio-economic and cultural context of these two constituencies to ensure depth and relevance. The study does not undertake a comparative analysis with urban constituencies or a longitudinal assessment of programme outcomes.

Limitations of the Study

A primary limitation of this study is its geographical focus on only two constituencies, Kasenengwa and Chipangali. While this allows for in-depth contextual analysis, the findings may not be fully generalizable to all rural or urban settings in Zambia, where socio-economic conditions, cultural norms, and institutional landscapes may differ. The reliance on self-reported data from youth respondents through questionnaires and interviews introduces the potential for social desirability bias, where participants might provide answers they perceive as more socially acceptable rather than their genuine beliefs or circumstances. This could affect the accuracy of data regarding sensitive topics like perceived social stigma or personal academic shortcomings.

Additionally, the study's cross-sectional design provides a snapshot of the situation at a specific point in time, limiting the ability to observe changes in attitudes or behaviors over time or to establish definitive causal relationships between identified factors and participation decisions. Resource constraints also limited the sample size and the depth of engagement with other potential stakeholders, such as parents, traditional leaders, and employers, whose perspectives would have added valuable triangulation to the youth-centric data. Despite these limitations, the study employs methodological rigor through mixed methods to enhance validity and offers significant insights for the specified contexts.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in Ludwig von Bertalanffy's General Systems Theory, specifically its application through the input-output model within organisational contexts (Bertalanffy, 1974). Systems Theory posits that an organisation is an open system in constant interaction with its environment, consisting of inputs, transformation processes, and outputs (Koontz & Weihrich, 1988). In this framework, the vocational training centre is conceptualised as the core organisational system. The inputs include the students (youth), financial resources (CDF bursary), physical infrastructure, teaching staff, and the prevailing socio-cultural attitudes imported from the environment.

The transformation process encompasses all pedagogical, administrative, and social interactions within the institution. This includes curriculum delivery, quality of

instruction, managerial leadership, guidance counselling, and the internal culture that either challenges or reinforces external attitudes towards TVET. The theory suggests that the quality and nature of these internal processes critically determine system effectiveness. As Koontz and Weihrich (1988) note, an organisation's management style—whether open and adaptive or closed and bureaucratic—directly impacts its ability to process inputs successfully.

The desired output of this system is the acquisition of market-relevant vocational skills and positive attitudes among graduates, leading to employability or entrepreneurship. The Systems Theory lens helps explain low participation as a systemic failure. If negative societal attitudes (a cultural input) are not actively transformed within the institution, or if institutional processes (e.g., poor management, outdated training) are weak, the system will fail to produce the desired output of skilled, motivated youth. The CDF bursary, while a crucial financial input, is merely one component; its potential is nullified if other systemic elements are misaligned or dysfunctional.

Therefore, this framework guides the investigation beyond isolated factors. It prompts an examination of how inputs like youth awareness and attitudes interact with the institutional processes at training centres, and how this interplay ultimately influences the output decision of enrolment or non-participation. It underscores that solving the participation puzzle requires a holistic, systemic intervention that addresses all interconnected components, rather than focusing on financial inputs alone.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study visualises the relationship between the independent variables (factors influencing participation), the intervening variable, and the dependent variable (youth participation in TVET). The independent variables are categorised into three key domains derived from the literature and research objectives. Firstly, Awareness and Information Factors encompass the youth's knowledge of available TVET programmes, the clarity of information on the CDF bursary, and the effectiveness of career guidance received. This domain is foundational, as participation is precluded by a lack of awareness (Ngogo, 2014).

Secondly, Socio-Cultural and Attitudinal Factors constitute a critical domain. This includes perceived social stigma towards manual trades (Hitti & O'Gorman, 2004), parental and peer influence, personal aspirations for white-collar employment, and the individual's intrinsic valuation of vocational skills. Ismail (2010) and Ijaiya (1998) strongly affirm that negative attitudes are a primary deterrent. Thirdly, Institutional and Perceptual Factors relate to the youth's perception of TVET quality and outcomes. This involves views on the adequacy of training facilities (Berner et al., 1993), instructor competence (Burnett, 1995), perceived job security, limited career progression, and the relevance of skills to the local labour market.

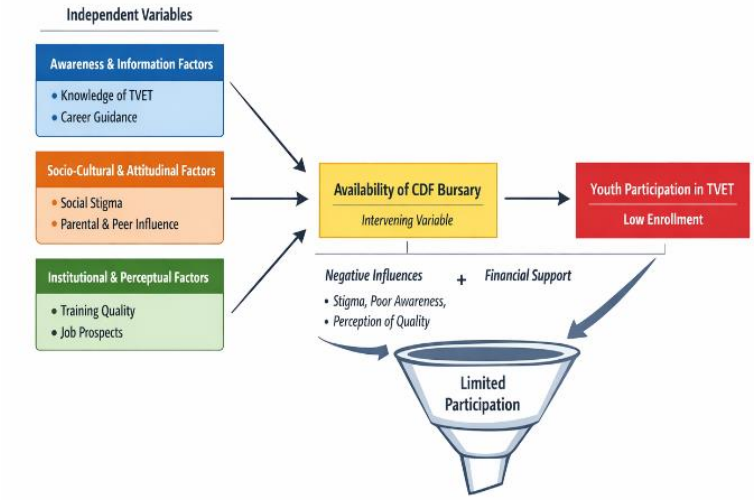

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

These independent variables do not operate in isolation but are mediated by the Availability of the CDF Bursary, which serves as the key intervening variable. The bursary is designed to neutralise financial barriers, theoretically enabling participation. The central research problem is that despite this intervention, the dependent variable—Youth Participation in Vocational Training Programmes—remains low. The conceptual model posits that the strength of the negative independent factors (e.g., strong stigma, poor awareness, and negative perceptions of quality) can overwhelm the positive effect of the bursary, leading to non-participation. The framework thus provides a structured lens to analyse how non-financial factors effectively "filter out" the incentive provided by the bursary, preventing its translation into increased enrolment.

Operational Definitions of Terms

Youth: For this study, operationalised as individuals aged between 17 and 35 years residing in Kasenengwa or Chipangali constituencies, aligning with common demographic definitions used in Zambian policy contexts.

Vocational Training Programme: Refers to any formal or non-formal, accredited skills-based training course (e.g., carpentry, tailoring, mechanics, computing) offered by government or recognised private institutions within or accessible to the study constituencies.

CDF Bursary: The full or partial financial grant provided by the Zambian government through the Constituency Development Fund to cover tuition and related costs for eligible students enrolling in approved vocational training programmes.

Shun Away/Avoidance: The act of an eligible youth not enrolling in an available vocational training programme despite awareness of the opportunity and the CDF bursary.

Awareness: The state of being informed or knowledgeable about the existence, entry requirements, and benefits of specific vocational training programmes and the CDF bursary scheme.
Attitude: The learned predisposition to respond consistently in a favourable or unfavourable manner towards vocational skill acquisition, measured through expressed beliefs, feelings, and behavioural intentions.
Participation: The act of formally enrolling and actively attending a vocational training programme.
Societal Factor: The influence of community norms, values, and collective perceptions that elevate academic education over vocational training, affecting individual choice.
Institutional Factor: Attributes of the training provider that influence appeal, including perceived quality of infrastructure, trainer competency, curriculum relevance, and graduate success stories.
Skill Acquisition: The successful learning and demonstrated competency in performing the practical tasks associated with a specific vocational trade.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Youth Awareness of TVET Programmes

Awareness is the foundational precursor to participation in any educational programme. In the context of TVET, awareness encompasses not only the knowledge that such programmes exist but also an understanding of their structure, potential outcomes, and entry pathways (Watson, 2014). Effective awareness bridges the information gap between policy provision and potential beneficiaries, serving as the critical first step in the decision-making chain. Without robust awareness, even well-funded and designed interventions like the Constituency Development Fund (CDF) bursary fail to engage their target audience, as the opportunity remains invisible or misunderstood to those it intends to serve.

The channels through which awareness is disseminated are varied and carry different weights of influence. Formal channels include school career guidance, government advertisements, and institutional outreach. Research indicates that structured career education within secondary schools significantly shapes post-school aspirations and knowledge of alternatives to university (Hughes & Karp, 2004). However, in many rural African contexts, such as Kasenengwa and Chipangali, formal career guidance is often under-resourced or non-existent, leaving a vacuum that is filled by informal channels like peer networks, family opinions, and community perceptions (Makunja, 2016).

Informal channels, while powerful, can perpetuate misinformation or reinforce existing biases. The work of Bandura (1977) on social learning theory suggests that individuals learn and model behaviors based on observation. If community role models are predominantly in academic professions, youth are less likely to be aware of or value vocational pathways. This creates a cyclical problem where low visibility of successful

TVET graduates leads to low awareness, which in turn results in low enrolment, further limiting the number of visible success stories.

The role of mass media and digital platforms in raising awareness is growing but remains unevenly distributed. While urban youth may access information via radio, television, or the internet, rural constituencies often face digital divides and limited media penetration (Aker & Mbiti, 2010). Consequently, awareness campaigns that rely solely on national media may fail to reach the peripheries, rendering potential beneficiaries in areas like Kasenengwa and Chipangali uninformed about the CDF bursary and the TVET opportunities it supports.

The content of awareness messaging is equally critical. Messaging that merely announces the existence of a programme is insufficient. Effective communication must also address perceived value propositions. This involves clarifying the tangible benefits of TVET, such as specific employability skills, entrepreneurial potential, and realistic earning trajectories, to counter prevalent societal narratives that devalue technical careers (Oketch, 2007). Awareness must therefore be transformative, aiming not just to inform but also to positively influence perceptions.

Awareness is also intrinsically linked to the concept of 'knowledge mobilisation' in educational policy. Levin (2013) argues that for policies to be effective, knowledge must be co-constructed and meaningfully engaged with by end-users. Applying this to the CDF bursary, awareness-building should be a dialogic process involving community leaders, parents, and youth themselves, rather than a top-down dissemination of information. This participatory approach can enhance relevance and credibility, leading to deeper, more accurate awareness.

Furthermore, awareness intersects with self-efficacy beliefs. An individual may be aware of TVET but may not perceive themselves as capable of succeeding in that domain. According to Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), career choices are influenced by self-efficacy and outcome expectations (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994). Therefore, awareness initiatives must also include components that build confidence, such as taster courses, visits to workshops, or interactions with trainers, to help youth envision themselves as successful participants.

The timing of awareness interventions is paramount. Career decisions are often shaped during early adolescence. Introducing concepts of diverse career pathways, including TVET, at the primary and junior secondary levels can normalise these options before entrenched academic biases solidify (Mittendorff, Jochems, & Brok, 2008). Waiting until senior secondary or after completion may be too late, as aspirations have already been cemented towards university entrance, regardless of academic performance or economic practicality.

Gender plays a significant role in differentiated awareness. In many societies, awareness of certain vocational trades is gendered, with fields like automotive engineering or carpentry promoted to boys, and tailoring or cosmetology to girls (Chisamya et al., 2012). This gendered filtering of information limits the awareness of all available options for both sexes and reinforces occupational segregation. Targeted,

gender-sensitive awareness campaigns are therefore necessary to ensure all youth are informed of the full spectrum of opportunities.

Finally, the measurement of awareness itself is a complex undertaking. It is not a binary state of 'aware' or 'unaware' but exists on a continuum encompassing depth, accuracy, and source of knowledge (Ajzen, 1991). Studies often conflate having heard of a programme with a substantive understanding of its requirements and benefits. This review posits that shallow awareness—knowing a TVET centre exists—is inadequate; what is required for informed decision-making is comprehensive awareness that empowers potential students to evaluate TVET as a viable, attractive life course.

Awareness is further stratified by socioeconomic status. Youth from more affluent families, with greater access to diverse information sources and networks, often possess a more nuanced understanding of educational and career landscapes, including TVET (Bourdieu, 1986). In contrast, youth from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, who might benefit most from skills training, frequently have the most restricted access to reliable information, creating a paradox where the target demographic is least informed about the opportunities designed for their upliftment.

The credibility of the information source significantly impacts how awareness translates into consideration. Information received from trusted, local figures such as respected teachers, community elders, or successful local artisans carries more weight than impersonal government circulars (Rogers, 2003). Therefore, awareness campaigns must identify and empower these local 'opinion leaders' to act as authentic messengers, leveraging existing social capital to enhance the legitimacy and uptake of information about TVET programmes and bursaries.

Linguistic and cultural accessibility of information is a frequently overlooked barrier. Official awareness materials are often produced in English, the national language, which may not be the first language or the most comfortable medium of comprehension for all youth in rural constituencies (Brock-Utne, 2000). Information that is not communicated in locally dominant languages or that fails to resonate with cultural contexts risks being misunderstood or ignored, rendering even disseminated awareness ineffective.

The dynamic nature of TVET offerings also complicates awareness. Programmes, entry requirements, and bursary details can change annually. Static, one-time information campaigns quickly become obsolete. Sustained awareness requires mechanisms for continuous information updates, such as community noticeboards, regular school visits by TVET representatives, or accessible local offices where current information can be obtained, ensuring that youth and advisors are working with accurate and timely data (OECD, 2010).

Awareness is not merely cognitive but also affective. It involves not just knowing facts but also developing a 'feeling for' a potential future. Narratives and storytelling are powerful tools for affective awareness-building. Sharing compelling success stories of local TVET graduates—their journeys, challenges, and achievements—can make the

pathway feel more tangible, relatable, and emotionally resonant than a list of course descriptions or policy benefits (Bruner, 1991).

The concept of 'critical awareness' is essential. This moves beyond knowing about TVET to understanding its position within the broader political economy of education and work. It involves recognising the historical roots of vocational stigma and critically evaluating the real economic opportunities versus perceived limitations. Fostering this deeper, critical awareness can empower youth to make choices that defy negative social pressures, based on a clear-eyed assessment of their own interests and the market realities (Freire, 1970).

Awareness-building competes with a vast array of other informational inputs in a youth's life. The aspirational pull of global media, which often glorifies certain professional lifestyles, can drown out local messages about practical skills (Hoffner et al., 2006). Effective TVET awareness strategies must therefore be designed to cut through this noise, using engaging, modern formats and connecting skills to broader narratives of innovation, entrepreneurship, and national development to capture attention and imagination.

Finally, awareness must be linked to actionable next steps. Knowing about a programme is futile if the process to enroll is opaque or perceived as cumbersome. Clear awareness includes knowledge of the 'how-to': where and when to apply, what documentation is needed, who to contact for help, and what the bursary covers in detail. Simplifying and clearly communicating these procedural steps is a crucial, yet often neglected, component of transforming awareness into actual participation (Mintrom, 2015). Youth awareness of TVET is a multi-dimensional construct influenced by channel, content, source, timing, and socio-demographic factors. It exists on a spectrum from superficial recognition to deep, critical understanding. For the CDF bursary in Kasenengwa and Chipangali to be effective, a strategic, multi-faceted, and sustained awareness campaign is necessary—one that is participatory, culturally resonant, gender-sensitive, and provides both the inspiration and the practical roadmap for youth to see TVET as a viable and valuable future.

Factors Impeding Youth Participation in TVET

Even when awareness is established, a complex web of factors can deter youth from enrolling in TVET programmes. These impediments exist at multiple levels: societal, institutional, and individual. A primary and pervasive barrier is the deeply ingrained socio-cultural stigma attached to manual labour and vocational work. This stigma has historical roots in colonial education systems, which designed vocational training for Africans to fulfil subordinate economic roles, while reserving academic education for the colonial elite (Foster, 1965). This legacy has created a durable social hierarchy where white-collar employment is valorised.

This socio-cultural devaluation manifests in family and peer pressure. Parents, often aspiring for higher social status for their children, may actively discourage TVET enrolment, viewing it as a destination for academic underachievers (Bogonko, 1992). Peer influence compounds this, as youth social circles may ridicule vocational pursuits in favour of university ambitions, regardless of the labour market realities or individual

aptitude. This pressure makes the social cost of choosing TVET perceptibly high, acting as a powerful deterrent independent of a programme's actual quality or economic return.

At the institutional level, the perceived and actual quality of TVET provision is a critical factor. Many TVET institutions in sub-Saharan Africa suffer from chronic underfunding, resulting in obsolete equipment, inadequate workshops, and outdated curricula misaligned with modern industry standards (Oketch, 2007). When potential students and their families perceive training centres as poorly resourced, they logically infer that the skills acquired will be of low market value, thus negating the incentive to enrol even with a bursary covering fees.

Closely linked to infrastructure is the quality of instruction. TVET requires instructors who are both master practitioners and effective pedagogues. However, the sector often struggles with tutor shortages, inadequate pedagogical training, and a lack of industry currency among staff (Allais, 2012). The phenomenon of tutor burnout, characterised by emotional exhaustion and reduced personal accomplishment, further diminishes teaching effectiveness and the learning environment (Maslach & Leiter, 1997), making programmes less attractive to discerning youth.

The structure of the labour market and perceived economic returns fundamentally influence participation decisions. Human Capital Theory posits that individuals invest in education expecting future returns (Becker, 1964). If TVET is perceived to lead only to low-wage, insecure, or dead-end jobs with limited vertical mobility, the investment—even if tuition-free—is deemed unattractive. This perception is often reinforced by the visible underemployment of TVET graduates in informal, low-productivity sectors, creating a discouraging feedback loop.

Conversely, the perceived benefits of general academic education, particularly university degrees, are often inflated. The 'graduate premium'—the wage advantage of holding a degree—is a powerful motivator, despite high graduate unemployment rates in many African countries (McGrath, 2012). This creates an 'aspiration trap', where youth pursue academic qualifications with poor labour market prospects while shunning vocational pathways with stronger employment linkages, due to the overriding pursuit of social prestige.

Financial considerations, while addressed by the CDF bursary, extend beyond tuition. Indirect costs such as transportation, learning materials, uniforms, and foregone income from potential work (opportunity cost) remain substantial barriers for youth from low-income households (Penrose, 2005). A bursary covering only tuition fees may be insufficient to make participation economically viable for the most marginalised, for whom these ancillary costs are prohibitive.

Geographic and logistical barriers are pronounced in rural constituencies. The concentration of quality TVET institutions in urban centres necessitates relocation or long commutes for rural youth, incurring additional costs and social dislocation (Akoojee & McGrath, 2007). For young women, safety concerns associated with travel

or living away from home can be a particularly acute deterrent, further limiting their participation even when financially supported.

Psychosocial factors, including self-efficacy and career identity, are pivotal. Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent et al., 1994) highlights that individuals avoid career paths where they doubt their capabilities (low self-efficacy). A youth who has struggled with theoretical academic subjects may internalise a belief that they are 'not smart enough' for any formal education, including TVET, or conversely may see TVET as a confirmation of academic failure rather than a positive choice of a different skill set.

The lack of clear articulation pathways within the education system also impedes participation. In many systems, TVET is a terminal track with limited opportunities for progression to higher education. This 'dead-end' perception discourages ambitious youth who wish to keep future options open (Knight & Sweet, 2005). Creating recognised pathways from TVET certificates to diplomas and degrees is crucial for enhancing its status and attractiveness as part of a lifelong learning framework.

Finally, ineffective marketing and branding of TVET contribute to its low appeal. Marketing often targets those who have already failed academically, framing TVET as a consolation prize. This reinforces negative stereotypes. Contemporary rebranding efforts globally focus on TVET as 'career and technical education'—a high-skill, technology-driven, and prestigious choice for innovators and entrepreneurs (Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011). The absence of such positive framing in local contexts sustains its image as a less desirable option.

The lack of visible and relatable role models within the vocational sector further entrenches these barriers. When successful professionals in medicine, law, and business are highly visible, but accomplished master craftspeople, technicians, or vocational entrepreneurs are not celebrated, youth lack aspirational figures in TVET fields. This absence makes it difficult for them to envision a successful, respected future through a vocational pathway, reinforcing the notion that such careers lack social recognition and personal fulfilment (Bandura, 1977).

Gender-specific barriers create a dual challenge, particularly for young women. Societal norms often designate certain trades as masculine, creating environments that are unwelcoming or hostile to female trainees (Chisamya et al., 2012). Additionally, concerns about physical safety, harassment, and a lack of appropriate facilities (such as separate changing rooms) in technical workshops can actively exclude young women. These gendered obstacles limit not only participation but also the range of skills women can access, perpetuating economic disparities.

Policy incoherence and a lack of sustained political commitment also undermine TVET's appeal. Frequently, TVET policies are announced with fanfare but suffer from inconsistent funding, fragmented implementation across multiple ministries, and a lack of long-term strategic vision (King, 2009). This instability sends a signal to the public that TVET is not a government priority, thereby validating societal skepticism and discouraging youth from making what they perceive to be a risky educational investment.

This disconnect between training providers and industry employers is a critical structural impediment. When curricula are designed without direct input from employers, graduates often possess skills that are mismatched with market needs (World Bank, 2019). This skills mismatch leads to poor employment outcomes, which in turn damages the reputation of TVET institutions. Without strong apprenticeship programmes or work-integrated learning, students cannot verify the relevance of their training, making enrolment a leap of faith.

The very design of the CDF bursary may inadvertently create barriers. Complex application procedures, a lack of transparency in selection criteria, bureaucratic delays in disbursement, or uncertainty about the continuity of funding can erode trust in the mechanism (Mussa, 2018). If the process of securing the bursary is perceived as cumbersome or unfair, it can deter eligible youth from even applying, rendering the financial incentive null in practice.

Furthermore, a deep-seated 'diploma disease' pervades many societies, where the intrinsic value of learning a skill is overshadowed by the pursuit of a certificate for its own sake (Dore, 1976). TVET, with its focus on competency, can be undervalued in a system that rewards paper qualifications over demonstrable ability. This credentialist mindset pushes youth towards academic programmes that offer recognized degrees, even if they provide less practical utility.

Finally, a lack of foundational skills among potential entrants poses a significant barrier. TVET programmes often require a baseline proficiency in literacy, numeracy, and critical thinking. Youth who have experienced poor-quality basic education may lack these prerequisites, making them ineligible for or likely to struggle within formal TVET courses (UNESCO, 2012). This creates a cruel paradox where those most in need of skills training are often least prepared to access it, perpetuating cycles of disadvantage.

Attitudes towards Vocational Skill Acquisition

Attitudes, defined as learned predispositions to respond favourably or unfavourably towards an object, person, or idea, are central to understanding educational choices (Ajzen, 1991). In the context of TVET, attitudes encompass cognitive evaluations (beliefs about TVET's value), affective responses (feelings of pride or shame), and behavioural intentions (willingness to enroll). These attitudes are not formed in a vacuum but are constructed through a dynamic interplay of historical, social, and personal experiences over time.

The historical construction of attitudes towards manual work in Africa is critical. As previously noted, the colonial legacy institutionalised a dichotomy where intellectual work was superior and manual work inferior (Foster, 1965). This ideological framework was absorbed into post-colonial societal structures, ensuring that attitudes favouring academic knowledge over practical skill were reproduced across generations through family socialization, school curricula, and media representations, creating a powerful, self-sustaining cultural norm.

Attitudes are reinforced through social representation theory, which examines how communities develop shared understandings of reality (Moscovici, 1988). In many communities, TVET is socially represented as a pathway for the 'less intelligent', a narrative that simplifies complex labour market realities into a binary hierarchy. This shared representation becomes a normative force, guiding individual attitudes and making deviation from the academic norm a socially risky behaviour that requires significant justification.

The theory of planned behaviour (TPB) provides a robust framework for analysing TVET attitudes. According to TPB, behavioural intention (to enroll) is predicted by attitude towards the behaviour, subjective norms (perceived social pressure), and perceived behavioural control (Ajzen, 1991). A negative attitude towards TVET enrolment, combined with strong subjective norms favouring university, and low perceived control over success in TVET, powerfully predicts the intention to shun vocational training, irrespective of objective opportunities.

Attitudes are also shaped by perceived utility and value expectancy. From an economic rationality perspective, individuals weigh expected benefits against costs. If the perceived benefit of TVET (e.g., a stable, respectable trade) is low and the social/psychological cost (stigma) is high, a negative attitude is a rational outcome (Becker, 1964). Changing attitudes therefore requires interventions that demonstrably increase the perceived utility and status of vocational outcomes, making the cost-benefit analysis more favourable.

The role of experiential learning in attitude formation is profound. Direct, positive experiences with hands-on tasks can foster intrinsic interest and positive attitudes towards practical work (Dewey, 1938). Conversely, educational systems that are overwhelmingly theoretical and examination-focused can cultivate an aversion to practical engagement. Introducing basic technical and entrepreneurial skills experientially at an early age can help build positive foundational attitudes before negative stereotypes solidify.

Media and popular culture play an under-researched but significant role in shaping youth attitudes. Globally, television, film, and social media often glorify certain professions (law, medicine, tech) while rendering skilled trades invisible or depicting them in negative, stereotypical ways (Hoffner et al., 2006). This symbolic annihilation or misrepresentation in media contributes to a cultural landscape where vocational careers lack glamour or aspirational appeal for young people.

Gender is a key moderating variable in attitudes. Societal gender norms prescribe 'appropriate' roles and skills for men and women. Technical trades are often coded as masculine, which can make girls feel they do not belong and boys feel it is a default option rather than a choice (Chisamya et al., 2012). Attitudes towards TVET are thus gendered, requiring targeted strategies to make environments inclusive and to challenge stereotypes about which genders can excel in which trades.

Attitude change is a complex process but is achievable through targeted interventions. Persuasion theories, such as the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo,

1986), suggest that lasting attitude change requires central route processing—engaging thoughtfully with high-quality, relevant arguments. For TVET, this means providing credible information through trusted messengers (e.g., successful alumni, respected industry figures) and facilitating immersive experiences that allow for personal, positive engagement with the skill domain.

Ultimately, attitudes are not static but are sites of potential agency and change. While deeply influenced by structure, individuals can and do develop counter-normative attitudes through critical reflection, exposure to alternative narratives, and transformative experiences (Bandura, 2001). The challenge for TVET advocacy is to create the social and informational conditions that enable such critical reflection and provide compelling alternative narratives that resonate with youth aspirations for dignity, success, and contribution.

Attitudes are also shaped by the perceived locus of control over one's career. If vocational work is seen as dependent on informal patronage, fraught with exploitation, or offering little autonomy, it fosters negative attitudes of powerlessness. Conversely, if TVET is framed as a path to self-employment, business ownership, and professional independence, it can cultivate attitudes of empowerment and self-determination, aligning with youth desires for agency and control over their economic futures (Rotter, 1966).

The cognitive component of attitude involves specific beliefs about TVET's outcomes. Common detrimental beliefs include that TVET leads only to physically taxing, low-status jobs; that it is intellectually undemanding; and that it offers no global mobility. Countering these requires evidence-based messaging that highlights the technical complexity, problem-solving demands, and international recognition of modern skilled trades, thereby restructuring the cognitive schema associated with vocational work (Fiske & Taylor, 1991).

The affective component—the emotional response—is often overlooked but is equally powerful. Feelings of shame, embarrassment, or anxiety associated with choosing TVET can override rational cost-benefit analyses. Positive affect can be cultivated through celebratory events like skills competitions, public awards for apprentices, and community recognition of artisan contributions, generating feelings of pride and belonging associated with vocational identities (Zajonc, 1980).

Social comparison processes profoundly influence attitudes. Youth constantly compare their chosen paths with those of peers. When TVET is perceived as the choice of lower-achieving students, it triggers downward social comparison, damaging self-esteem (Festinger, 1954). Elevating TVET's social position requires making it a visible choice for high-achieving, respected peers, thereby shifting the reference group and making it a subject of upward, rather than downward, comparison.

The accessibility of alternative narratives is crucial for attitude change. If the dominant story is that "university equals success," alternative stories of vocational achievement must be equally visible and compelling. This involves strategic storytelling through multiple channels: showcasing young TVET entrepreneurs, featuring skilled

professionals in career talks, and integrating vocational biographies into school curricula to normalise and celebrate diverse pathways to success (Bruner, 1991).

Institutional signals heavily inform attitudes. When governments allocate minimal budgets to TVET, locate centres in inferior facilities, or exclude technical subjects from core curricula, they send a powerful symbolic message about its low priority (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Changing attitudes requires congruent action: significant investment in state-of-the-art workshops, integrating TVET into national education exhibitions, and awarding scholarships for technical excellence to signal genuine value and commitment.

The duration and timing of exposure to TVET concepts affect attitude formation. Brief, one-off interventions are less effective than sustained engagement. Longitudinal programmes that embed practical skills across school years, facilitate mentorship by tradespeople, and provide ongoing career counselling can gradually reshape attitudes through repeated, positive reinforcement, moving them from the periphery to the core of a youth's identity and aspiration set (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993).

Finally, the congruence between personal identity and vocational identity is a final filter. A youth who sees themselves as an 'academic' or 'future leader' may reject TVET as identity-incongruent, regardless of its practical benefits (Stryker & Burke, 2000). Interventions must therefore help youth explore and construct hybrid identities, such as 'innovative engineer,' 'creative designer,' or 'entrepreneurial technician,' which successfully merge practical skill with intellectual and aspirational self-concepts, making TVET a compatible choice.

Empirical Review

Global Perspectives on TVET Participation

Globally, the challenge of making TVET an attractive choice is not unique to Zambia. In Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, similar struggles with the perceived lower status of Vocational Education and Training (VET) persist, despite strong systems in nations like Germany, Switzerland, and Austria (the 'dual system' models) (Brockmann, Clarke, & Winch, 2011). The high esteem of VET in these contexts is attributed to well-established social partnerships, high-quality apprenticeships integrated with industry, and clear pathways to secure, well-remunerated careers, demonstrating that systemic design can fundamentally alter societal attitudes.

In contrast, in many Anglophone countries (e.g., the UK, USA, Australia), TVET has historically been viewed as a secondary track, leading to policy initiatives focused on 'parity of esteem' (Keep, 2005). Research from these contexts highlights that simply rebranding or increasing funding has limited impact without simultaneous efforts to improve quality, strengthen employer links, and address deep-seated cultural preferences for academic learning, suggesting that multi-pronged, sustained reform is necessary for meaningful change.

East Asian economies, such as Singapore and South Korea, have strategically elevated TVET as a core component of national economic development strategies (Ashton,

Sung, & Turbin, 2000). This involved significant government investment in state-of-the-art training facilities, close collaboration with multinational corporations to ensure curriculum relevance, and active promotion of TVET graduates as 'technologists' critical to national innovation. This top-down, economically driven approach has yielded higher participation but also critiques of overly instrumentalist, state-controlled human capital development.

International comparative studies, such as the OECD's Learning for Jobs review, consistently identify common success factors: employer involvement in curriculum design, work-based learning components, and qualified teachers with industry experience, and flexible pathways that allow movement between vocational and academic streams (OECD, 2010). The global literature thus converges on the principle that TVET's attractiveness is inextricably linked to its perceived and actual connection to the world of work and its permeability within the wider education system.

The Nordic model, exemplified by countries like Finland and Denmark, integrates TVET within a robust framework of lifelong learning and social equity. Here, VET is not a terminal track but part of a comprehensive education system with multiple entry and exit points, strongly supported by career guidance (Cedefop, 2020). This model emphasises personal development alongside skill acquisition, reducing stigma by framing VET as a choice aligned with individual interests and societal needs, rather than academic selection.

In Latin America, nations like Chile and Brazil have undertaken significant TVET reforms to address skills gaps and social inclusion. These reforms often involve public-private partnerships and attempts to modularise curricula for greater flexibility (Jacinto, 2010). However, challenges persist, including and disconnect between training and the informal economy where many youth work, and the difficulty of raising the prestige of VET in highly stratified societies with a strong academic tradition.

A critical global discourse examines TVET within the context of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR). There is increasing consensus that future-proof TVET must transcend traditional manual skills to include digital literacy, complex problem-solving, and adaptive learning (World Economic Forum, 2020). This evolution presents both a challenge and an opportunity: it requires massive investment in modernisation but also offers a chance to rebrand TVET as a forward-looking, high-tech sector, thereby enhancing its appeal to digitally-native youth.

The role of employer engagement is universally acknowledged as a linchpin for success. In successful systems, employers are not passive consumers of graduates but active co-creators of standards, assessors of competency, and providers of work placements (ILO, 2017). This deep engagement ensures relevance, provides authentic learning environments, and creates a direct pipeline to employment, which is the most powerful motivator for youth participation and a key factor in elevating TVET's status. Conversely, a common global pitfall is the "qualification spiral," where an overemphasis on standardised certification can lead to credential inflation without corresponding improvements in actual skill competency or employment outcomes (Allais, 2012). This can disillusion both students and employers, undermining the

credibility of TVET systems. Balancing formal certification with demonstrable, industry-recognised competence is a persistent challenge worldwide.

Globalisation and labour mobility have also influenced TVET perceptions. In some regions, the demand for internationally recognised skills has driven standardization and quality improvement in TVET to meet global benchmarks (Powell & Solga, 2011). However, this can sometimes lead to a tension between developing locally relevant skills and creating qualifications that are portable across borders, a dilemma particularly acute for developing economies.

The funding models for TVET vary significantly worldwide, impacting accessibility and quality. Some European models rely on shared financing between the state, employers, and trainees, fostering a sense of shared investment (Cedefop, 2020). In contrast, in many developing countries, TVET remains heavily reliant on unpredictable state funding or high student fees, which can limit access and perpetuate perceptions of it being a residual option for those who can afford neither university nor quality training.

A growing global trend is the emphasis on "green skills" within TVET curricula, aligning training with sustainable development goals (UNESCO-UNEVOC, 2017). This reframing connects TVET to urgent global agendas like climate change and circular economies, potentially enhancing its relevance and prestige by positioning vocational skills as essential for building a sustainable future, thus attracting environmentally conscious youth.

Finally, the impact of global policy networks and development agencies on national TVET systems cannot be understated. Organisations like the World Bank, UNESCO, and the ILO promote specific policy models, funding mechanisms, and quality assurance frameworks (McGrath, 2012). While this can drive positive reform, it also risks promoting one-size-fits-all solutions that may not respect local cultural contexts and historical legacies, sometimes exacerbating the very participation challenges they aim to solve.

In summary, global perspectives reveal that while the challenge of low TVET participation is widespread, the strategies and outcomes are diverse. Success hinges on a holistic ecosystem involving quality provision, strong social partnership, permeable education pathways, and positive branding. The global experience underscores that there is no single blueprint; effective systems are those that skilfully adapt these core principles to their unique socio-economic, cultural, and historical contexts.

Regional Perspectives on TVET Participation

Within sub-Saharan Africa, research on TVET participation barriers reveals region-specific nuances. A persistent theme is the disjunction between colonial-era structures, which framed TVET for social control, and post-independence development goals that require TVET for economic transformation (McGrath, 2012). This historical hangover continues to shape policy ambivalence and under-investment, creating systems that are often peripheral to main educational budgets and reforms, thereby perpetuating their poor image and performance.

Studies from Kenya and Ghana illustrate the powerful role of family and societal pressures. Research by Ngerechi (2005) in Kenya found that parental aspirations were the single strongest predictor of a student's choice against vocational subjects, driven by a desire for white-collar status. In Ghana, Akyeampong (2002) documented how community perceptions of certain trades as 'dirty' or for 'school dropouts' actively dissuaded high-achieving students from considering technical pathways, even when they had personal aptitude.

The issue of quality and relevance is consistently highlighted. A World Bank (2019) review of TVET in Africa noted widespread problems of obsolete equipment, theoretically biased curricula, and instructors disconnected from industry practice. This results in a 'low-quality equilibrium': poor quality deters enrolment of capable students, which leads to poor outcomes, which further justifies societal disdain and low investment, creating a cycle that is difficult to break without external, concerted intervention.

Gender dynamics in African TVET are particularly pronounced. Research from Nigeria and Tanzania shows that female enrolment is not only low overall but also highly concentrated in traditionally 'feminine' fields like tailoring and hairdressing, while male-dominated trades like welding or masonry remain largely inaccessible to women due to social norms and sometimes hostile learning environments (Chisamya et al., 2012; Okeke, 2010). This gendered segregation limits the potential economic returns for women and reinforces occupational stereotypes.

The structure of many African economies, heavily reliant on informal sectors, presents a unique challenge. TVET systems are often designed for formal wage employment, yet most graduates will end up in informal self-employment. This mismatch means training may not provide the entrepreneurial, financial, and business management skills needed for success in the informal economy, reducing its perceived practical value (Adams, 2011). This disconnect diminishes the real and perceived return on investment in formal vocational training.

Policy implementation gaps are a recurrent regional issue. Many countries have progressive national TVET policies influenced by international frameworks, but these often falter at the implementation stage due to weak institutional capacity, corruption, and a lack of coordination between multiple governing ministries (Allais, 2017). This results in a chasm between policy rhetoric on paper and the reality in training centres, which erodes trust and confirms public skepticism about the sector's seriousness.

Financing models also present a regional constraint. Heavy reliance on government funding, which is often insufficient and irregular, is common. The concept of cost-sharing with trainees or industry is underdeveloped, placing the entire financial and quality burden on the state (Atchoorena & Delluc, 2001). This limits expansion, stifles innovation, and often leads to the imposition of ad-hoc fees that become prohibitive for the poor, contradicting equity goals.

The rural-urban divide critically affects access and quality. Quality TVET infrastructure is overwhelmingly concentrated in urban centres, effectively excluding

rural youth or imposing high relocation costs (Akoojee & McGrath, 2007). Furthermore, urban-centric curricula may not address the skill needs of rural economies, such as agro-processing or renewable energy maintenance, making training irrelevant for those who wish to remain and contribute to their local communities.

Regional initiatives, such as those by the African Union (AU) and regional economic communities, aim to harmonise and strengthen TVET. Frameworks like the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA 16-25) emphasises skills development (AU, 2016). However, translating these continental commitments into tangible improvements at the national and constituency level remains slow, often hindered by competing national priorities and limited monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

The role of traditional apprenticeship within the informal sector is a significant regional feature. In many West African countries, this system trains more youth than formal TVET institutions (Walther, 2015). While accessible and relevant to local markets, it often lacks standardization, theoretical grounding, and certification that facilitates mobility. Integrating and upgrading these traditional systems into national qualification frameworks is a persistent challenge and opportunity for increasing participation.

The influence of faith-based and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in TVET provision is notable across the region. These entities often fill gaps left by the state, offering community-based training (Ndalichako, 2014). While increasing access, this can lead to a fragmented system with variable quality and limited pathways for progression, further complicating efforts to build a coherent, nationally recognised TVET system that commands public confidence.

Youth perceptions are also shaped by the visible outcomes of public investment. In many countries, massive investment in public university expansion has been more politically visible than TVET investment, sending a clear signal about state priorities (Vavrus, 2009). When gleaming new university campuses contrast with dilapidated technical institutes, it visually reinforces the hierarchy of educational value in the minds of youth and parents alike.

Finally, the regional discourse is increasingly linking TVET to themes of peace building and preventing violent extremism, particularly in fragile states. The argument posits that providing tangible skills and economic hope to disenfranchised youth is a critical stabilisation strategy (ICRC, 2020). This securitisation of TVET policy introduces a new rationale for investment, though it risks focusing on quick, large-scale training programmes over sustainable quality and systemic reform. In summary, regional perspectives highlight that the barriers to TVET participation in sub-Saharan Africa are deeply embedded in historical legacies, economic structures, and socio-cultural norms. Addressing them requires more than copying global models; it demands context-specific strategies that tackle quality deficits, bridge the formal-informal economy divide, challenge gendered norms, and ensure policies are effectively implemented to alter the lived reality and perception of TVET on the ground.

Local Perspectives on TVET Participation

In the Zambian context, literature specifically examining TVET participation is growing but remains limited. National policy documents, such as the Technical Education, Vocational and Entrepreneurship Training (TEVET) Policy (GRZ, 1996) and its subsequent revisions, consistently identify low societal perception as a key challenge. However, these documents often diagnose the problem in broad strokes without granular, constituency-level analysis of the specific attitudes and information flows that underpin this perception, thereby limiting the formulation of targeted, locally resonant interventions.

Empirical studies within Zambia have tended to focus on the supply side: analysing curriculum, institutional capacity, and graduate employment rates (e.g., Mwewa, 2015). Fewer studies have deeply investigated the demand side—the youth perspective—especially in rural constituencies. Where demand is studied, it often concentrates on urban areas or broad national surveys, potentially missing the unique socio-cultural and logistical dynamics of rural districts where traditional values and limited infrastructure may interact differently with national policy (Chondoka, 2016).

Research on the CDF bursary itself is nascent. Most available literature evaluates CDF as a constituency-level development fund broadly, assessing its impact on infrastructure projects. There is a significant gap in scholarly work critically examining its application and effectiveness in the education sector, particularly its specific utility as a tool to stimulate TVET enrolment. This study enters a space where the intersection of a major funding policy (CDF) and a specific educational challenge (TVET uptake) at the local level has been underexplored.

Localized research is critical because the implementation of national TVET policy varies considerably across Zambia's diverse provinces. Studies conducted in urban Copperbelt provinces, focused on mining-related skills, offer limited insight into the dynamics in agricultural regions like Eastern Province (Carmody, 2004). The economic drivers, community structures, and aspirational references in constituencies like Kasenengwa and Chipangali are distinct, necessitating context-specific investigation to understand local barriers.

Furthermore, the role of traditional authority and community leadership in shaping educational choices is profound in rural Zambian settings. Chiefs and headmen hold significant influence over community norms and can act as gatekeepers or champions for new initiatives like the CDF bursary (Lungwangwa, 2014). The extent to which these local power structures are engaged in or endorse TVET pathways is a crucial but largely unstudied factor influencing youth participation at the grassroots level.

The local media and information ecosystem also plays a unique role. In rural constituencies, information dissemination relies heavily on community radio, church networks, and word-of-mouth rather than national newspapers or the internet (Banda, 2009). The effectiveness of official communications regarding the CDF bursary and TVET opportunities through these local channels, and the potential for misinformation, remains an unexamined aspect of the participation puzzle.

Local economic opportunities directly shape the perceived value of TVET. In agricultural economies, skills in mechanics for farm equipment, agro-processing, or renewable energy installation might be highly relevant, whereas generic urban-focused trades may seem impractical (Hampwaye, 2013). The alignment—or misalignment—between locally offered TVET courses and the tangible economic opportunities youth perceive in their immediate environment is a key determinant of demand that requires localised study.

Gender dynamics at the local level also present specific challenges. In rural Zambian communities, gendered expectations regarding work and mobility are often more pronounced than in urban areas. Early marriage pressures for girls and expectations for boys to contribute to household farming can directly conflict with the time commitment required for formal TVET programmes, creating unique logistical and social barriers that are not captured in national-level data (Kakuru, 2017).

The administrative experience of accessing the CDF bursary at the local level is a critical but overlooked factor. Bureaucratic hurdles, perceptions of nepotism or political bias in selection, and delays in disbursement can undermine trust in the mechanism (Resnick, 2013). Understanding these grassroots implementation challenges is essential to evaluate why a well-intentioned financial incentive might fail to translate into increased enrolment in specific constituencies.

Finally, the lived experience of existing TVET students and recent graduates within the local community serves as the most powerful testimonial. The visibility of their success or struggle, their employment status, and their earnings relative to peers shape community perceptions more than any policy document (Kelly, 1999). Investigating these local narratives and outcomes provides indispensable insights into the real-world validity of TVET as a pathway, as judged by the community itself. In summary, the local perspective in Zambia, particularly for rural constituencies, represents a significant knowledge gap. While national policies and broad surveys outline general challenges, they fail to capture the intricate web of local socio-cultural norms, economic realities, information flows, and implementation nuances that ultimately determine whether a youth in Kasenengwa or Chipangali will choose to pursue TVET, even with a CDF bursary in hand. This study directly addresses this gap.

Personal Critique of the Literature

The existing body of literature provides a solid foundation for understanding the global and regional challenges of TVET participation. It effectively identifies macro-level barriers such as historical stigma, poor quality, and negative attitudes. The strength of this literature lies in its consistent identification of these cross-cutting themes across diverse contexts, suggesting that the problem, while locally nuanced, has universal structural and cultural dimensions. Theoretical frameworks from social psychology (TPB, SCCT) and sociology (social reproduction) are well-applied to explain the persistence of negative perceptions.

However, a significant weakness is the frequent disconnection between macro-level policy analysis and micro-level, experiential studies of youth decision-making. Many policy papers and international reports speak in aggregate terms about ‘youth

perceptions' without sufficiently grounding these perceptions in the lived realities, aspirations, and social networks of young people in specific localities. This can lead to policy prescriptions that are technically sound but culturally tone-deaf, failing to resonate with the target audience's worldview and daily constraints.

Furthermore, there is often an implicit deficit model in the literature, framing the problem as residing in the mistaken attitudes of youth and communities, rather than also critically examining the failures of TVET systems to reform, market themselves effectively, and deliver tangible value. This can unhelpfully blame the victim (the disinterested youth) while letting underperforming institutions and policies off the hook. A more balanced critique would hold both demand-side perceptions and supply-side performance in simultaneous view.

Much of the African literature, while valuable, tends to be descriptive rather than explanatory. Studies frequently document what the barriers are (e.g., "parents prefer university") but less frequently delve into the why at a deeper psychosocial level or explore how these barriers are communicatively reinforced within families and peer groups. There is a need for more interpretive, qualitative research that uncovers the narratives, metaphors, and emotional resonances that surround TVET in local communities.

Finally, there is a conspicuous gap regarding the intersection of new financial mechanisms like the CDF bursary and TVET demand. The literature on financial barriers typically discusses tuition fees generically. It has not yet robustly analysed a scenario where tuition is fully covered, isolating other deterrent factors. This represents a critical analytical opportunity: to study a 'natural experiment' where the primary financial barrier is removed, allowing the remaining socio-cultural and institutional barriers to be seen in sharper relief.

A further critique concerns the frequent over-reliance on cross-sectional survey data, which captures attitudes at a single point in time but cannot trace the evolution of decision-making processes. This methodological limitation means the literature often presents a static snapshot, missing the dynamic, sometimes contradictory, negotiations that youth undertake when considering their futures amidst conflicting social messages and economic pressures (Vaughan, 2018).

Moreover, the literature often treats 'youth' as a homogenous category, insufficiently disaggregating findings by critical variables such as gender, socio-economic quintile, or prior academic achievement. The barriers faced by a high-achieving girl from a poor rural household are likely distinct from those of a boy with average grades from an urban trading family. This lack of intersectional analysis can obscure the specific needs of the most marginalised subgroups within the youth population (Crenshaw, 1991).

Theoretical application, while present, is sometimes superficial. For instance, the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) is often cited to list attitudinal factors, but few studies rigorously measure and model the relative weights of attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control in predicting enrolment intentions within

specific cultural contexts. This limits the predictive power and practical utility of the research for designing targeted behavioural interventions (Ajzen, 1991).

There is also a notable paucity of longitudinal studies that follow TVET graduates over time to assess long-term socio-economic outcomes compared to their academic-track peers. Without this longitudinal evidence on earnings, job satisfaction, and social mobility, the argument for TVET's utility remains speculative. This evidentiary gap weakens the ability of advocates to counter stigma with hard data on life outcomes (Ryan, 2001).

Furthermore, the literature from successful TVET systems (e.g., in German-speaking Europe) is sometimes presented as a directly transferable blueprint. This overlooks the deeply embedded historical, cultural, and institutional factors—such as strong corporatist traditions and standardized apprenticeship systems—that make these models difficult to transplant to different governance and cultural contexts, potentially leading to inappropriate or failed policy transfer (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004).

Finally, a significant portion of the literature is produced by international development agencies or for policy audiences, which can sometimes priorities consensus and actionable recommendations over critical, dissenting analysis. This can result in a body of work that reiterates established problem diagnoses and solution sets, potentially stifling more radical critiques of the political economy of education and labour that underpin the TVET participation challenge (McGrath, 2018). In summary, while the existing literature successfully maps the terrain of the problem, it has notable gaps in depth, methodology, and contextual specificity. It often lacks the fine-grained, longitudinal, and intersectional analysis needed to fully explain local decision-making processes, particularly in the unique context of a financial intervention like the CDF bursary. This critique underscores the need for the kind of localized, mixed-methods research that this study undertakes.

Research Gap

The synthesis of literature reveals a clear and multi-faceted research gap that this study aims to address. First, there is a contextual gap. While barriers to TVET are well-documented globally and regionally, there is a paucity of focused, empirical research examining these dynamics within specific rural Zambian constituencies like Kasenengwa and Chipangali. The local interplay of culture, economy, and information ecosystems may produce unique configurations of barriers that cannot be fully extrapolated from national or urban studies.

Second, an analytical gap exists regarding the specific role of financial incentives. Extensive literature examines cost as a barrier, but very little research investigates why participation remains low when this cost is ostensibly eliminated by a policy instrument like the CDF bursary. This gap limits understanding of the relative weight of financial versus non-financial factors and hinders the development of policies that move beyond subsidisation to address more complex deterrents.

Third, a methodological gap is evident. Many studies rely on surveys or policy analysis. There is a need for mixed-methods research that combines quantitative data on

awareness and attitudes with in-depth qualitative explorations of youth narratives, family deliberations, and community discourses. This approach can provide both breadth and depth, capturing the scale of perceptions and the rich, nuanced reasons behind them, which pure quantitative studies often miss.

Fourth, a theoretical application gap is present. While theories like the Theory of Planned Behaviour are referenced, they are seldom rigorously applied to collect and analyse data in this specific field within the Zambian context. Applying such frameworks systematically can provide a more structured and predictive understanding of the behavioural intentions of youth towards TVET enrolment, moving beyond descriptive lists of factors to a model of how these factors interact.

Finally, there is a policy-evaluation gap. The CDF bursary scheme represents a significant policy innovation in decentralised education funding. However, its effectiveness as a tool for stimulating TVET demand has not been critically evaluated from the ground up. This study fills this gap by providing empirical evidence on the scheme's impact (or lack thereof) on the decision-making calculus of youth, offering direct feedback for policy refinement and the design of complementary interventions needed to make the bursary truly effective.

III. Research Methodology

Research Design

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). This design is characterised by the collection and analysis of quantitative data in a first phase, followed by the collection and analysis of qualitative data in a second phase. The priority is given to the quantitative strand, with the qualitative strand designed to elaborate on, explain, or contextualise the initial statistical results. This approach is particularly suited to research problems where numerical trends require deeper interpretive explanation, aligning perfectly with this study's aim to quantify barriers and then explore their lived experience.

The rationale for this design is rooted in pragmatism, which priorities the research question over allegiance to a single paradigm and advocates for using whichever methods best address the problem (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). The quantitative component allows for the generalisation of findings about awareness levels and common deterrents across a sample, providing measurable evidence. Subsequently, the qualitative component delves into the 'how' and 'why,' uncovering the social processes, personal narratives, and contextual influences that the survey alone cannot capture.

Thus, the design moves from a broad understanding of the phenomenon to a focused exploration of its mechanisms. For instance, if survey data indicate a high percentage of youth citing 'social stigma,' subsequent interviews will probe the specific sources of this stigma (e.g., family, peers), its emotional impact, and how it is negotiated in daily life. This sequential integration strengthens the validity of conclusions by ensuring they are not only statistically significant but also richly descriptive and theoretically insightful (Ivankova, Creswell, & Stick, 2006).

Study Site

The study was conducted in Kasenengwa and Chipangali constituencies, located within the Eastern Province of Zambia. These constituencies were purposively selected as they are rural, agrarian-based areas where the CDF bursary for TVET has been actively implemented, yet anecdotally, enrolment challenges persist. Their selection provides a crucial case study of how national policies interact with the specific socio-economic and cultural dynamics of rural Zambia, where the majority of the population resides and where developmental challenges are often most acute (GRZ, 2022).

Both constituencies share characteristics typical of Zambia's rural periphery: economies centred on subsistence and small-scale commercial agriculture, limited formal employment, and geographic challenges to service delivery. However, they also possess unique community structures and varying degrees of access to TVET institutions. Studying both allows for comparative insights within a similar regional context, helping to identify whether barriers are locally idiosyncratic or represent broader regional patterns, thereby enhancing the transferability of findings to similar rural settings across the country.

Target Population

The target population for this study was defined as all youth aged 18-35 years who are residents of Kasenengwa or Chipangali constituencies and who are eligible for vocational training programmes. This age bracket aligns with the national definition of youth and encompasses the primary cohort making post-secondary education and training decisions (GRZ, 2019). The population includes both those who have enrolled in or completed TVET and, critically, those who have not, despite being aware of the CDF bursary opportunity.

The population is heterogeneous, comprising individuals of different genders, educational backgrounds, marital statuses, and socio-economic standings. This diversity is essential for capturing the full spectrum of perspectives and experiences regarding TVET. By targeting the entire eligible youth population, the study aims to understand the decision-making calculus not just of participants, but of non-participants—the central group for understanding the phenomenon of 'shunning'—thereby providing a complete picture of demand-side dynamics (Kumar, 2019).

Sample Size

For the quantitative phase, a sample size of 200 youth was determined, with 100 participants drawn proportionately from each constituency (Kasenengwa and Chipangali). This sample size was calculated to achieve a confidence level of 95% and a margin of error of ±7%, which is considered acceptable for social science research in defined geographical areas (Israel, 1992). A sample of this magnitude provides sufficient statistical power to detect meaningful patterns and associations within the data, allowing for reliable generalisations to the target population within these constituencies.

From this quantitative sample, a sub-sample of 30 participants was purposively selected for the in-depth qualitative interview phase. The selection criteria for this sub-sample aimed to ensure maximum variation (Patton, 2015), including individuals based on

gender, TVET participation status (enrolled, graduated, considered but rejected, never considered), and locality. This strategic selection ensures that the qualitative data captures a wide range of experiences and explanations, providing depth and context to the broader quantitative trends identified in the first phase.

Sampling Techniques

A multi-stage sampling technique was employed. In the first stage, Kasenengwa and Chipangali constituencies were purposively selected as the study sites. In the second stage, a stratified random sampling method was used within each constituency. Wards were treated as strata to ensure geographic representativeness. From each ward, a random selection of villages or neighbourhoods was made using a lottery method. This approach guarantees that different parts of each constituency have a known chance of being included, enhancing the representativeness of the sample (Taherdoost, 2016).

Within the selected villages, systematic random sampling was used to identify individual respondents. A sampling frame was developed with community leaders, listing eligible youth. A sampling interval (k) was calculated, and every kth individual on the list was selected for participation. This technique provided an efficient and unbiased way to select participants, giving every eligible youth an equal probability of being included in the quantitative survey, thereby minimising selection bias and supporting the statistical generalisability of the findings (Henry, 1990).

For the qualitative phase, purposive sampling was utilised to select information-rich cases from the pool of survey respondents. Participants were chosen based on specific characteristics to ensure diversity of perspective, a technique known as maximum variation sampling (Patton, 2015). For example, the researcher intentionally selected some youth who were highly negative towards TVET, some who were ambivalent, and some who were positive, as well as ensuring gender balance and representation from both TVET participants and non-participants. This non-probability technique is ideal for gaining deep, contextual insights.

Data Collection Methods

Quantitative data were collected using a structured, closed-ended questionnaire administered to the sample of 200 youth. The questionnaire was developed based on the literature review and the study's theoretical frameworks (Theory of Planned Behaviour, Social Cognitive Career Theory). It contained sections measuring: (a) demographic variables, (b) awareness levels of TVET and the CDF bursary, (c) attitudes towards vocational skill acquisition (using Likert-scale items), and (d) the perceived influence of various barriers (socio-cultural, institutional, economic). This instrument allowed for standardised data collection that was efficient and amenable to statistical analysis.

Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with the 30 selected participants. An interview guide, developed with open-ended questions and probes, facilitated in-depth exploration of themes emerging from the quantitative data. Questions explored participants' personal educational journeys, detailed perceptions of TVET, the decision-making process regarding the CDF bursary, and stories of influence from family and peers. This method provided the flexibility to pursue

unexpected yet relevant lines of inquiry, capturing the complexity and nuance of individual experiences (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Secondary data were also reviewed to triangulate findings. This included analysing policy documents (e.g., TEVET Policy, CDF guidelines), reports from the Technical Education, Vocational and Entrepreneurship Training Authority (TEVETA), and enrolment statistics from local training institutions. This documentary analysis helped contextualise the primary data within the broader policy and institutional landscape, providing an understanding of the official intentions and structures within which individual decisions are made (Bowen, 2009).

Data Collection Procedure

Prior to data collection, ethical approval was sought and obtained from DMI-St. Eugene University and relevant local authorities in Kasenengwa and Chipangali. Research assistants, who were fluent in the local languages (Chinyanja/Chichewa), were recruited and trained over a two-day workshop on research ethics, questionnaire administration, and interview techniques. The training emphasised neutrality, informed consent procedures, and data confidentiality to ensure the quality and integrity of the collected data.

Data collection for the quantitative phase took place over four weeks. The researcher and assistants visited the pre-selected villages. After obtaining informed consent, questionnaires were administered through one-on-one interactions. For participants with limited literacy, the questions were read aloud and responses recorded by the assistant to ensure inclusion and accuracy. This method helped minimise non-response errors and ensured that all questions were understood, increasing data reliability.

The qualitative interview phase followed, conducted over the subsequent three weeks. Interviews were scheduled at times and locations convenient for participants, often in their homes or a quiet community space. With permission, interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accurate transcription. Each interview lasted between 45-90 minutes. Detailed field notes were also taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual observations. This immersive approach was crucial for building rapport and gaining trust, allowing participants to share sensitive insights openly.

Throughout both phases, the researcher maintained a reflective journal to document methodological decisions, challenges encountered (e.g., accessibility of certain areas), and preliminary observations. This journal served as an audit trail, enhancing the transparency and rigour of the research process. All collected data—completed questionnaires, audio files, and field notes—were securely stored, with digital files password-protected and physical materials kept in a locked cabinet to uphold confidentiality.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the 200 questionnaires were cleaned, coded, and entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS Version 28) for analysis. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations) were computed to summarise the demographic profile of respondents, levels of awareness, and the

prevalence of various attitudes and perceived barriers. Inferential statistics, specifically Chi-square tests and binary logistic regression, were employed to examine relationships between variables, such as testing for significant associations between gender and attitudes towards TVET (Pallant, 2020).

Qualitative data analysis followed a thematic analysis approach, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). All interview recordings were transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were then imported into NVivo software for systematic coding. The analysis proceeded through six phases: familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. This process was both inductive (themes emerging from the data) and deductive (informed by the research questions and theoretical frameworks).

Integration of the mixed methods occurred at the interpretation stage. The quantitative results provided a map of the 'what'—the distribution and correlation of key factors. The qualitative findings provided the 'why' and 'how'—the narratives and mechanisms behind the statistics. For instance, if regression showed parental education level as a significant predictor of negative attitudes, interview excerpts were used to illustrate how this influence operates within family discussions. This joint display and weaving of findings provided a coherent, multi-layered explanation of the research problem (Fetters, Curry, & Creswell, 2013).

Ethical Considerations

The principle of informed consent was paramount. All potential participants received a detailed information sheet in a language they understood, explaining the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks (minimal), benefits, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Written consent was obtained from literate participants; for others, a witnessed verbal consent process was used and documented. This ensured that participation was fully voluntary and based on comprehension (BERA, 2018).

Confidentiality and anonymity were rigorously maintained. All participants were assigned unique identification codes, and no personally identifiable information was included in the research database or final report. Audio recordings were transcribed using these codes, and the original files were stored separately from the consent forms. In reporting findings, particularly qualitative excerpts, care was taken to use pseudonyms and omit any details that could lead to the identification of individuals or specific communities.

Given the potential sensitivity of discussing educational choices and family pressures, the research adopted a 'do no harm' approach. Interviewers were trained to be empathetic and to avoid pressuring participants to disclose information. If a participant showed signs of distress, the interview would be paused or terminated, and information for accessing local counselling services (where available) would be provided. The research aimed to be an enlightening rather than a distressing experience for all involved.

Finally, the study adhered to principles of beneficence and justice. The research design aimed to generate knowledge that could benefit the participating communities by

informing better policy. Furthermore, the sampling strategy ensured fair opportunity for participation across different genders and locations within the constituencies. The researcher committed to sharing a summary of the findings with community leaders and stakeholders in an accessible format, ensuring the knowledge generated is returned to the community.

IV. Data Presentation And Analysis

Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

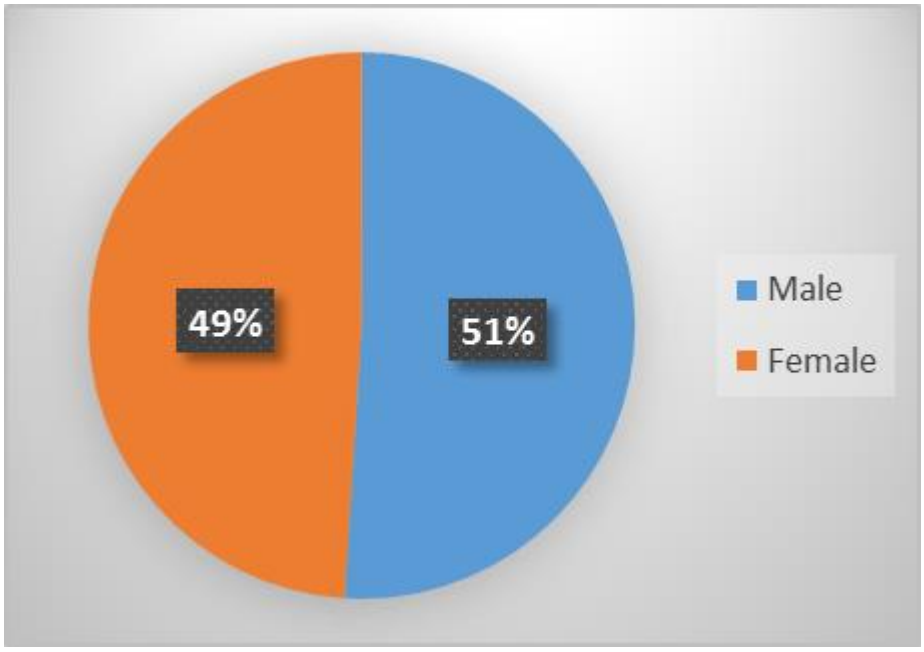

Figure 2: Gender Distribution of Respondents (N=200)
Source; Fieldwork (2025)

The survey included 200 youth, with a nearly equal gender distribution (51% male, 49% female). This balanced representation ensures that the findings reflect the perspectives of both young men and women, allowing for a gendered analysis of awareness, barriers, and attitudes. The equitable sampling supports the generalisability of results across genders within the study constituencies, highlighting whether TVET participation dynamics differ significantly between young men and women in these rural settings.

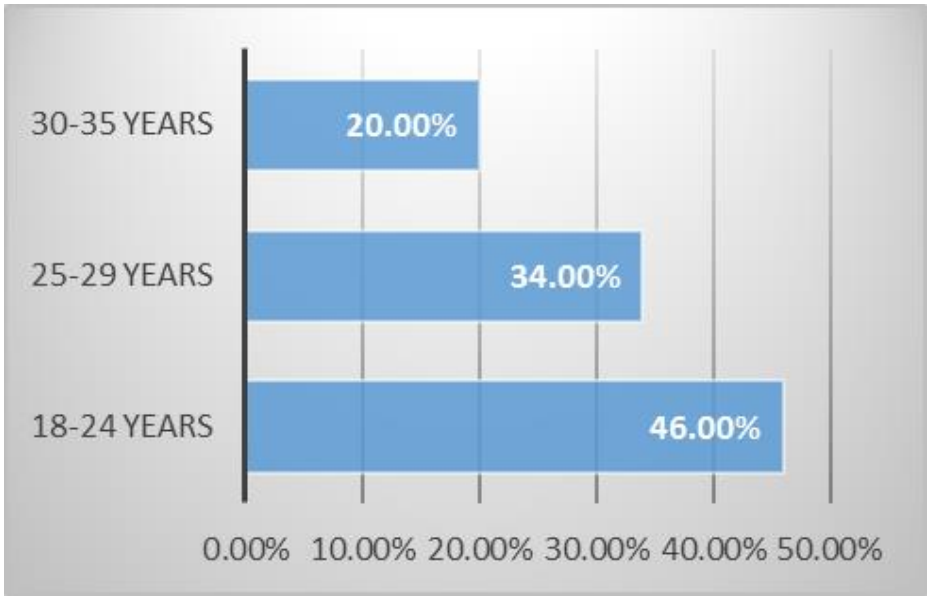

Figure 3: Age Distribution of Respondents (N=200)

Source; Fieldwork (2025)

The majority of respondents (80%) were aged between 18 and 29 years, representing the core demographic for post-secondary training and entry into the labour market. The significant proportion (46%) in the 18-24 cohort indicates the study successfully captured youth at a critical decision-making point. The inclusion of older youth (30-35 years) provides insights into retrospective views on training opportunities and perceived lifelong learning pathways, adding depth to the understanding of how age influences perceptions of TVET.

Table 1: Highest Educational Attainment (N=200)

Qualification	Frequency	Percentage
Primary School	25	12.5%
Junior Secondary (Grade 9)	60	30.0%
Senior Secondary (Grade 12)	98	49.0%
Tertiary (Diploma/Certificate)	17	8.5%
Total	200	100%

Source; Fieldwork (2025)

Nearly half (49%) of the respondents had completed senior secondary education (Grade 12), forming the largest group. This is significant as they represent the primary target for TVET recruitment post-secondary school. The 30% with junior secondary education highlights a cohort that may have left formal schooling earlier and for whom TVET could be a vital bridge. The distribution underscores that the study engaged with

youth across the educational spectrum, from those with basic literacy to those qualified for higher education, capturing a wide range of academic self-concepts and aspirations.

Table 2: Parental/Guardian Occupation (N=200)

Occupation Category	Frequency	Percentage
Subsistence Farming	110	55.0%
Formal Employment	35	17.5%
Informal Trade/Business	40	20.0%
Unemployed/Retired	15	7.5%
Total	200	100%

Source; Fieldwork (2025)

A majority of respondents (55%) reported their parents or guardians were engaged in subsistence farming, reflecting the agrarian economic base of the constituencies. Only 17.5% had a parent in formal employment. This socio-economic context is crucial, as financial constraints and exposure to limited occupational models profoundly shape youth aspirations and their perception of risk associated with different career paths. The high prevalence of informal and agricultural livelihoods underscores the potential relevance of TVET tailored to these economic realities.

Youth Awareness of TVET Programmes and the CDF Bursary

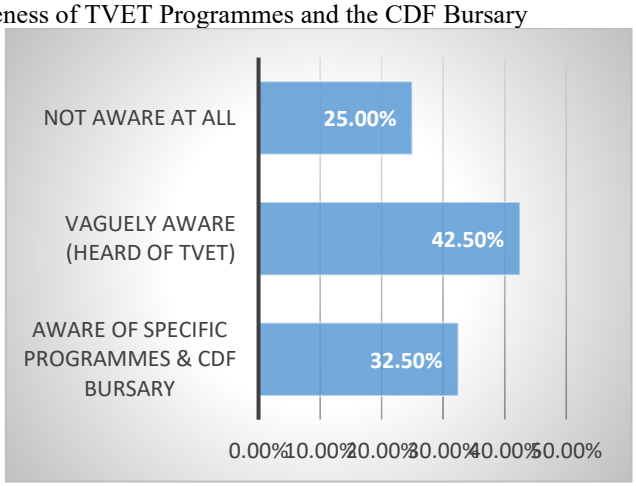

Figure 4: Level of Awareness about TVET Programmes (N=200)

Source; Fieldwork (2025)

Only 32.5% of youth demonstrated comprehensive awareness, knowing specific TVET courses and the linked CDF bursary. A larger segment (42.5%) had only vague awareness, having "heard of" TVET centres but lacking details on offerings or funding. A quarter of respondents (25%) reported no awareness. This indicates a significant information deficit, where the CDF policy's mechanics are not effectively reaching its intended beneficiaries. The gap between vague and specific awareness is critical, as it influences the ability to make an informed enrolment decision.

Table 3: Primary Sources of Information on TVET

Information Source	Frequency	Percentage
Friends/Peers	120	60.0%
Radio	90	45.0%
Family Members	70	35.0%
School Teachers	45	22.5%
Community Leaders	30	15.0%
Social Media/Internet	25	12.5%

Source; Fieldwork (2025)

Informal networks are the dominant information channels: 60% cited friends/peers, and 35% family. Radio remains a key medium (45%). Formal sources like school teachers (22.5%) and community leaders (15%) play a lesser role. The low influence of teachers suggests weak career guidance integration in schools. The minimal use of social media (12.5%) highlights the digital divide in these rural areas. This reliance on informal sources increases the risk of misinformation and perpetuates stereotypes, as information is filtered through peers and family who may themselves hold biased views.

Table 4: Perception of CDF Bursary Application Process

Perception	Frequency	Percentage
Transparent and straightforward	10	15.4%
Complicated and bureaucratic	40	61.5%
Unfair/Prone to favouritism	15	23.1%
Total	65	100%

Source; Fieldwork (2025)

Among those aware of the bursary, a overwhelming 84.6% viewed the application process negatively. Most (61.5%) found it complicated and bureaucratic, while 23.1% perceived it as unfair or prone to nepotism. Only 15.4% saw it as transparent. These perceptions act as a critical deterrent, transforming a financial incentive into a source of frustration and distrust. The bureaucratic hurdle and fear of unfair selection demotivate youth from even attempting to apply, effectively nullifying the bursary's potential to stimulate enrolment before other socio-cultural factors even come into play.

Table 5: Correlation between Awareness Source and TVET Perception

Primary Info Source	Holds Positive View of TVET	Holds Negative View of TVET
School Teacher	60%	40%
Community Leader	55%	45%
Radio	35%	65%

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Friends/Peers	25%	75%
Family Members	20%	80%

Source; Fieldwork (2025)

The source of information strongly correlates with perception. Youth who heard about TVET from formal, authoritative sources (teachers, community leaders) were more likely to hold positive views (55-60%). In contrast, information from informal, personal networks (family and peers) was associated with markedly negative perceptions (75-80% negative). This highlights a vicious cycle: negative attitudes within families and peer groups are the most common information filter, reinforcing stigma. Breaking this cycle requires strategically bypassing these filters with positive messaging from trusted formal authorities.

Interview data revealed the nuances behind the statistics. Many youth with "vague awareness" described TVET in limited, stereotypical terms. As (M, 24) stated, "I know there is a trades school in Chipata town. They fix cars and sew clothes. But I don't know what courses they have or if you can do business after." This highlights awareness devoid of detail on curriculum or career pathways.

The complexity of the CDF process was a recurrent theme. (F, 21) explained her discouragement: "They said to bring many papers: NRC, Grade 12 certificate, a letter from the headman... then you go to the council, they tell you to come back next week. It is for those who have time and know people there." This perception of bureaucratic opacity and potential nepotism was widespread.

Interviews also confirmed the power of informal networks. David (M, 27) shared how his perception was formed: "My uncle said, 'Why would you go to fix pipes when I struggled to send you to school? That is for those who failed.' So even when I heard on radio about bursaries, my mind was already closed." This illustrates how family attitudes can override formal information campaigns.

However, positive role models from formal sources showed impact. (F, 29), who enrolled in a tailoring programme, credited her teacher: "My teacher in Grade 12 saw I was good in art. She told me about design and that I could get a bursary. She even helped me with the first form. Without her, I would have just stayed home." This underscores the transformative potential of proactive, positive guidance from authoritative figures.

Factors Affecting Youth Participation in TVET despite the CDF Bursary

Table 6: Ranking of Perceived Barriers to TVET Participation (N=200)

Barrier (Ranked by % citing as "Major Barrier")	Frequency	Percentage
Social Stigma (Seen as for failures)	160	80.0%
Poor Quality of Training Facilities	145	72.5%
Fear of Limited Career Progress/Job Security	140	70.0%
High Indirect Costs (Transport, Materials)	125	62.5%

Parental Disapproval	120	60.0%
Geographical Inaccessibility of Centres	110	55.0%

Source; Fieldwork (2025)

Social stigma emerges as the most pervasive barrier, cited by 80% of respondents. This is closely followed by concerns over institutional quality (72.5%) and poor labour market outcomes (70%). Financial barriers, while significant (62.5%), rank below these socio-cultural and perceptual factors. This hierarchy is critical: it demonstrates that even if indirect costs were addressed, the profound stigma and doubt about TVET's value would remain dominant deterrents. Parental disapproval (60%) reinforces the social stigma, creating a powerful normative constraint against enrolment.

Table 7: Perception of TVET Institutional Quality (N=200)

Quality Indicator	Positive Perception	Negative Perception
Modern Equipment	15%	85%
Industry-Relevant Curriculum	20%	80%
Qualified & Motivated Instructors	25%	75%
Linkages to Employers/Apprenticeships	10%	90%

Source; Fieldwork (2025)

Perceptions of TVET quality are overwhelmingly negative. Critically, 90% of youth see a lack of linkages to employers, and 85% believe equipment is outdated. These perceptions, whether fully accurate or not, create a rational reluctance to invest time. If training is seen as irrelevant to the modern job market, the CDF bursary merely funds a perceived dead end. The low confidence in instructors (75% negative) further erodes trust in the learning environment, suggesting that improving physical infrastructure must be paired with developing human capital within TVET institutions.

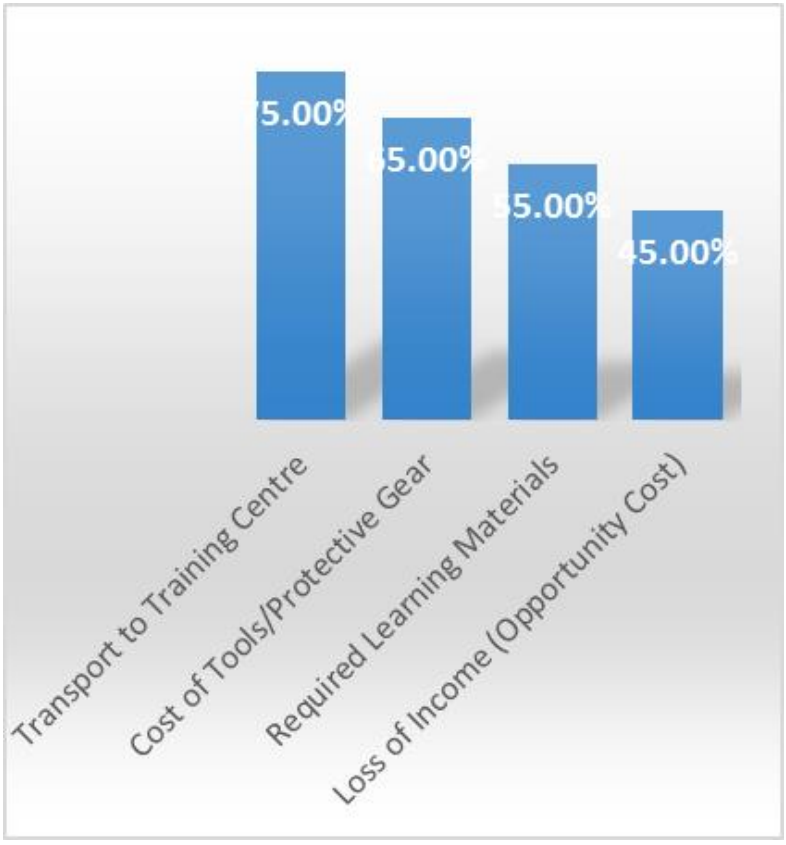

Figure 5: Financial Barriers Beyond Tuition (N=200)
Source; Fieldwork (2025)

The CDF bursary's limitation to tuition fees is starkly revealed. Transport is the most cited prohibitive cost (75%), especially for rural youth travelling to urban centres. The need to purchase personal tools and materials (65%) presents another significant financial cliff. The opportunity cost of forgone income or household labour (45%) is particularly salient for older youth supporting families. This data indicates that a "full" bursary that covers only tuition is, in practice, a partial subsidy, leaving major economic obstacles intact for low-income households.

Table 8: Gender-Differentiated Barriers (Multiple Responses)

Barrier	Male Respondents (N=102)	Female Respondents (N=98)
Social Stigma	75%	85%
Parental Disapproval	50%	70%
Safety/Commute Concerns	10%	65%
Gendered Hostility in Trades	5%	40%

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Source; Fieldwork (2025)

Barriers are gendered. While social stigma affects both, it is more acute for young women (85%). Parental disapproval is significantly higher for daughters (70% vs 50%). Unique to young women are safety concerns (65%) and fear of hostility in male-dominated trades (40%). These factors severely restrict not only overall participation but also the range of trades women consider viable. For young men, barriers are more focused on status and economic return; for young women, they encompass personal safety, social permission, and inclusion within the training environment itself.

The depth of social stigma was vividly expressed. (M, 22) said, "If I go to that college, people in the village will laugh. They will say, 'See, his education ended in the workshop.' They will think I am not clever. Even to find a wife will be hard." This links vocational choice directly to social identity, intelligence, and future prospects.

Perceptions of quality were based on visible evidence. (F, 26) explained her decision: "I visited that centre with my brother. The sewing machines are the ones our grandmother used. The building is poor. How can I learn modern fashion there? I would be wasting the bursary." Here, the bursary is seen not as an opportunity, but as a scarce resource not worth investing in a substandard institution.

The burden of indirect costs was a practical reality. (M, 30), a father of two, calculated: "The bursary is good, yes. But if I go to Lusaka for training, who will pay rent there? Who will buy food for my family here? The bursary does not answer these questions." For many, TVET participation is not a single decision but a complex household livelihood calculation.

Gendered barriers were particularly stark in interviews. (F, 19) shared her parents' fear: "My father refused even to discuss metalwork. He said, 'That place is for men. What will people say about me allowing my daughter there? You will do tailoring or nothing.'" Another, (F, 23), cited safety: "The centre is far, and I would finish late. Taking a minibus at that time, as a girl, is asking for trouble. My parents would never allow it."

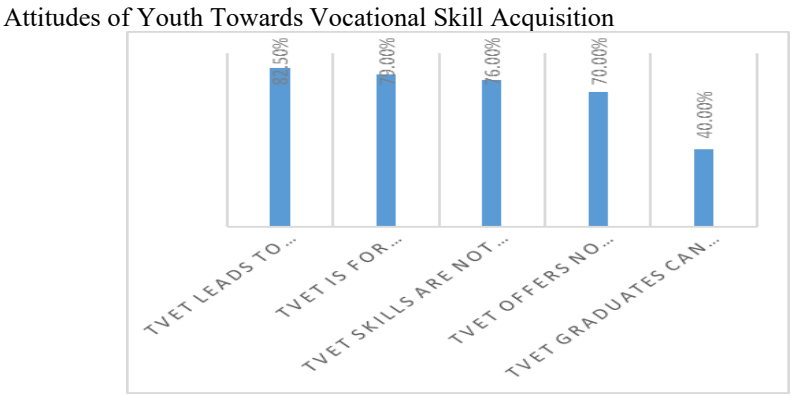

Figure 6: Cognitive Beliefs About TVET (Agree/Strongly Agree, N=200)

Source; Fieldwork (2025)

Cognitive attitudes are predominantly negative. Over three-quarters believe TVET is for the academically weak (79%) and leads to low-status, low-pay work (82.5%). A strong majority (76%) feel the skills are socially disrespected, and 70% see it as a dead end. The only moderately positive belief—that TVET can lead to entrepreneurship—was held by only 40%. This reveals a cognitive schema dominated by limitations rather than opportunities. The belief structure rationalises the avoidance of TVET, making negative attitudes a logical, defended position rather than a simple lack of information.

Table 9: Affective (Emotional) Responses to TVET (N=200)

Emotional Association with TVET Choice	Frequency	Percentage
Shame/Embarrassment	130	65.0%
Fear of Regret/Wasting Time	115	57.5%
Anxiety about Family Reaction	105	52.5%
Pride/Confidence in choosing a skilled trade	45	22.5%
Indifference	30	15.0%

Source; Fieldwork (2025)

The emotional landscape is dominated by negative affect. Shame and embarrassment are the most common feelings (65%), powerfully inhibiting action. Fear of making a wrong investment of time (57.5%) and anxiety about family disapproval (52.5%) create significant psychological barriers. In contrast, only 22.5% associated TVET with pride or confidence. This affective dimension is crucial; even if cognitive beliefs could be shifted with facts, the deep-seated feelings of shame and anxiety may persist, acting as a stronger deterrent to behaviour change. Emotions, not just logic, drive the shunning of TVET.

Table 10: Behavioural Intentions Towards TVET (N=200)

Intention Scenario	Yes, Would Enrol	No, Would Not Enrol
If a close friend recommended it	35%	65%
If a parent approved/supported it	40%	60%
If guaranteed a job after training	70%	30%
If training centre had modern facilities	65%	35%

Source; Fieldwork (2025)

Behavioural intentions are conditional and reveal leverage points. Social influence (friend/parent approval) only shifts a minority (35-40%). However, concrete guarantees about outcomes dramatically change intentions: a job guarantee would persuade 70% to enrol, and modern facilities would persuade 65%. This indicates that while social stigma is a powerful barrier, it can potentially be overridden by tangible evidence of quality and successful labour market integration. Youth are pragmatically risk-averse; they are not opposed to skilled work per se, but to what they perceive as a high-risk, low-reward pathway.

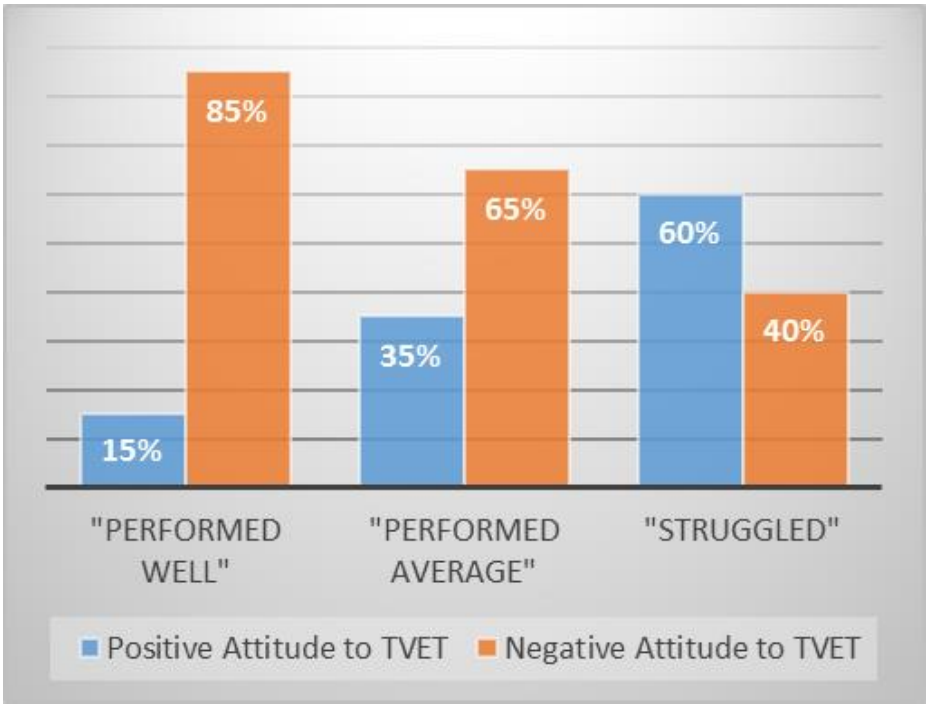

Figure 7: Attitude by Previous Academic Performance (Self-Reported)

Source; Fieldwork (2025)

Attitude is inversely related to academic self-concept. Those who believed they performed well in school were most negative towards TVET (85% negative), likely seeing it as beneath their achieved status. Those who struggled academically were most positive (60% positive), viewing it as a viable alternative. This correlation reinforces the stereotype of TVET as a refuge for academic failure. It creates a systemic problem: the youth who are most positive may lack the foundational skills to succeed, while those with stronger academics—who could elevate the sector's prestige—are the most dismissive.

The emotional weight of shame was palpable. (M, 25) confessed, "I would feel small. My younger brother is at university. How would I explain that I am at a trade's school? Even if I learn a good skill, the shame would be there first." This illustrates how attitudes are comparative and embedded in family dynamics.

Cognitive beliefs were often expressed through metaphors of confinement. (F, 21) said, "TVET is like a small room. You go in a carpenter, you come out a carpenter. University is a big field—you can go many ways." This belief in limited mobility and intellectual growth is a core component of the negative cognitive schema.

However, interviews with the minority holding positive attitudes revealed a different narrative. (M, 28), a motorcycle repair apprentice, argued: "People respect what you can do. When I fix a bike others failed to fix, they pay me and say 'thank you, expert.'

That is better respect than a university graduate who is just sitting at home." His attitude is rooted in demonstrated competence and immediate social utility.

The conditional nature of intentions was clear. (M, 23) stated, "If I knew that after finishing I would get a job with Zesco [power utility] or in the mines, I would go today, and I would not care who laughs. But they don't promise that. They just give you a certificate and say good luck." This highlights the critical link between attitudes and trust in the system's ability to deliver secure outcomes.

V. Conclusion and Recommendations

Discussion of Findings

This study's finding that only 32.5% of youth possessed comprehensive awareness of TVET programmes aligns with the global literature on information asymmetry in rural education (Watson, 2014). However, the dominance of informal information channels (peers and family) over formal ones (teachers, media) underscores a context-specific failure of knowledge mobilisation (Levin, 2013). Unlike studies from urban settings where digital media plays a larger role (Aker & Mbiti, 2010), the rural digital divide in these constituencies forces reliance on social networks that are often conduits of stigma rather than accurate information.

The identification of social stigma as the paramount barrier (80%) powerfully resonates with historical analyses of TVET in Africa (Foster, 1965; Hitti & O'Gorman, 2004). This finding confirms that the colonial legacy of associating manual labour with low status remains a living, active force in youth decision-making. It extends the work of Bogonko (1992) and Ijaiya (1998) by quantifying its prevalence in a specific Zambian rural context, demonstrating that stigma is not a fading relic but a primary contemporary deterrent.

The hierarchy of barriers, where stigma and quality perceptions outweigh direct financial costs, challenges a core assumption of the CDF bursary policy. This supports Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964) in a nuanced way: youth are rational actors, but their cost-benefit analysis includes heavy social and reputational costs. The bursary addresses only the monetary cost, leaving the larger perceived 'costs' of shame and wasted time untouched, rendering the financial incentive largely ineffective.

The strong negative perception of TVET institutional quality (e.g., 85% citing outdated equipment) mirrors concerns raised in regional reviews (World Bank, 2019; Oketch, 2007). This finding validates the concept of a "low-quality equilibrium." When youth perceive training as obsolete, they logically reject it, which lowers demand and justifies continued underinvestment by authorities, perpetuating the cycle. This creates a critical implementation gap between national policy aspirations and local institutional realities. The gendered nature of barriers substantiates feminist critiques of TVET systems (Chisamya et al., 2012). The significantly higher parental disapproval and acute safety concerns for young women reveal how gender norms actively police vocational pathways. This goes beyond general stigma to create a dual exclusion: women are discouraged from TVET generally and are actively barred from many technical trades,

severely limiting their economic empowerment and reinforcing occupational segregation.

The finding that attitudes are inversely related to academic self-concept critically informs the stigma discussion. It confirms the stereotype of TVET as a refuge for "academic failure," a perception that alienates high-achieving youth who could elevate the sector's status. This creates a perverse selection where those most inclined to enroll may lack strong foundational skills, potentially affecting programme outcomes and further damaging TVET's reputation—a dynamic noted by scholars of educational stratification (Dore, 1976).

The conditional behavioural intentions—where job guarantees and modern facilities would dramatically increase enrolment—offer a crucial insight for intervention. This suggests that youth are not intrinsically opposed to skilled work but are highly risk-averse due to a lack of trust in the TVET system's outcomes. This aligns with Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent et al., 1994), which posits that outcome expectations are key; if expectations are poor, self-efficacy and interest become irrelevant.

The negative perception of the CDF bursary's application process as bureaucratic and unfair (cited by 84.6% of aware youth) introduces a novel, policy-specific barrier. This extends the literature on financial aid, which typically focuses on amount and availability (Penrose, 2005), to highlight how administrative design can undermine policy goals. Procedural complexity and perceptions of nepotism can erode trust and act as a filter that deters applications before financial aid can even be accessed.

The powerful correlation between information source and attitude reinforces Bandura's (1977) social learning theory. When TVET information is filtered through family and peers with negative views, it reproduces those views. Conversely, positive messaging from authoritative figures like teachers can foster positive attitudes. This highlights the need to shift from broad awareness campaigns to strategic communication that leverages and amplifies positive local influencers.

The affective dimension of attitudes—dominant feelings of shame and anxiety—provides a deeper explanation for low participation beyond cognitive beliefs. This emotional component, often under-researched in TVET studies, is critical. As Zajonc (1980) argued, affective reactions can precede and override cognitive reasoning. The pervasive shame associated with TVET choices is thus a powerful, non-rational barrier that information-based interventions alone cannot easily dismantle.

From a Systems Theory perspective (Bertalanffy, 1974), the findings illustrate a systemic failure. The CDF bursary (a financial input) is introduced into a system where other crucial components—positive cultural attitudes (environmental input), efficient administrative processes (transformation), and quality training leading to good jobs (output)—are malfunctioning. The system cannot produce the desired output (skilled youth) because the transformation process is corrupted by stigma and poor quality, nullifying the new financial input.

The study's mixed-methods approach allowed these dynamics to be fully unpacked. The quantitative data established the scale and hierarchy of barriers, while the qualitative narratives gave voice to the lived experience of stigma, the frustration with bureaucracy, and the pragmatic calculations youth make. This integration answers the call for more nuanced, explanatory research that moves beyond descriptive surveys (McGrath, 2012).

In comparing these findings to global models, the stark contrast with dual-system countries (Brockmann et al., 2011) is evident. There, employer integration and clear career pathways mitigate stigma and quality concerns. In Kasenengwa and Chipangali, the absence of these systemic features leaves stigma unchallenged. This underscores that policy transfer is not about copying bursaries, but about building the entire ecosystem of trust, quality, and employer engagement.

The research also highlights a critical disconnect between the formal TVET system and the informal rural economy. Many youth perceived TVET as preparing for urban, formal jobs that are scarce, while their immediate economic environment is informal and agrarian. This mismatch reduces perceived relevance, a finding that aligns with critiques of TVET in developing economies (Allais, 2012). Training must be contextualised to local economic realities to be seen as valuable.

Finally, the study addresses the identified research gap regarding the intersection of financial aid and non-financial barriers. It demonstrates conclusively that in this context, removing tuition fees is a necessary but grossly insufficient condition for improving participation. The CDF bursary, while a well-intentioned policy, operates in a vacuum unless accompanied by concerted efforts to dismantle stigma, improve quality, and build trust in outcomes.

Conclusion

This study set out to investigate the paradoxical reluctance of youth to enroll in vocational training programmes in Kasenengwa and Chipangali constituencies despite the availability of a full government bursary. The evidence presents a clear and multifaceted explanation. A profound information deficit exists, with most youth receiving incomplete or negatively biased information about TVET through informal family and peer networks rather than authoritative sources. This lack of accurate awareness is the first hurdle, preventing many from even fairly considering the opportunity.

The most powerful deterrent, however, is the deep and pervasive social stigma attached to vocational work. This stigma, a legacy of historical colonial structures, manifests as a fear of being labelled an academic failure and suffering a loss of social standing. It creates a significant social and psychological cost that the financial benefit of the bursary cannot offset. Young people face immense pressure from family and peers to pursue academic university pathways, which are perceived as the only route to respect and success.

Closely linked to stigma is a widespread and entrenched negative perception of the quality and relevance of TVET institutions. Youth overwhelmingly believe that training

centres are poorly equipped with outdated tools, offer curricula disconnected from the modern job market, and are staffed by underqualified instructors. They see a lack of formal links to employers, making the pathway from training to secure employment seem uncertain and risky. The bursary, in this light, is seen as funding a potentially worthless endeavor.

While the CDF bursary removes tuition fees, it leaves substantial indirect costs unaddressed. Expenses for transportation, materials, tools, and foregone income or labour pose prohibitive barriers for youth from low-income, predominantly subsistence-farming households. Furthermore, the application process for the bursary itself is perceived as complex, bureaucratic, and potentially unfair, creating a significant deterrent that undermines trust in the mechanism before enrolment can even be considered.

The barriers are distinctly gendered, imposing a double burden on young women. They face stronger parental disapproval, heightened concerns about physical safety when travelling or training in male-dominated spaces, and the threat of harassment in non-traditional trades. These factors not only reduce overall female participation but also confine those who do participate to a narrow range of socially approved "feminine" fields, limiting their economic potential.

Attitudes towards vocational skill acquisition are predominantly negative, composed of detrimental cognitive beliefs, powerful negative emotions, and low behavioural intentions. Most youth believe TVET leads to low-pay, low-status jobs with no advancement and is only suitable for those who performed poorly in school. Emotionally, the choice is associated with feelings of shame, embarrassment, and anxiety about social judgment and future regret.

Crucially, these attitudes are not fixed but are conditional. Youth expressed a pragmatic willingness to enrol if concrete conditions were met: if a job was guaranteed upon completion, or if training centres were visibly modern and well-connected to industry. This indicates that the resistance is not to skilled work itself, but to the high perceived risk and low perceived reward associated with the current TVET system as they understand it.

The CDF bursary, therefore, operates in isolation. It is a single policy instrument attempting to solve a multidimensional, systemic problem. It addresses the financial barrier but is overwhelmed by the stronger forces of socio-cultural stigma, perceived institutional ineffectiveness, and logistical hurdles. Without complementary interventions targeting these deeper issues, the bursary's potential to transform enrolment rates will remain largely unrealised.

The study concludes that the low uptake of TVET despite the bursary is a rational response by youth to the signals they receive from their environment. The stigma communicated by society, the poor quality signaled by training institutions, and the bureaucratic complexity of the bursary process collectively communicate that vocational training is a high-risk, low-status, and cumbersome path. Youth are making sensible choices based on this available information.

Ultimately, transforming TVET participation requires a fundamental shift in its social value proposition. This goes beyond marketing or bursaries. It requires demonstrable proof of quality through investment in infrastructure and instructor training. It requires building trustworthy bridges to employment through apprenticeships and formal employer partnerships. It requires community engagement to shift narratives and celebrate vocational success stories.

The systemic failure identified calls for a systemic solution. Policymakers must move from a singular focus on financial access to a holistic strategy that simultaneously attacks stigma, guarantees quality, ensures relevance, and simplifies access. Institutions must actively rebrand themselves as centres of technical excellence and innovation, not last resorts. Communities, including parents and traditional leaders, must be engaged as partners in reshaping perceptions.

In essence, the CDF bursary is a necessary but insufficient tool. For it to become effective, it must be embedded within a broader ecosystem of change that makes vocational training a visibly respectable, qualitatively sound, and economically reliable choice. The task is not merely to fund training slots but to rebuild the entire chain of trust—from the first piece of information a youth receives, through the quality of the training experience, to the dignity and success of the graduate in the community. Until this holistic transformation is undertaken, youth in constituencies like Kasenengwa and Chipangali will continue to shun vocational training, and a critical opportunity for skills-based development will be lost.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:
Design targeted, multi-channel awareness campaigns that utilise community radio, local leaders, and school career days. Messaging must move beyond announcing the bursary to showcase successful local TVET graduates, detail specific high-potential trades, and explain the tangible economic benefits and entrepreneurial pathways.

Integrate mandatory, practical career guidance into the secondary school curriculum, facilitated by trained counsellors or external TVET ambassadors. This should include visits to TVET centres, talks from artisans and technicians, and tools for skills aptitude assessment to present TVET as a positive, informed choice.

Simplify the application process by creating clear, standardised guidelines and checklists. Decentralise application points to ward level and implement a transparent, merit-based selection system with published criteria and outcomes to build trust and reduce perceptions of bias.

Review the CDF bursary to include subsidies or full coverage for critical indirect costs, particularly transportation and essential toolkits for needier students, transforming it from a tuition-only grant to a comprehensive support package.

Launch a coordinated government and private sector initiative to upgrade workshops, laboratories, and equipment in TVET institutions to modern standards. This "quality visibility" is essential to change perceptions and improve training outcomes.

Establish continuous professional development programmes for TVET instructors, focusing on both pedagogical skills and regular industry immersion to ensure they are teaching current, market-relevant technologies and practices.

Mandate and facilitate formal partnerships between TVET institutions and local businesses, agriculture cooperatives, and industries. Develop structured apprenticeship and work-placement programmes to provide practical experience and create direct pipelines to employment.

Involve local employers and community representatives in curriculum review committees to ensure training programmes align with the economic opportunities and skill needs of the Eastern Province and similar rural economies.

Develop and enforce policies to make TVET institutions safer and more inclusive for women. This includes providing safe transport or accommodation options, ensuring gender-sensitive facilities, offering scholarships for women in non-traditional trades, and conducting community sensitisation to reduce gendered stigma.

Undertake a coordinated national campaign to rebrand TVET as "Career and Technical Education," highlighting its role in innovation, technology, and entrepreneurship. Use media to profile high-achieving technicians and vocational entrepreneurs as national role models.

Develop clear, formal pathways that allow graduates from certificate-level TVET programmes to progress to diploma and degree levels within the national education framework, dismantling the "dead-end" perception.
Actively involve chiefs, headmen, and religious leaders in championing TVET. Their public endorsement and participation in launching programmes can significantly influence community norms and reduce stigma.

: Create systems to track TVET graduate outcomes and provide post-training support, such as business start-up kits, access to microfinance, and job placement services, to demonstrate successful outcomes and improve the programme's credibility.
Introduce basic practical skills, design technology, and entrepreneurship education as compulsory elements in upper primary and junior secondary school to cultivate positive attitudes towards manual and technical work from a young age.

The Ministry of Education and TEVETA should commission similar diagnostic studies in other rural constituencies to understand local variations in barriers and design context-specific interventions, moving away from a one-size-fits-all national policy approach.

Future Studies
Future research should build upon the limitations and findings of this study. A longitudinal study tracking a cohort of youth who receive the reformed CDF bursary and supportive interventions (e.g., enhanced career guidance, improved facilities) would be invaluable. Such a study could measure changes in enrolment rates, attitudes over time, and, critically, the long-term employment and income outcomes of graduates

compared to their academic-track peers. This would provide the hard evidence needed to definitively assess the return on investment in TVET and further combat stigma with data.

Additionally, research is needed to explore the perspectives of other critical stakeholders omitted from this youth-centric study. Investigations focusing on parents, employers, TVET instructors, and local policy implementers would provide a 360-degree view of the TVET ecosystem. Understanding parental decision-making rationales, employer willingness to hire and pay TVET graduates, and the challenges faced by instructors could reveal further leverage points for systemic intervention and provide a more complete picture for holistic policy formulation.

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