

Historical Reconstruction of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) in Kenya (1965–2025): From Village Polytechnics to the Kenya School of TVET

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Abstract

Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) remains pivotal to Kenya's socio-economic transformation, youth employability, and industrial growth. This paper reconstructs and critically examines the historical evolution of Kenya's TVET system from 1965 to 2025, tracing its progression from community-driven village polytechnics to a nationally coordinated, competency-based framework under the Kenya School of TVET (KSTVET). Grounded in Human Capital Theory and the Skills Ecosystem Approach, the study employs a historical-analytical methodology integrating Orodho's (1984) seminal analysis of the Maseno Youth Polytechnic with subsequent policy reviews, national development plans, and institutional archives. The inquiry delineates four interconnected phases of transformation: the foundational era (1965–1979), institutional expansion (1980–1999), reform and quality assurance (2000–2012), and modernization through competency-based and digital innovations (2013–2025). Findings reveal that despite significant gains in access, inclusivity, and quality enhancement, persistent challenges remain in governance efficiency, sustainable financing, trainer professionalization, and responsiveness to emerging labour market demands. The study underscores that Kenya's TVET sector can achieve its full transformative potential only through an integrated policy framework that consolidates governance, diversifies funding, strengthens industry partnerships, and embeds green and digital competencies. Aligning TVET reforms with Kenya's Vision 2030, the African Union's Agenda 2063, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will be critical for positioning TVET as a driver of equitable, innovation-led, and sustainable industrial growth in the 21st century.

Keywords: Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET); Historical Development; Competency-Based Education; Governance and Industry Linkages; Sustainable Skills Ecosystems; Policy Reform

DOI: 10.7176/RHSS/15-9-02

Publication date: October 30th 2025

1.0. INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

1.1. Contextual Background

The importance of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) in Kenya cannot be overstated, as it serves as a cornerstone for national development, youth empowerment, and economic growth (Orodho, 2022). Historically, Kenya's roots in vocational training trace back to indigenous African communities, where functional education—comprising apprenticeship and skill transmission—was central to survival, craftsmanship, and community responsibilities (Court, 1974). Sheffield (1967) emphasized that "African societies maintained their own systems of vocational training long before the advent of colonial formal schooling," highlighting that the foundation of Kenya's technical education was deeply cultural and pragmatic, rooted in community needs and everyday life (Court, 1974; Sheffield, 1967).

In recent decades, empirical evidence demonstrates that robust TVET systems contribute significantly to a country's sustainable development. According to a report on improving technical and vocational training in Kenya, well-structured TVET programs are essential for developing human capital, reducing youth unemployment, and fostering economic resilience. These programs are critical because they bridge skills gaps, align training with industry demands, and promote lifelong learning, thus directly impacting productivity and innovation (Kenya Vision 2030, 2008; Republic of Kenya, 2024). Furthermore, research shows that countries with strong TVET frameworks, such as Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan, experience higher rates of youth employment and economic growth, illustrating Kenya's potential to achieve similar outcomes if reforms are supported by quality standards and industry collaboration (World Bank, 2020).

In Kenya, TVET's role extends from fostering individual employability to contributing to broader socio-economic goals. It offers practical, demand-driven training that enhances workforce skills, promotes entrepreneurship, and empowers marginalized groups, including women, who are targeted to acquire relevant skills for immediate labour market needs (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2024; Kenya TVET Authority, 2025). The sector is increasingly recognized as vital for realizing Kenya's development ambitions, especially as the government aligns TVET with strategies like the Kenya Vision 2030, emphasizing technological innovation and employment creation. Overall, the evolution of Kenya's TVET reflects a growing acknowledgment that technical education is not merely a complementary pathway but a central driver of inclusive and sustainable economic transformation.

Following independence in 1963, Kenya faced a critical policy dilemma: how to reconcile an inherited academic education system with the growing demand for employable skills. The early post-independence period was characterized by rapid expansion of primary and secondary education, leading to an increasing number of school leavers who lacked relevant skills for either wage employment or self-employment (Republic of Kenya, 1964). The National Christian Council of Kenya (NCCCK) drew national attention to this crisis through its landmark 1965 conference titled *After School, What?* (Orodho, 1984). The conference underscored the widening gap between formal education and gainful employment, calling for a paradigm shift toward practical, community-based training that would enable youth to become self-reliant rural entrepreneurs.

In response, the Government of Kenya recognized that the majority of its youth would depend on opportunities in the rural and informal economy, particularly in agriculture, small-scale industry, and craft-based enterprises. Consequently, the government sought to reform education to align more closely with the employment structure and developmental needs of the nation. This effort was spearheaded by a high-level national conference convened by the University College, Nairobi (then affiliated with Makerere University) and funded by the Ford Foundation and Dulverton Trust. The outcome was the Kericho Conference on Education, Employment, and Rural Development, held between September and October 1966 (Sheffield, 1967). The conference was a watershed moment in Kenya's educational planning, articulating for the first time the linkage between education, employment, and rural transformation.

The Kericho Conference Report (Sheffield, 1967) emphasized that "education must be designed to serve the needs of the many, not the few," arguing for a system that integrates practical training, local resource utilization, and productive work. This recommendation directly informed the establishment of village polytechnics in the late 1960s—a movement that sought to provide rural youth with technical and entrepreneurial skills while promoting local development through self-help (Orodho, 1984; Youth Development Division, 1969). These institutions were rooted in Kenya's Harambee philosophy, reflecting the communal spirit of self-reliance that underpinned early national development efforts (Republic of Kenya, 1970).

However, as Psacharopoulos (1997) later observed, many African countries, including Kenya, struggled to balance the dual objectives of providing basic education and promoting employable technical skills. In Kenya's case, the early vocational initiatives—though innovative and community-driven—were constrained by inadequate resources, limited instructor training, and weak linkages to industry. Despite these challenges, the village polytechnic model became a cornerstone of Kenya's educational innovation, representing an indigenous response to unemployment, underemployment, and the search for equitable development (Orodho, 1984; World Bank, 1990).

By the mid-1970s, the government had institutionalized the philosophy of practical and technical education through various policy documents, culminating in the Gachathi Report (Republic of Kenya, 1976), which called for greater integration of vocational training within the national education system. These early reforms set the stage for subsequent TVET transformations under the Mackay (1981), Kamunge (1988), and Sessional Paper No. 1 (2005) policy frameworks, ultimately leading to the competency-based and digitally enhanced TVET ecosystem anchored by the Kenya School of TVET (KSTVET) established in 2021.

Thus, Kenya's TVET journey represents more than a series of policy reforms—it reflects a progressive adaptation of education to economic realities, social aspirations, and technological change. As Orodho (1984) aptly noted, "the village polytechnic movement was not merely an educational innovation; it was a development strategy—linking learning to living, and training to transformation."

1.2. Problem Statement

Ideally, a well-functioning Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) system should serve as a dynamic engine for national industrialization, innovation, and inclusive economic growth. It should produce a skilled, adaptive, and employable workforce capable of responding to evolving labour market needs while advancing Kenya's Vision 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In such a system, strong governance structures, sustainable financing, and robust linkages with industry and communities would ensure continuous curriculum relevance, quality assurance, and equitable access.

However, despite six decades of continuous reform efforts, Kenya's TVET sector has struggled to attain this ideal. The historical shift from community-based village polytechnics to centralized national institutions has often prioritized structural expansion over functional effectiveness. Persistent challenges—including fragmented governance frameworks, inadequate and unsustainable financing mechanisms, weak public-private partnerships, and limited industry engagement—have hindered the system's responsiveness to market and technological changes. The mismatch between TVET training outputs and labour market demands has resulted in underemployment, skills gaps, and reduced competitiveness of graduates. Furthermore, inconsistencies in quality assurance and trainer professionalization continue to undermine institutional credibility. Consequently, Kenya's TVET system remains constrained in fulfilling its transformative potential as a driver of human capital development, innovation, and sustainable socio-economic transformation.

1.3. Justification and Significance of the Study

The persistent disconnect between Kenya's Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) system and the evolving labour market underscores the need for a comprehensive, historically grounded analysis of the sector's developmental trajectory. While numerous reform initiatives—ranging from the introduction of village polytechnics in the 1960s to the establishment of the Kenya School of TVET (KSTVET) and adoption of Competency-Based Education and Training (CBET)—have sought to realign TVET with national development priorities, limited scholarly attention has been given to tracing how policy shifts, institutional arrangements, and economic transformations have shaped its performance over time. This study, therefore, fills a critical knowledge gap by reconstructing the historical continuum of TVET reforms in Kenya from 1965 to 2025, identifying structural strengths, policy discontinuities, and emerging opportunities for modernization.

The study's significance lies in its potential to inform policy and practice by generating evidence-based insights for enhancing governance coherence, financing sustainability, and industry collaboration. By anchoring the analysis in Human Capital Theory and the Skills Ecosystem Approach, the study contributes to both theoretical advancement and applied reform design. Its findings are expected to guide the Ministry of Education, TVET Authority, KSTVET, development partners, and private sector actors in developing a more integrated, responsive, and innovation-oriented TVET framework. Ultimately, the research provides a policy-relevant blueprint for repositioning Kenya's TVET system as a strategic pillar for inclusive industrial growth, youth empowerment, and sustainable development.

1.4 Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study is to reconstruct the historical evolution of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) in Kenya from 1965 to 2025, with a focus on how changing socio-economic contexts, policy orientations, and institutional frameworks have shaped its philosophy, governance, financing, and industry linkages. The study aims to provide an evidence-based understanding of TVET's transformation from community-driven village polytechnics to a nationally integrated, competency-based system anchored by the Kenya School of TVET (KSTVET).

Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. **Trace** the origins and growth of village polytechnics as grassroots innovations for rural development (1965–1980).

2. **Examine** the institutional expansion and policy consolidation of formal TVET under national education frameworks (1980–1999).
3. **Analyze** the reform era emphasizing employability, quality assurance, and responsiveness to labor market needs (2000–2012).
4. **Explore** the modernization and digital transformation of TVET through the adoption of competency-based education and the establishment of KSTVET (2013–2025).
5. **Recommend** strategic interventions to strengthen TVET governance, diversify financing mechanisms, and deepen linkages between training institutions and industry for sustainable national development.

1.5 Theoretical Framework

The historical evolution of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) in Kenya can be comprehensively understood through two complementary theoretical lenses: Human Capital Theory and the Skills Ecosystem Approach. Together, these frameworks illuminate both the economic rationale for investing in vocational education and the socio-institutional dynamics that underpin sustainable skill formation across six decades of reform.

Human Capital Theory

Human Capital Theory, advanced by Schultz (1961) and Becker (1964), posits that education and training enhance individuals' productive capacities, thereby improving their earning potential and contributing to national economic growth. This theoretical orientation provided the intellectual foundation for Kenya's post-independence investment in education and vocational training. It emphasized that the expansion of access to relevant, market-oriented skills was essential for economic modernization, employment generation, and rural development.

Within this framework, the Ominde Commission of 1964 and the Kericho Conference of 1966 underscored the need to align education with national development priorities (Sheffield, 1967; Orodho, 1984). The establishment of village polytechnics in the late 1960s embodied this ideal—an innovative attempt to equip school leavers with practical skills for self-reliance and local enterprise development. As Psacharopoulos and Patrinos (2018) affirm, Human Capital Theory continues to guide investment in education and training globally, though its scope has expanded beyond individual productivity to encompass social equity, innovation, and lifelong learning.

In contemporary Kenya, this theoretical orientation remains salient. Policy instruments such as the TVET Act (2013) and Sessional Paper No. 1 of 2019 on Education and Training reaffirm the human capital logic by situating technical and vocational skills at the core of Vision 2030 and the Bottom-Up Economic Transformation Agenda (BETA). Human Capital Theory, therefore, provides an enduring explanatory base for understanding Kenya's sustained prioritization of TVET as a driver of inclusive and innovation-led growth.

The Skills Ecosystem Approach

While Human Capital Theory elucidates the economic justification for TVET, the Skills Ecosystem Approach (Finegold, 1999; Buchanan et al., 2001; Hall & Lansbury, 2006) offers a systems-level perspective that situates skill formation within networks of institutions, industries, and social actors. This approach argues that vocational education outcomes depend not only on individual competencies but also on the strength of linkages among education providers, employers, policy agencies, and communities.

Applied to Kenya's context, the Skills Ecosystem Approach is instrumental in analyzing the transition from village polytechnics to modern TVET institutions such as the Kenya School of TVET (KSTVET). This transition reflects the emergence of a broader ecosystem involving government agencies—such as TVETA, CUE, and KNQA—alongside development partners and private industry actors. Collectively, these stakeholders influence curriculum design, quality assurance, apprenticeship systems, and financing mechanisms that determine the responsiveness of TVET to labor market dynamics.

As Wheelahan, Buchanan, and Yu (2015) contend, robust skills ecosystems require institutions that can continuously adapt to technological and industrial transformation. Kenya's adoption of Competency-Based

Education and Training (CBET) and integration of digital learning innovations illustrate this adaptive capacity, signalling a shift from supply-driven to demand-driven training models. Furthermore, recent reports by the OECD (2021) and African Union (2020) highlight that the effectiveness of TVET reform in Africa increasingly depends on localized ecosystems that connect employers, trainers, and communities to ensure relevance and sustainability. Kenya's National Skills Development Policy (2019) echoes this principle by promoting multi-stakeholder partnerships in skills governance and delivery.

Application to the Current Study

This study integrates Human Capital Theory and the Skills Ecosystem Approach to interpret the historical and institutional evolution of Kenya's TVET system from 1965 to 2025.

- Human Capital Theory explains the early post-independence rationale for introducing vocational training as an engine for economic growth, employment creation, and self-reliance. It contextualizes policy milestones such as the establishment of village polytechnics, technical training institutes, and national polytechnics.
- The Skills Ecosystem Approach provides a contemporary analytical lens for understanding the transformation of TVET through competency-based education, industry partnerships, and digital innovation, culminating in the establishment of KSTVET as a centre of excellence for trainer development and system coordination.

By combining these two theoretical perspectives, the study captures both the economic logic and the institutional complexity of Kenya's TVET transformation. This integration reveals how policy evolution, community participation, and industry collaboration have interacted to sustain human capital development and position TVET as a strategic pillar for inclusive socio-economic transformation.

2.0 METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

2.1. Research Design and Orientation

This study adopts a historical–documentary research design, integrating both qualitative and quantitative techniques to reconstruct the evolution of Kenya's Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) system from 1965 to 2025. Historical research, as Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2018) note, “seeks to understand the present in light of the past and to inform possible futures through critical reflection on continuity and change” (p. 205). This orientation enables the study to capture policy shifts, institutional developments, and socio-economic transformations that have defined the TVET trajectory over six decades.

The design is grounded in the logic of contextual interpretation and chronological synthesis, which are key attributes of educational historiography. As Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2016) emphasize, historical inquiry “moves beyond mere description to offer analytical narratives that situate events within broader ideological and structural transformations” (p. 152). In this spirit, the present study combines archival, policy, and statistical analysis to provide an integrated reconstruction of Kenya's TVET development within the country's changing governance and development paradigms (Orodho, , Nzabwirwa, Odundo , Waweru & Ndayambaje,2016; Orodho, Ampofo, Bizimana & Ndayambaje,2016).

2.2. Data Sources and Scope

The reconstruction draws upon both primary and secondary documentary sources, encompassing government reports, policy papers, and academic studies spanning the post-independence period to the contemporary era. Foundational materials include the Kericho Conference Report (Sheffield, 1967), Youth Development Division Reports (1969, 1976), and seminal policy documents such as Sessional Paper No. 10 of 1965 on *African Socialism and Its Application to Planning in Kenya*, alongside Ministry of Education Reports from the 1970s and 1980s.

Central to this analysis is Orodho's (1984) pioneering master's thesis, *The Role of Village Polytechnics in the Socio-Economic Development of Rural Areas in Western Kenya: The Case of Maseno Youth Polytechnic*, which

provides an empirical foundation for understanding the early philosophy and implementation of village polytechnics as instruments of rural transformation. The study also references Orodho et al. (2016), which reinforces the value of empirical grounding in policy evolution and contextual understanding.

Complementary contemporary sources include Sessional Paper No. 1 of 2005, the Constitution of Kenya (2010), the TVET Act (2013), and strategic reports from TVETA, KNQA, and the Kenya School of TVET (KSTVET). These were triangulated with scholarly works, donor reviews (UNESCO, 2018; World Bank, 2021), and quantitative datasets from the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS) to examine both policy evolution and institutional performance.

2.3 Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Data collection followed a systematic documentary review protocol involving the identification, selection, evaluation, and interpretation of policy and archival materials (Bowen, 2009). Each document was assessed for authenticity, credibility, representativeness, and meaning—the four classical criteria for historical source evaluation (Scott, 1990). Archival records were accessed through the Ministry of Education, TVETA, and KSTVET repositories, with supplementary quantitative data extracted from national education statistics (Orodho, Khatete & Mugiraneza, 2016).

Thematically, the study examined the evolution of policy rationales, governance mechanisms, financing patterns, and industry linkages. Quantitative data on enrolment, staffing, and institutional expansion were synthesized into trend analyses (see Table 1). Qualitative interpretation drew upon contextual triangulation, linking documentary evidence with interpretive commentary to construct an integrated understanding of the TVET system's evolution (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

2.4 Credibility, Trustworthiness, and Limitations

Credibility and trustworthiness were established through data triangulation, cross-verification, and methodological transparency. The inclusion of longitudinal data sources—ranging from Orodho's (1984) field-based study to recent TVET Authority reports—ensured both historical depth and contemporary validity. As Lincoln and Guba (1985) advise, trustworthiness in qualitative and historical inquiry depends on “dependability, confirmability, and authenticity,” achieved here through systematic cross-referencing and interpretive rigor. Nonetheless, archival limitations were encountered, including missing or incomplete records from early village polytechnics and inconsistencies in statistical reporting formats. These were mitigated through comparative interpretation and corroborative referencing, following Scott's (1990) criteria for reconstructing partial historical records.

2.5 Ethical and Interpretive Considerations

Given its reliance on documentary materials, the study strictly adhered to the principles of ethical scholarship, emphasizing accurate citation, faithful interpretation, and acknowledgment of original authorship to ensure academic integrity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Every policy document, report, and scholarly source was analysed and cited transparently to respect intellectual ownership and to maintain verifiability of interpretations. The interpretive stance guiding this inquiry aligns with constructivist and transformative paradigms (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Orodho, 2009, 2017), both of which assert that the reconstruction of educational history is inherently value-laden and context-dependent. Constructivism holds that knowledge is co-constructed through engagement with texts and contexts, while the transformative paradigm emphasizes the role of inquiry in challenging dominant narratives and illuminating pathways for equity, empowerment, and systemic change. This orientation is particularly pertinent in studying Kenya's Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) system, whose evolution has been shaped by ideological, political, and socio-economic forces.

As Patton (2015) emphasizes, qualitative inquiry “seeks not neutrality but fairness, balance, and depth of understanding” (p. 64). In this sense, the researcher's role is not to offer a detached chronicle of events, but to interpret the underlying meanings, tensions, and reform trajectories within Kenya's TVET landscape. The study, therefore, sought to critically interrogate how shifts in governance, curriculum, and policy reflect broader struggles between centralization and community participation, or between expansion and quality assurance. Additionally, reflexivity was maintained throughout the analytical process by acknowledging the researcher's

positionality—as both a scholar and participant in Kenya’s education system—and how this may influence interpretation. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), such reflexive awareness enhances authenticity and trustworthiness, enabling the researcher to represent multiple perspectives fairly while recognizing the dynamic interplay between data, interpretation, and social meaning. Ultimately, this ethical-interpretive approach enabled the study to move beyond mere description toward a critical, historically grounded synthesis—revealing how TVET reforms mirror Kenya’s broader developmental aspirations and ideological transformations over six decades.

3.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. The Foundational Era (1965–1979): Village Polytechnics and the Ethos of Self-Reliance

The roots of vocational and technical education in Kenya stretch back to indigenous pre-colonial systems, where youth acquired practical skills through apprenticeship and community-based learning. However, the formalization of vocational training as a structured educational pathway began in the immediate post-independence period, when concerns about rising youth unemployment prompted a national rethinking of education’s purpose.

In 1965, the National Christian Council of Kenya (NCKK) convened a landmark conference titled *After School What?*, which brought national attention to the plight of school leavers unable to find gainful employment (Orodho, 1984). The meeting underscored the mismatch between academic education and the realities of Kenya’s largely agrarian economy. Delegates advocated for a system that would equip young people with practical, locally relevant skills to enable them to become self-employed and productive in rural areas.

Responding to these concerns, the Government of Kenya initiated a series of consultations aimed at aligning education with national development priorities. Later that year, the government tasked Nairobi University College (then affiliated with Makerere University) to organize a national conference on *Education, Employment, and Rural Development*. Supported by the Ford Foundation and the Dulverton Trust, the conference planning began in January 1966 and culminated in the Kericho Conference held between September 25 and October 1, 1966 (Sheffield, 1967).

The Kericho Conference became a watershed moment in Kenya’s educational policy history. It introduced the concept of village polytechnics (VPs)—low-cost, community-based training centres designed to provide primary school leavers with practical and entrepreneurial skills for self-reliance. The conference report emphasized that true national development could not be achieved without empowering rural communities:

“The overwhelming majority of Kenyan citizens live and work in rural areas. The core challenge is to integrate more of this rural economy into national growth, which involves not only increasing production but also raising income levels, social status, and self-respect within farming communities” (Sheffield, 1967, p. 3; Orodho, 1984, p. 46).

This new orientation signaled a shift from elite-oriented education to community-driven learning and rural productivity. Consequently, in 1969, the National Development Committee issued a memorandum to the National Rural Development Committee, advocating for the establishment of village polytechnics across the country (Orodho, 1984). A Steering Committee convened in January 1970 to operationalize the proposal and recommended technical assistance from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). This led to the commissioning of an International Labour Office (ILO) mission, led by R. J. C. Ford, to evaluate existing youth employment initiatives and propose sustainable vocational training models (Republic of Kenya, 1970).

Further government commitment was articulated in the 1972 Sessional Paper on Employment, which diagnosed the youth unemployment crisis as one of “frustrated aspirations”—a growing mismatch between educational credentials and available job opportunities (Republic of Kenya, 1973). The report acknowledged that the solution required not only educational reforms but also long-term strategies for rural enterprise development and income diversification. Against this backdrop, the Village Polytechnic Programme was expanded as a cornerstone of Kenya’s youth empowerment agenda (Orodho, 1984).

Expansion of Village Polytechnics in Kenya (1970–1980)

The implementation of the Village Polytechnic Programme began modestly in 1968 with four pioneering centres: **Nambale Youth Polytechnic** in Busia (Western Province), **Muccii-wa-Urata Youth Polytechnic** in Eastern Kenya, **Ndere Youth Polytechnic** in Siaya (Nyanza Province), and **Maseno Youth Polytechnic** in Vihiga (formerly Kakamega District) (Youth Development Division, 1976; Orodho, 1984). These early institutions embodied the spirit of self-help (*Harambee*), community ownership, and grassroots innovation.

Table 1 : Growth of Village Polytechnics in Kenya (1970–1980)

Province / Region	VPs (1970)	VPs (1980)	Enrolment (1980)	Key Remarks
Central	8	43	3,600	Women’s groups active in training and management
Nyanza	5	28	2,400	Supported by NGOs; Maseno Youth Polytechnic served as a regional model
Western	4	25	2,100	Rural self-help groups and church missions promoted expansion
Rift Valley	6	37	3,200	Focus on agricultural and technical trades
Eastern	7	39	3,500	Strong community mobilization and county-level sponsorship
Coast	3	14	1,200	Specialized in marine, carpentry, and tailoring trades
Total	33	186	~16,000	Rapid community-led expansion across the country

Source: Orodho (1984); Ministry of Education Archives (1970–1980).

Over the following decade, the network of polytechnics grew exponentially—from 33 in 1970 to 186 by 1980—representing a remarkable 463% increase. Enrolment rose to approximately 16,000 trainees, a reflection of both public enthusiasm and the government’s prioritization of technical skills as a pathway to rural transformation (Orodho, 1984).

Regional variations reflected local economic priorities and community initiatives. Central Province led in expansion, establishing 43 centres by 1980, largely supported by vibrant women’s organizations. Nyanza Province followed closely, benefiting from strong NGO partnerships, with Maseno Youth Polytechnic emerging as a regional hub for vocational excellence. Western Province’s progress was underpinned by church Over the following decade, the network of polytechnics grew exponentially—from 33 in 1970 to 186 by 1980—representing a remarkable 463% increase. Enrolment rose to approximately 16,000 trainees, a reflection of both public enthusiasm and the government’s prioritization of technical skills as a pathway to rural transformation (Orodho, 1984).

-based initiatives and community self-help projects that integrated local needs into training curricula. In Rift Valley, polytechnics concentrated on agricultural and mechanical trades aligned with regional production systems, while Eastern Province leveraged county sponsorship and community fundraising to expand rapidly. The Coastal region, though smaller in scale, developed niche programs in maritime, carpentry, and tailoring trades suited to its economic environment.

This expansion demonstrated a remarkable synergy between local communities, faith-based organizations, and the state in driving youth-focused vocational training. The growth of village polytechnics during this period represented not just an educational reform, but a grassroots movement for economic self-reliance.

Achievements and Challenges

While the 1970s witnessed impressive numerical growth, qualitative challenges persisted. Many institutions lacked standardized curricula, adequate instructional materials, or trained instructors. Funding was sporadic, and coordination between government agencies and communities remained weak. As Orodho (1984) observed, “the enthusiasm of communities was unmatched by government policy coherence,” underscoring the disconnect between bottom-up innovation and top-down planning. Quality assurance mechanisms were embryonic, leading to uneven outcomes and limited transition pathways for graduates into formal employment or entrepreneurship (Republic of Kenya, 1976; Youth Development Division, 1976).

Despite these limitations, the foundational era of 1965–1979 laid the cornerstone for Kenya’s Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) system. It established a participatory model that valued **skills for self-reliance**, community initiative, and localized training. The period’s legacy endures in contemporary TVET reforms that continue to emphasize inclusivity, entrepreneurship, and lifelong learning as drivers of socio-economic transformation

3.2. The Institutionalization Era (1980–1999)

The 1980s marked a period of formalization and consolidation for Kenya’s Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) sector, catalysed by national policy frameworks such as the Gachathi Report (1976) and the Mackay Report (1981). These reports influenced the design of the 8-4-4 education system, which prominently integrated vocational learning as a core component (Republic of Kenya, 1981). During this era, Technical Training Institutes (TTIs) and National Polytechnics expanded rapidly, signalling a shift from the early community-driven village polytechnic model to a more state-controlled and regulated TVET system. This transition introduced uniformity in training standards and certification, which improved the recognition and credibility of vocational qualifications across the country.

However, institutionalization came at the expense of local responsiveness and flexibility. Community-based initiatives with strong contextual relevance were often sidelined for standardized curricula and centralized administration. Donor-supported projects, notably the World Bank’s Industrial and Vocational Training Project launched in 1990, sought to strengthen linkages between TVET and industrial needs but tended to emphasize formal sector skills, thereby inadequately addressing the informal sector, where a large segment of Kenya’s workforce operates (World Bank, 1990; Republic of Kenya, 1981). Despite financial and material support, the rigidity of the national system limited the reach and adaptability of TVET programs to local labour market dynamics.

3.3. Reform Era (2000–2012): Policy Rationalization and Quality Assurance

The turn of the millennium saw renewed focus on enhancing TVET efficiency and employability outcomes in Kenya. The Sessional Paper No. 1 of 2005 and the Vision 2030 development blueprint identified TVET as pivotal for improving industrial competitiveness and economic diversification (Republic of Kenya, 2005). The Kamunge Report (1988) had earlier identified the critical need for better alignment between training programs and labour market demands, a concern reiterated in these reforms that sought to rationalize policies and introduce quality assurance measures.

However, despite these efforts, governance of the TVET sector remained fragmented across multiple ministries and agencies, resulting in coordination challenges. Funding inconsistencies further undermined program effectiveness, limiting institutional capacity to deliver responsive and relevant training (Mwiria, 2009). Industry linkages, though recognized as essential, were still weak, with many institutions struggling to tailor courses to real-time market needs or to facilitate apprenticeships and industrial attachments effectively (Makau & Wamahiu, 2010). The reform era laid important groundwork in setting frameworks for improving quality, but persistent structural challenges delayed comprehensive sector-wide impact.

3.4 Modernization Era (2013–2025): The Competency-Based Transformation

The enactment of the TVET Act in 2013 was a transformative milestone, establishing the Technical and Vocational Education and Training Authority (TVETA), the Curriculum Development, Assessment and

Certification Council (CDACC), and the Kenya National Qualifications Authority (KNQA). These institutions have distinct yet complementary mandates: quality assurance, curriculum design, and national qualifications recognition, respectively, enabling a more cohesive regulatory framework (Republic of Kenya, 2013).

Devolution under the 2010 Constitution further decentralized Vocational Training Centers (VTCs) to county governments, creating a multi-level governance system that brought TVET closer to communities and local labor markets (Matiang'i, 2015). The establishment of the Kenya School of TVET (KSTVET) in 2021 institutionalized professional training for TVET managers and instructors, addressing long-standing capacity gaps in human resources (KSTVET, 2024). By 2025, TVET enrolment surpassed 200,000 annually, demonstrating significant growth (KNBS, 2024).

This era is characterized by the adoption of Competency-Based Education and Training (CBET), which emphasizes practical skills and direct alignment with employment standards. Digital learning platforms and enhanced industry collaboration, including public-private partnerships, have also become foundational features, increasing access and relevance of TVET programs (KNQA, 2023). These reforms align with global best practices in TVET, positioning Kenya to better meet both the demands of a rapidly evolving economy and the aspirations of its youth.

3.5 Summary Outlook and Discussion: Toward an Integrated and Inclusive TVET Future

The historical and analytical trajectory of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) in Kenya reveals a multifaceted system that has evolved through cycles of reform, adaptation, and reorientation in response to national and global socio-economic shifts. The findings confirm that TVET remains central to Kenya's development agenda—bridging education, employment, and industrial competitiveness—yet faces persistent systemic and structural challenges (Mwiria, 2009; Afeti & Adubra, 2022).

1. Cyclical Policy Evolution and Governance Shifts

Kenya's TVET system has oscillated between community-based and state-controlled models, reflecting changing political ideologies and development priorities. The early **village polytechnic movement** of the 1960s and 1970s, inspired by the Harambee philosophy, epitomized localized vocational empowerment for rural youth. Studies such as Orodho (1984) and Nkinyangi (1982) demonstrated that these institutions provided context-relevant skills linked to agricultural and small-scale enterprise development—an approach consistent with human capital and community development theories.

However, the **centralization of TVET** management in the 1980s and 1990s under the Ministry of Education led to bureaucratization and a gradual erosion of local initiative and ownership (Mwiria, 2009; Oketch, 2007). This centralization diluted responsiveness to local labor market needs, resulting in policy fragmentation. As noted by Afeti and Adubra (2022), effective TVET governance requires a balance between national policy direction and community participation to ensure both quality and contextual relevance.

2. Fragmented Institutional Governance and Coordination

The study finds that institutional overlaps and fragmented governance among agencies such as the Technical and Vocational Education and Training Authority (TVETA), the Kenya National Qualifications Authority (KNQA), and the Kenya School of TVET (KSTVET) have led to duplication of roles, inconsistent standards, and inefficiencies in quality assurance. This echoes earlier findings by UNESCO (2018) and the World Bank (2021), which stressed that policy coherence and institutional synergy are prerequisites for effective TVET outcomes.

A unified governance architecture is therefore necessary to harmonize accreditation, curriculum development, and industry participation. Aligning these functions can enhance the credibility and portability of TVET qualifications within the Kenya National Qualifications Framework (KNQF) and across the East African Qualifications Framework for Higher Education (EAQFHE), as advocated by the African Union (2019).

3. Financing Constraints and Resource Inequities

Despite multiple reforms, financing remains a structural bottleneck in the TVET sector. Mwiria's (2009) seminal analysis observed that underfunding led to dilapidated infrastructure, obsolete technology, and limited instructor training—conditions that still persist. The Kenya Economic Survey (2023) confirmed that most public TVET institutions continue to rely heavily on government capitation, which is often inadequate and irregular.

Scholars such as UNESCO-UNEVOC (2022) and African Development Bank (2021) recommend diversified funding models, including public-private partnerships (PPPs), industrial apprenticeships, and skills development levies. Such models not only enhance sustainability but also strengthen accountability by linking financing to measurable employability outcomes. The introduction of the TVET Fund (2021) marks progress, but its implementation needs stronger governance and transparent disbursement mechanisms to avoid elite capture and ensure equitable resource distribution.

4. Curriculum Responsiveness and Industry Linkages

Findings indicate that Kenya's adoption of the Competency-Based Education and Training (CBET) framework in 2016 marked a transformative step toward aligning TVET curricula with industry needs. However, the implementation remains uneven, particularly in rural and under-resourced institutions (World Bank, 2021; Republic of Kenya, 2022).

As Kilemi Mwiria (2009) and Oketch (2014) argued, weak industry-TVE linkages hinder curriculum dynamism and limit graduate employability. A robust dual training system, combining classroom learning with industrial attachment, could bridge the gap between theory and practice. This is consistent with Germany's "dual system" model and Singapore's SkillsFuture initiative, both cited by UNESCO (2020) as benchmarks for contextual adaptation in Africa. To sustain relevance, Kenya's TVET must integrate emerging domains such as digital manufacturing, green energy, artificial intelligence, and service innovation, ensuring graduates are not just employable but also adaptable in rapidly evolving labor markets (World Economic Forum, 2022).

5. Digital Transformation, Gender, and Inclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic catalyzed digital learning adoption, revealing both innovation and inequity. Many TVET institutions lacked the infrastructure and capacity to deliver blended or online training, exacerbating the urban–rural and gender digital divide (UNEVOC, 2022). However, digital transformation remains a critical enabler of future growth. The next decade must emphasize digital inclusion, ensuring women, youth, and learners from marginalized counties have equitable access to technology-enhanced learning. This aligns with the African Union's Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA, 2016–2025) and Kenya's Digital Master Plan (2022–2032), both of which advocate integrating ICT and innovation across the TVET ecosystem.

6. Human Capital, Employability, and Sustainable Development

The findings affirm that human capital development through TVET directly supports Kenya's Vision 2030 and Africa's Agenda 2063 aspirations for industrial transformation. As Becker's (1964) human capital theory posits, investment in vocational education enhances productivity and earnings potential. Yet, without adequate labour market data and tracer studies, TVET's contribution to national development remains under-measured. A more evidence-driven TVET policy framework—anchored on monitoring graduate employability, wage outcomes, and employer satisfaction—is essential for ensuring accountability and continuous improvement (ILO, 2020).

7. Toward an Integrated and Inclusive TVET Ecosystem (2025–2035)

The synthesis of findings underscores the necessity of a whole-of-society approach in the next decade of TVET reform. Integration across policy, financing, curriculum, and digital transformation will be critical for building an inclusive system that bridges gender, regional, and socio-economic disparities.

Kenya's transition from village polytechnics to the Kenya School of TVET (KSTVET) symbolizes the nation's enduring adaptability. The future lies in consolidating this momentum through: Policy coherence and inter-

agency collaboration. ; Sustainable financing and public-private engagement. ; Gender-sensitive and digitally enabled training models and Continuous curriculum review informed by labour market analytics.

An integrated and inclusive TVET ecosystem will not only expand employability but also position Kenya as a regional hub for skills innovation, contributing to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 4, 5 8, and 9).

4.0 CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATIONS and WAYFORWARD

4.1 Conclusions

The historical reconstruction of Kenya’s Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) system from 1965 to 2025 reveals a rich tapestry of reform, experimentation, and adaptation. Over six decades, the system has evolved from the community-based village polytechnics of the post-independence era to the modern, policy-driven, and competency-oriented institutions represented by the Kenya School of TVET (KSTVET). This evolution reflects Kenya’s enduring quest to link education, work, and development—a process continually shaped by economic imperatives, social aspirations, and global reform trends.

Anchored in Human Capital Theory and the Skills Ecosystem Approach, the study concludes that the success of TVET reforms depends not only on the accumulation of skills but also on the integration of institutional networks that sustain continuous learning, innovation, and employment. Early initiatives such as the village polytechnics embodied this integration at the community level, demonstrating that localized, participatory approaches can yield both social and economic dividends. However, later centralization, bureaucratic expansion, and inconsistent financing fragmented the system, weakening responsiveness to industry needs and local realities.

The findings further affirm that policy coherence, governance reform, and digital innovation are the defining pillars of a resilient TVET ecosystem. For Kenya to harness the demographic dividend and accelerate industrial transformation, TVET must operate as a *national system of innovation*—one that connects government strategy with private sector dynamism, community engagement, and inclusive participation.

Moreover, the study highlights the need for a paradigm shift from expansion to transformation. While the quantitative growth of institutions and enrolments has been substantial, the qualitative outcomes—employability, entrepreneurship, and innovation—remain uneven. As UNESCO (2020) and the World Bank (2021) emphasize, the future of TVET lies in developing adaptive systems that integrate digital literacy, green skills, and lifelong learning pathways. Kenya’s transition to Competency-Based Education and Training (CBET) marks a critical step in this direction, yet its success hinges on effective capacity building for trainers, institutional autonomy, and sustainable financing models.

In conclusion, Kenya stands at a defining juncture. The next decade (2025–2035) presents an opportunity to consolidate past gains, address persistent structural challenges, and position TVET as the engine of inclusive industrialization and sustainable development. This calls for a governance model that promotes equity, excellence, and employability, while embedding TVET within broader national priorities such as Vision 2030, the Bottom-Up Economic Transformation Agenda (BETA), and the African Union’s Agenda 2063.

Ultimately, the historical continuum traced in this study demonstrates that Kenya’s TVET transformation is not merely an educational project but a nation-building enterprise. Its future success will depend on how effectively the system integrates policy vision, community innovation, and industry collaboration to prepare a generation capable of driving economic competitiveness and social progress in an increasingly digital and interconnected world

4.2. Actionable Recommendations

Kenya’s Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) system is at a pivotal moment, ready to evolve from a fragmented and supply-driven model into a unified, industry-responsive, and innovation-focused ecosystem. The decade from 2025 to 2035 presents a unique opportunity to consolidate six decades of reform efforts, bolster institutional resilience, and align TVET fully with Kenya’s industrialization and digital

transformation goals. To guide this transformation, six strategic and actionable recommendations have been identified.

1. strengthening governance and institutional coherence is essential. The current landscape, characterized by multiple oversight bodies like TVETA, CDACC, KNQA, KICD, KSTVET, and county governments, has led to duplication and fragmented accountability. Kenya should therefore establish a National TVET Council that brings together ministries, industry representatives, professional bodies, and county governments. This council would provide coordinated policy direction, strategic planning, and performance monitoring. Moreover, integrating digital data systems across all TVET agencies would enhance labour market intelligence, increase transparency, and facilitate evidence-based decision-making. Such a harmonized governance framework, grounded in multi-level coordination, will improve institutional coherence and responsiveness to national and regional development needs.
2. Diversifying financing and strengthening resource mobilization are critical for sustainability. The government's funding should be supplemented by industry contributions, innovation grants, and partnerships with development agencies. The creation of a National Skills Development Fund (NSDF), governed jointly by the Ministries of Education, Labour, and Industry, could catalyze investments in digital infrastructure, curriculum innovation, and trainer development. At the county level, incentivizing public-private partnerships (PPPs) would enhance local ownership, support Vocational Training Centres (VTCs), and stimulate innovation in skills training. Collaborations with multilateral donors such as the World Bank, UNESCO-UNEVOC, and the African Development Bank can provide long-term support for green and digital skills initiatives aligned with Kenya's Vision 2030 and Africa's Agenda 2063.
3. Deepening industry linkages and work-based learning is necessary to close the gap between skills training and employment. This can be achieved by implementing sector-specific apprenticeships, dual training systems, and Sector Skills Councils jointly chaired by employers and training institutions. The Kenya School of TVET (KSTVET) should spearhead the development of a National Apprenticeship and Internship Framework to enable hands-on learning, industry immersion, and co-designed curricula. Fiscal incentives like tax rebates and subsidies can boost private sector participation in structured internships. These efforts will ensure TVET graduates gain relevant, transferable, and future-ready skills aligned with labour market demands.
4. Kenya's TVET system must advance digital transformation and green skills development. Given the global shifts in work, integrating digital literacy, automation, and sustainability competencies into all programs is imperative. Full implementation of Competency-Based Education and Training (CBET) by 2025 should be supported with e-learning platforms, virtual simulation labs, and digital credentialing to improve access and flexibility. Additionally, institutions should adopt green campus initiatives—including renewable energy, waste recycling, and eco-friendly construction—underpinned by Kenya's Green Economy Strategy and Implementation Plan (GESIP) and the Digital Masterplan (2022–2032). Such initiatives will align TVET with national sustainability goals and the worldwide move toward carbon neutrality.
5. Professionalizing TVET teaching and applied research will underpin successful transformation. KSTVET should be cemented as a Centre of Excellence for TVET pedagogy and research, coordinating continuous professional development, adult learning methodologies, and applied innovation. Establishing research chairs in technical education and forging partnerships with universities will promote evidence-based reform. Exchange programs, mentorship networks, and postgraduate training will serve to professionalize trainers and enhance instructional quality, inclusivity, and lifelong learning outcomes.
6. Fostering inclusion, lifelong learning, and skills mobility must be central to the TVET agenda. The system should serve all Kenyans, with a focus on women, youth, persons with disabilities, and marginalized groups in arid, informal, and refugee-hosting areas. The Kenya National Qualifications Authority (KNQA) should expand Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) programs to formally certify informal and experiential skills, thereby increasing employability and mobility. Flexible pathways between basic education, TVET, and higher education need to be institutionalized in a seamless qualifications framework that encourages continuous learning and reskilling. Targeted incentives and scholarships for women and disadvantaged populations will promote equitable access and empower skills development across the nation.

.4.3. Way Forward: Building a Future-Ready Skills Ecosystem

realize these recommendations, Kenya must cultivate a whole-of-society approach—uniting government, industry, academia, and communities in a shared vision of TVET as the cornerstone of industrial competitiveness and inclusive growth. By investing in governance coherence, digital and green transitions, and professional excellence, Kenya can transform TVET into a dynamic skills ecosystem that delivers on Vision 2030, the Bottom-Up Economic Transformation Agenda (BETA), and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The decade ahead thus offers not only a policy window but a moral imperative: to ensure that every Kenyan, regardless of background, has access to relevant, future-facing skills for productive livelihoods and national transformation.

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