

# The Historical Development of Vocational Education and Training for Persons with Visual Impairments in Kenya

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**Abstract:** *Vocational Education and Training (VET) has been shown to be a drive towards socio-economic development for individuals as well as for a country. Considering that persons with disabilities such as those with visual impairments need to be empowered, then VET becomes one of the tools through which Persons with Visual Impairments (PWVI) can be emancipated from dependency to being independent. Whereas the government of Kenya has in the recent past put a lot of emphasis on Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), the researchers observed that VET for PWVI has attracted little policy, fiscal and research attention. It is in this regard that this article sought to trace the historical development of VET to PWVI in order to determine the exact progress realized and the challenges encountered in order to inform the present situation and future decisions. In achieving this, the researchers followed the historical research design in which data was systematically sought from the various relevant sources, authenticated and analyzed before being presented as historical evidence. The study established that the provision of VET to PWVI in Kenya has grown from a single institution in 1946, to the current situation where all the VET institutions admit all learners including those with visual impairments. In addition, the study established that there are two VET institutions that exclusively provides education and training to PWVI. The study however concludes that there is much that still needs to be done towards equipping such institutions to be able to cater for persons with disabilities such as PWVI. The number of VET institutions for PWVI can be increased from the current two or the existing institutions can be well equipped to encourage inclusion.*

**Keywords:** Vocational Education, TVET, Education for the Blind

## 1. Introduction

Vocational Education and Training (VET) which is also commonly referred to as Vocational Education (VE) or Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) refers to education and training through formal, non-formal and informal learning that provides knowledge and skills for employment (UNESCO, 2015). VET provides training in technologies and practical sciences that relates to the various sectors of the economic and social life. Vocational education and training thus prepares people to work as technicians, tradesmen or as artisans in various fields of specializations. Vocational schools, also known as trade schools, provide training to prepare learners for career-based skills. Historically, VET has moved from traditional learning through apprenticeship and informal training to the present highly organized technical and vocational education and training that is offered in TVET institutions or universities in most countries of the world. Vocational education and training has been linked to high employability of the trainees which in turn promotes a country's socio-economic development since this type of training directly prepares individuals for the world of work (ILO, 2001).

In Kenya, VET has attracted the attention of more learners in the recent years leading to an increased enrolment as compared to earlier years. In the year 2018 for instance, the enrolment in the public TVET institutions in Kenya was 175, 278 students, an increase from 101, 108 students that

were enrolled in the year 2016 (Government of Kenya [GoK], 2019). The number of TVET institutions has also increased tremendously through the government's initiative of promoting TVET as the leading impetus towards the achievement of the Kenya's Vision 2030 as well as the Jubilee Government's 'Big 4' Agenda (GoK, 2019). Vocational Education and Training in Kenya has been undergoing reforms since independence with the aim of not only making it to sufficiently produce the needed middle level human resource for the national economy but to also empower the youth with skills that will enable them to be self-reliant in society. Some of the most recent policy documents in which VET is anchored include the TVET Act No. 29 of 2013, the Sessional Paper No. 1 of 2019 on Reforming Education and Training in Kenya, National Education Sector Strategic Plan (NESSP) 2018-2022, the Vision 2030 and the 'Big 4' Agenda among others.

Whereas there has been a commendable progress in VET in Kenya as indicated before, one area that has not received commensurate attention is VET for Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) such as those with visual impairments. As at 2019, there was only one TVET institution that is exclusive for the persons with visual impairments and one TVET institution for the blind and the deaf out of the total 1,918 TVET institutions that were registered in Kenya. These institutions are Machakos Technical Training Institute for the Blind and Sikri Technical Training Institute for Deaf and Blind (GoK, 2019). Besides the two TVET institutions, there are only

two other TVET institutions in the area of Special Needs Education (SNE). These include Karen Technical Training Institute for the Deaf and Nyang'oma Technical Training Institute for the Deaf. Whereas other TVET institutions admit PWDs, an observation by the researchers indicated that most of such institutions do not have sufficient capacity to effectively cater for PWDs. Such capacity would include trained tutors in the area of SNE, adapted environment as well as adaptive teaching and learning resources for the different categories of learners with special needs. This situation creates a concern of why TVET education for learners with special needs seems to be lagging behind in an area that is actively progressing. It is in this regard that this article sought to analyze the historical development of TVET to persons with visual impairments in order to inform on the present situation and the challenges that might have been encountered in providing such education and training.

## 2. Methodology

Being a historical inquiry, the study used the historical research design in which the past information concerning VET education in Kenya was systematically sought, authenticated and analyzed. This was done through the systematic search of documents, relics and persons with information concerning the development of VET in Kenya. The researchers studied archival documents from Kenya National Archives (KNA), reports of educational commissions and committees, minutes of meetings, official school records, memos, newsletters and photographs that were mainly obtained from the archives. Upon collection of this information, analysis was done through triangulation and themes concerning the development of VET in Kenya were developed. The development of VET in Kenya is thus presented under two subtopics namely: Introduction and development of vocational education and training in Kenya and the Introduction and development of vocational education and training for PWVI in Kenya.

## 3. Introduction and Development of Vocational Education and Training in Kenya

The history of vocational education and training in Kenya can be traced back to pre-colonial times when people were trained through formal and informal means to carry out different trades. These trades included agriculture, pottery, basket making, construction of houses among the many others that were thought through the African indigenous education system (Chikati, 2014). This type of education was however enhanced upon the coming of the Europeans to Kenya in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century. Simiyu (2009) notes that the coming of the Europeans to Kenya and the subsequent building of the Kenya-Uganda railway attracted Indian traders and laborers who became instrumental in the training of artisans and craftsmen at the Kabete Industrial Training Depot from the year 1924. These Europeans who were either settlers, Christian missionaries or colonial government officials brought in technicians who were not only involved in the building of the railway but they were also involved in training of Kenyans in different skills. The trained Kenyans

were later engaged in the maintenance of tools, equipment and services for the railway. Besides the railway the British government also used vocational training to meet the critical human resources need in order to develop the then Kenya colony.

The early activities for VET in Kenya seemed to have been boosted by the aftermath of the Second World War which led to a higher influx of people with more sophisticated equipment and machinery, and a greater need for training (Simiyu, 2009). There arose an immense need for drivers, motor mechanics, masons, electricians, welders, carpenters and clerks among other trades. This led to the establishment of more industrial training centers most of which were upgraded to vocational schools in 1950s and, by the early 1960s, some were further converted into secondary vocational schools.

The developments in provision of VET in Kenya continued to be realized through the establishment of the Mombasa Institute of Muslim Education in the year 1948. The institute was established to provide technical and vocational education to Muslim students in East Africa. The Mombasa Institute of Muslim Education was later converted and renamed to Mombasa Technical Institute and later became the Mombasa Polytechnic in the year 1972. In the year 1954, a Commission for Higher Education was instituted by the British colonial government. The commission recommended for the establishment of the Royal Technical College which was established two years later at Nairobi in the year 1956. The Nairobi Royal Technical College later became the Nairobi University College. The college was also later promoted to form the first university in Kenya, the University of Nairobi. While Kenya was approaching its independence, another TVET institution was established at Nairobi in the year 1961. The institute was referred to as the Kenya Polytechnic and it was established to provide basic craft courses, which were phased out after 1966 following the introduction of similar courses in technical and vocational schools. Vocational Education and Training in Kenya has continued to grow as a result of direct government intervention and involvement through increased funding. Currently, there are 1,918 TVET institutions that includes national polytechnics, technical training colleges and village polytechnics (GoK, 2019). The government has continued to develop policy governing VET as evidenced in TVET Act No. 29 of 2013, the Sessional Paper No. 1 of 2019 on Reforming Education and Training in Kenya and the National Education Sector Strategic Plan (NESSP) 2018-2022 among others.

## 4. Introduction and Development of Vocational Education for Persons with Visual Impairments in Kenya

In spite of the VET having started in the early 1920s in Kenya, there seems to have been no official arrangements to offer the same training and education for Persons with Visual Impairments. This could be because of the then prevailing negative societal attitude which viewed people with disabilities like those with blindness as unproductive and with limited ability. Since the nature and training of

VET was to produce the necessary manpower to meet the immediate needs of the economy, persons with visual impairments were marginalized in this aspect. It was not until the year 1946 that the Salvation Army mission in collaboration with the government of the time established the first training institution for PWVI. This particular institution was known as the Salvation Army Institute for the Blind, Thika (Chikati, Wachira & Mwinzi, 2020). The Institute was established through the conversion of a center that was previously a rehabilitation center for ex-soldiers who were wounded in the war (World War I and II).

The conversion of this center to an institute for the blind was as a result of a joint agreement between the Salvation Army mission and the government of the time to commence educational activities for the blind on a wider scale. The institute was to cater for the training of blind male Africans in various trades with some elements of academic education. The admission to the institute was however limited to male persons only until the year 1954 when admission of female students alongside the male ones was introduced. The Trade courses included gardening, basket making, shoe repairing, carpentry, rope making, net making, mat making, and brick making. The academic elements that were offered together with trade training comprised of literacy and numerical competence skills as well as use of Braille.

The type and duration of the training offered to an individual at the Salvation Army Institute for the Blind was however determined by the age, background and ability of the individual learner as assessed by the authorities of the institute (KNA, MOH/3/282). If the person with visual impairment enrolling to the institute was an adult, then he was made to undertake one or two trades with training not exceeding three years depending on the abilities of the student. If the student was an adolescent however, he was encouraged to undertake academic training in addition to trade training. The training for such a student was normally lasting between four to five years. Children on the other hand were taken in for full academic training and were not allowed to undertake trade training until towards the end of their training.

As the founding institution for the PWVI in the entire East African region, the Salvation Army Institute for the Blind at Thika admitted students from all the territories within the East African region. The institution thus catered for PWVI from Kenya, Uganda and Tanganyika. In the year 1952 for instance, the institute had 56 Kenyans, three Ugandans and five students from Tanganyika who were pursuing VET in the various trades that were being offered at the institute. Despite of this wide catchment area of learners at the Salvation Army Institute for the Blind, the institution recorded a low enrolment of learners in its early years (KNA, MOH/3/282). While making a follow up to find out the reasons behind this low enrolment, the researchers established that it was partly due to the negative attitude in the society towards PWVI who were seen as unproductive and therefore educating them was seen as a waste a time and resources (Chikati, Wachira, Mwinzi, 2020). Most parents were therefore reluctant or totally unwilling to enroll their children with visual impairments to this institute. The other reason identified was that of ignorance. Most parents who

had children with visual impairments were not aware of the possibility of such children acquiring formal education and training just like their sighted peers. The other reason was that since the institution was a boarding school, most of the parents were not willing to let their children whom they considered as being vulnerable to stay on their at the institute far away from home. For this reason, majority of the learners that were enrolled at the institute in its early years were blind adults and adolescents. VET education therefore faced the attitude related challenges in its early years of establishment.

In 1953, the government formed an ad hoc committee as an interim measure pending the establishment of a new foundation for the blind (KNA, DO/ER/2/6/4). The ad hoc committee brought a major shift in the nature of education offered for VET in the then only existing Salvation Army Institute for the blind. The committee resolved to change and convert the Salvation Army Institute for the Blind to a primary school and to therefore gradually phase out the VET students from the year 1954. It was envisaged that the vocational and trade training programs were to be completely phased out by year 1956. Thika Institute for the Blind therefore changed its name to Thika School for the Blind by the year 1954.

While the move to start the phasing out of VET at the founding Institute for the blind seemed to suppress the progress of vocational education and training in the country, there arose a positive development in the year 1956, when another VET center for PWVI was established in the country by the same Salvation Army that had established the Institute at Thika. This came in form of a 'Shamba' (Farm) training center which was established at Kolanya in Western part of Kenya. This 'Shamba' training center was established to train PWVI to acquire farming skills so that they could be independent by making a living from their farms. Its establishment was based on the rural background of over 90 percent of PWVI in Kenya (KNA, BY/27/4). In the year 1958, another such 'Shamba' training center for PWVI was established at Chuka in Eastern part of Kenya through the collaboration between the Salvation Army the then newly formed Kenya Society for the Blind (KSB). Together with the institute at Thika, these centers provided training to blind peasants in agricultural tasks that were connected with the family's agricultural activities (KNA, BY/27/4).

The development of VET for PWVI underwent a great milestone once again in the year 1958 when the KSB under the sponsorship of the Royal Commonwealth Society for the Blind established Machakos Institute for the Blind in Eastern part of Kenya. This institute at Machakos was started as a rehabilitation center for ex-soldiers of the Second World War who had lost sight during the war. The institute however started by offering technical craft skills to both ex-soldiers as well as male civilians with blindness so that they would be able to find new ways of subsistence in their life. The vocational training at Machakos Institute for the Blind comprised of crafts and light industries courses. Training in crafts lasted for one year and it involved rural training, mat-making simple carpentry and basketry. Training in light industries lasted for six months with the aim of enabling

PWVI to establish themselves as local craftsmen or be absorbed into local light industry (KNA, KTI/3/7/11).

In the year 1959, VET was re-introduced at Thika School for the Blind in form of a subsidiary crafts course for male school-leavers who had not obtained employment as well as for those learners who had surpassed the maximum age of admission to Thika School for the Blind but had not attained the age of obtaining admission to the Training center at Machakos (KNA, BY/12/21). This was because there was a gap between the maximum age for admission to TSB (10 years) and the minimum age of admission to Machakos Institute for the Blind (17 years). Vocational training at Thika School for the Blind however continued only up to the late 1960s when it was phased out leaving the school to operate purely as a primary school.

At Kenya's independence in the year 1963, there were thus four institutions offering VET to PWVI. These were Machakos Institute for the Blind, the two Shamba training centers at Kolanya and Chuka as well Thika School for the blind that was offering a subsidiary course for the blind. More efforts and resources were however channeled to the education sector after independence in order to produce the required man power to take up the many new vacant positions that were left by the colonial masters. These efforts played a positive role towards VET for PWVI leading to the registration of Machakos Institute for the Blind as a Vocational Training Institute in the year 1965. The institution was thus given the mandate of training youths and adults who were either born with blindness or became blind in the course of their life. The institution thus expanded its training to include mobility orientation, Braille literacy and handcraft.

In 1967, the training at Machakos Institute for the Blind was further expanded to include training in telephone operation. The institute however continued to admit only male students until the year 1987 when the first female students were admitted after the introduction of Knitting and garment making courses. This presents the then existing negative stereotypes of what female persons were to undertake considering that they were not admitted to pursue courses that were being undertaken by their male counterparts. Machakos Institute for the Blind however continued to expand its access and courses with the introduction of government trade tests in the year 1988 as well the introduction of integrated artisan level training in the year 1994. In the year 1997, the institute was upgraded to a technical institute and therefore it was renamed to Machakos Technical Training Institute. Currently, the institute is the only technical training institution for PWVI in the country and the entire East-African region that is offering craft courses that are examined by the Kenya National Examinations Council.

A similar blind vocational center to the one at Machakos was opened by the Catholic Mission at Sikri in Nyanza region of Kenya in the year 1970 (Chikati, Wachira & Mwinzi 2020). The institute with the name Sikri Institute for the Blind was established to offer practical agricultural skills for PWVI. The enrolment of the students with visual impairments was however very low with an admission of six

students in 1970 and another six in 1971. Massive campaigns were therefore made by the institute in order to promote the awareness of education for PWVI but these efforts seemed not to have borne much fruits. In the year 1975, the institute's population dropped drastically prompting the administration to extent the admission to learners with hearing impairments. The Institute thus changed from Sikri Institute for the Blind to Skiri Institute for the Blind and Deaf.

Despite of the challenges experienced by Skiri Institute for the Blind and Deaf in terms of low enrolment of learners, the institution continued to increase its capacity in terms of access as well as courses to be offered. In 1988 for instance, the institute introduced wood work as a course which focused on training in production of furniture as well ornamental wood carvings. In the same year, the institute also introduced carpentry, weaving as well as textile and clothing courses. The institute also enhanced training orientation and mobility as well as Braille literacy for blind learners. Currently, the institute is also the only one providing VET to PWV as well as those with hearing impairments.

## 5. Conclusion

The study has presented the slow development of VET for PWVI in Kenya. Whereas VET was introduced in Kenya in the early 1920s, it took a long time before such education was extended to PWVI in the year 1946 through the establishment of the Salvation Army Institute for the Blind at Thika. The beginning of VET education to PWVI was limited to low level trade courses but this situation changed as more VET institutions for PWVI emerged. Among other institutions that emerged include two 'Shamba' training centers at Kolanya in western Kenya and in Chuka in Eastern part of Kenya. Others that emerged and have grown to fully functional technical training institutes for PWVI are Machakos Institute for the Blind and Sikri Institute for the Blind and Deaf.

In the development of VET for PWVI, there were a number of challenges related to negative societal attitudes and ignorance on the potential of persons with disabilities such as PWVI. Girls were also not effectively catered for since their enrolment in most of the institutions came much later than that of boys. These challenges seems to be still lingering to the present considering that there are only two VET institutions for PWVI in the country. The provision of VET to PWVI in Kenya has however grown tremendously considering that we have close to 2000 TVET institutions that admit all learners regardless of their disability. The researchers however concludes that there is much that still needs to be done in order to equip such institutions to be able to cater for persons with disabilities such as PWVI. The number of VET institutions for PWVI can be increased from the current two or the existing institutions can be well equipped to encourage inclusion.

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