

The effect of educational aspirations on labour market outcomes in secondary vocational education in Africa

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ABSTRACT

The study explores the relationship between educational aspirations and labour market outcomes among African secondary vocational education students. It reveals that students with vocational education are more aware of labour market demands and desire to acquire skills that align with industry needs. However, disparities in access to quality vocational training and societal perceptions of vocational education significantly impact students' aspirations. A comprehensive systematic literature review was explored to examine the impact of educational aspirations on labour market outcomes in secondary vocational education in Africa, focusing on countries like Nigeria and Ghana. The review focuses on studies published between 2010 and 2024, reflecting current trends and challenges vocational education graduates face. The study identifies key labour market outcomes linked to vocational education, including employment rates, job stability, and income levels. Graduates of vocational programs secure employment more rapidly than general education students but face challenges in advancing their careers due to limited opportunities for further training and professional development. The research calls for policy interventions to enhance the quality and perception of vocational education in Africa, ensuring that they meet immediate labour market needs and empower young people to achieve their long-term career aspirations. This research can potentially inform vocational education policy in Africa by developing targeted strategies to enhance the effectiveness of vocational training programs. Adapting policies that align vocational education with labour market demands can create a more responsive educational system that addresses the needs of both students and employers.

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INTRODUCTION

The relationship between educational aspirations and labour market outcomes has gained significant attention, especially in developing regions like Africa. Educational aspirations are the hopes, goals, and expectations individuals hold regarding their educational achievements, which are essential in shaping young people's trajectories as they transition from learning environments to the workforce. Educational aspirations encompass a range of expectations regarding one's educational attainment, including pursuing vocational training, higher education, and attaining specific qualifications (Billett, 2011). These aspirations are often shaped by various factors such as socioeconomic background, cultural influences, parental education levels, and exposure to role models and opportunities. In many African contexts, educational aspirations are also influenced by the perceived value of education about employment opportunities and economic advancement (Adesola et al., 2019; Meece et al., 2014; Mkwanzani, 2019). High educational aspirations can increase engagement in academic and vocational programs, improve educational attainment, and enhance employability. Conversely, low aspirations often correlate with disengagement from education and limited career prospects, perpetuating cycles of poverty and underemployment.

Secondary vocational education is particularly relevant in the discussion of educational aspirations and labour market outcomes.

In many African countries, vocational education serves as a critical pathway for young individuals seeking to enter the labour market, especially where traditional academic routes may not be feasible or desirable. Research indicates that students enrolled in vocational programs often report higher educational aspirations compared to their peers in general academic tracks, attributed to tangible skills and certifications gained through vocational training, which often lead to immediate job opportunities (Donald et al., 2018; Malette et al., 2024; Marope et al., 2015; Rosenbaum et al., 2017). The nexus between educational aspirations and labour market outcomes is a critical area of study, particularly in the context of secondary vocational education in Africa. Vocational education in Africa is crucial for addressing the continent's youth unemployment crisis and fostering economic growth. It equips students with practical skills and knowledge to meet market demands and enhance employability. However, the quality and relevance of vocational education initiatives often fall short of industry needs, leading to a disconnect between the skills imparted and those sought by employers (Balodi, 2021; Diop, 2020; Marope et al., 2015). This misalignment results in graduates struggling to find suitable employment or facing underemployment, further exacerbating the continent's economic challenges.

Challenges in vocational education in Africa include inadequate funding and infrastructure, perception and stigma, curriculum relevance, access and equity, integration with the formal economy, and effective policy frameworks (Adams et al., 2024; Allais, 2020; Gyimah, 2020). Insufficient investment leads to outdated equipment, inadequate training materials, and a shortage of qualified instructors, which compromises the educational experience for students. Perception and stigma also exist, as vocational education is often viewed as less prestigious than academic pathways, deterring students from pursuing vocational training (Decker, 2019). Curriculum relevance is another critical issue, as the content taught often does not reflect the current needs of the labour market. Access to vocational education is uneven across the continent with significant disparities between urban and rural areas. Gender disparities persist, as young women may face additional barriers to accessing vocational education due to cultural norms and expectations (Baxter et al., 2022).

Integration with the formal economy is essential for aligning vocational education programs with the skills required by employers. Collaboration between vocational training institutions and industries is crucial for facilitating internships, apprenticeships, and job placements, enhancing students' prospects for successful labour market entry. However, the challenges it faces are significant and require concerted efforts from governments, educational institutions, industries, and communities. The relationship between educational aspirations and labour market outcomes in secondary vocational education in Africa is increasingly significant, especially as the continent grapples with high youth unemployment rates. Vocational education provides students with practical skills and training tailored to meet the demands of the labour market, often encompassing diverse fields like agriculture, engineering, hospitality, and information technology (Gyimah, 2020; Ndile, 2018).

However, the effectiveness of vocational education is heavily influenced by students' aspirations. Research indicates that students with higher educational aspirations are more likely to engage actively in their studies, seek internships, and pursue additional qualifications, thereby enhancing their employability upon graduation (Donald et al., 2018; Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021; Silva et al., 2016). The alignment between educational aspirations and vocational training can be seen as a critical determinant of labour market success. Students pursuing higher education or advanced vocational training show increased motivation and commitment, leading to increased participation in additional training programs, internships, or apprenticeships, enhancing their employability (Bonnard, 2020; de Amesti & Claro, 2021). Conversely, students with lower aspirations may lack the motivation to fully engage in their vocational training, resulting in suboptimal skill acquisition and reduced employment prospects (Arenas & Alejandro, 2013; Bandara, 2019).

Socio-economic factors also play a role in shaping the educational landscape. In regions with robust demand for skilled labour, students may be more inclined to pursue vocational education, driven by the prospect of stable employment (Robb, 2014). Conversely, in areas plagued by

economic instability and high unemployment rates, students may become disillusioned with vocational training, leading to diminished aspirations and poor labour market outcomes (Mbalamwezi, 2015). Cultural perceptions surrounding vocational education can also influence aspirations. Addressing these cultural perceptions is essential to fostering a positive view of vocational education and encouraging higher aspirations among students. High educational aspirations lead to more engaged students, resulting in higher-quality learning and the development of competencies in demand within the labour market (Solberg et al., 2021). Students with high educational aspirations are more likely to engage fully in their vocational training, seeking to master the necessary skills for their chosen field. This commitment often leads to a higher quality of learning and the development of competencies in demand within the labour market.

High educational aspirations also correlate with proactive behaviour in networking and professional development, such as engaging with industry professionals, attending workshops, and joining relevant associations (Arokiasamy et al., 2011). These activities not only broaden their knowledge but also expand their professional networks, which can significantly enhance their job prospects upon entering the labour market. Students with strong educational aspirations tend to exhibit greater resilience in the face of challenges, leading to improved performance in vocational training and better preparation for the realities of the job market (Dougherty & Lombardi, 2016; Su et al., 2020). Aspirations can also influence the types of employment opportunities vocational students pursue, contributing to long-term career fulfilment and stability. Various factors can affect the level of aspiration among students in vocational education, including socioeconomic background, cultural influences, parental support and expectations, school environment and resources, and the quality of the vocational training program. Understanding these factors is essential for addressing the challenges faced by vocational students in Africa and ensuring their success in the labour market.

Previous literature on secondary vocational education in Africa has shown mixed results, with some studies showing a positive correlation between vocational training and employment opportunities, while others highlight significant gaps in the effectiveness of these programs. For example, Ogwo (2023) found that vocational education significantly improves employability among graduates, but the quality and relevance of the training provided often fail to meet industry standards. Juma (2020) undermined the optimism surrounding vocational education by emphasizing high unemployment rates among graduates of such programs. Previous research has often been limited by a lack of comprehensive data and regional variability, often focusing on urban settings, neglecting rural areas where vocational training might play an equally crucial role (Malecki, 2018; Tacoli et al., 2015). The intersectionality of gender, socio-economic status, and educational access remains underexplored, which is essential for understanding the holistic impact of vocational education on diverse populations.

The educational landscape in Africa has been undergoing significant transformations, particularly in vocational education. This sector plays a crucial role in equipping young individuals with the necessary skills to thrive in the labour market. However, the effect of educational aspirations on labour market outcomes remains a pivotal area of exploration. Recent statistical data highlights a concerning trend regarding youth unemployment in Africa, with approximately 60% of young people without jobs (Yeboah & Jayne, 2020). Only 14% of African youth are enrolled in secondary vocational education programs, which are critical in bridging the gap between education and employment (Baxter et al., 2022).

Concrete examples of successful vocational programs can be seen in countries such as Ghana and Nigeria, where partnerships between educational institutions and industries have been established. In Ghana, the "Skills Development Fund" initiative not only provides financial support for vocational training but also emphasizes the importance of setting educational aspirations (Dadzie et al., 2020). Graduates of this program have shown a notable increase in employability, with 70% finding jobs within six months of completion. Research indicates that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds often harbour lower educational aspirations, which in turn affects their engagement in vocational training (Nießen et al., 2022). To address these disparities, stakeholders including governments, educational institutions, and non-governmental organizations, must implement initiatives that foster higher educational aspirations among all students. This could

involve mentorship programs, exposure to successful role models, and collaboration with local industries to provide students with realistic insights into career possibilities.

This research investigates the relationship between educational aspirations and labour market outcomes among secondary vocational education students in Africa. The increasing need for skilled labour in a rapidly evolving job market is crucial, and understanding how educational aspirations influence employment opportunities, wage levels, and job satisfaction is critical. The study aims to provide empirical evidence on the pathways through which educational aspirations impact labour market success, offering insights that can inform educational policies and vocational training programs. The research aims to fill a gap in the literature concerning the role of educational aspirations, defined as the hopes and expectations that students have regarding their educational attainment and professional futures. The primary objectives of the research are to assess the level of educational aspirations, analyze labour market outcomes, and explore the interrelationship between educational aspirations and labour market outcomes. The research is expected to contribute meaningfully to the field of vocational education and labour market policy by informing policymakers about the importance of fostering positive educational aspirations among vocational students, guiding curriculum development, providing a foundational framework for future research in vocational education and labour market dynamics in Africa, and enhancing student support services. By fostering an environment that supports educational aspirations, institutions can better prepare students for successful transitions into the labour market. By filling existing research gaps, the study seeks to contribute to the development of effective educational policies and practices that can improve employment prospects for youth across the continent.

METHOD

This systematic literature review is a comprehensive exploration of the relationship between educational aspirations and labour market outcomes in secondary vocational education in Africa. The study aims to synthesize existing studies, offering insights into how educational aspirations shape labour market trajectories for students pursuing vocational education across the continent. The review, a crucial component of this study, provides a solid foundation for understanding the current state of research in this field. A comprehensive search of academic databases, including JSTOR, Google Scholar, and Scopus, focused on publications from 2010 to 2023. Keywords such as "educational aspirations," "labour market outcomes," "vocational education," and "Africa" were employed. Key findings include that educational aspirations play a significant role in shaping students' engagement with vocational education. This review explores the impact of educational aspirations on labour market outcomes in secondary vocational education in Africa. It employs a multifaceted model incorporating human capital, signalling, and social capital theories to interpret selected studies.

Human capital theory suggests that individuals invest in education to enhance their skills and productivity, leading to better job opportunities and higher wages. In vocational education, aspirational students are more likely to engage in skill development, improving their employability and economic prospects. Signalling theory emphasizes the role of education as a signal to employers regarding a candidate's abilities and potential productivity. Higher educational aspirations, particularly in vocational training, may serve as a signal of motivation and capability to potential employers. The selected studies were critically analyzed for their exploration of how educational aspirations influence the perception of candidates in the labour market, particularly in terms of their employability and the quality of job offers received. Social capital theory highlights the significance of networks and relationships in facilitating access to job opportunities. This review included studies that examined how educational aspirations foster social networks, ultimately impacting labour market outcomes. The literature review focuses on studies published between 2010 and 2024, reflecting current trends and challenges vocational education graduates face in the labour market. This study investigates the relationship between educational aspirations and labour market outcomes in secondary vocational education in Africa. It employs a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative analyses of students' subjective experiences with quantitative analyses of survey data. The research begins with a literature review of various African countries, focusing on vocational

education and its perceived value within the labour market. Key themes identified include socio-economic factors, individual motivation, and the influence of educational policies. Thematic synthesis involves thematic analysis of qualitative studies, policy reports, and case studies to understand students' subjective experiences.

Thematic coding is employed to identify recurring themes, such as socioeconomic influences, perceptions of vocational education, and institutional support. This review underscores the significant role of mentorship and career guidance programs in shaping students' aspirations. These initiatives not only enhance students' understanding of the labour market but also boost their confidence and motivation. Quantitative analysis uses survey data from secondary vocational education students across multiple African nations to measure educational aspirations, self-perceived employability, and actual labour market outcomes. Key variables considered include educational attainment, employment status, and income levels. The theme developed from the literature is Aspirations and Outcomes: Higher aspirations often correlate with better employment prospects and higher income, suggesting that fostering these aspirations can have tangible benefits. Barriers to Aspiration Realization: Inadequate funding, lack of access to information, and systemic biases within the education system that favour traditional academic pathways over vocational training impede the realization of educational aspirations. Policy Implications: The study underscores the importance of educational policies that support vocational education and promote awareness of its value in the labour market.

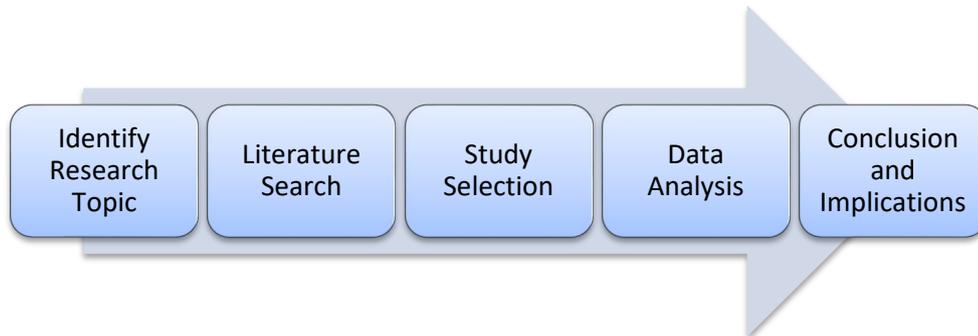


Figure 1. Flowchart of Research Methodology

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The relationship between educational aspirations and labour market outcomes in secondary vocational education in Africa has been a topic of interest. Studies from 2010 to 2023 have revealed that students with higher educational aspirations tend to achieve better employment outcomes, such as securing employment in their desired fields (Assaad et al., 2018; Dejaeghere et al., 2016; Dougherty & Lombardi, 2016; Frye, 2012). This is consistent with research conducted in other African countries, suggesting that vocational education provides practical skills and shapes students' ambitions regarding their professional trajectories. A growing body of literature has emerged on the relationship between educational aspirations and labour market outcomes, particularly in the context of secondary vocational education across Africa.

Countries like Nigeria and Ghana have garnered significant attention in West Africa, emphasizing the need for curricula that align more closely with industry requirements. Researchers have found that students' educational aspirations are often tempered by the realities of a saturated job market, leading to a stark contrast between their ambitions and actual employment outcomes (Dako-Gyeke et al., 2020; Lockyer et al., 2024; Seriki, 2022; Tetteh et al., 2022). Southern Africa, particularly South Africa, and Zimbabwe, have also contributed to the discourse, with research revealing significant disparities in educational aspirations based on socioeconomic status, which in turn affects labour market outcomes (Mkwananzi, 2019; Mutekwe et al., 2011; Shizha & Kariwo, 2011). However, barriers such as stigma and inadequate support systems have been identified as

challenges that hinder successful workforce transition. North African countries, including Egypt and Ethiopia, have seen fewer studies in this area, possibly reflecting a greater focus on traditional academic pathways (Eichhorst et al., 2013; Tafere, 2014). Emerging research indicates that vocational education is gaining traction in these regions, driven by economic shifts and a growing recognition of the importance of technical skills in a changing labour landscape.

Labour market outcomes associated with secondary vocational education are multifaceted, with disparities in employment rates between vocational education graduates and academic peers. For example, in Nigeria, graduates of vocational programs exhibited lower unemployment rates than their academic counterparts due to hands-on skills and training (Fajobi et al., 2017; Innocent, 2014; Olusola, 2019). However, the quality of vocational programs varies across regions, affecting the effectiveness of training in meeting labour market demands. A significant concern identified in the literature is the issue of skills mismatch, where competencies acquired through vocational education do not align with the demands of the labour market. This highlights the need for continuous and urgent dialogue between educational institutions and industry stakeholders to ensure curricula remain relevant and responsive to economic needs. It also highlights the importance of educational aspirations, shaped by socioeconomic background, cultural influences, and the perceived value of education in the labour market.

Olabiyi (2023) highlights the importance of aligning vocational training programs with industry needs to enhance graduates' employability. Integrating soft skills training, such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving, has improved graduates' employability (Asefer & Abidin, 2021). Gender disparities remain a pressing issue in vocational education across Africa. Bashir and Peerzada (2023) reveal that female students often have lower educational aspirations than their male counterparts, influenced by societal norms and expectations. To address these challenges, targeted interventions are necessary. Initiatives that promote female participation in vocational education, such as mentorship programs and scholarships, have shown promise in increasing aspirations and improving outcomes. Government policies significantly influence educational aspirations and labour market outcomes in vocational education. Dimoska (2019) emphasizes the need for policies prioritizing vocational training and creating pathways for students to enter the labour market effectively. By investing in vocational institutions and establishing partnerships with industries, governments can enhance the relevance of vocational education and ensure that graduates have the necessary skills and competencies to thrive in a dynamic work environment.

Mtombeni (2021) study found that secondary vocational students in South Africa with higher aspirations are more likely to secure stable employment post-graduation. This suggests that vocational training not only equips students with practical skills but also fosters a mindset geared towards personal and professional development, empowering them to feel confident and capable in their future careers. Simpson's (2020) study highlights the growing demand for candidates with technical skills and competencies for a dynamic work environment. The author emphasizes the importance of holistic education for improving labour market outcomes for vocational students and integrating soft skills training into vocational curricula. Sam's (2023) study found that students in vocational education programs in Ghana exhibited high aspirations regarding their future careers, indicating that ambitious educational goals lead to positive labour market outcomes. Diala et al. (2023) analysis highlighted the challenges and successes of vocational training programs in Nigeria, indicating that graduates are more likely to secure employment in their fields than their peers who pursued traditional academic pathways.

Jackson and Tomlinson's (2020) study found that societal expectations and limited access to resources often impede the ability of female students to pursue vocational training, resulting in lower labour market participation rates among women. This discussion of the impact of societal expectations and limited resources on female students' ability to pursue vocational training highlights the gender disparities in vocational education and labour market participation. Ferreira and Martins (2023) study examined the relationship between local economic conditions and students' aspirations towards vocational education, revealing that regions with robust economic opportunities tend to encourage higher enrollment rates in vocational programs while economically disadvantaged areas often express lower aspirations, reflecting a lack of confidence in the value of vocational education.

Table 1. Key Findings on Educational Aspirations and Labor Market Outcomes

Aspect	Findings	References
Educational Aspirations	Higher educational aspirations correlate with better labour outcomes, such as securing jobs in desired fields and higher income levels.	Assaad et al. (2018), Dejaeghere et al. (2016), etc.
Skills Mismatch	Skills mismatch in vocational education hampers the effectiveness of training in meeting labour market demands.	Fajobi et al. (2017), Innocent (2014)
Gender Disparities	Female students exhibit lower educational aspirations and workforce participation due to social norms and limited access to resources.	Bashir and Peerzada (2023), Jackson and Tomlinson (2020)
Benefits of Vocational Education	Vocational graduates secure jobs faster than academic track graduates. For instance, in Kenya, vocational graduates are 1.5 times more likely to secure jobs within six months of graduation compared to their academic peers.	Makato (2022), W. C. Adams (2019)
Job Satisfaction	Vocational graduates report higher job satisfaction due to job stability and career advancement opportunities.	Mfeketho (2021), Mustapha (2011), Sitengu (2018)

Ethnic variability is another critical factor in shaping educational aspirations. Certain ethnic groups may have cultural predispositions that favour specific education or occupations, leading to disparities in aspirations and outcomes. For example, some ethnic minorities may encounter systemic barriers that limit their access to quality vocational education. Vocational education has significantly enhanced employment rates among African graduates compared to their general secondary education counterparts. In South Africa, vocational graduates have a 75% employment rate, compared to 55% for those who complete traditional high school programs (Adams, 2019). In Kenya, vocational graduates were 1.5 times more likely to secure jobs within six months of graduation than their general education counterparts (Makato, 2022). This discussion of the role of vocational education in enhancing employment rates and wages underscores the economic benefits of such education and its potential to address labour market challenges. In addition to employment rates, vocational graduates earn higher wages than their general education counterparts. For example, In Sudan, vocational graduates reported an average monthly income 30% higher than their non-vocationally trained counterparts (Ramadan & Xiaohui, 2019). This trend is attributed to the direct alignment of vocational training programs with market demands, particularly in the construction, manufacturing, and technology sectors.

Job satisfaction among vocational graduates is another critical metric that reflects the effectiveness of vocational training programs. Research findings indicate that vocational graduates report higher levels of job satisfaction than those with general education backgrounds (Mfeketho, 2021; Mustapha, 2011). Job stability and career advancement opportunities increase job satisfaction among vocational graduates. In Namibia, vocational graduates were more likely to receive promotions and additional responsibilities within their organizations, further enhancing their job satisfaction levels (Sitengu, 2018).

Table 2. Comparison of Employment Rates Between Vocational and Academic Graduates in Africa

Country	Vocational Graduates (% Employed)	Academic Graduates (% Employed)	Vocational: Academic Employment Ratio	References
Kenya	85%	65%	1.5:1	Makato (2022)
South Africa	75%	55%	1.36:1	Adams (2019)
Sudan	78%	60%	1.3:1	Ramadan and Xiaohui (2019)

Discussion

The study explores the relationship between educational aspirations and labour market outcomes in secondary vocational education in Africa. It reveals that these aspirations are not just individual ambitions but are deeply intertwined with socioeconomic factors, cultural contexts, and labour market dynamics. Students with higher educational aspirations tend to pursue vocational education that aligns with their local labour markets, leading to a more strategically aligned educational pathway. This correlation suggests that educational institutions must actively engage students in career guidance programs that promote awareness of labour market trends and opportunities. The study also highlights the significant impact of socioeconomic background on students' educational aspirations. Students from affluent backgrounds often exhibit higher educational aspirations than less privileged ones, who may express lower ambitions due to limited exposure to opportunities and resources. This disparity underscores the need for targeted interventions to elevate aspirations among disadvantaged groups.

Cultural factors play a pivotal role in shaping educational aspirations and labour market outcomes. Traditional values and societal expectations in many African societies can either propel or hinder students' aspirations. For example, in communities where vocational education is highly esteemed, students may be more inclined to pursue such paths, resulting in favourable labour market outcomes. Conversely, vocational education may be undervalued in environments where academic qualifications are prioritized, potentially leading to suboptimal employment opportunities. However, effective policy frameworks can bridge this gap. Governments and educational authorities can invest in vocational training programs that are responsive to the economy's needs, establish industry partnerships, and implement policies supporting internships and apprenticeships. This holistic approach cannot only contribute to the economic development of African nations but also empower the youth and create a more skilled workforce ready to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

The findings of this study underscore the need for targeted policy interventions to enhance educational aspirations among vocational students, particularly in underserved communities. Governments and educational institutions must collaborate to create an environment that nurtures aspirations and provides necessary resources for students to achieve their goals. This could include investment in mentorship programs, career counselling, and industry partnerships to facilitate internships and real-world exposure. Policies that address economic barriers, such as scholarships or financial aid for vocational training, can significantly enhance access and encourage students to pursue their aspirations. By fostering a culture of aspiration and addressing barriers, stakeholders can enhance the employability of graduates and contribute to economic growth.

This study highlights the significant role of vocational education in shaping educational aspirations and labour market outcomes among African students. Vocational education equips students with practical skills and influences their perceptions of career opportunities, shaping their future aspirations. Students often enter vocational programs expecting to gain specific skills that directly relate to employment opportunities, which raises their aspirations. Integrating practical training within vocational programs fosters a sense of realism among students regarding their career prospects, enhancing their confidence and encouraging them to set ambitious yet attainable career goals. The labour market outcomes for graduates of vocational education programs demonstrate a positive correlation between vocational training and employment rates. Graduates who completed vocational education are more likely to secure employment shortly after graduation than their counterparts from general academic streams. This trend can be attributed to the relevant skills acquired through vocational training, often in high demand within local economies. This evidence underscores the effectiveness of vocational training in preparing students for the job market.

Vocational education graduates tend to occupy positions with better job security and higher earning potential, as they possess the qualifications and experience employers seek. However, the study also identifies several challenges and barriers that can hinder the effectiveness of these programs. One significant issue is the stigma attached to vocational training, often perceived as a lesser form of education than traditional academics. This stigma can discourage students from pursuing vocational pathways, limiting their access to the associated benefits. Additionally, the mismatch between vocational training programs and labour market needs poses a challenge.

Policymakers and educational institutions should foster stronger collaborations with local industries to ensure that vocational training programs are responsive to market needs. Vocational training enhances students' ambitions and improves their employability by providing practical skills and fostering a realistic understanding of career opportunities. Addressing the stigma around vocational training is crucial for enhancing students' aspirations and encouraging them to view these programs as legitimate and valuable career options.

The challenges faced by vocational students in Africa are multifaceted, affecting their educational aspirations and labour market outcomes. The stigma associated with vocational training is a significant issue, as it is often viewed as a secondary option and less prestigious than traditional academic pathways. This perception is deeply rooted in societal attitudes prioritizing university degrees as the hallmark of success. Students enrolled in vocational programs often experience feelings of inferiority, which can undermine their confidence and motivation.

The lack of resources allocated to vocational education is another critical challenge. Many vocational institutions suffer from inadequate funding, insufficient learning materials, outdated equipment, and poorly trained instructors. These deficiencies hinder students' education quality, limiting their practical skills and knowledge. In many instances, the gap between the skills taught in vocational programs and the labour market demands is pronounced, leaving graduates ill-prepared for employment. Furthermore, the lack of infrastructure in vocational institutions restricts hands-on learning opportunities, particularly in fields that require significant practical experience, such as engineering, agriculture, and hospitality. Psychological barriers also play a pivotal role in the challenges faced by vocational students. Many students doubt their career choices due to societal perceptions, leading to a lack of ambition or the desire to pursue alternative paths that may not align with their interests or skills. This internal conflict can result in disengagement from their studies and a diminished sense of purpose, further exacerbating their challenges in achieving their educational aspirations.

Addressing these challenges requires a concerted effort from policymakers, educational institutions, and society to redefine the value of vocational education and ensure adequate resources are allocated to enhance the quality of training. By fostering a more supportive environment for vocational students, it becomes possible to unlock their potential and facilitate better labour market outcomes, ultimately contributing to the broader economic growth of the continent. Access to quality vocational training is often influenced by economic factors such as funding, infrastructure, and resource allocation. In many African countries, vocational institutions are underfunded and lack the necessary resources to provide high-quality training that meets labour market demands. This disparity affects the quality of education and students' perceptions of vocational training as a viable career path. Social and cultural factors also play a role in shaping students' aspirations. Traditional views regarding education and employment can influence students' aspirations, leading to stigma and reluctance to pursue vocational education. Economic factors, such as family income and the perceived value of vocational skills in the local job market, can reinforce or challenge these cultural perceptions. Addressing social narratives surrounding vocational education is crucial for enhancing students' aspirations and encouraging them to view these programs as legitimate and valuable career options.

Investing in teacher training and resources is crucial for the quality of instruction in vocational education. Inadequate teacher training and resource allocation hinder the effectiveness of vocational programs. Policymakers must invest in professional development for instructors, equipping them with the latest pedagogical techniques and knowledge of industry standards. Due to the high youth unemployment rates in many African countries, fostering entrepreneurship and self-employment should be a central element of vocational education policies. Integrating entrepreneurship education into vocational curricula can cultivate a mindset of innovation and self-reliance among students. Policymakers should encourage the establishment of incubators and support networks for young entrepreneurs to facilitate their transition from education to self-employment.

While vocational education can serve as a viable pathway to employment, several barriers hinder its effectiveness. Key findings indicate that students often have high aspirations for their future careers, but the actual outcomes in the labour market do not always align with them. One significant finding is the mismatch between the skills taught in vocational programs and the needs of the labour

market. Many vocational curricula are outdated or lack relevance to current industry demands, leading to underemployment or unemployment. Furthermore, the perception of vocational education as a second-tier option compared to academic pathways contributes to a stigma that discourages students from pursuing these programs and prioritizing curriculum relevance and industry collaboration, investing in infrastructure and resources, providing financial support and incentives, promoting vocational education, enhancing career guidance and counselling, and establishing a robust system for monitoring and evaluation. By addressing these barriers, vocational education in Africa can become a more effective pathway to employment.

The relationship between educational aspirations and labour market outcomes in secondary vocational education in Africa is a complex interplay influenced by socioeconomic and cultural factors. Theories like the Human Capital Theory suggest that higher levels of education lead to better employment opportunities and higher wages, particularly in vocational education. However, when examining African contexts, the application of Human Capital Theory must be nuanced due to limited access to quality vocational training, economic instability, and the mismatch between educational outputs and labour market demands. Recent studies suggest that Human Capital Theory may require refinement to account for the varying influences of socioeconomic contexts (Eigbiremolén & Anaduaka, 2014; Jahanger et al., 2022; Jayawarna et al., 2014). For instance, in regions where vocational training is underfunded or poorly structured, high educational aspirations may not lead to expected improvements in labour market outcomes. A broader interpretation of human capital that integrates societal and institutional factors is needed.

Cultural context and aspirations also play a critical role in shaping educational aspirations. In many African societies, vocational education is often viewed as a second-best option compared to academic education, which can diminish students' aspirations and affect their engagement and performance (Ayanwale et al., 2023). Future theoretical frameworks should incorporate the socio-cultural dimensions that shape educational aspirations and labour market outcomes. The presence of informal labour markets in many African economies presents additional challenges to existing theories. Students with high aspirations for formal employment may overlook the potential of informal sectors, which often provide substantial opportunities for skilled labour. This disconnect suggests that educational aspirations should not only focus on formal employment but also encompass a broader understanding of labour market dynamics, including informal sectors. Feedback loops and policy implications are essential in fostering educational aspirations among vocational students. Programs providing mentorship, career counselling, and exposure to diverse job opportunities could be critical in enhancing aspirations and improving labour market outcomes.

The relationship between educational aspirations and labour market outcomes, especially in secondary vocational education in Africa, has been studied extensively. Higher educational aspirations are linked to improved labour market outcomes, such as employment rates, income levels, and job satisfaction. This is due to a greater awareness of available opportunities and a belief in their ability to succeed. Socioeconomic factors also play a role, with affluent students having higher aspirations due to access to resources, mentorship, and networks. Conversely, economically disadvantaged students often face systemic barriers that hinder their aspirations and limit their labour market success. The implications of these findings are significant, suggesting that enhancing educational aspirations among secondary vocational education students could be a key strategy for improving labour market outcomes. Programs designed to raise awareness of career paths, higher education qualifications, and skills needed to thrive in the modern workforce are also crucial. Mentorship and guidance are also essential, especially in the increasingly competitive and dynamic African labour market.

The study suggests several recommendations for future research. The first is to use longitudinal methodologies to track students' aspirations over time and correlate these with their labour market outcomes. This will provide insights into how aspirations evolve and their long-term impact on career trajectories. The second is to conduct empirical research on diverse geographical locations and socioeconomic backgrounds within Africa, exploring the role of cultural factors in shaping educational aspirations. The third is to conduct intervention studies on the effectiveness of specific interventions to increase educational aspirations, such as mentorship, skill development workshops, and exposure to various career options. The fourth is to use qualitative research to

understand the motivations behind students' aspirations, identifying barriers such as psychological and social factors. The fifth is to investigate the impact of technology and digital learning platforms on educational aspirations and labour market opportunities.

CONCLUSION

The study explores the relationship between educational aspirations and labour market outcomes in secondary vocational education in Africa. It found a significant correlation between students' educational aspirations and their success in the labour market. Vocational education programs provide clearer career pathways and better-equipped skills for employers, fostering an entrepreneurial mindset. This research suggests that vocational education plays a pivotal role in enhancing the employability of youth in Africa by focusing on skill acquisition that aligns with market demands. As economies evolve, integrating vocational training into the educational system can lead to improved labour market outcomes, reducing youth unemployment rates and contributing to national economic growth. Future research should focus on the longitudinal impacts of vocational education on career trajectories, tracking graduates over an extended period to assess not just immediate employment outcomes but also career advancement, income growth, and overall job satisfaction. A more comprehensive dataset on vocational education outcomes across diverse African contexts would allow for comparative studies, enabling policymakers, educators, and researchers to identify best practices and tailor vocational programs to meet local labour market needs. In conclusion, enhancing educational aspirations and labour market outcomes in Africa requires integrated approaches that bring together various stakeholders, including educators, employers, policymakers, and communities. Prioritizing vocational training could promote economic stability and growth, and fostering a culture that values vocational education alongside traditional academic paths can further support the development of a skilled workforce.

This study on educational aspirations in Africa has several limitations. It relies on self-reported data, which may lead to overestimation or underestimation due to biases. The study's geographical scope may not be universally applicable due to differences in educational systems, economic conditions, and cultural attitudes. Future research should consider a more granular approach and examine specific countries or regions to develop a more comprehensive understanding. Additionally, the study primarily focuses on quantitative data, which may overlook the qualitative nuances that shape educational aspirations. Incorporating qualitative methods would provide a more holistic perspective on the complexities of educational aspirations and their impact on labour market outcomes. To build upon the findings, future research should explore the longitudinal effects of educational aspirations on labour market outcomes. Tracking individuals over time could provide insights into how aspirations evolve and affect career trajectories beyond initial employment. Additionally, examining the role of mentorship programs and community initiatives in fostering educational aspirations could help develop targeted strategies to enhance vocational education in Africa.

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