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Tukundane, Cuthbert; Minnaert, Alexander; Zeelen, Jacques; Kanyandago, Peter

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## Building vocational skills for marginalised youth in Uganda: A SWOT analysis of four training programmes



Cuthbert Tukundane<sup>a,\*</sup>, Alexander Minnaert<sup>b</sup>, Jacques Zeelen<sup>b</sup>, Peter Kanyandago<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Institute of Ethics and Development Studies, Uganda Martyrs University, P.O. Box 5498, Kampala, Uganda

<sup>b</sup> Faculty of Behavioural and Social Sciences, University of Groningen, Grote Rozenstraat 38, 9712 TJ Groningen, The Netherlands

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### ABSTRACT

Educational exclusion leads to the marginalisation of many youth in regards to employment and other livelihood opportunities. Vocational education and training (VET) is expected to offer skills to ameliorate this situation. This paper presents findings of an exploratory study conducted on four VET programmes for marginalised youth in the rural areas of Mbarara district, south-western Uganda to examine the current VET practices and how the youth are prepared for the labour market and livelihood opportunities. The findings show that VET can improve access to labour market and livelihood opportunities, but a number of areas require improvement.

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### 1. Introduction

Large numbers of young people equipped with appropriate skills have the potential to boost their country's prosperity. Ignoring the skills needs of disadvantaged young people not only limits their chances of achieving their potential, but also threatens to slow growth and poverty reduction (UNESCO, 2012b, p. 299).

The above statement from the Education for All (EFA) *Global Monitoring Report (GMR)* (UNESCO, 2012b) underscores the importance of education and skills training in realising individual potential and the development of society as a whole. It comes against the backdrop of many countries, especially in the developing world, that are making notable progress in improving access to education for young people but also facing challenges in providing access to some, retaining those individuals in school and providing quality education. The statement, therefore, reiterates the need to cater to the education and training needs of young people who have not been able to access education or complete school. Such youth often lack the required skills and competences to integrate into the labour market and earn a livelihood (Adams, 2007; Kibwika et al., 2010; The World Bank, 2006). If not equipped with appropriate skills, the majority of these young people will suffer marginalisation and social exclusion, will have their life chances curtailed, and will not

contribute much to their countries' development (International Labour Office, 2005; Olmec, 2007). It is believed that gaining skills will improve not only their life chances, but also their "respect, self-confidence and personal pride" (Powell, 2012, p. 650).

Uganda is one of the Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) countries that have made remarkable progress in school enrolment rates at all levels, but especially at the primary and secondary school levels. With initiatives (such as the Universal Primary Education [UPE] and Universal Secondary Education [USE] implemented in 1997 and 2007, respectively, by the Ministry of Education and Sports [MoES]) to improve educational access, the country's primary school enrolment rose from 2.7 million in 1996 to 8.7 million in 2010 and secondary school enrolment from 0.5 million in 2000 to 1.5 million in 2010 (UBOS, 2010). Enrolment figures notwithstanding, similar to many other SSA countries, early dropout rates are very high and the quality of education is wanting (Blaak et al., 2013; Zeelen et al., 2010). Studies have shown that in Uganda, early school leaving (ESLg) is linked to direct and indirect costs of education, parental decisions, pregnancy, early marriages, interest in petty trading, being too old for the class (for late enrollers), effects of war, child labour, poor academic progress, sickness or calamity, harassment at school, perceived lack of relevance and orphan-hood (Amone-P'Olak, 2007; Angucia, 2010; Blaak et al., 2013; Kanyandago, 2010; MoES, 2008a; Nakanyike et al., 2002; UBOS, 2006). Such research provides a more complex picture than simply offering free education to solve the problem of ESLg. With several antecedents of ESLg not properly addressed, UPE and USE have not prevented high rates of ESLg.

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +256 772850479.

E-mail address: [tukundane2006@gmail.com](mailto:tukundane2006@gmail.com) (C. Tukundane).

The Ugandan education system has also been heavily criticised for being overly academic, theoretical and exam-oriented such that many of those who leave the system early, from primary and secondary schools, do not possess the skills to be employed or initiate livelihood ventures (Kanyandago, 2010; Openjuru, 2010). Due to ESLg and low-quality education, “children are entering adolescence poorly prepared for work and life” (Jimenez et al., 2007, p. 89). ESLg diminishes their life chances and the lack of skills makes it much more difficult for them to escape poverty. Early school leavers (ESLs) miss out on the wider potential benefits of education, including sense of self-worth, increased productivity and social mobility (Schargel and Smink, 2001; The World Bank, 2006; UNESCO, 2011). Not only do they miss out on these benefits, but some ESLs find themselves vulnerable to a number of other health, social and behavioural problems such as illness, drug abuse, crime, unwanted pregnancies, prostitution, etc. (Angucia, 2010; Conen and Rutten, 2003; Modiba and Zeelen, 2007; Zeelen et al., 2010). The skills level and labour market opportunities for higher education graduates in Uganda are also questionable in the face of high and rising youth unemployment (Zeelen, 2012). However, ESLs are at a greater disadvantage than their graduate counterparts in terms of finding a well-paying job and better life choices. Minnis (2006, p. 130) asserts that “no group is in greater need of personal transformation than the millions of out-of-school youth for whom there is little future without some form of training”. This is because ESLg, which is tantamount to educational exclusion, is also a fundamental contributing factor to social exclusion (Olmec, 2007; Tukundane et al., 2014). Social exclusion, viewed from Amartya Sen’s “capabilities” approach, can be considered as a process that leads to a state in which it is more difficult for certain individuals and groups to achieve certain “functionings” that are expected of them in society (Saith, 2007). Social exclusion is what occurs when “... people ... face a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, discrimination, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime, bad health and family breakdown” (ODPM, 2004, p. 4). Studies have shown that ESLs are at an increased likelihood of long-term unemployment, low-skilled and poorly paid employment and social and economic marginalisation (Adams, 2007; International Labour Office, 2005; Sabates et al., 2010; Taylor, 2009).

The Ugandan youth situation is compounded by the fact that the country has one of the youngest and fastest growing populations on the African continent. Figures from the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS) (UBOS, 2012) indicate that the country has approximately 34 million people, 54% of whom are below the age of 18. Youth unemployment is high and driven by a number of factors, critical among which are the following: lack of employable skills, a mismatch between skills and requirements of the labour market, and insufficient emphasis on Vocational Education and Training (VET) (African Economic Outlook, 2012). Although some ESLs can have positive experiences in life, the majority find themselves unemployed or employed in low-paying jobs, menial work, and petty trading. Their state is attributed to the low levels (or lack) of skills and competences (Africa Progress Report, 2012; Kibwika et al., 2010). Accordingly, VET is considered as one of the remedies for the skills deficit or at least as a “second chance” that will equip ESLs with the required skills for the labour market and earning a livelihood (Blaak et al., 2013; Chin et al., 2009; Jjuuko, 2012; Muyobo, 2012; Zeelen et al., 2010). It is assumed that skills development, especially through VET, will tremendously improve the lives of marginalised youth (Africa Progress Report, 2012; Sappa and Bonica, 2011; UNESCO, 2012b; UNESCO – Dakar Regional Office, 2012).

As McGrath (2012b) acknowledged, it is difficult to find a definite definition of VET because people use different terms and definitions for it. For this reason and for the purposes of this paper,

we will use VET to refer to education and training that aim to equip participants with practical skills, know-how and understanding that facilitate their entry and performance in the labour market and enable their livelihoods. In Uganda, such VET programmes are run by both public and private institutions. However, for the marginalised youth, much of the provision is by the private sector (mainly non-governmental organisations [NGOs], community-based organisations [CBOs] and individuals operating in the informal sector). The training is geared towards the graduates finding a job or becoming self-employed, especially in the informal sector, which is the main employer in Uganda (UBOS, 2012; UNESCO, 2012b). Until recently, VET in Uganda had not been given its due importance because of a number of factors, including the prevailing image of VET as a second choice, government prioritisation of primary and secondary education, and inadequate financial resources. However, with high youth unemployment, large numbers of young people leaving school early without the required skills for their integration into the labour market and a desire for greater socio-economic development, there is now a policy shift in the country towards VET and skills development. This change is clearly stipulated in the Business, Technical, and Vocational Education and Training (BTVET) Act of 2008 (MoES, 2008b), the National Development Plan (NDP) (NPA, 2010), the Skilling Uganda Programme (MoES, 2011) and the Uganda Vision 2040 (The Republic of Uganda, 2007). The focus on VET and skills development is meant to improve young people’s labour market and livelihood opportunities and promote prosperity and national development.

Although there is renewed interest in VET in Uganda as part of the solution to youth unemployment and the skills deficit, there is a need to first examine the existing practices so that lessons can be learned to better implement VET programmes. In the current paper, we report the findings of an exploratory study on four VET programmes for marginalised youth in the rural areas of Mbarara district in south-western Uganda. We examine the strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities (SWOT) of these different VET programme approaches to gain insight into current practices and determine what lessons can be learned to help improve the existing programmes and better implement future programmes. The analysis is based on the perceptions and experiences of several key stakeholders including, past and present participants, instructors, and employers. The findings of this study are crucial to VET practitioners and policy makers who seek to have effective VET programmes.

## 2. Background to the VET sector in Uganda

As in many other countries of Anglophone SSA, VET in Uganda is generally offered outside of the mainstream school system (Atchoarena and Delluc, 2002). In these countries, the “school system leads to two paths: general education which enables pupils who gain access to them to continue in their schooling to higher levels and vocational education for those who opt to focus on immediate employment or those who, due to limited access to education opportunities, are crowded out of the general education ladder” (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2006, p. 30). Although primary education in Uganda is intended to provide basic education and skills and secondary education to offer more subject or skill-oriented instruction (UBOS, 2010, p. 21), the reality is that the system does not deliver the required skills to students, as previously noted in Section 1 of this paper. At the same time, a large number of young people leave school before completing these levels. The government of Uganda acknowledges that the school system does not adequately equip the students with skills for labour market integration and taking advantage of various

livelihood opportunities (MoES, 2012; The Republic of Uganda, 1992; UBOS, 2010).

Consequently, the government is currently implementing the BTVET Act, which was enacted in 2008 to address the skills insufficiency problem and tackle youth unemployment. However, the proper implementation and success of BTVET will largely depend on the commitment of government to “walk the talk”. At the moment, there is scepticism among some sections of the populace as to the success of this undertaking given the governments’ failure to provide the necessary resources and implement earlier VET policies. In 1992, the government white paper on *Education for national integration and development* (The Republic of Uganda, 1992, p. 116) emphasised the need to prioritise VET so as “to stimulate intellectual and technical growth of students in order to make them productive members of the community; and to produce craftsmen, technicians and other skilled manpower to meet the demands of industry, agriculture and commerce”, but most of its proposals were never implemented.

Although McGrath (2012a, p. 622) accentuates that VET should not be viewed as “just a backwater of the education system, populated by those who are unable to learn or teach successfully in more mainstream institutions and pathways [but rather] as an integral part of our being as learners, workers and humans”, the situation in Uganda is such that the majority of the participants in VET are marginalised youth who have been excluded from mainstream education for various reasons. Very few young people with means and capability to continue in mainstream academic education will freely choose the VET path because of its historical and poor image as being the “poor cousin” of mainstream education (UNESCO – Dakar Regional Office, 2012; Watson, 1994). As Liang (2002, p. 52) states, VET in Uganda “suffers from its residual role in an elite academic system”. VET in Uganda is provided by both public and private institutions, organisations and individuals; however, much of the provision is by the private sector. It is offered in formal, non-formal and informal settings. Non-formal VET is highly fragmented and often localised, provided in various centres and places of work and learning (MoES, 2010; Wirak et al., 2003).

According to MoES (2012) and Wirak et al. (2003), VET in Uganda trains young people in foundational skills, technical skills, business-related skills, technology and work-specific skills and professional skills. These are also reflected in the BTVET Act (MoES, 2008b), which envisions producing “a competent and polyvalent workforce with practical skills, entrepreneurial skills and orientation that are essential for employment”, better livelihoods and national development (MoES, 2010, p. 29). The good sign is that the country now has policies in place to guide the VET sector and a great desire to skill its young people, especially the marginalised youth who have hitherto had limited access to vocational training and skills development (Swisscontact, 2012). A directorate of industrial training (DIT) is also in place to test and certify the skills of various categories of learners/trainees, of which ESLs would be the largest beneficiaries, as their skills are often overlooked in the labour market due to lack of certification. However, proper implementation of the policies, availability of resources to the VET sector and a change in the mind-set about VET will be critical to the achievement of the desired outcomes.

Although VET cannot fix all of the problems of marginalised youth, it is considered as one of the pathways to their further education, employment and empowerment (African Economic Outlook, 2008; Singh, 2000; UNESCO, 2010). In fact, Blaug (2001, p. 40) emphatically states that “once non-completers have left school, we need to draw them into vocational training programmes that result into certificates of competence”. Vocational skills play an important role in equipping young people with skills required

for work and social integration (International Institute of Educational Planning, 2006). UNESCO (2012a, p. 21) observes that “as well as being a threat to social cohesion, the weak labour market integration of youth is a loss to development as a whole”. For this reason, there is a renewed interest in VET worldwide, but especially in SSA, where it has been neglected for some time (Africa Progress Report, 2012; Palmer, 2007; UNESCO, 2012b). With inadequate investment in equivalency programmes and “second chances” to meet the diverse needs of ESLs (The World Bank, 2008), VET is often used as a strategy for equipping young people with employable skills. Accordingly, the overriding goal of VET in many countries, including Uganda, has been to train skilled young people for the labour market and combat unemployment (Oketch, 2007; The World Bank, 2008). Recently, there has been a greater focus on the second objective, which is to train them for self-employment (Atchoarena and Delluc, 2002).

However, this application of VET has been seriously criticised by some scholars as being “narrow” and “productivist” and unable to cater to the holistic needs of its participants (Blaak et al., 2013; Jjuuko, 2012; McGrath, 2012b). Based on works by theorists such as Freire (1996), Nyerere (1978), Sen (2001), and Human Development Reports (HDR) by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), they argue that the role of VET should be viewed from a wider perspective to include the enhancement of peoples’ freedoms, capabilities, rights, dignity, and self-confidence and promote their empowerment, self-reliance and human development. This view was earlier stressed by other researchers in VET such as Dunbar (2002), McGrath and King (1995), and UNESCO (1993). Indeed, marginalised youth in Uganda who have multiple needs and challenges require training that will provide them with not only skills for work but also skills for life and livelihood opportunities. Thus, VET graduates need a combination of technical and occupation-specific skills as well as generic and entrepreneurial skills. As Blaak et al. (2013, p. 95) state, for VET to provide “practical empowerment” to marginalised youth in Uganda, it should help them to acquire “marketable skills and business skills but also decision making skills, knowledge to make informed decisions, social skills to manage social support, awareness of one’s position and rights in society [and] also strong self-esteem and assertiveness”. Lim et al. (2012, p. 655) add that “at the individual level, receiving skills training cannot be reduced to merely an investment for securing a job”; rather, it should have wider aims such as emancipation of the learners to “seek out a livelihood”. In this way, VET will contribute to the improvement of young people’s life choices, human development and the development of the wider society.

Research further shows that proper skills development and empowerment of marginalised youth can best take place in flexible and conducive environments (Cheng, 2010; Schaap et al., 2012; Wyn et al., 2004) that promote a culture of lifelong learning (McGrath, 2012b; Minnis, 2006) or *lifewide* learning, as Javis (2007) prefers to call it. For positive results, learning in VET should be learner-centred, encourage problem-based learning that leads to problem solving abilities and, above all, be linked to the needs of the labour market where such young people are likely to be employed (Chappell, 2003; Cheng, 2010; DSO/OO, 2011; Minnis, 2006; Zeelen et al., 2010). In the SSA context in general and Uganda in particular, many of the VET graduates find employment in the informal sector in either agriculture-related activities or micro and small-scale enterprises (McGrath and King, 1995; Minnis, 2006; Palmer, 2007). Accordingly, it is of paramount importance to link and coordinate VET with this crucial sector. As most marginalised youth will have undergone challenging and traumatising experiences in life, they also need intensive support, guidance and counselling to benefit fully from their VET experience (Blaak et al., 2013).

Whereas VET programmes for marginalised youth are credited for helping to provide practical and hands-on skills, improving employment and livelihood prospects for young people, and instilling a sense of confidence in marginalised youth (see e.g., Currie et al., 2001; McGregor and Mills, 2012; UNESCO, 2012b; UYDEL, 2006; Weyer, 2009), they have also been found to have a number of weaknesses, especially in low-income countries like Uganda. The weaknesses include; inadequate funding and facilities, lack of holistic and multi-disciplinary delivery approaches, lack of link with and relevance to the labour market, not being flexible and innovative enough, and lack of guidance and counselling (see e.g., Blaak et al., 2013; Jjuuko, 2012; Kibwika et al., 2010; Openjuru, 2010). Some of these weaknesses arise because current VET is mainly supply-driven and tends to aim at producing “ready-made workers” for the market, though without caring much to know about the market. However, Hager and Hodkinson (2009) advise that vocational education should move beyond the metaphor of “transfer of learning”, which denotes educating “ready-made workers”, to “learning as becoming”, acknowledging that learning never ends and attempting to equip young people with tools and minds that encourage them to continually learn in the ever-changing world of work. If the VET sector in Uganda is to improve the opportunities and life chances of marginalised youth, such new concepts and learning strategies have to be put into consideration, but of course within the local context.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Research design and methods

To gain insight into VET skills training programmes for marginalised youth in Mbarara and how they prepare young people for the labour market and livelihood opportunities, a SWOT analysis of four VET training programmes was carried out. In this SWOT, strengths (S) refer to the advantageous or positive characteristics within a particular VET programme that enable it to achieve its objectives; weaknesses (W) refer to the negative or disadvantageous characteristics within the programme that make it difficult to achieve the desired objectives; opportunities (O) denote the elements in the external environment of a VET programme that could be exploited to the programme's advantage; and threats (T) refer to the elements in the external environment that could prevent the programme from achieving its goal. Gaining insight into the strengths and weaknesses (programmes' internal factors) and opportunities and threats (programmes' external factors) provides knowledge about how these programmes operate so that actions for improvement of practice and strengthening of the programmes and institutions can be undertaken strategically and systematically (Sasidhar and Gopal Reddy, 2012). Maximising the strengths and opportunities and overcoming or minimising the weaknesses and threats should result in better VET programmes.

This SWOT analysis was based on the perceptions and experiences of several key stakeholders in VET skills development for marginalised youth in Mbarara and also on the TVET assessment indicators proposed by the *Inter-Agency Working Group on TVET Indicators* (2012). Established in 2010 to make recommendations on a set of TVET indicators that can support countries assess the efficiency and effectiveness of national TVET systems, with particular focus on low-income countries, the group has proposed four key indicators. They are: (1) *TVET financing* (how financial resources are collected, as well as how they are equitably and efficiently allocated, and managed depending on the economic situation and availability of resources; priority levels that decision makers of various types of TVET have with regard to relevance, equity and quality; and on the trade-offs stemming from those

priorities); (2) *Access and participation* (promotion of equity and inclusion in TVET and the implications on expanding learning opportunities for excluded groups; providing viable and effective opportunities to benefit from high quality TVET leading to labour market outcomes); (3) *Quality and innovation* (teaching and learning processes and their effectiveness; availability of facilities and equipment to meet the skills needs; the capacity of systems to innovate; how the teaching and learning process is a site of innovation; availability of a systematic approach to quality assurance in order to support practitioners and policy-makers in improving the quality of training provision, and also guide students in making choices); and (4) *Relevance* (extent to which TVET is responsive to labour market needs and requirements; labour market links to TVET programmes and outcomes of the TVET programmes).

Although the results of this SWOT study cover only four cases, they provide exemplary knowledge that can be used for analytic generalisation and theorising about VET and skills development in Uganda. The exemplary knowledge can be used to improve existing programmes and aid in the design and implementation of future VET programmes.

This SWOT study followed a qualitative multiple-case study approach. The multiple or collective (Stake, 1995) case study allowed us to explore particular issues within each specific VET programme setting and across the programmes (Baxter and Jack, 2008; Yin, 2003). According to Yin (2003, p. 47), such a multiple-case study method is important for theoretical replication logic; in this particular case, theorising about skills development for marginalised youth through VET. Multiple-case studies are assumed to lead to greater insight into the phenomenon under study compared to single-case studies and are thought to be better for analytic generalisation and theorising (Cheng, 2010). In general, case study research produces exemplary knowledge (Thomas, 2010a, 2010b; Smaling, 2003).

The cases used in the present study were purposefully selected using maximum variation sampling to allow the “capturing” of the “central themes” and “outcomes” that “cut across” (Patton, 1990, p. 172) the study cases and the significance of the uniqueness and variety of “various circumstances of [each] case process and outcome” (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 230). Accordingly, this method of selecting the VET programmes for marginalised youth enabled us to explore the key enabling features that cut across the programmes and the features that are peculiar to each programme that facilitate or stifle skills development for these young people. Additionally, a qualitative stance aids in understanding skills training for marginalised youth within context-specific settings (Golafshani, 2003). Moreover, McGrath and Lugg (2012, p. 8) assert that research on VET should use a “variety of methods”, including qualitative methods, and Powell (2012) underscores the importance of listening to the hitherto side-lined voices of VET learners in research. Upon examining the human-centred approaches to VET, McGrath (2012b, p. 630) proposes “a shifting of the focus of VET research away from the domination of a technician view that privileges a focus on systems and institutions, and their efficiency, towards more humanistic approaches that place individuals at the heart of research, as subjects as well as objects”.

The current study was carried out in four phases. The first phase was used to explore the current practices/programmes that are engaged in training ESLs in Mbarara district by performing desk research, visiting the district education department, visiting the training centres and interacting with the local people who are knowledgeable about VET and eventually selecting the four cases for study. The programmes were selected based on the criteria that would give maximum variation, for example, formal/non-formal, public/private, school-based/apprenticeship, private individual/private organisation, etc. After making a list of the programmes

and their categories, four were selected for study based on the recommendations of the local people who were informally interviewed and mentioned them as well-known and beneficial programmes. The second phase involved interviewing current participants (students) and instructors (teachers) in the selected VET institutions. In the third phase, we conducted a small tracer study to follow up on some of the graduates of these training programmes and to interact with some of their employers and after-training activities. In the last phase, we organised a workshop, invited those who had participated in the study and presented our preliminary findings and conclusions to receive feedback from them and ascertain whether our conclusions represented their actual views.

In total, 87 people, including 23 current trainees, 37 alumni, 16 instructors and 11 employers, participated in the study. The current trainees and instructors who participated in the study were mainly volunteers who displayed an interest after the Principals had given us the opportunity to explain the purpose of the study to the students and staff and assure them of privacy and confidentiality. To locate the former participants and their employers, we used the snowball method, in which one alumnus led us to another because the training programmes did not have a database with current contacts of their former trainees. We followed up alumni who had completed their studies at least two years prior to the study. This allowed time for them to have acquired a job, started a personal initiative or to have a reason why neither had occurred. The data were collected using individually focused interviews (Clausen, 2012), observation and documentary analysis (mainly for the cases' background information). We also recorded many field notes during the visits and workshop. The data were analysed thematically (Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2005) to explore the key features and outcomes of the programmes.

### 3.2. The cases

Sections 3.2.1–3.2.4 present a brief overview of the cases studied.

#### 3.2.1. Programme I: Farm school

The farm school began in 1994 with the aim of training and equipping primary school leavers with life and hands-on practical skills in agriculture. However, due to demand and a general dislike of agriculture among some youth, the curriculum has been diversified to incorporate other technical subjects such as carpentry and joinery, brick laying and concrete practice. The three-year courses offered at this school lead to the Uganda Junior Technical Certificate (UJTC). Though church-founded, the school is now a public/school and formal training institution. Information from the school indicates that the objectives of the training are to impart hands-on practical skills in the courses offered, create a sense of self-awareness among the youth and enhance economic independence through job acquisition and self-employment. The school authorities assert that they are training young people to be “job creators and not job seekers”. The target group is mainly primary school leavers, but youth who have dropped out of secondary school or completed secondary school are eligible to enrol, although they are considered as primary school leavers and only qualify for the UJTC. At the end of the course, one must pass formal national examinations to qualify for the certificate. Although the school is called a farm school, very few trainees opt for agricultural courses, especially after the introduction of other technical subjects. Of those enrolled in agriculture, the majority are girls. Currently, the government is in the process of transforming the school into a Farm Institute. Therefore, some ESLs will no longer have access to it, as they will not have the required entry qualifications.

#### 3.2.2. Programme II: Non-formal skills training centre

This church-affiliated centre runs three different courses on a short-term basis, lasting between three weeks and three months. The programmes are as follows: Education for Life (Efl) (three weeks); the non-formal BTVET skills training programme (3 months), which was introduced by the government of Uganda in the financial year 2009/2010 at various centres and vocational schools to serve as alternatives to addressing the unemployment problems of marginalised youth, especially ESLs; and the Support to Enterprise Skills and Linkages Programme for Apprenticeship Training (SESLPA) (three months) supported by the Private Sector Foundation of Uganda (PSFU). These programmes recruit young people who never attended school and ESLs and train them in various skills, including practical skills training in ceramics, multimedia crafts, textile weaving, fabric decoration, baking and bakery technology, bee keeping, agriculture, drum making, mushroom growing, etc. In addition to these practical skills, the BTVET and the SESLPA programmes also train these youth in communication, entrepreneurial and leadership skills. The Efl programme also has a behaviour change component that provides preventive information and awareness about HIV/AIDS. The main aim of these programmes is to help marginalised rural youth to realise their potential and obtain skills in trades that can facilitate better livelihoods. They also aim to address the challenges that the youth face, such as HIV/AIDS, unemployment, drug abuse, theft, alcoholism, early marriages and becoming victims of the law and power abuse. Participants in the Efl course do not complete exams and are not issued any certificates at the end of the course. Those who go through the BTVET and SESLPA programmes must be examined on the skills gained practically. They are not subjected to theory examinations, and the training and examination are conducted in the local language. A certificate of completion is issued after the course.

#### 3.2.3. Programme III: Young people's empowerment school

This school, founded in 2002 by the Ugandan branch of an international organisation, aims to unite and acquaint the youth who do not continue with school or who end at lower levels of education with religious values, life skills and the ability to have a bright future through self-employment or jobs in the areas in which they are trained. The objectives of the training programme are, inter alia, to provide the youth with a variety of recreational activities and promote community well-being by identifying and encouraging development projects and developing self-reliance skills that are financially feasible; help persons to develop a Christian character and to build a Christian society through the maintenance of activities and services that contribute to their physical, social, economic, mental and spiritual growth. The overall goal is to empower young people by providing skills that enable them to lead healthy and productive lives. The school recruits lower secondary level graduates for the certificate courses and advanced level secondary graduates for diploma courses. It also offers holiday courses that can be attended by all, including ESLs. The courses offered include accountancy, secretarial studies, computer applications, catering and hotel management, and tailoring and embroidery. Students have the opportunity to go on internship placements, and graduates of this training programme receive official certificates. The courses take two to three years depending on the level at which the course is taken.

#### 3.2.4. Programme IV: Apprenticeship training

Started in 1972 by five trained mechanics, this garage specialises in motor vehicle repairs and metal fabrication. Most of the current mechanics were trained in this garage and were hired to remain as workers. The garage trains ESLs in motor vehicle repairs, panel beating, spraying and metal fabrication. The trainees

learn on the job as they assist and learn from experienced mechanics and welders while carrying out their tasks. The objective of the programme is to help ESLs gain hands-on skills for self-employment, self-reliance, and better livelihoods. The trainees do not pay fees, as their labour in the garage during training and assistance to their senior colleagues is counted as payment for their training. The length of time taken to complete training depends on the individuals' pace of learning and mastering a particular skill. Unless otherwise, one is not given a certificate of completion until the instructors are satisfied with the skill level of the trainee. All who complete the training course successfully receive a certificate of completion.

#### 4. Results and discussion

In this section we present and discuss the findings of the SWOT study beginning with the table summary of the key issues from the SWOT analysis. Tables 1–4 summarise the key SWOT issues that emerged from this study with regard to the four training programmes studied. The issues are not placed in any order of importance and will later be discussed under five broad themes developed by the researchers during data analysis and in light of the TVET assessment indicators proposed by the [Inter-Agency Working Group on TVET Indicators \(2012\)](#) which were highlighted earlier in Section 3.1.

**Table 1**  
Strengths in the programmes.

| Programme I  | Programme II  | Programme III   | Programme IV  |
|--|---|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Formal curriculum</li> <li>• Fair employment opportunities</li> <li>• Well-grounded theoretical knowledge</li> <li>• Nationally recognised certificates</li> <li>• Small classes</li> <li>• Possible link with further education</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hands-on practical knowledge</li> <li>• Learner-centred training</li> <li>• Learner chooses trade or skill of interest</li> <li>• Flexible time-table</li> <li>• Guidance and counselling</li> <li>• Accessible – small amount of fees and other courses free</li> <li>• Good possibilities of starting own trade</li> <li>• Follow-up of former trainees</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Formal curriculum</li> <li>• Well-grounded theoretical knowledge</li> <li>• Wide course choice options</li> <li>• Nationally recognised certificates</li> <li>• Internship opportunities</li> <li>• Fair employment opportunities</li> <li>• Many female students</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hands-on practical experience</li> <li>• Problem-based learning</li> <li>• Individualised learning and supervision</li> <li>• Learning by doing</li> <li>• Small groups of learners</li> <li>• No formal fees to be paid</li> <li>• Fair employment opportunities</li> </ul> |

**Table 2**  
Weaknesses in the programmes.

| Programme I  | Programme II   | Programme III  | Programme IV   |
|--|--|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rigid curriculum</li> <li>• Inadequate practical training</li> <li>• Supply-driven, no link with the labour market/private sector</li> <li>• Traditional VET courses</li> <li>• Inadequately trained and motivated staff</li> <li>• Teacher-centred approach</li> <li>• Inadequate infrastructure</li> <li>• Lack of guidance and counselling</li> <li>• No attention to soft and entrepreneurial skills</li> <li>• Dislike of agricultural courses</li> <li>• Low self-esteem among some trainees</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Short training time to master some trades/skills</li> <li>• Inadequately trained teachers</li> <li>• Large groups of students</li> <li>• Inadequate soft and entrepreneurial skills</li> <li>• Inadequate basic/foundational skills</li> <li>• Limited tools and materials</li> <li>• Virtually no possibilities for a link to further education</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rigid curriculum</li> <li>• Overly theoretical</li> <li>• Teacher-centred approach</li> <li>• Very few full-time teachers</li> <li>• Internship not linked with school curriculum</li> <li>• Supply-driven, employment opportunities due to the nature of courses offered</li> <li>• Very poor facilities for practical lessons</li> <li>• Inadequate attention to soft and entrepreneurial skills</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inadequate theoretical grounding</li> <li>• Lack of structure and time-frame</li> <li>• Lack of monitoring</li> <li>• Possible exploitation and child labour</li> <li>• Lack of attention on soft and entrepreneurial skills</li> </ul> |

**Table 3**  
Opportunities of the programmes.

| Programme I   | Programme II  | Programme III  | Programme IV  |
|---|---|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Renewed interest in VET by government and donors</li> <li>• Keeness of businesses to link with training institutes</li> <li>• National qualifications framework in place – some learners have possibilities to progress to further education</li> <li>• Some government support</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assessment framework for short course non-formal BTVET developed</li> <li>• Financing from the private sector and government BTVET programme</li> <li>• Many out-of-school youth ready to enrol</li> <li>• External stakeholders' monitoring and evaluation</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internship placements often lead to job acquisition</li> <li>• National and international connections (funding for infrastructure development)</li> <li>• Appealing value system</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Renewed interest in apprenticeship</li> <li>• Valued by the informal sector</li> <li>• Many out-of-school youth looking for affordable practical training opportunities</li> <li>• Increased demand for practical skills</li> <li>• Directorate of industrial training (DIT) to start certifying their skills</li> </ul> |

**Table 4**  
Threats to the programmes.

| Programme I   | Programme II   | Programme III  | Programme IV   |
|---|--|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Negative attitude towards VET</li> <li>• Inadequate funding</li> <li>• Cost of training (fees)</li> <li>• Negative attitude towards agriculture</li> <li>• Low levels of innovation</li> <li>• Irrelevance to the labour market</li> <li>• Lack of means for self-employment</li> <li>• “Diploma disease”</li> <li>• Elevation to institute level</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uncertainty about continued funding</li> <li>• Lack of means for starting individual businesses/trades</li> <li>• Differences in education levels of trainees</li> <li>• Too many different skills/trades to teach</li> <li>• Political interference</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Negative attitude towards VET</li> <li>• Low levels of innovation</li> <li>• Perception of courses offered as girls' courses</li> <li>• Inadequate funding</li> <li>• Slow job creation in the informal sector</li> <li>• Lack of means for self-employment</li> <li>• Cost of training (fees)</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Absence of regulation and protection of the youth in training</li> <li>• Low pay for teachers</li> <li>• Lack of means for self-employment</li> <li>• Few opportunities for further skills development</li> <li>• Funding problems</li> </ul> |

#### 4.1. Accessibility and participation in VET

The findings of this study revealed strong negative social perceptions and stigma about VET (Table 4), whereby the majority of students and members of the community view VET as “second-class education” for only academic rejects and underachievers and, therefore, a “poor cousin of mainstream education”. This has implications for access and participation in VET. Due to the stigma surrounding VET, some parents do not encourage their children to enrol in VET. Second, it further destroys the self-confidence of young people already marginalised by educational exclusion. During interviews with some of the current VET students, many of them explained that they were forced into it by unavoidable circumstances and that if they had means, they would have continued in mainstream academic education. Stories such as “I joined this programme because I couldn’t continue in primary, secondary or tertiary education due to lack of school fees or the required grades for the next level” were common among the current students. As a result, some of them perceive the junior VET level as a stepping stone to higher VET levels and diploma courses as a type of “competition” with mainstream education. This attitude often diverts their attention from skills development to studying to pass exams and obtain the opportunity to enrol in the next level. However, we found that the negative perception about VET is less among the graduates of VET programmes who are working because the training helped them to acquire jobs and earn money for a living.

The cost of training in the formal programmes is relatively high (Table 4), which makes some marginalised youth, especially in rural areas, fail to enrol in VET. The fees in the two formal programmes included in this study compare with the fees in most rural secondary schools in Mbarara. Therefore, some youth, especially those from very poor families, cannot access formal VET and some who do access it struggle to pay. However, in programme II, where only a small fee is required and some courses are sponsored by the government under the BTVET non-formal programme and others by the Private Sector Foundation, many youth have enrolled and others cannot obtain places in a particular course and must wait for another opportunity. This indicates that lowering the cost of VET could improve access for many marginalised youth. The study also found a noted gender disparity problem in these VET programmes. In programme I, over 80% of the students were males; in programme II, the females comprised approximately 60%; in programme III, over 90% were females; and in programme IV, all except one student were males. This is related to the deep-rooted gender stereotypes about which courses and/or skills are suitable for females and for males. In light of this, the gender figures provided here can be explained by the types of courses offered in the programmes, as presented in Sections 3.2.1–3.2.4.

#### 4.2. Teaching and learning in VET

The experiences of students and teachers in the two formal VET programmes (I and III) showed that the teaching is largely teacher-centred (Table 2), mainly utilising the lecture method with little time for practical exercises. Although programme III sends its students for internship at different periods in the study programme, the internship is not formally organised and monitored. Thus, the benefits of the internship and its addition to skills development of the students are not clear. According to the alumni from these two programmes that we followed up, the teacher-centred method of teaching with limited time for practical lessons does not allow students to master a trade or job-specific skills.

When I look back at the training I received, and compare with what I found in the field, I think some things should change. In class, we were given a lot of notes and a lot of theory but when you get a job, they want you to use your hands and work . . . to do things that can be seen. But sometimes you find that you don’t know. (Former student – Programme I)

Programmes II and IV, due to their non-formal nature, tend to be more flexible and take a practical approach to their training. The trainees learn by doing and this assists them in gaining hands-on experience that is needed to perform tasks at work. However, trainees in these programmes could also benefit from some theoretical grounding because a combination of theory and practice that is well developed and balanced can be a better option. For programme II, more time may be needed for some particular trades and skills to be mastered by the learners.

The other major issue in VET programmes is that of inadequately trained and experienced teachers (Table 2). Whereas most of the teachers are graduates of technical and vocational institutes and polytechnics, many lack practical/industrial experience and pedagogical training. As most of the VET students are marginalised youth with self-confidence problems and other emotional and learning needs, they require specially trained teachers to address these issues as they teach the official subjects. However, the teachers are not trained to play such roles. To make matters worse, they are not well motivated, mainly in terms of pay. Therefore, they are not completely committed to their work, as expressed in the words of one of the teachers.

This is where I got a job, I had nothing to do. I had to take it up. I don’t like teaching because it does not pay well. . . I don’t come here every day; sometimes I go to do some other business to supplement my income. (Teacher – Programme I)

Similar to many other VET schools and programmes in Uganda, the programmes studied have a common motto: “training job creators, not job-seekers” with hopes that their graduates will become self-employed, thereby creating jobs for themselves and other young



people. Nonetheless, none of the four studied programmes deliberately imparts entrepreneurial and other soft skills that would help the graduated students to achieve this goal. Consequently, most of the graduates become job-seekers rather than job creators, contrary to the programmes' motto.

#### 4.3. VET funding and infrastructure

During the visits to the VET schools and centres, we observed (and interviews also confirmed) inadequate equipment and facilities (Table 2) to enable good skills training. Inadequate funding does not allow for the acquisition of the necessary tools, materials and equipment for practical experience. Proper skills development requires that the students have access and exposure to the types of tools and equipment that they will be expected to use later in the world of work. Lack of public finance for physical infrastructure and equipment is one of the major constraints to appropriate formal VET development. The two formal VET programmes included in the current study largely depend on fees collections from the students, which is not sufficient for infrastructure development. Programme I receives a small grant from the government to supplement income from fees, but it is too small to make a visible difference. Increased government funding could also improve access to VET for marginalised youth. As noted in Section 4.1, in programme II, in which the government funds the non-formal BTVET courses, access has greatly improved. Thus, Uganda's renewed interest in VET (Table 3) through the BTVET programme to skill the youth for the labour market and livelihood opportunities will essentially depend on the government's commitment to providing funding for physical infrastructure development and equipment acquisition.

#### 4.4. Relevance to the labour market

The experiences of VET graduates revealed that VET skills training can increase marginalised youth's chances of entering into the labour market, but mainly in the informal labour sector. Of the 37 alumni of the four programmes that we were able to trace, all but 8 had jobs. Five of the eight unemployed were pursuing further studies. Of the 29 who were working, 25 were employed by others and only 4 were self-employed. Of those employed by other people, 4 were employed in work unrelated to their training courses because they did not have an interest in the field or could not obtain the job they qualified for. The self-employed were working on small-scale projects that did not require a large amount of money or resources to start. They were from programme II, which has modularised courses on specific skills or trades. Some of the apprentices who trained in programme IV were later employed in the same garage in which they trained and others were employed as mechanics or metal fabricators in Mbarara or neighbouring towns. This appeared to be a positive outcome. However, when we dug deeper into their experiences on the job and spoke to their employers, we discovered that there were some skills mismatches and deficits (such as lack of adequate practical experience and skills to manage latest technology) that could be improved to make VET more responsive to the needs of the labour market.

It was evident from our interactions with the different stakeholders in the programmes that skills development is supply-driven (Table 2) and, in most cases, has little relevance to the labour market. Programmes I, II and III did not have any partnerships with potential local employers to provide work-based learning opportunities which would improve practice. In all programmes, except for the apprenticeship training in programme IV, the training is not clearly linked to the needs of the local labour market and employers are not involved in the design and delivery

of the training. Coupled with poor post-training follow-up and support, programme managers are not aware of where their graduates go, the challenges that they meet or the needs of the employers. Some of the employers we interviewed decried the low levels of practical skills that some graduates of formal VET exhibit.

The training is defective. When I contract some of these young men from vocational institutes, in most cases they don't know what to do. They have theory but cannot do anything; some can't even erect the scaffolding or correctly place bricks on a high wall at a building site because they are used to building short models in training. They need more practical exposure in their training. Let them come to real sites during the training to see and learn what happens here. Otherwise, when they come to us, it's like we are beginning the training afresh. (Employer – Building Contractor)

The training in the two formal programmes (I and III) tends to be quite academic and theoretical, and most of the graduates must complete further on-the-job training when they become employed. The situation in programmes II and IV is much better because of their focus on providing practical hands-on experience (Table 1).

I did secretarial studies but we were using typewriters. We had few computers and we were many students. I didn't master computer applications. When I got this job as a secretary, they gave me a computer but I didn't know how to use it very well. I am now learning new things as I work and my colleagues help me. (Former student – Programme III)

Most of the ESLs and VET graduates will usually find themselves in the informal sector and in rural settings, and they will most likely enter into agriculture-related activities. However, in the current study, we found a general dislike for agricultural courses among some students because of wider perceptions about agriculture being a "dirty" job, being for the "uneducated" and not paying well.

Those of us taking agriculture are in most cases despised by our fellow students and sometimes by a section of teachers. They ask us; how do you come to school to study how to dig? Couldn't you learn that at home? ... The other thing is, some students taking agriculture want to be taught only theory and don't want to engage in practical assignments. They do not want to be seen working in the soil on the farm. (Current student – Programme I)

Agricultural education is always the second or third choice of young people in training institutes. This negative attitude towards agriculture is not a good development because in a country like Uganda, agriculture and related rural trades have the greatest potential to provide youth with economic and social opportunity. It is also important to note that, in Uganda, like in many other countries of SSA, labour markets are changing with the onset of new technologies, especially information technology (use of mobile phones, computers). Consequently VET must adjust to the new changes in the labour market and begin training in new skills rather than focusing on the old subjects. This will only happen if the VET programmes keep in touch with the labour market and employers. If this is not done, there is a danger that training programmes train young people in skills that will quickly become obsolete.

#### 4.5. VET and empowerment of marginalised youth

Although there are some image and training problems, as stated above, VET attempts to improve the labour market and livelihood opportunities of marginalised youth. The majority of youth who underwent the training appreciate it. Their image of VET has

improved because they were able to obtain a job or engage in a trade that results in income. For some, it raises their status from being “that academic reject” to an individual who is able to use his/her hands and skills to live a reasonable life. Many of the graduates reported that the VET training has helped them to earn a living; they feel that their lives would be worse without that training.

This is what I am able to make after the training (he raised up the clay pots he had made and displayed for sale). I can now make money and sustain myself. (Former Ceramics trainee – Programme II)

I would not have got this job of farm manager if I did not go through that training . . . In future, I will buy my own animals and also be a farmer; I don't want to keep working for other people. (Former student – Programme I)

Although some of them are employed as casual workers and a few have not yet obtained the jobs they aspired for, most of the VET graduates from the four programmes were able to articulate the economic and social benefits of their training. They are able to meet their basic needs and acquire some livelihood assets. For some, VET has given them another pathway to further education, as they have progressed to higher levels of VET. However, some face challenges such as low pay and poor working conditions and would like to be self-employed but lack financial and social capital to start their own trades or enterprises.

When I finished my course, I had a dream to be self-employed, to start my own restaurant but I could not afford the capital to start because I am from a family that is not well-off. So, I got a job at this hotel as a Chef. Maybe after working for a few years, I will start my own business. (Former catering trainee – Programme III)

It is also evident from the testimonies of the graduates that VET can improve the self-confidence and personal pride of marginalised youth. This was highly exhibited by the graduates of programme II because they learned a specific trade and were able to “practically do something that they were not able to do before”. This sense of self-confidence and personal pride could also be a result of the programme's guidance and counselling component. To properly empower the youth, VET should endeavour to develop the respect, self-confidence and personal pride of the participants in addition to offering skills for employability. To improve the chances of self-employment and better performance at work, VET must inculcate into the learners the spirit of love for work, team work, conflict management, critical and creative thinking and include generic and entrepreneurial skills in the curriculum.

## 5. Conclusions and recommendations

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into VET skills training for marginalised youth in Uganda through a SWOT analysis of four training programmes in Mbarara district. In Uganda, there are thousands of VET institutions and centres that operate in various modes and by different actors. In the current study, four case studies that function in different settings and orientations were used to provide exemplary knowledge and theoretical replication logic. Therefore, caution must be taken in making generalisations about VET in Uganda. However, the study provides good insights, lessons and exemplary knowledge that current and future VET practitioners can learn from to properly design and implement VET programmes for marginalised youth.

Generally, this study has revealed that VET can improve access to the labour market for marginalised youth and ameliorate their livelihoods by providing them opportunities to earn income and

other assets. It was evident from the experiences of VET graduates that their lives would be worse if they had not undergone VET training. However, there are indications that the current practices in VET do not help the youth realise their full potential. Some VET graduates aspire for high positions in society and organisations and high-paying jobs, but the nature and level of their training leads to lower cadre and low-paying jobs. There are also issues of access due to the cost of training and a general negative attitude towards VET because of the persistent social perceptions that VET is a “second class option” for academic misfits. In this regard, if VET is to help the youth realise their full potential, the government of Uganda must begin “walking the talk” and implement the proposals contained in the BTVET Act by increasing funding to VET; paying attention to VET in the private sector; training VET teachers; and making a deliberate effort to change the prevailing negative mind-set about VET through awareness campaigns, infrastructure development and creating better job opportunities in the informal sector and in agriculture. The new policies described in the documents referred to in Section 1 of this paper must be carefully and systematically implemented and facilitated to achieve the desired objectives. It is one thing to have good policies in place and another thing to have them properly implemented.

Consistent with previous research in SSA, the current study has shown that VET skills training for marginalised youth is supply-driven and not linked with the needs and requirements of the informal labour market, where most of the VET graduates will work. Thus, there must be deliberate effort by the training institutions and centres to form partnerships with potential employers and engage them in the design and delivery of the training. The programmes would also benefit from follow-ups of their graduates and performing labour market research to determine the current or future labour market needs and requirements. VET should also venture into new skills in light of recent developments in technology (such as in information and communications technology (ICT), transport systems such as the *Boda Bodas* [motorbike taxis], agribusiness systems, and creative arts). This will improve the relevance of the skills training to the requirements of the labour market. Gender stereotyping must be eliminated to give equal opportunity to males and females in regards to course/skill choices and improve their access to VET. For the government, it is crucial that partnerships are formed with the private sector to spur growth and job creation in the informal sector; otherwise, there will be VET graduates without jobs. For the informal sector to grow and create more jobs, increased access to finance, infrastructure development, increased access to information and technological innovation are key requirements.

The study also found a need to improve the pedagogical and didactical practices in VET for marginalised youth. The teacher-centred and transfer of learning approaches currently used in VET do not adequately prepare young people for the labour market and livelihood opportunities. More learning-by-doing, collaborative learning and industrial training should be integrated into the current pedagogy to enrich the learners' experiences so that they can measure up to the tasks they are given later in the labour market. The learners should be introduced to the culture of “learning as becoming” (Hager and Hodkinson, 2009) or “lifelong learning/lifewide learning” (Javis, 2007) so that they can continually learn from their immediate environment and experiences to enhance their skills and knowledge (Boekaerts and Minnaert, 1999). This will ensure better performance on the job and that the students' skills do not become obsolete in the ever-changing labour market. Learning as becoming will also improve the other desired outcomes of VET such as a good sense of self-worth, self-confidence, empowerment and human development. To promote self-reliance, empowerment and freedoms, and rights

of marginalised youth, VET curricula should include generic and entrepreneurial skills training. As evident from graduates of programme II, VET learners' self-confidence, respect and motivation can be greatly improved by incorporating guidance and counselling in the training.

Last but not least, it is important to note that the problems of ESLs cannot be solved solely by VET. There is a need for broader policy interventions that ensure macro-economic stability, keep children in school to gain foundational and transferable skills, create jobs and livelihood opportunities, and reduce poverty.

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