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**INTEGRATING CAREER READINESS COMPETENCIES INTO VOCATIONAL CURRICULUM FOR ENHANCED GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY: A CASE STUDY OF SELECTED TRADE AREAS IN NAMIBIA**

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**Abstract**

*This study explored the integration of career readiness competencies into vocational curriculum in Namibia to improve graduates' employability in key trade areas such as welding, joinery, clothing, bricklaying, hospitality, and information technology sectors. The research uses a quantitative descriptive case study method to gather data from vocational students and literature reviews. The study aims to identify the most valued career readiness competencies and assess the extent to which vocational education institutions are addressing them. The findings have implications for vocational education policy and practice, enhancing graduates' employability and economic development. It also contributes to the discussion on soft skills and career readiness in vocational education.*

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**Keywords:** *Career Readiness Competencies, Quantitative Methods, Vocational Curriculum, Employability, Soft Skills.*

**INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) in Namibia is to prepare trainees with knowledge, skills, competencies and values that will help them to either be employed or self-employed upon graduation (UNESCO, 2021). Research argues that trainees require entrepreneurship, professional development, interpersonal, self-management, communication and problem-solving skills if they are to be employable or self-employed upon graduation (Ng, 2021). "Career readiness competencies are the skills, knowledge, and abilities that students need to be successful in the workforce". These competencies include job search strategies, interview skills, and job offer negotiating skills. However, many vocational graduates lack these competencies, which can make it difficult for them to find employment after graduation. Integrating career readiness competencies into vocational curriculum can help enhance graduate employability by providing students with the skills they need to succeed in the workforce. The next section presents the statement of the problem, followed by the purpose of the study, research questions, and significance of the study and subsequently the literature reviewed for the study; methodology and methods adopted for the study. The paper further presents the results of the study according to the research questions, followed by the data interpretation and discussions of the results; and lastly the conclusion of the study.

**STATEMENT OF THE STUDY**

In an era characterised by rapidly evolving job markets and increasing demands for a skilled and adaptable workforce, the need for vocational education programmes to produce graduates who are not only proficient in their respective technical fields but also equipped with essential career readiness competencies has become paramount (World Economic Forum, 2020). This research aims to address the following problem.

Globally, the current vocational education system, while proficient in imparting technical skills, often falls short in preparing graduates with the necessary career readiness competencies, which are essential for successful transition into the ever-changing job market (World Bank, July 2023). Research highlights numerous reasons why graduates in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) systems in many low- and middle-income countries find it increasingly challenging to secure gainful employment immediately upon completing their vocational programmes. Evidence suggests that one of the main reasons is due to the disconnection between their acquired technical skills and the non-technical competencies demanded by prospective employers (Claybourn, 2023).

Namibia grapples with the challenge of equipping its workforce with Industry 4.0 skills (Namibia 4IR Task Force, 2022), including career readiness skills. High unemployment rates (33.4%) persist, even among TVET graduates (50.2%), indicating a mismatch between acquired skills and job market needs (Namibia Labour Force Survey, 2021; TVET National Graduate Survey, 2017). According to a study by Tom and Norton (2018), business and industry representatives in both developed and developing countries have expressed considerable dissatisfaction with the general level of preparedness of prospective entry-level employees. Musa (2020)'s study in Malaysia found that the graduate career readiness is at a lower level and shows that the Competence Based Learning (CBL) approaches do not have a significant effect on the level of career readiness among vocational college graduates. These findings across the world suggest that current TVET courses in Namibia may also not be adequately addressing career readiness among its students. The main question of this study was How might we integrate career readiness competencies into vocational curriculum for enhanced graduate employability in some selected trades in Namibia's TVET system?. The main purpose of this study was to investigate career readiness competencies that should be integrated in the vocational education curriculum and propose an integration approach of identified career readiness competencies with the overarching goal of enhancing graduate employability and ensuring a more successful and seamless transition of vocational graduates into the workforce.

The study was to address the following research questions:

- What career readiness competencies should be integrated in the vocational curriculum to enhance graduate employability in selected trades and centres in Namibia?
- How might career readiness competencies be integrated in the vocational curriculum?

### **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

The significance of this study is threefold. By conducting the current study, the researchers hope that the findings will likely increase awareness of the career readiness skills that must be integrated in the vocational curriculum. Additionally, the researchers hope that the findings of the current study will be used to improve the vocational curriculum, which may likely enhance career readiness among TVET trainees. Lastly, through this study the researchers expect to stimulate research to explore further career readiness skills that will improve the job prospects of TVET graduates.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **Defining Career Readiness**

Career readiness is the state of having preparation or being in a position to take action. It involves learning new skills, creating goals, and preparing for a career. Career readiness is a practical approach to preparing students for the workforce by developing key skills for professional success and easing the transition from students to employees (Southern Careers Institute, 2023).

The integration of career readiness competencies into vocational curriculum has been identified as a key strategy for enhancing graduate employability. According to Weligamage (2009), and Alam et al. (2022) the development of employability skills is essential for graduates to meet the demands of the ever-changing job market. In their literature review, Lee and Choi (2011) found that the integration of employability skills into vocational education programmes can lead to improved employment outcomes for graduates. They also note that the development of these skills should be an ongoing process that begins in the classroom and continues throughout a student's academic career.

Although integrating career readiness competencies into vocational curriculum for enhances graduate employability of TVET graduates. two perennial questions confront curriculum planners: first, what career readiness competencies might be integrated in vocational curriculum to enhance graduate employability in selected trades? And second, how might the identified career readiness skills in the be integrated in the vocational curriculum? With regard to the first question evidence provides several competencies that are involved in career readiness, including communication skills, critical thinking skills, problem-solving skills, and more (Heine, 2023). The current study, however, concentrated on job-seeking skills such as searching for jobs, negotiating skills, resume writing, and preparing for job interviews. These job-seeking skills are important as students need to be able to look for a job, apply for it, and interview with confidence. They should also be able to identify and express their skills, strengths, knowledge, and experience to potential employers (Heine, 2023).

In terms of effective approaches to integrating career readiness competencies into vocational curriculum, there are several strategies that have been identified in the literature. For example, in their study, *embedding employability skills in vocational education and training: A systematic review*, Kamarudin et al. (2021) found that embedding career readiness skills into vocational education and training can lead to improved employment outcomes for graduates. They also note that this approach can help students develop a range of transferable skills

that are valued by employers. Similarly, in their article, *developing graduate employability skills and attributes: Curriculum enhancement through work-integrated learning*, Billett et al. (2019) found that work-integrated learning can be an effective approach to developing graduate employability skills. They note that this approach can help students develop practical skills and knowledge that are relevant to their chosen field of work.

## **METHODOLOGY AND METHODS**

The study adopted a single case study quantitative descriptive research design to describe and document the characteristics, behaviours, attitudes, opinions, and perceptions of research respondents (McCombes, 2023) without manipulating or altering any variables.

### **Target Population, Sample Strategy and Sample Size**

The study's population involved 44 trainees enrolled in Bricklaying, Joinery and Cabinet Making, and Welding and Metal Fabrication. Given the small number of the target population researchers adopted two sampling techniques: whole population and purposeful sampling techniques to include 44 samples, the total population of the study. A whole population sampling strategy refers to a sampling method where the entire population is included in the sample (McCombes, 2019), while purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique where units are selected based on specific characteristics that the researcher is interested in studying (McCombes, 2019; Robinson, 2014).

### **Data Collection Instruments**

A questionnaire was used to collect data for this study. A questionnaire is a printed self-report form designed to elicit information that can be obtained through the written responses of the respondents (Burns & Grove 1993: 138). The decision to use a questionnaire as a means of data collection is twofold. First, questionnaires ensure a high response rate as they are distributed to respondents to complete and are collected personally by the researcher. Second, questionnaires provide less chance for bias as they are presented in a consistent manner.

### **Reliability and Validity**

Reliability is the degree of consistency with which an instrument measures the attribute it is designed to measure (Polit & Hungler 1993). In order to ensure the reliability of the instrument, the researcher administered all the questionnaires. In addition, the researcher maintained the ethical issues of privacy and confidentiality of research respondents. For instance, respondents were not allowed to write their names on questionnaires. According to Polit and Hungler (1993, p. 448) validity of an instrument is the degree to which an instrument measures what it is intended to measure. To ensure the content validity of the instrument, the questionnaire items was based on the information gathered during the literature review. To ensure validity the researcher alone administered the questionnaires used simple, clear and understandable language in the questionnaire with clear instructions. Also, the researcher ensured that all questionnaires were completed in his presence. This was done to prevent respondents from giving questionnaires to other people to complete on their behalf. To ensure external validity, the researcher recruited enough participants to take part in this study. Additionally, the researchers sought for content validity of the instruments by seeking advice from the research supervisors who scrutinised the layout, completeness and accuracy of the items in the research instrument (Polit & Hungler 1995).

### **Data Analysis Methods**

The current study adopted a deductive approach to analyse closed-ended questions, and generate descriptive statistics, and frequency tables in Microsoft Excel (Frost, n.d.). Thematic analysis was used to analyse open-ended questions to understand research respondents' opinions and attitudes on the research questions (Braun, & Clarke, 2012).

### **Ethical Considerations**

The researcher ensured that research respondents do not feel forced or compelled to take part in this study.

In approaching the respondents, the following steps were followed (Gay & Airasian, 2003):

The researcher disclosed and discussed the purpose of the study with research respondents.

The researcher emphasised that taking part in this study was entirely voluntary.

The researcher assured participants full confidentiality and anonymity on events that take place during the study.

## **Results**

A total of 44 questionnaires were distributed for completion by research respondents. The questionnaire had seven questions; with six closed-ended questions and one open ended question. The results of this study are presented according to the research questions.

### Gender of the Respondents

This question was asked to determine the gender of the research participants in this study. Table below presents the gender categories, the number of respondents in each category, and the percentage of respondents of each gender.

**Table 1:** Respondents 'Gender

Gender	Number	%
Female	33	75.0
Male	11	25.0
<b>Total</b>	44	100

Table 1 above shows a clear gender distribution among the research respondents. The majority of the respondents are female (75.0%), while a smaller proportion is male (25.0%). This suggests that the surveyed group is predominantly female.

### Level of Study

This question was asked to solicit research respondents' the level of study. Table 2 below shows the number of respondents, and the percentage of research respondents at each level.

**Table 2:** Research Respondents' Level of Study

Level 1	10	22.7
Level 2	34	77.3
<b>Total</b>	44	100

As shown in table 2 above, 10 out of the 44 respondents (22.7%) indicated that they are studying at Level 1; while the majority of respondents, 34 out of 44 (77.3%), reported that they are studying at Level 2. Overall, the data reveals that the majority of respondents (77.1%) are studying at Level 2, while smaller proportions (22.7%) are studying at Level 1. This suggests that Level 2 is more prevalent among the surveyed individuals, while Level 1 is less common.

### Trade of Study

We asked this question mainly to determine respondents' trade of study. Table 3 highlights data showing the name of the trade, the number of respondents, and the percentage of respondents who indicated each trade level.

**Table 3:** Research Respondents' Trade of Study

Trade of study	Number	%
1. Hospitality L2	20	45.5
2. Welding L2	5	11.4
3. Bricklaying L 2	5	11.4
4. Joinery L 2	4	9.1
5. Joinery L 1	3	6.8
6. Office Admin L1	3	6.8

7. Clothing L1	4	9.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 3 above shows that 20 out of the 44 respondents (45.5%) indicated that they are studying Hospitality at Level 2; while 5 out of 44 respondents (11.1%) reported that they are studying Welding at Level 2. Similarly, the table indicates that 5 out of 44 respondents (11.4%) are pursuing Bricklaying at Level 2; whereas 4 out of the 44 respondents (9.1%) are enrolled in Joinery at Level 2; 3 out of 44 respondents (6.8%) are studying Joinery at Level 1; while an equal number of respondents, 3 out of 44 (6.8%), reported that they are studying Office Administration at Level 1. Lastly, table 3 above shows that 4 out of the 44 respondents (9.1%) are pursuing Clothing at Level 1.

Overall, the data suggests that the most common trade of study among the respondents is Hospitality at Level 2, with 45.45% of the respondents selecting it. However, the data represents a diverse range of trade levels and fields of study among the surveyed individuals.

#### Knowledge of Job Search Strategies?

This question provided data pertaining to the research respondents' knowledge of job search strategies in response to several statements shown in table 4 below. The data is presented in the table below shows the number and percentage of respondents who answered "Yes," "No," or "Not sure" for each statement.

**Table 4:** Research respondents' knowledge of Job Search Strategies

I...	Yes		No		Not sure	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
... know how to network effectively.	20	14.8	9	8.5	14	23.7
... know where to search for jobs targeted to my specific field of interest.	26	19.3	5	4.7	12	20.3
... have established a professional online presence through LinkedIn and other social media.	15	11.1	21	19.8	8	13.6
... have written an effective résumé and cover letter and asked for expert feedback.	10	7.4	25	23.6	9	15.3
... have participated in internships, extra-curricular, or volunteer activities that relate to my chosen career.	16	11.9	23	21.7	5	8.5
... have crafted a career plan to support me in reaching my goal.	29	21.5	11	10.4	4	6.8
... have been trained on how to research on my career using a variety of current employer information.	19	14.1	12	11.3	7	11.9
	135		106		59	

Table 4 shows the results of the research question based on seven statements as follows:

Statement 1: Networking. About 14.8% of respondents answered "Yes," indicating they know how to network effectively; 8.5% answered "No,," while 23.7% indicated that they were "Not sure" about their networking skills.

Statement 2: Job Search Targeted to Field of Interest. Data shows that 19.3% of respondents answered "Yes," indicating they know where to search for jobs targeted to their specific field of interest; however, 4.7% answered "No," and 20.3% were "Not sure" about this.

Statement 3: Professional Online Presence. Whereas 11.1% of respondents answered "Yes," indicating they have established a professional online presence through LinkedIn and other social media; about 19.8% answered "No," and 13.6% were "Not sure" about this.

Statement 4: Effective Résumé and Cover Letter. Table 4 above indicates that 7.4% of respondents answered "Yes," indicating they have written an effective résumé and cover letter and asked for expert feedback. About 23.6% answered "No," and 15.3% were "Not sure" about this.

Statement 5: Internships, Extracurricular Activities. The results in the table above shows that 11.9% of respondents answered "Yes," indicating they have participated in internships, extra-curricular, or volunteer activities related to their chosen career; 21.7% answered "No," and 8.5% were "Not sure" about this.

Statement 6: Career Plan. Data shows that while 21.5% of respondents answered "Yes," indicating they have crafted a career plan to support them in reaching their goal; only about 10.4% answered "No," and a mere 6.8% were "Not sure" about having a career plan.

Statement 7: Training on Career Research. In table 4, 14.1% of respondents answered "Yes," indicating they have been trained on how to research their career using a variety of current employer information; whereas 11.3% answered "No," and 11.9% were "Not sure" about this.

In summary, the data shows that respondents vary in their knowledge and preparedness in job search strategies. While some respondents are confident in various aspects of job search strategies, others are unsure or lack knowledge in these areas. This data can be useful for designing targeted career development and job search support programmes.

### Interview Attributes and Skills

This question was asked to obtain information pertaining to respondents' attributes and skills related to job interviews. Table 5 below present's data indicating the number and percentage of respondents who answered "Yes," "No," or "Not sure" for each statement.

**Table 5: Interview Attributes and Skills**

I...	Yes		No		Not sure	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
...have been prepared for job interviews by completing a mock interview.	9	17.3	25	19.2	10	26.3
...have been trained on how to answer difficulty interview questions such as „Why should our company hire you?“with confidence.	16	30.8	25	19.2	3	7.9
... know how to follow up after a job interview.	13	25.0	22	16.9	9	23.7
... know how to write a thank you letter.	7	13.5	30	23.1	7	18.4
...have conducted an informational interview with at least one person in the career fields I am enrolled.	7	13.5	28	21.5	9	23.7
	52		130			38

Table 5 above presents the results of the five statements as follows:

Statement 1: Preparedness for Job Interviews (Mock Interview). About 17.3% of respondents answered "Yes," indicating they have been prepared for job interviews by completing a mock interview; 19.2% answered "No," and 26.3% were "Not sure" about their preparedness.

Statement 2: Training on Answering Difficult Interview Questions. The table above shows that 30.8% of respondents answered "Yes," indicating they have been trained on how to answer difficult interview questions with confidence; 19.2% answered "No," and 7.9% were "Not sure" about this training.

Statement 3: Follow-Up After Job Interviews. The data in the table above shows that 25.0% of respondents answered "Yes," indicating that they know how to follow up after a job interview. However, 16.9% answered "No," and 23.7% were "Not sure" about follow-up procedures.

Statement 4: Writing a Thank You Letter. The table above shows that 13.5% of respondents answered "Yes," indicating that they know how to write a thank-you letter; but 23.1% answered "No," and 18.4% were "Not sure" about this skill.

Statement 5: Informational Interviews. As we can see in table 5 above, 13.5% of respondents answered "Yes," indicating that they have conducted informational interviews in their enrolled career fields; 21.5% answered "No," and 23.7% were "Not sure" about conducting informational interviews.

In summary, the data suggests that there is a range of preparedness and knowledge among respondents in terms of job interview attributes and skills. While some respondents have received training and feel confident in areas such as answering difficult interview questions, others are unsure or lack these skills. The data also shows that there is room for improvement in areas like conducting informational interviews and following up after job interviews, as a significant proportion of respondents are not confident in these aspects. This information could be used to guide career development and interview training programmes.

**Negotiating Skills**

We asked this question to solicit information pertaining to research respondents' skills and training related to negotiating job offers. Table 6 below present's data indicating the number and percentage of respondents who answered "Yes," "No," or "Not sure" for each statement.

**Table 6:** Respondents' Negotiating Skills

I...	Yes		No		Not sure	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
... have been trained on how to negotiate a job offer.	10	47.6	30	56.6	4	28.6
... know how to negotiate a job offer.	11	52.4	23	43.4	10	71.4
	21		53		14	

Table 6 above presents the following results on each of the two statements:

Statement 1: Training on How to Negotiate a Job Offer. The table shows that 47.6% of respondents answered "Yes," indicating that they have been trained on how to negotiate a job offer; 56.6% answered "No," and 28.6% were "Not sure" about having received such training.

Statement 2: Knowledge of How to Negotiate a Job Offer. The table above shows that more than half (52.4%) of respondents answered "Yes," indicating they know how to negotiate a job offer; whereas 43.4% answered "No," and 71.4% were "Not sure" about their ability to negotiate a job offer.

In summary, the data suggests that there is a disparity in respondents' knowledge and training related to negotiating job offers. While a significant proportion of respondents have received training on how to negotiate a job offer, larger percentages are not confident in their ability to negotiate. Additionally, a substantial number of respondents are uncertain about their negotiation skills. This information can be useful for designing negotiation skills training programmes or resources to help individuals feel more confident when negotiating job offers.

**Any Other Comments**

This open-ended question was asked to solicit qualitative data from research participants to which they responded as shown in table 7 below, which contains responses related to various themes, with each response representing the perspective of a trainee from different fields of study.

**Table 7:** Any Other Comments

Theme	Response
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☐ Trainees lack of tools and equipment	'Trainees in Bricklaying do not have tools and equipment so can be adequately trained' (Level 2 Bricklaying Male trainee).
☐ Trainees unprepared for job market	'In my opinion joinery trainees are not adequately prepared for the industry or the job market.' (Level 2 Joinery and cabinet making male trainee).
☐ Lack of soft skills	I suggest that those of us who are doing Welding should be taught about how to search for jobs. Also, it is important that we should learn how to answer questions during job interviews.' (Level 2 Welding and Metal Fabrication male trainee).

Table 7 above present's three themes pertaining to research participants' qualitative responses.

Theme: Trainees Lack of Tools and Equipment. „*Trainees in Bricklaying do not have tools and equipment so cannot be adequately trained.*“ (Level 2 Bricklaying Male trainee)

In our view, this response highlights a concern regarding the lack of necessary tools and equipment for trainees in the field of Bricklaying. The trainee suggests that this deficiency is hindering their ability to receive adequate training. This issue may call for improved resource allocation or access to tools and equipment for the training programme.

Theme: Trainees Unprepared for the Job Market. ‘*In my opinion, joinery trainees are not adequately prepared for the industry or the job market.*’ (Level 2 Joinery and Cabinet Making Male trainee).

Evidently, this response raises concerns about the level of preparedness of joinery trainees for the industry and the job market. It suggests that there might be a gap in the training programme or curriculum in terms of preparing students for real-world job opportunities. This feedback could inform curriculum improvements and job market integration.

Theme: Lack of Soft Skills. „*I suggest that those of us who are doing Welding should be taught about how to search for jobs. Also, it is important that we should learn how to answer questions during job interviews.*“ (Level 2 Welding and Metal Fabrication Male trainee).

This response emphasises the importance of soft skills, such as job search and interview skills, for trainees in the field of Welding. It further suggests that these skills are currently lacking in the training programme and should be included to better prepare students for the job market. This feedback may prompt the inclusion of career development and soft skills training in the curriculum.

In summary, the responses in table 7 provide valuable insights into the challenges and concerns of trainees in different fields of study. They suggest potential areas for improvement in terms of resources, curriculum, and soft skills training to better prepare trainees for their respective industries and the job market. It's important for training programmes to take into account such feedback to enhance the overall quality of education and training.

## INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION

Based on the results of this investigation, it appears that the vocational training centres (VTCs) need to further examine their curricular. In line with the results of the study, a number of primary conclusions can be drawn.

Based on the results of this investigation, it appears that the vocational training centres (VTCs) need to further examine their curricular. In line with the results of the study, a number of primary conclusions can be drawn. First, data from this study indicate that career readiness should be an important consideration for vocational curricular, a key theme that is not been adequately addressed in the current TVET environment. Qualitative data provides evidence that research participants in this expressed a lack job search and interview skills, which are not offered in the training programme and leaves them unprepared for the job market.

Second, data indicates that respondents across the trades in this study did not only have divergent knowledge and preparedness in job search strategies, but were mainly unsure or lack knowledge of job search skills; were not receiving adequate training in any of the skills highlighted in tables 4, 5 and 6. Additionally, research respondents indicated that due to their twin challenges of lack of knowledge and inadequate training, they were less



confident and not ready enough to pursue their careers upon graduating in their respective trades. These results corroborate with the literature consulted for this study (Heine, 2023; Southern Careers Institute, 2023).

## CONCLUSION

This study investigated the integration career readiness competencies, especially job-seeking skills into Vocational Curriculum to enhanced graduate employability in Hospitality, Welding, Bricklaying, Joinery, Office Admin and Clothing Production. The study also investigated how to integrate the identified job-seeking skills into Vocational Curriculum to enhanced graduate employability so as to enhance the employability of graduates in trades such as Hospitality, Welding, Bricklaying, Joinery, Office Admin and Clothing Production.

To respond to the research questions, the study found that job-seeking skills are less promoted in the vocational curriculum, particularly in the trades that were included in this study. This curriculum deficiency suggests that trainees are not receiving adequate training that can help them to transition from college education and training to the world of work.

The study therefore shows that there is a great need for integrating job-seeking skills in the vocational curriculum in order to enhance the employability of trainees upon graduation. In view of the findings, the study recommends that TVET centres should adopt an embedded approach to help students develop a range of transferable soft skills that will be better prepare them to seek for employment opportunities with confidence.) TVET centres could also use work-integrated learning effective approach of developing graduate employability skills, including job-seeking skills. Literature confirms that this approach can help students develop practical skills and knowledge that are relevant to their chosen field of work (Billett et al., 2019).

It is hoped that the findings of the current will be an important first step in helping TVET centres to find effective approaches of integrating career readiness skills in the vocational curriculum so as to prepare trainees of various with adequate and relevant skills that will help them to land jobs of dream upon graduating.

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