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Review Article

Between Compliance and Consciousness: Africanising Curriculum and Professional Identity in South African Vocational Education

Ezekiel Majola[1*] (iD)

Deidre Geduld[2] (iD)

Heloise Sathorar[2] (iD)

AFFILIATIONS

[1,2&3]Faculty of Education, Nelson Mandela University, Gqeberha, South Africa.

CORRESPONDENCE

Email: Ezekiel.Majola@mandela.ac.za*

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Abstract: This article interrogates the contradictions embedded in the Advanced Diploma in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) at Nelson Mandela University, situating the preparation of vocational lecturers within the historical and political legacies of apartheid and the contested reforms of post-1994 South Africa. It examines how the formation of vocational educators navigates tensions between compliance and critical consciousness, between academisation and Africanisation, and between professionalisation and pedagogical justice. Although discursively framed by institutional commitments to humanising pedagogy and transformative learning, the curriculum frequently defaults to technicist delivery and bureaucratic alignment, thereby marginalising African epistemologies, multilingualism, and community-engaged practice. Drawing on a critical desktop analysis of curriculum documents, policy texts, and institutional frameworks, the article positions TVET lecturer education as a contested terrain of knowledge production, identity formation, and ideological struggle. Grounded in Freirean pedagogy and African philosophical traditions such as Ubuntu and epistemic justice, the analysis reveals that professional identity is shaped through normative compliance rather than ethical reflexivity. By extending the South African case to global debates, the article argues that vocational institutions must be understood not only as skill-delivery systems but also as sites of belonging, identity, and epistemic justice. In doing so, it contributes to decolonial scholarship in critical African studies by reframing vocational education as a space for epistemic courage, curricular justice, and the rehumanisation of knowledge in Africa and beyond.

Keywords: TVET lecturer education, Africanisation, professionalisation, curriculum justice, Freirean pedagogy, epistemic justice, Ubuntu.

1. Introduction

In post-apartheid South Africa, the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) sector has been positioned as a crucial vehicle for redress, skills development, and socio-economic inclusion. It is anticipated to address persistent inequalities, youth unemployment, and the chasm between formal qualifications and actual economic realities. Nonetheless, despite these expectations, TVET remains epistemically marginalised, under-resourced, and entangled in the colonial and apartheid legacies that continue to shape its languages, pedagogies, and professional cultures. At the centre of this tension is the TVET lecturer, often underprepared, professionally marginalised, and institutionally peripheral, who must navigate contradictory pressures between transformation mandates and the enduring grip of academic elitism and technicist logic (Grijpstra & Papier, 2015; Buthelezi, 2018; Khoza & Ngqula, 2025).

Introduced through the Department of Higher Education and Training's (DHET, 2013) Policy on Professional Qualifications for Lecturers in Technical and Vocational Education and Training, the Advanced Diploma in TVET was designed to professionalise this lecturer cohort. At Nelson Mandela University (NMU), the qualification is framed by commitments to humanising pedagogy, Freirean

praxis, and African decolonial traditions. Its formal structure reflects a vision of teacher education that is community-responsive, ethically grounded, and contextually embedded (Maluleke et al., 2024; Biccard & Meeran, 2024). However, this vision is constrained by institutional architectures that continue to privilege Eurocentric norms, managerialist pedagogies, and epistemological conformity (Kaiser, 2025; Badal, 2024).

Against this background, the present study interrogates the contradictions between compliance and critical consciousness that animate the NMU Advanced Diploma in TVET. It argues that vocational educator preparation cannot be conceived as a neutral or technical exercise; rather, it is a deeply political and epistemological project. Drawing on Paulo Freire's assertion that education is never neutral, the study interprets the NMU programme as a site of ideological struggle. It poses the following questions: How does the Advanced Diploma in TVET construct the professional identity of lecturers? To what extent does it embed African epistemologies, philosophies, and languages within its design? How do institutional and policy frameworks enable or constrain its transformative intent?

By addressing these questions, the article situates vocational lecturer education within the broader continental debates on decolonising the curriculum, Africanising pedagogy, and reclaiming teacher agency as an emancipatory project (Vally & Motala, 2022; Tikumah, 2024). The analysis examines whether the NMU programme facilitates the development of contextually grounded, critically conscious, and socially responsive lecturers, or whether it inadvertently reproduces the hierarchies it seeks to challenge through symbolic Africanisation, procedural professionalism, and the exclusion of African knowledges and languages. These concerns are systemic across Africa, where teacher education continues to grapple with issues of epistemic violence, monolingual instruction, and the bureaucratisation of pedagogy (Mavhiza & Nkealah, 2024; Tabiri & Afful, 2024; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020). This study adopts a desktop approach rather than a qualitative design per se, though it is informed by critical interpretive reading. It involves the systematic review and interpretation of NMU's curriculum frameworks, module guides, and institutional policy statements. The desktop study does not aim to generate primary qualitative data but rather interprets existing institutional texts through a critical, decolonial lens. Conceptually, it is anchored in Freirean dialogical pedagogy and African philosophical traditions, particularly Ubuntu, epistemic justice, and multilingual inclusion—enabling a reading of the curriculum as a contested space that encodes political choices regarding knowledge, voice, and legitimacy.

The discussion unfolds in several stages. Section 2 situates TVET within its historical and political context in post-apartheid South Africa. Section 3 outlines the theoretical framework, focusing on the pedagogical politics of Freire and the imperative of Africanisation, followed by a methodological account of the desktop analysis. Section 4 presents the curriculum mapping and examines how professional identity is constructed, while Section 5 extends the analysis to global debates on vocational education, identity, and belonging. The article concludes by advocating for the repoliticisation of TVET educator preparation as a decolonial project that affirms justice, dignity, and epistemic renewal across Africa and beyond.

2. Theoretical Framework

The education of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) lecturers is neither neutral nor purely technical; rather, it serves as a site of epistemological and ideological contestation shaped by the legacies of colonialism, apartheid, and neoliberalism, which continue to marginalise vocational knowledge. This study is grounded in the concept of pedagogical politics—the idea that education is invariably implicated in broader struggles concerning whose knowledge is deemed valid, whose voices are legitimised, and which futures are envisioned (Vally & Motala, 2022; Tikumah, 2024). In post-apartheid South Africa, where educational practices still reflect epistemic hierarchies and technocratic governance, this insight is particularly urgent within the vocational

sector, which has historically been excluded from academic prestige and critical pedagogical innovation.

Consequently, the Advanced Diploma in TVET at NMU is not regarded as a neutral set of learning outcomes; instead, it is perceived as a discursive and ideological project through which lecturer identity, curriculum intent, and epistemic legitimacy are negotiated. The analysis utilises a dual analytical lens: Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy and African decolonial philosophies, especially those centred on Ubuntu, epistemic justice, and Africanisation. Freire's critique of the banking model of education, where knowledge is deposited into passive learners by omniscient teachers, remains a foundational reference for analysing the conceptualisation of pedagogy in TVET (Freire, 1970, 1998; Hyslop-Margison & Dale, 2010). Freire advocates for dialogue, conscientisation, and praxis—a pedagogy that links critical reflection with transformative action. In contexts such as South Africa, where many TVET lecturers and students originate from working-class and historically disadvantaged communities, Freire's assertion that education should commence with lived experience resonates profoundly (Majola, 2024, 2025; Moosa & Moodley, 2024). However, Freire's framework alone cannot adequately address the ontological and cultural specificities of African education. His theory must be situated in dialogue with African philosophies that prioritise communalism, relationality, and the politics of belonging.

Africanisation is not merely a symbolic addition to Western frameworks; rather, it constitutes a radical re-centring of knowledge within African intellectual traditions, languages, and histories (Mbembe, 2016; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020). It necessitates a shift from Eurocentric universalism to epistemic plurality and contextual relevance, thereby challenging the supremacy of English, Cartesian rationalism, and abstract academic norms (Deji-Afuye & Zhou, 2025; Sibanda, 2021). In this study, Africanisation functions as a praxis of refusal—a deliberate repudiation of curricular silences, linguistic exclusion, and professional dehumanisation. Closely associated with this concept is epistemic justice, which pertains to the fair recognition of diverse knowers and knowledge systems (Fricker, 2007). Within the NMU diploma framework, epistemic justice involves the legitimisation of African ways of knowing and the dismantling of hierarchies that privilege Eurocentric epistemologies. When vocational curricula neglect indigenous knowledge and multilingual realities, they perpetuate what Fricker terms epistemic injustice—the marginalisation of certain groups as credible knowers.

Ubuntu, an African humanist philosophy, enriches this theoretical framework by emphasising relationality, dignity, and interdependence. To exist is to become through others (Bhengu, 2006; Assié-Lumumba, 2017; Ngubane & Makua, 2021). Ubuntu transforms pedagogy from an individualistic transaction into a collective ethical encounter. While Freire underscores liberation through conscientisation, Ubuntu asserts the importance of becoming human through others, offering a profound corrective to the isolationist logic of neoliberal education. Integrating Ubuntu into vocational teacher education foregrounds empathy, community engagement, and moral responsibility as central tenets of professional identity. Consequently, this article adopts a hybrid analytical framework that combines Freirean critical pedagogy with African philosophical thought. Freire provides a theory of conscientisation and praxis, while Africanisation and Ubuntu contribute the ontological grounding and ethical orientation required for a genuinely decolonial pedagogy. Collectively, these frameworks challenge the NMU Advanced Diploma to transcend procedural professionalism in favour of curriculum justice—a condition in which knowledge, language, and identity are re-centred around the lived experiences and cultural realities of African educators and learners. In doing so, this framework directs the article's central inquiry: Is the NMU Advanced Diploma professionally coherent, ethically accountable, epistemically just, and transformationally responsive? This framework situates the study within broader African scholarship that envisions education not as compliance, but as possibility; not as conformity, but as consciousness; and not as reform, but as rupture in pursuit of epistemic freedom.

2.1 Historical and political context of TVET in post-Apartheid South Africa

The trajectory of TVET in South Africa can only be comprehended through the intertwined legacies of apartheid and the evolving political agendas of the democratic era. Under apartheid, vocational colleges were intentionally racially stratified institutions, designed to prepare Black learners for low-skilled and subordinate roles within the economy, while reserving technical and managerial education for white learners (Wedekind et al., 2024). The system thus entrenched a dual hierarchy—social and epistemological—where vocational knowledge was constructed as inferior to academic knowledge. TVET institutions were stripped of intellectual legitimacy and positioned as peripheral to the university system, reflecting what Vally and Motala (2022) describe as the pedagogical paradox of apartheid education, in which access to education was structured through dispossession and inequality (Kraak, 2016).

With the democratic transition in 1994, TVET was reimagined as a strategic vehicle for equity, redress, and national reconstruction. Policy reforms such as the White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (DHET, 2013a) and the Policy on Professional Qualifications for Lecturers in TVET (DHET, 2013b) sought to integrate the sector into a coherent post-school education system. The central aim was to professionalise TVET lecturers, enhance quality, and position the sector as an engine of socio-economic transformation. However, as Allais (2019) notes, these reforms were underpinned by neoliberal assumptions that privileged employability and market alignment, resulting in what Russon and Wedekind (2023) refer to as technicist drift—a narrowing of vocational education into compliance-oriented, skills-based training. This contradictory inheritance leaves post-apartheid TVET in an ambivalent position. On one hand, it embodies the state's aspiration for redress and inclusive growth; on the other, it remains burdened by the structural and epistemic residues of apartheid. Persistent underfunding, social stigma, and the continued valorisation of universities as the custodians of "legitimate knowledge" have hindered its transformation. Consequently, the professional identity of TVET lecturers is shaped by a dual tension between transformation and compliance, and between emancipatory intent and bureaucratic rationality (Vally & Motala, 2022).

Within this context, the Advanced Diploma in TVET at Nelson Mandela University (NMU) represents both possibilities and constraints. It aspires to reconfigure the preparation of vocational educators through Africanisation and humanisation but operates within institutional and policy frameworks still governed by Eurocentric and technocratic logics. This double bind between the emancipatory promise of decolonisation and the inherited structures of compliance forms the conceptual tension that animates the present analysis. Recognising this duality is crucial to understanding the stakes of vocational curriculum reform in South Africa and appreciating the broader implications of the South African case for global debates on vocational education, justice, and epistemic transformation. By situating the NMU case within this historical and political framework, the study foregrounds how pedagogical politics, as theorised in the preceding section, continue to shape the lived contradictions of professional identity formation. This contextual grounding provides the foundation for the methodological framework that follows, which interrogates how these structural tensions are reproduced or resisted within the curriculum itself.

3. Methodology

This study employs a critical desktop analysis to examine how the Advanced Diploma in TVET, as implemented at NMU, constructs pedagogical meaning, professional identity, and epistemological legitimacy. The desktop method was chosen not for procedural efficiency but for its capacity to illuminate the symbolic, ideological, and epistemic structures that shape curriculum design, qualification documentation, institutional texts, and state policy (Cohen et al., 2011; Avery, 2020). In this approach, curriculum is understood not as a neutral artefact but as a political discourse—a domain where power, identity, and legitimacy are continuously negotiated. This perspective aligns with Creswell and Poth's (2018) conceptualisation of qualitative inquiry as a means of uncovering

the silent architecture of meaning, particularly in contexts where direct observation may be limited or ethically constrained. Within African higher education systems, as argued by Badal (2024) and Tikumah (2024), critical desktop analysis provides an essential decolonial lens, revealing how institutional and curricular structures may reproduce, mask, or resist colonial power through their content, framing, and omissions.

In South Africa's post-apartheid educational landscape, which continues to be shaped by the enduring influence of colonial curricular design, technocratic rationalism, and epistemic inequality, such textual analysis emerges as a necessary act of intellectual resistance. It facilitates the excavation of assumptions that inform the formation of professional identity and uncovers absences that signal deeper ideological positions: the marginalisation of African epistemologies, the exclusion of indigenous languages, and the procedural framing of pedagogy that displaces ethical reflexivity and communal responsibility. The analysis is situated within a transformative and decolonial paradigm, drawing conceptually from Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy and African philosophical traditions such as Ubuntu and epistemic justice. The researcher approaches the task not as an external observer but as an engaged participant within an ongoing epistemic struggle. Freire's emphasis on dialogue, humanisation, and conscientisation (1970, 1998) is combined here with African ethics of relationality, multilingual justice, and epistemic disobedience (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020; Ngubane & Makua, 2021; Sibanda, 2021). Ubuntu ethics, in this context, refers to a moral and philosophical orientation that affirms human interconnectedness—the idea that a person is a person through other persons. It emphasises compassion, mutual respect, dignity, and responsibility within community life (Tutu, 1999; Metz, 2011).

As an educational ethic, Ubuntu challenges individualism and instrumentalism by situating learning within relationships of care, reciprocity, and shared humanity. This dual lens enables the examination of the curriculum not only for what it explicitly articulates but also for what it refuses to acknowledge. The researcher recognises that educational policy, when read critically, functions as an ideological script—a discursive apparatus that constructs who the legitimate knower is, what constitutes valid knowledge, and how professional identity is imagined. Reflexively, the researcher is positioned as both participant and critic within the South African TVET landscape. This positionality acknowledges the privileges and constraints of insider knowledge and seeks to balance empathy with analytical distance, aligning with Kamlongera et al. (2024), who argue that African methodologies must challenge extractive research paradigms and embrace justice-oriented, dialogical approaches. Thus, the study's methodology is intentionally ethical and situated, informed by Freirean dialogical reflection and Ubuntu's ethics of humility and reciprocity.

The data corpus comprised institutional, curricular, and policy documents pertaining to NMU's Advanced Diploma in TVET from 2018 to 2023. This collection included official programme frameworks, module guides, and institutional policy statements. The modules analysed encompassed key areas such as Philosophical Perspectives in Education (PVPH401), Psychology of Education in a Vocational Context (PVPS401), Vocational Education for Social Change (PVSO402), Historical Developments in Vocational Education (PVHI402), Curriculum Studies and Assessment Practices (PVCA401), Pedagogical Perspectives in TVET (PVPP401), A Professional Identity for a Vocational Lecturer (PVPI402), Designing a Vocational Pedagogy (PVDP402), Critical Discourses in TVET (PVCD401), Practical Learning – Teaching Practice (PVTP400), and Workplace-Based Practice (PVWP402). These documents were supplemented by institutional planning frameworks, faculty guidelines, and national policy texts, including the White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (DHET, 2013a) and the Policy on Professional Qualifications for Lecturers in TVET (DHET, 2013b). Additionally, public discursive materials, such as the speeches of Dr Muki Moeng (2018), were incorporated, as they provided interpretive insights into the institutional positioning of the programme within broader national policy discourses.

Documents were included if they directly informed the design, content, or assessment of the Advanced Diploma, addressed issues of lecturer professional identity or pedagogical philosophy, or reflected national and institutional perspectives on curriculum reform. Texts that were administrative or unrelated to curricular framing were excluded. The selection process was therefore purposive, aimed at capturing both the formal and discursive structures of the programme and its ideological underpinnings. The analytical process unfolded in iterative cycles of reading, interpretation, and synthesis. The first stage involved familiarisation with the textual corpus to identify recurring themes and patterns concerning Africanisation, professional identity, and pedagogical framing. This was followed by interpretive coding, organised around five interrelated categories derived from the study's theoretical framework: epistemological orientation, pedagogical assumptions, lecturer identity, multilingual and cultural inclusion, and professionalisation. These categories provided a scaffold for tracing how specific discourses, silences, and contradictions were embedded within the texts. The final stage involved critical interpretation, where the coded data were examined through the Freirean–Ubuntu lens to uncover how the programme negotiates tensions between compliance and consciousness. For example, a module that references "transformation" in its outcomes was analysed in relation to its assessment design to determine whether the evaluative structure reinforced or disrupted technicist logic. This recursive engagement between data and theory highlighted how the curriculum operates simultaneously as a space of resistance and reproduction.

This study adhered to institutional and national ethical research standards. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Nelson Mandela University Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee under reference number H21-EDU-PGE-021, as part of a broader doctoral study examining TVET and social transformation. The research involved no human participants and relied exclusively on documentary materials—policy statements, module guides, and institutional frameworks that are either publicly accessible or formally authorised for scholarly analysis. All institutional data are represented with academic integrity and anonymity where required. The researcher acknowledges the ethical sensitivity of critiquing documents produced by the host institution and therefore approached the analysis with reflexivity, respect, and a commitment to constructive scholarly dialogue. This ethical positioning aligns with the principles of Ubuntu ethics: humility, relational accountability, and non-extractive engagement, as well as with Freire's call for dialogical inquiry grounded in respect for community and institutional dignity.

4. Study Findings

This section presents the findings of the document analysis conducted on the Advanced Diploma in Technical and Vocational Teaching (Adv Dip TVT) at Nelson Mandela University. The analysis examined module descriptors, programme guides, policy documents, assessment rubrics, and prescribed reading lists to determine how the curriculum constructs vocational lecturer professionalisation. Using a Freirean–Ubuntu theoretical lens, the findings are organised around six interrelated themes: the dominance of technicist pedagogy, epistemological narrowness, linguistic exclusion, the proceduralisation of work-integrated learning, national comparative positioning, and the tension between professionalisation and transformation. Together, these themes reveal a curriculum that formally promotes humanising pedagogy yet remains structurally shaped by compliance-driven, Eurocentric, and monolingual frameworks that constrain its transformative potential.

4.1 Technicist pedagogy disguised as professionalisation

A review of NMU's module descriptors, programme guides, and assessment rubrics reveals that the curriculum is primarily framed around compliance-based learning outcomes, procedural teaching competencies, and performance standards. Phrases such as "demonstrate competence in lesson planning," "align teaching activities with institutional policy," and "apply assessment frameworks

effectively" appear frequently across modules such as Pedagogical Perspectives in TVET (PVPP401) and Curriculum Studies and Assessment Practices (PVCA401) (Faculty of Education, 2018–2023). While these outcomes suggest an emphasis on professionalism and accountability, they rarely reference dialogical learning, social critique, or contextual reflexivity, which are key indicators of transformative pedagogy.

Despite rhetorical commitments to a humanising pedagogy, the curriculum often privileges a technicist construction of teaching. Modules tend to conceptualise pedagogy as a neutral, apolitical skill set, focusing on lesson planning, outcome alignment, and institutional compliance. This approach aligns with what Freire (1970) termed the "banking model of education," wherein knowledge is deposited into passive learners, allowing little space for critical interrogation or dialogic learning. While the structure of the programme is clear and organised, its framing of teacher education largely reflects the managerialist logic that Allais and Marock (2024) identify as characteristic of post-apartheid vocational reform. This tendency is further reinforced by policy-driven imperatives surrounding standardisation and quality assurance. Lecturers are trained as curriculum implementers expected to align with institutional templates rather than as transformative agents capable of disrupting inherited pedagogical and epistemological hierarchies. As Vally and Motala (2022) argue, such technocratic orientations limit the potential of TVET education to contribute to broader social justice agendas. Consequently, the Adv Dip TVT at NMU risks preparing lecturers to function within, rather than critique, the dominant structures of South African education.

4.2 Epistemological narrowness and the marginalisation of African knowledges

An examination of module outlines, prescribed readings, and assessment tasks across the ten modules indicates that the epistemological framing of the programme remains predominantly Eurocentric. The reading lists are largely dominated by Western educational theorists such as Dewey, Schön, Vygotsky, and Brookfield, while African or Global South scholars are rarely foregrounded. For instance, in Philosophical Perspectives in Education (PVPH401) and Vocational Education for Social Change (PVSO402), fewer than a quarter of the cited texts are authored by African scholars, and references to indigenous or local knowledge systems are minimal. Consequently, the curriculum positions Euro-American theories as foundational, while relegating African epistemologies to peripheral or optional status. This documentary pattern supports the interpretation that, although the programme's rhetoric invokes humanising pedagogy, its knowledge base continues to privilege Global North frameworks.

The curriculum's epistemic framing reflects another contradiction. While NMU espouses a humanising ethos, there is limited substantive engagement with African philosophies, indigenous knowledge systems, or decolonial theory. African intellectuals such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Nyerere, Biko, and Ndlovu-Gatsheni are rarely cited or embedded within the core curriculum. This absence amounts to what Fricker (2007) describes as epistemic injustice—the systematic exclusion of certain knowledges from the domain of legitimacy. In South Africa's postcolonial context, this omission cannot be considered accidental; it reproduces the enduring colonial hierarchy of knowledge production. As Mbembe (2016) and Assié-Lumumba (2017) argue, genuine decolonisation demands more than rhetorical inclusion; it requires the re-centring of African epistemologies as foundational to intellectual life. The Adv Dip TVET's failure to do so undermines its own transformative promise. A Freirean–Ubuntu reading of the curriculum reveals how this silence functions not merely as omission but as ideological containment, thereby limiting the imaginative horizons of what constitutes vocational knowledge.

4.3 The absence of multilingualism and linguistic justice

The document analysis revealed a consistent reliance on English as the sole language of instruction, communication, and assessment across all modules. None of the module guides reviewed, including

Practical Learning (PVTP400) and Workplace-Based Practice (PVWP402), make provision for multilingual pedagogy, translanguaging, or the use of African languages as learning resources. Institutional policy documents further confirm that "English shall be the medium of instruction," with no accompanying strategies for linguistic inclusion. This textual evidence demonstrates that the multilingual realities of Eastern Cape students are not recognised pedagogically or linguistically within the programme design.

Consequently, the exclusion of African languages reproduces epistemic hierarchies, and a further silence emerges in the programme's monolingual delivery. Despite the linguistic diversity of the Eastern Cape and the predominance of isiXhosa among TVET students, English remains the sole language of instruction, assessment, and academic discourse. This erasure of linguistic plurality contradicts both Freire's (1970) dialogical pedagogy and Ubuntu's ethic of relationality. Language is not merely a communicative medium but, as Sibanda (2021) and Paris (2012) contend, a repository of culture, identity, and epistemic worldview. By excluding African languages, the curriculum perpetuates what wa Thiong'o (1986) described as the colonial wound—a dislocation of self and intellect through linguistic domination. The continued privileging of English positions it as the language of authority, reinforcing epistemic inequality and symbolic subordination. This silence undermines the programme's humanising claims, for true dialogue cannot occur when the linguistic realities of participants are unacknowledged. As Makalela (2015) and Stroud and Kerfoot (2021) demonstrate, the pursuit of educational justice in South Africa requires translanguaging pedagogies that recognise multilingual realities as epistemic resources rather than pedagogical obstacles.

4.4 Work-integrated learning as missed praxis

A review of the WIL modules Teaching Practice (PVTP400) and Workplace-Based Practice (PVWP402) indicates that the assessment rubrics and course descriptions prioritise procedural competence over critical reflection. The documents delineate observable behaviours such as lesson preparation, classroom management, and adherence to institutional policy but offer minimal scaffolding for socio-political analysis, learner diversity, or ethical reflection. The evaluation instruments are checklist-based, necessitating that students demonstrate their ability to plan and deliver lessons and comply with workplace protocols. There is no explicit encouragement for students to interrogate structural inequities or contextual realities during their practicum.

These findings substantiate the argument that WIL, as it is currently implemented, operates more as an exercise in compliance than as Freirean praxis. The WIL component, which constitutes 32 of the 120 credits through modules such as Teaching Practice (PVTP400) and Workplace-Based Practice (PVWP402), ostensibly embodies Freire's notion of praxis—the unity of reflection and action. In principle, these modules could function as transformative spaces where theory intersects with lived experience. However, the document analysis reveals that WIL is predominantly operationalised through compliance-based assessment instruments that privilege lesson templates, observation checklists, and standardised rubrics over dialogical inquiry or socio-political reflection. Reflection journals, when included, seldom transcend procedural commentary and administrative reporting. As Rudman and Meiring (2018) assert, when praxis is reduced to bureaucratic documentation, its emancipatory potential is lost. To reclaim its transformative purpose, WIL must be reconceptualised as a dialogical engagement with institutional culture, learner diversity, and social inequality. In its present form, NMU's WIL structure risks producing reflective technicians rather than critically conscious practitioners.

4.5 Comparative perspective: NMU in the national context

Institutional prospectuses, programme outlines, and public statements indicate that NMU's Advanced Diploma reflects national trends in TVET educator training, particularly in its strong alignment with DHET policy requirements and its limited integration of Africanisation frameworks.

The curriculum shares common structures and outcomes with analogous diplomas at Wits, UJ, and other universities, all of which prioritise professionalisation and standardisation. A comparative analysis of institutional documentation reveals that only a few institutions, notably UKZN and STADIO, explicitly incorporate African philosophies, Ubuntu ethics, or multilingualism into their module designs. Within this broader context, NMU's programme appears progressive in form but conservative in epistemic orientation. This comparative evidence situates NMU's curriculum within national debates regarding the tension between professionalisation and transformation.

Institution	Delivery Mode	Curriculum Emphasis
NMU	Part-time/full-time (blended)	Humanising pedagogy, WIL, SDGs, but limited Africanisation
UKZN	Blended/contact	African contextualisation, social justice, decolonial praxis
Wits	Hybrid	Theory-practice integration, workplace collaboration
UJ	Online/blended	Engineering-focused, inclusion and teacher identity
STADIO	Fully online	Ubuntu, vocational philosophy, multilingualism, RPL-based WIL

Placed in a national context, NMU's approach reflects a broader pattern of ambivalence in South African TVET professionalisation. Institutions such as the University of the Witwatersrand and the University of Johannesburg share similar frameworks that prioritise standardisation, employability, and lecturer certification (Wits, 2024; UJ, 2021; DHET, 2013b). These models embody the neoliberal and managerialist tendencies described by Allais (2019), which reduce education to human-capital production. However, other universities have moved towards more explicitly decolonial orientations. At the University of KwaZulu-Natal, curriculum reforms actively integrate African philosophies, community-based learning, and social-justice frameworks, while the Cape Peninsula University of Technology embeds Ubuntu ethics and indigenous knowledge in its vocational pedagogy (UKZN, 2025; CPUT, 2025). Even private institutions such as STADIO have incorporated multilingualism, vocational ethics, and Ubuntu principles into their online teacher education models (STADIO, 2024). Against this comparative backdrop, NMU emerges as a hybrid case: rhetorically progressive and technologically innovative, yet epistemically conservative. Its curricular design remains aligned with procedural rationality rather than transformative praxis, illustrating the structural inertia that continues to characterise much of South African vocational education (Biccard & Meeran, 2024; Tabiri & Afful, 2024).

4.6 Between professionalisation and possibility

The NMU Advanced Diploma in TVET thus embodies the paradox of South African vocational reform: it is both a product of and a response to the colonial and neoliberal architectures that define post-apartheid education. While it succeeds in meeting state imperatives for lecturer professionalisation, it falls short of the deeper epistemic and linguistic transformation it professes. The curriculum's technicist orientation, narrow epistemic base, and monolingual structure collectively risk reproducing the very hierarchies it seeks to dismantle. However, these limitations also signal points of possibility. The programme's blended format, its engagement with reflective pedagogy, and its stated humanising ethos offer a platform for re-imagining vocational education as a site of decolonial praxis. For this to materialise, the qualification must shift from procedural professionalisation towards curriculum justice, a paradigm grounded in African epistemologies, multilingual inclusion, and the ethical relationality of Ubuntu. Only through such re-centring can the NMU diploma fulfil its transformative potential and contribute meaningfully to the broader project of Africanising vocational education.

The next section deepens this discussion by analysing how institutional and ideological structures interact to shape the formation of the twenty-first-century vocational educator, tracing the ongoing tension between compliance and consciousness at the heart of South Africa's TVET transformation.

5. Discussions of Major Arguments

The Advanced Diploma in TVET at NMU exemplifies a national effort to professionalise a historically marginalised sector; however, the programme embodies a tension central to TVET educator formation: the dissonance between compliance with policy mandates and the cultivation of critical consciousness. Framed by instruments such as the White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (DHET, 2013a) and the Policy on Professional Qualifications for Lecturers in TVET (DHET, 2013b), the curriculum purports to enhance status, coherence, and capacity in vocational education. Nevertheless, when examined through the dual lenses of Freirean praxis and African decolonial critique, this promise is destabilised, revealing the friction between standardisation and the potential for transformative, reflective practice.

5.1 Technicist professionalism and the politics of competence

Professionalisation within the NMU diploma is articulated predominantly through a competency-based, procedural framework that prioritises measurable outcomes, curriculum alignment, and institutional coherence. While such a structure provides formal legitimacy and accountability, it risks reducing pedagogy to an instrument of regulation rather than transformation. Freire (1970, 1998) cautioned against pedagogies that position teachers as delivery agents of pre-defined content, warning that such models foreclose critical reflection and social action. In the NMU context, this orientation manifests as a form of technocratic pedagogy where teaching proficiency is equated with compliance to prescribed standards rather than the cultivation of ethical and political consciousness.

This logic is not unique to NMU but is symptomatic of what Allais (2019) and Wheelahan (2007) describe as the global shift toward performativity in vocational education. Within such frameworks, pedagogical intention becomes subordinated to external metrics of employability and institutional efficiency. The result is an epistemic narrowing that marginalises community-based, culturally embedded, and dialogical ways of knowing. This condition mirrors the process of academic drift (Kaiser, 2025; Gjelstad, 2025), in which vocational institutions emulate university structures to attain legitimacy, yet lose their contextual relevance in the process. Thus, the politics of competence in the NMU diploma reasserts the very hierarchies that post-apartheid education seeks to dismantle.

5.1.1 Africanisation as rhetoric, not praxis

Although the institutional discourse surrounding the diploma invokes humanising pedagogy and Africanisation, these commitments remain largely rhetorical. The curriculum seldom engages deeply with African intellectual traditions or decolonial thinkers such as Nyerere, Biko, wa Thiong'o, or Ndlovu-Gatsheni, whose insights could reorient pedagogy towards epistemic sovereignty. Ubuntu, while occasionally referenced in teaching philosophy statements, is not embedded in learning outcomes or assessment design. As Mbembe (2016) and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2020) argue, epistemic justice demands more than symbolic recognition; it requires structural reconfiguration and curricular courage. This absence becomes most visible in the programme's continued monolingualism. Despite serving a predominantly isiXhosa-speaking student body, the diploma provides no framework for multilingual instruction or translanguaging pedagogy. The linguistic homogeneity of English-only teaching reproduces what wa Thiong'o (1986) terms the colonial wound — the epistemic rupture caused by the erasure of indigenous languages as vehicles of thought. Language, as Sibanda (2021) and Paris (2012) remind us, is not merely communicative but constitutes identity and worldview. The curriculum's silence on linguistic justice thus exposes a profound disjuncture between its stated aims of transformation and its operational design. Without the inclusion of African languages, the promise of Africanisation remains aspirational rather than enacted.

5.1.2 Work-integrated learning: lost opportunities for praxis

The WIL component represents one of the diploma's most significant attempts to integrate theory with practice, conceptually aligning with Freire's notion of praxis—the reflective action that transforms reality. By allocating 32 out of 120 credits to teaching practice and workplace-based modules, the institution demonstrates a commitment to experiential learning. However, the implementation of WIL at NMU remains constrained by bureaucratic processes. Documentation, assessment instruments, and supervision protocols prioritise procedural compliance, focusing on logbooks, lesson templates, and observation checklists. Reflection, where required, is often limited to descriptive accounts rather than critical engagement with systemic issues such as class inequality, language exclusion, or gendered dynamics in vocational spaces. As Rudman and Meiring (2018) and Taliep et al. (2023) observe, when experiential learning devolves into an exercise in compliance, its emancipatory potential is compromised. Freirean praxis demands more than the mere application of theory; it necessitates that educators identify, analyse, and act upon the contradictions inherent in their social realities. The current configuration of WIL at NMU largely excludes such engagement. The educator-in-training learns to manage classrooms and implement policy but seldom interrogates the ethical and political conditions that shape those environments. Consequently, WIL risks producing reflective technicians rather than transformative practitioners.

5.1.3 The educator between containment and liberation

The most fundamental contradiction within NMU's Advanced Diploma in TVET lies in its invocation of transformation through instruments of containment. Reflective practice is encouraged, yet often within pre-structured templates and rubrics that limit authentic critique. Social justice is prominent in programme rhetoric but is rarely theorised or operationalised. Africanisation is referenced in mission statements but seldom enacted in curricula. This dynamic epitomises what Spreen and Vally (2010) term the pedagogical paradox of post-apartheid education: a reform discourse that proclaims liberation while reproducing bureaucratic architectures of control. Re-politicising vocational educator formation, therefore, necessitates reimagining professionalism not as conformity to institutional codes, but as a practice of ethical and epistemic engagement. Professionalism, in this context, should entail the capacity to question, to humanise, and to locate one's practice within community and history. Majola et al. (2026) contend that the TVET educator must be understood as a public intellectual—an agent of cultural affirmation and social transformation rather than a service technician aligned with bureaucratic metrics. This reconceptualisation demands that the curriculum become a space of dialogue, reflexivity, and co-construction: a site of becoming rather than certification.

In this tension between compliance and consciousness, the NMU case illustrates the broader struggle within South African vocational education—a struggle to reconcile the necessity of professional standards with the ethical imperative of decolonial transformation. The following section extends this discussion by proposing pathways for curricular renewal and epistemic justice, suggesting how the Advanced Diploma can transition from symbolic Africanisation toward a praxis of genuine transformation.

5.2 Global lessons from the South African TVET case

Although this study focuses on the Advanced Diploma in TVET at Nelson Mandela University, its insights extend far beyond South Africa, addressing global debates concerning the purpose, politics, and identity of vocational education. Across diverse contexts, from the United Kingdom and Australia to Ghana and Nigeria, TVET and further education systems grapple with similar tensions between compliance with market-driven imperatives and the pursuit of educational justice (Allais & Marock, 2024; Yuan, Taylor, & Dauda, 2024). In many instances, vocational institutions occupy a subordinate position within national education hierarchies, conceived primarily as pipelines to

employability rather than as intellectual and cultural spaces that nurture belonging, identity, and epistemic agency. The South African case illustrates how colonial and neoliberal legacies converge to reproduce exclusion even while promising transformation. This paradox is not unique. In the United Kingdom, Hodkinson (1998) observed how technicism curtailed the pedagogical agency of vocational educators, while Wheelahan (2007), in Australia, demonstrated that competency-based frameworks excluded working-class learners from access to "powerful knowledge." Similarly, in Ghana and Nigeria, scholars have documented the persistent struggle to integrate indigenous knowledge and multilingual practice into vocational curricula, echoing South Africa's challenges surrounding linguistic justice and epistemic inclusion (Deji-Afuye & Zhou, 2025; Opoku et al., 2024).

The South African experience thus offers a critical conceptual lesson: vocational education must be understood not only as an economic enterprise but also as a site of belonging, cultural survival, and epistemic justice. When TVET colleges are reduced to skill-delivery institutions, they risk reproducing social hierarchies by positioning working-class and marginalised students as passive recipients of technical expertise. However, when framed as spaces of critical pedagogy and cultural affirmation, vocational institutions can cultivate professional identities grounded in humanisation, relationality, and ethical engagement. This invites a broader provocation for international higher and further education: What if we assessed vocational and technical colleges not merely by employability statistics but by their capacity to nurture ethical consciousness, communal belonging, and epistemic freedom? What if educator preparation were evaluated not solely through compliance with national standards but through its success in cultivating critically conscious, culturally grounded practitioners who reimagine futures with their communities? The South African case contributes to this global conversation by highlighting both the risks of technocratic drift and the possibilities of decolonial praxis. It reveals that vocational education can serve as a central arena for justice-oriented curriculum reform—one in which African epistemologies, languages, and philosophies such as Ubuntu confront the neoliberal narrowing of educational purpose. In this sense, the NMU case is not merely diagnostic but generative: it demonstrates how compliance can be interrupted by consciousness and how education can move from certification toward transformation.

5.2.1 Reframing the debate: Toward a pedagogy of ethical disobedience

The contradictions embedded in NMU's Advanced Diploma reflect broader struggles within global and South African higher education systems, oscillating between reformist pragmatism and decolonial rupture. Institutional frameworks seek coherence, predictability, and compliance, whereas decolonial pedagogy insists on the disruption of hierarchy, language, and epistemic injustice. The challenge is not simply to integrate African or local content into existing structures but to rethink the form itself: the logics, languages, and epistemological assumptions that define curriculum, assessment, and educator identity. Following Wang and Horta (2024), authentic curriculum innovation arises not from alignment with global benchmarks but from intimate critique, cultural rootedness, and political courage. The question, therefore, is not whether change is necessary, but whether the change we pursue disrupts exclusion or merely reshapes it into more procedural forms. Between compliance and consciousness lies a productive tension that must be navigated through ethical disobedience—a pedagogy that resists standardisation by asserting plural epistemologies, dialogical engagement, and the transformative intent of education as a humanising act. This pedagogy of ethical disobedience requires educators to act with critical conscience: to question institutional orthodoxy, to reclaim their role as intellectuals rather than technicians, and to anchor their teaching in the relational ethics of Ubuntu. Such disobedience is not rebellion for its own sake but an ethical stance—a refusal to separate professional practice from moral responsibility. Within vocational education, it redefines the educator not as a regulator of skills but as a facilitator of consciousness.

5.3 Reimagining educator preparation: from technocratic formation to transformative praxis

Reimagining TVET educator preparation at NMU requires a shift from technocratic credentialing to transformative praxis, where the Advanced Diploma serves as a site of ethical reflexivity, social engagement, and epistemic justice. Moving beyond procedural competence, the programme must cultivate critically conscious, community-rooted public intellectuals, preparing educators not only to deliver curriculum but also to interrogate, transform, and co-construct it alongside their learners.

5.3.1 Praxis over procedure

At the core of this transformation lies Freire's enduring principle of praxis, defined as the dialectical unity of reflection and action directed toward liberation (Freire, 1970, 1998). In its current form, NMU's curriculum constrains praxis through technocratic constructions of professionalism that equate reflection with compliance and innovation with adherence to standards. However, as Badal (2024) reminds us, "silence in educational spaces is never neutral"; it signifies both exclusion and resistance. Reclaiming praxis entails transforming Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) into a relational, dialogical space of immersion and critical inquiry. Drawing on Motala and Vally (2022) and Moosa and Moodley (2024), WIL should become a process of social witnessing and co-design in which lecturers-in-training engage with vocational students' lived realities as legitimate sources of knowledge. This reconceptualisation resonates with Tikumah's (2024) call for a sociological imagination in pedagogy—one that contests cultural essentialism and fosters unity through ethical plurality. In this vision, educator preparation prioritises empathy, civic responsibility, and ethical orientation rather than procedural mastery. Praxis thus reclaims its original meaning: not the mastery of technique, but the cultivation of critical humanity.

5. 3.2 Africanisation as foundational, not supplementary

For curriculum transformation to be authentic, Africanisation must be structural rather than merely symbolic. As Biccard and Meeran (2024) observe, Africanisation remains fragile precisely because it is often confined to rhetoric or elective modules. At NMU, the absence of sustained engagement with African languages, anti-colonial thinkers, and indigenous pedagogies underscores this fragility. To address this issue, Ubuntu and orality should be embedded across all modules, not as cultural decoration but as an epistemological foundation. Deji-Afuye and Zhou (2025) demonstrate how English-dominated instruction in multilingual African contexts silences learner participation and self-expression. Consequently, NMU's monolingual curriculum perpetuates what Boaventura de Sousa Santos terms epistemicide, the systematic erasure of linguistic diversity. Incorporating translanguaging strategies, multilingual assessment, and culturally responsive materials would enact linguistic justice and reposition African languages as sources of cognitive and ethical insight (Sibanda, 2021; Paris, 2012; Tabiri & Afful, 2024). In this reframing, language becomes not a barrier but a bridge to epistemic belonging.

5.3.3 Centring student voice and community participation

Finally, transformative vocational pedagogy must prioritise student voice and community participation. Current curricular designs often regard students merely as policy subjects, rendering them passive within institutional hierarchies. However, as Mavhiza and Nkealah (2024) emphasise, identity formation flourishes in dialogic spaces that honour personal histories and community knowledge. A decolonial approach necessitates pedagogies of storytelling, reflective journaling, and co-creation that acknowledge students as narrators of lived experience. Opoku et al. (2024) similarly argue that teacher identity develops through iterative and relational mentoring processes rather than through top-down instruction. From this perspective, professionalism is not characterised by bureaucratic competence but by critical reflexivity, cultural empathy, and ethical accountability. As Khoza and Ngqula (2025) assert, preparing educators for multilingual, working-class, postcolonial

contexts requires engagement with history, power, and the ethics of care. Reimagined in this manner, TVET educator formation evolves into a project of collective humanity—an enactment of Ubuntu in practice, where learning is both ethical and emancipatory.

6. Conclusion: Curriculum as Contested Terrain, Pedagogy as Possibility

This article has argued that the Advanced Diploma in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) at Nelson Mandela University represents a critical fault line in post-apartheid education, constituting an institutional space where the promises of transformation are constrained by the demands of compliance. Emerging from state-driven efforts to professionalise a historically marginalised sector, the diploma confers long-overdue legitimacy upon vocational lecturers who have been excluded from academic recognition. However, as this study has demonstrated, the curriculum remains entangled in technocratic architectures, monolingual pedagogy, and symbolic gestures towards Africanisation that limit its emancipatory intent. Drawing on Freirean praxis and African philosophical traditions, this analysis has posited the curriculum not as a neutral technical framework but as an ideological artefact that constructs meaning regarding knowledge, identity, and justice. The findings reveal that despite rhetorical commitments to humanising pedagogy, the programme often defaults to procedural compliance, linguistic exclusion, and epistemic conservatism. African epistemologies are invoked but rarely integrated; reflection is encouraged but seldom politicised. In response, this study proposes a reimagined model of TVET educator formation, one grounded in praxis, Ubuntu, multilingualism, and curriculum justice. Such a model shifts professional formation from performative competence towards pedagogical ethics that affirm identity, dignity, and historical redress. Here, the vocational educator ceases to be merely a technician of content and instead becomes a public intellectual—community-rooted, critically aware, and ethically engaged.

The South African case also carries ramifications beyond its national borders. Globally, from the United Kingdom and Australia to Ghana and Nigeria, vocational education remains subordinate to university hierarchies, valued primarily for its contribution to employability rather than for epistemic agency or cultural continuity. The contradictions identified herein between compliance and consciousness, and between symbolic transformation and substantive decolonisation, reflect tensions in other postcolonial and neoliberal contexts where vocational colleges navigate the dual pressures of technicism and inequality. By reframing Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) as a site of belonging, identity, and epistemic justice, rather than merely a conduit to labour markets, this article conceptually contributes to reimagining vocational education as a cultural and political project with transformative potential across global contexts. In advancing this argument, the article also affirms the broader intellectual agenda of critical African thought: to position Africa not merely as a site of empirical illustration but as a producer of theory that disrupts Eurocentric educational orthodoxies. By foregrounding African philosophies, linguistic justice, and decolonial critique, this analysis challenges dominant paradigms of vocational education and reframes pedagogical spaces as arenas of dignity, humanisation, and epistemic freedom.

The formation of vocational educators is not a technical exercise; it is a profoundly political and ethical act. In an era where decolonisation remains an unfinished project, the TVET classroom offers a critical terrain upon which the future of education can be contested and reimagined. To teach for work without teaching for transformation is to betray the very communities that vocational education seeks to empower. The task before us, then, is not only curricular reform but epistemic courage: the will to challenge inherited hierarchies, to teach in languages that carry history and memory, and to cultivate pedagogies that position students as co-authors of knowledge rather than recipients of skills. Between compliance and consciousness lies a generative space—a space where the struggle for justice becomes pedagogical, where learning becomes liberation, and where the future of African vocational education can ultimately be claimed as an act of collective becoming.

7. Declarations

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