



Employment Tactics and Strategies of Technical-Vocational Education Students for Career and Professional Development in the Labour Market of Vietnam

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Abstract: Many policies and strategies have been implemented to improve both the quality and quantity of Vietnam's technical and vocational education (TVE) system, and the results indicated innovative reform of the TVE system in both ways in Vietnam. Many aspects of TVE in Vietnam have been explored by a series of reports of the National Institute for Vocational Education and Training (NIVET); however, there exists a shortage of studies attempting to focus on the process of TVE graduates' employment experience in the Vietnamese labour market. This study attempts to explore the employment of TVE graduates from technical colleges in Vietnam, with a focus on their employment tactics. To base this study on a qualitative approach, the primary data sources were obtained through semi-structure interviews and self-diary on employment tactics and strategies of TVE graduates in the labour market within two years. The obtained data were subjected to thematic analysis. Based on this, results revealed difficulty in obtaining desirable and high-paying jobs even though it was not difficult to obtain jobs to earn a living. Also, low satisfaction and resilience due to poor working conditions were revealed. Three key strategies: maintaining low pay jobs to earn a living, updating their skills to get better jobs, and changing to suitable jobs were figured out by TVE graduates. These strategies gradually assisted TVE graduates to obtain sustainable goals of career promotion and professional development.

Keywords: Career and professional development, employability, technical college, TVET

1. Introduction

Technical and vocational education (TVE) is a type of educational instruction that trains its graduates to take advantage of employment opportunities in the labour market. It is argued that vocational training programs are tied or related to the needs of businesses (Mouzakitis, 2010) and socioeconomic growth (Jüttler et al., 2021; Xia et al., 2022). These benefits lead many students to pursue vocational education rather than general education to secure entry-level job offers and spend less time looking for work (Brunello & Rocco, 2017). Furthermore, with their practical skills, TVE graduates have an advantage in technical jobs, especially manual jobs that are directly related to their expertise (Velde & Cooper, 2000; Rintala & Nokelainen, 2020).

Understanding the benefits that technical and vocational education (TVE) offers, the Vietnamese government prioritized VET as the primary education sector to meet the country's demand for skilled labour since the educational

reform in 1986 (Tuan & Cuong, 2019). To effectively reform vocational education, many strategies were introduced, such as the Strategy for Socio-Economic Development 2001–2010 (Vietnam Government, 2006), the Law on Vocational Training (Law No. 76/2006/QH11) (International Labour Organization, 2007), the Draft of National Education Strategy Planning 2009–2020 (Viet Nam Ministry of Education and Training, 2010), and the Vocational Development Strategy 2011–2020 (International Labour Organization, 2012). These strategies prioritized TVE's role in the innovation of the nation's economy with attempts to equip people with high skills and knowledge to work effectively in both national and international contexts.

Three decades after the reform's inception, the picture of vocational-technical education was stunning, with many aspects of vocational education having been suitably upgraded and developed. For instance, according to Ho (2014), there were approximately 325 vocational institutes in 1987, which included vocational colleges and secondary schools. In 2013, this number reached 1339 institutes (ILSSA, 2015). Additionally, the reforms successfully enhanced the qualifications of teachers (UNESCO, 2018) and the quality of administration (NIVET, 2018).

Like TVE systems in other nations, the development of TVE in Vietnam had huge concerns from scholars on various aspects. For instance, it has been proven that the reform of TVE was sufficient to assist students in developing essential hard and soft skills demanded by the labour market (NIVET, 2018; NIVET, 2020). There is strong evidence of cooperation between TVE institutions and different industries for multiple stakeholders' benefits such as students, institutions, and companies (NIVET, 2018). Additionally, the monthly wages of vocational graduates were appropriately recorded (UNESCO, 2016, p. 41). For example, the average income of TVE graduates in rural regions was 5.08 million VND and 6.03 million VND. However, less focus has been on exploring the employment of TVE students in the labour market, leading to little account to understand the experiences of TVE students in the workplace, particularly on job seeking and forming strategies to reach their desired goals of career promotion and life standards.

Learning from the experience of higher education students in the labour market has been shown to bring various benefits to both students and higher education institutions. Firstly, having information related to students' employment enables higher institutions to strengthen their capacity in supplying skilled workers to satisfy labour market needs. This allows higher institutions to understand the shortages in relevant skills they need to include in their training objectives (Wheelahan & Moodie, 2016; Chhinzer & Russo, 2018). The evaluation of students' employability also helps to reduce the skills mismatch between higher institutions and labour market needs, reducing overqualified or underqualified scenarios (Montt, 2017). Furthermore, in today's labour market, employers are not only concerned about employees' skills (both hard and soft) but also their work experiences. Work experience, both paid and unpaid, enables graduates, including TVE graduates, not only to practice their theoretical knowledge but also to boost the development of their employability skills (Weiss et al., 2014; Osmani et al., 2019). For instance, a study by Jackson and Tomlinson (2022) investigated work experience, extracurricular activities, and university-based activities on students' employability and found that students' employability skills, such as networking, work attitudes, and learning possibilities for future career development, were greatly boosted through these activities. Similarly, Oswald-Egg and Renold (2021) explored TVE work experience in the labour market and found that employment experience had a significant influence on TVE graduates' wages (7% to 19%) one year after graduation from higher education. Therefore, learning from the employment experience of TVE provides essential ground for improving TVE graduates' performance in the labour market.

Therefore, this study attempted to explore the perspectives of TVE students' employment experience, discovering the strategies applied to get jobs and achieve sustainable career goals in the labour market. Specifically, it seeks to learn about real experiences, challenges related to employment, and methods that TVE graduates utilize to achieve their prosperity and life standards. In line with this purpose, the following questions were generated to support the research design:

- i) What are the employment tactics of TVE students in the workforce?
- ii) What strategies do TVE students use to achieve sustainable career promotion and professional development goals?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Employment Tactics and Strategies

A mass of work on a couplet of tactics and strategies already exists, ranging from the military (Sullivan & Karreth, 2019), business and management (Mackay & Zundel, 2016), education (Katz & Kim, 2017; Mahdi, 2015), to labour and work (Baxter-Reid, 2021; Datta et al., 2007). Although these couplet words are used in different contexts, they depict similar meanings. Tactics reflect the unplanned art of the weak (those without power and authority) to attain their goals, while strategies reflect more well-organized mechanisms and calculated steps to achieve set goals. The tactic is defined as the current steps or actions individuals perform in a real context, while strategy is the plan of action in the long run to achieve desired goals (Laoyan, 2021). Often, a tactic is a short-term action without a proper intention of goal setting (lacks formal or informal steps to obtain the goal in the future), while a strategy is a careful and thoughtful plan in the long run to obtain the favourite goals. In the labour market, tactics are defined as the experience of the process of employment of employees, which includes the description of the employment procedure, working emotion, and development actions (Holton, 2001). Descriptively, tactics are demonstrated as the method of observation of specific actions and behaviours of individuals in

a specific context and clearly illustrate the verification of individuals to their actions or behaviours (Charbonneau et al., 2021). Thus, employment tactics are descriptive accounts of individuals' experiences with variations in their employment, such as the procedure of seeking jobs, salary, satisfaction, and working conditions. They can be conducted by either employee, themselves, or external experts. On the other hand, employment strategy is an indicator or method that department officers use to obtain and achieve employment goals (The Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training, 2009, pp. 40-73; OECD, 2017). At the employees' level, employment strategy is the desirable plan that employees carry out to reach their expected goals. The most common techniques are to improve competency by enhancing their knowledge, skills, and understanding of the labour market dynamics (Lei, 2012; Blackmore et al., 2015, p. 10; Jennifer, 2022). Therefore, employment strategy is a long-term plan that aims to enhance not only skills and knowledge that promote professional development but also the understanding of variations in the demand of the labour force. These abilities are believed to assist students in reaching their goals of career and professional development.

2.2 TVE Students' Employment and Incomes

TVE students have a high employment rate and high pay when they enter the labour force (Korber, 2019; Brunello, 2020). This advantage is offered to both male and female students (Korber, 2019). In comparison to academic students, there are no major differences between the employment rates and salaries of TVE students and academic students (Brunello, 2020). However, this may only be true for TVE students at the initial time of entering the labour force. In the long term, they tend to have lower chances for career promotion and professional development compared to students in academic education (Forster et al., 2016). Furthermore, the results of the employment rate and salary of TVE students may differ depending on the social context. While Korber (2019) and Brunello (2020) conducted their studies in developed nations and asserted that TVE has a high salary and a high employment rate, the study of Helbling and Sacchi (2014), carried out in a developing country, stated negative results related to TVE students' employment.

2.3 TVET Students' Resilience, Satisfaction, and Welfare

Existing literature presents positive accounts of various aspects of the employability of TVE students. Firstly, TVE is linked to the high resilience of learners, exhibited in improved mindfulness of life (Cheung et al., 2020). The reason behind this is that TVE students are capable of critically analysing the issues in their lives to improve or overcome them, and this mindfulness of life is the foundation of resilience. Secondly, TVE is believed to offer students the opportunity to get jobs that provide high satisfaction (Michaelis & Findeisen, 2022). Research shows that similar to students in academic programs if the jobs satisfy their desires, TVE students tend to have high satisfaction. In nations that support the orientation of TVE, TVE tends to achieve high satisfaction (Zhou et al., 2008; Deborah et al., 2020). The key elements for high satisfaction in TVE are that jobs need to match their training skills, provide opportunities for career promotion, and offer opportunities for professional development. Thirdly, TVE is believed to provide high welfare to learners (Oseni et al., 2011). In developing nations, such as Nigeria, where technical skills are crucial for economic and social development, TVE learners likely gain high pay, which is enough for them to maintain a better life, and they can achieve good opportunities for career promotion and professional development. Additionally, it is important to note that in contexts where market orientations do not support TVE, TVE learners tend to obtain low resilience, low satisfaction, and low welfare compared to academic students, as Kratz et al. (2019) proved. The key problems for the issues of not having labour force support are that TVE students tend to gain low working conditions, which tend to cause health issues (Kratz et al., 2019), and do not have promotion opportunities for career prosperity and professional development (Forster et al., 2016; Woessmann, 2019).

2.4 Students' Strategies to Reach Sustainable Goals for Career Promotion and Professional Development

To achieve the goal of gaining jobs that offer career promotion and professional development, graduates of both academic and technical education need to lay out strategies that support their endeavours. In the context of TVE, there are two main procedures that TVE graduates can adopt: employment strategies and the updating of essential skills (Bhurtel, 2015). However, due to several reasons, TVE students find it difficult to obtain appropriate jobs in the workforce. As a result, self-employment as entrepreneurs or start-ups becomes a suitable alternative for achieving sustainable employment (Alli & Ekhovbiye, 2009; Bhurtel, 2015). The benefits of self-employment are varied but for most students, it enables them to apply their skills and talents in their own ways to contribute to socio-economic development. Although self-employment has been viewed as an employment option with negative consequences such as low satisfaction, limited leisure time, and low income (Hetschko, 2016), it has led to faster economic recovery than paid employment (Finkelstein-Shapiro, 2014). Similarly, self-employment has played a role in enhancing individuals' incomes, innovativeness, motivation, and creativity (André & Nardo, 2015), as well as contributing to greater welfare such as career advancement and professional development (Céline et al., 2020).

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Approach

This study employed a qualitative approach, as this method allows researchers not only to comprehend but also to delve into the essential meaning of human perspectives and experiences (Teherani et al., 2015; Tenny et al., 2022). To generate meaning from this context, this study utilized a phenomenological approach that allows researchers to properly understand the nature of the context, as well as the working experiences of the participants sufficiently (Neubauer et al., 2019). Therefore, this technique is suitable for researchers to effectively learn about the employment tactics of TVE students in the workforce.

3.2 Research Location

This research was conducted at LILAMA II College, one of 87 institutes in Vietnam that have received special investment to obtain high-quality teaching and training to fulfil the needs of the industry (Seel & Phuong, 2020, p. 37). Accordingly, LILAMA II aimed to achieve a series of objectives, and among those, it desired to increase the employment of learners, with the target that 60% of the graduates are likely to obtain employment within 6 months of graduation. Also, LILAMA II expects that 90% of the graduates will be prioritized to meet the demands of the industry.

3.3 Research Participants

To best meet the aim of this study, purposive sampling was undertaken as the technique considered by the researchers to select potential participants based on their professions and specialities (Robinson, 2014). With this technique, four criteria were generated to select suitable participants: 1) they had to have been participating in the labour market for at least 3 months, 2) they had to have graduated within the past two years and agree to join the study, 3) they had to promise to keep up with the study for the duration of 2 years since the first round of interviews, and 4) they had to promise to keep up with the activities of the study until it ended. Based on these criteria, the study expected to recruit 10 participants initially, which included 4 subjects from the Department of electrical engineering, 3 from the Department of mechanical engineering, and the rest from the Department of precision metalworking. However, after one year, five students dropped out of the project because they were unable to keep track of the project's activities, leaving only five students to complete the study activities. Three of the five remaining students graduated from the electrical engineering department, while 2 students completed their studies in the mechanical engineering department. These five students finished their studies in the summer of 2018 and included two female and three male students.

Table 1-The demographic information of participants who joined in all the activities of the research

Participants	Gender	Departments	Year in labour market
M1	Male	Mechanical	November 2018
M2	Female	Mechanical	November 2018
EL1	Male	Electrical	December 2018
EL2	Female	Electrical	December 2018
EL3	Male	Electrical	November 2018

Note: M1, M2 were students from Mechanical, while EL1, EL2, EL3 were students from Electrical

3.4 Information on Employment of Participants Over Two Years

M1 was able to get his first job within one month after graduating and worked as an employee in a shoe company in southern Vietnam. He decided to leave his first job after six months to work for a small firm that provided him with an opportunity to use his mechanical engineering skills. M2 started working as an employee in a shoe company three months after graduating, and after one year, she left to work as a product monitor for a textile company.

EL1 began working as an electrical technician for a construction company two months after graduating. After a year, he left to work as a driver for a small firm that sold construction materials. Two months after graduation, EL2 joined the staff of a textile company where she monitored the quality of the output product. After a year, she left to join the staff of an express-delivery company. EL3 landed his first job as an electrical technician for a large corporation within 2.5 months after his graduation. Even though the job was related to his training program, he quit after 7 months and started his own farm-products start-up because he desired working conditions that provided him with the chance for professional development and career promotion.

3.5 Research Instrument

The main instrument for data collection was the semi-structured interview, as this method allows researchers to obtain high-quality data from the perspectives of participants by giving them some control over the ideas discussed during the interviews (Jamshed, 2014; Magaldi & Berler, 2020). In addition, participants' self-diaries were also utilized to support

the data obtained from interviews. Self-diaries are essential for researchers to properly record information on participants' activities at a certain time (Jacelon & Imperio, 2005). To improve the rigour of the interviews, a list of questions was developed in consultation with experts in the field before conducting the actual interviews. Trial interviews were also conducted, and the trial data were used to modify the list of questions and create the interview guide.

3.6 Research Procedure

The study procedure took more than two years. In October 2018, the researchers sent invitation letters to three departments of LILAMA II College in the Long Thanh District of Dong Nai Province, Vietnam. LILAMA II is one of the key technical and vocational colleges selected as a model for the curriculum reform of TVE in Vietnam. Each invitation letter included a summary of the research purpose, objectives, and criteria for participant selection. Based on the settled criteria, the college initially introduced 25 qualified samples. However, after the shortlisting step, 15 students were unqualified because they did not meet the criteria.

Hence, initially, there were 10 students who satisfied the settled criteria above, and they all signed the informed consent form accepting to participate in the study. Then researchers and participants discussed arranging suitable times and places for interviews. The researchers conducted the first-round interviews in mid-December 2018, and all ten interviews were completed before December 30, 2018. After the first-round interviews, the participants were required to write an email letter to the researchers about their current employment status, and this report was considered the participants' self-diary describing their experience and current employment, based on some format headings given. After the first self-report activity, five students decided to leave the study, and thus, there remained only five students. These five students kept their reports on a scheduled basis every three months. To end the study, researchers began the second round of interviews in October 2020, and all interviews were completed by November 2020. In both phases of interviews, the average interview time was about 60 minutes. All the interviews were recorded with the participants' permission to serve as a basis for the coding process.

Table 2 - Information on the data obtained for the study

Departments	Interviews	Documents
Mechanical Engineering	Students ($n = 2$) First round ($n=2$) Second round ($n=2$)	Self-diary reports ($n=14$)
Electrical Engineering	Students ($n = 3$) First round ($n=3$) Second round ($n=3$)	Self- diary report ($n=21$)

3.7 Data Analysis

A total of ten semi-structured interviews, five from the first round and five from the second round, were transcribed into English along with the participants' self-diaries. The collected data were subjected to the thematic analysis method defined by Maguire and Delahunt (2017). Generally, to follow the principles of thematic coding analysis, the data were processed through six steps: familiarizing with the data, creating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing the themes, defining themes, and writing up the findings.

To increase the productivity of the coding process, MAXQDA was employed. The researchers attempted to identify codes based on similar ideas or meanings of phrases or chunks in the first piece of the transcripts, after becoming familiar with the data through repeated reading. The purpose of this stage was to create initial codes, categories, and themes that would become the framework for coding the rest of the documents. After all the documents were coded, extraction was carried out to put the codes under the correct categories and the categories under the correct themes. In this step, the researchers also tried to delete irrelevant phrases in the codes. Then, the framework of themes obtained was defined with suitable headings for themes and categories. Finally, the researchers used the final coding results to interpret the findings.

3.8 Rigour of Research Study

This study obtained numerous features of trustworthiness, as indicated by Johnson et al. (2020). Credibility was attained due to the well-defined procedures for choosing participants and gathering data. For instance, appropriate criteria were developed to enable the researcher to gather potential candidates, and purposive sampling was utilized to select the participants. Additionally, the instruments used to collect the data were well-constructed, with advice from experts in the field. The study also satisfied the requirement for confirmability, as the codes, categories, and themes obtained were properly rechecked by an external expert in the field before the researchers interpreted the findings.

4. Findings and Discussion

The primary data obtained in this study were subjected to thematic analysis, which revealed two main themes: accounts of employment experiences of TVE students in the labour market and strategies used by the students to advance their careers in the future.

4.1 Employment Tactics of TVE Students in Vietnam

The themes are presented as follows:

i) No difficulty in getting initial jobs but not desirable jobs.

The study found that while TVE students had no trouble finding work, it was difficult for them to obtain their desired jobs. Firstly, participants reported that they considered themselves lucky to obtain their first jobs within a few months, on average two months after graduation. Some participants were able to find jobs within one month, while others spent at least three months searching for jobs after their graduation. Secondly, participants claimed that they had to accept jobs that had little or nothing to do with what they studied in college.

Getting a job was not that hard for me, as I was able to secure my first job two months after my graduation... (EL2).

With the knowledge and the skills that I obtained from my college; it was suitable for me to get the offer of a job. I think I was lucky as I was able to get my first job within a few weeks of my graduation...(M1).

In my first job, I worked as a worker in a shoe company, and in my second job, I worked as a person who monitored the products of a textile company, and these works did not require me to use the skills and knowledge I gained in college...I have planned to get the vacancy which is relevant to my learning program...(M2)

It should be clear that the complaints were not that students were unable to apply the skills, knowledge, and attitudes acquired in college to their workplace, but rather that the nature of the jobs they secured required them to use less of the skills they had obtained from the college. All participants reported that they had developed new knowledge through work-based learning strategies that enabled them to easily secure their second jobs.

I worked as a worker in a shoe company...but, it does not mean that I could not scale up my skills when I was working there as a worker. Honestly, I learned how to manage tasks and how to communicate with others during my first time in the labour force, and these skills are vital to me in my second job...(M1)

During my time as a worker in a textile company, I often tried to learn from my colleagues who were electrical technicians... I realized that their work was demanding, so I focused on developing my communication skills to apply for a staff position at an express company... (EL2).

Generally, the experience of TVE students in Vietnam's labour market is like a study by Helbling and Sacchi (2014), who indicated that TVE students tend to easily get jobs in the labour force. With a qualitative approach, this study was able to understand the nature of jobs of TVE students, as well as their perspectives on employed jobs. Accordingly, TVE students in Vietnam were not satisfied with their first jobs, as those jobs were not related to their learning programs as well not related to their interests. This issue was commonly reported by students in higher education due to inadequate preparation or lack of understanding of the nature of labour markets (Wang, 2022). It is learned that the massive disparity comes from ideal occupations driven by a lack of understanding of psychological expectations and labour market reality (Wang, 2022). To address this issue, Wang (2022) suggested that higher education students should be better prepared for the realities of the job market and can find jobs that align with their learning programs. Additionally, TVE students should be equipped with the knowledge and skills needed to engage in work-based learning and enhance their own competencies to meet the demands of the labour market in their workplace (Cummins et al., 2019).

ii) The monthly wage is insufficient for living expenses

Based on the participants' perspectives, the salary was too low to support them in paying for their living expenses due to the high cost of living. For example, M1 had to accept a low-paying job with an initial salary of 4.5 million VND, which he claimed was the average salary for new labour market entrants. Additionally, EL2 accepted a low salary for the first three months of employment, after which her salary was increased by only 500 thousand VND, making her monthly salary 4.2 million. With this amount, it was difficult for her to afford living expenses such as rent, travel fees, essential groceries, and meals.

TVE students in Vietnam have claimed that their incomes are too low to cover their living expenses, which contrasts with the findings of Korber (2019), Brunello (2020), and Forster et al. (2016), who claim that the employment rate and salaries of TVE students are higher than those of general education graduates. In general, the monthly income of TVE students in their first jobs was not lower than the average monthly salary of new employees in Vietnam. Although UNESCO (2016, pp. 41-42) states that the average income of TVE students is 5.08 million VND, all participants claimed that they received a payment for their first jobs that was lower than what was reported by UNESCO (2016, pp. 41-42). It should be noted that the report by UNESCO (2016, pp. 41-42) on the average income was not sufficient to demonstrate whether the average incomes they reported were for newcomers to the workforce or not. Additionally, although TVE graduates obtained the TVE certificates for a three-year training program, which put them on the list of highly skilled workers; however, the wage for those who obtained TVE training programs was only 7 per cent higher than the standard minimum wage settled by the central government (Samuel, 2020). Nonetheless, only two participants, EL1 and EL3, were able to obtain jobs related to their learning programs, and they could get 4.6 million VND and 4.7 million VND, respectively, in their first jobs. Other participants worked as low-skilled workers, so they only obtained incomes that were not much higher than the highest minimum wage settled by the central government of Vietnam (Das, 2018).

It was found that the theme of this study was supported by Helbling and Sacchi (2014), who concluded that TVE students initially struggled to obtain high incomes when they entered the labour market. However, the existing literature provides different statements from Helbling and Sacchi (2014) and Korber (2019) on the incomes of TVE graduates, although both studies focused on the employment of TVE graduates in Switzerland. There is no clear reason for this difference, but it is possible that the location of employment of participants in the studies may have contributed to the divergence in their assertions of TVE incomes in the workplace. In this current study, the location of employment was not the main cause of low payment for TVE graduates in Vietnam, as most of the participants were employed in provinces located in Southern Vietnam, which were dynamic and rapidly growing economically (Ngoc-Thach, 2020). However, at the time they initially joined the workforce, the standard monthly wage settled by the central government for the region I, which includes Dong Nai and Vung Tau where the TVE graduates were employed, was 3.98 million VND (Das, 2018). Compared to the standard minimum wage of the region, the salaries obtained by TVE graduates were slightly higher. Nonetheless, the actual living wage in this region was higher than the monthly incomes of the employees. For example, in Ho Chi Minh, by 2018, the average cost of living for an individual was approximately 6.4 million VND, while the average actual income was around 4.8 million VND (Nguyen, 2018). The disparity between incomes and living wages may explain why TVE graduates were struggling to manage their living standards.

iii) Having low resilience or dissatisfaction with employment

All participants claimed that they had low resilience in the job market due to their dissatisfaction, as they were unable to find jobs that satisfied their developmental goals, such as career advancement, promotion, high pay for living standards, well-being and protected working conditions, and professional development. This stagnation was their situation for the first two years after entering the labour market.

I was fortunate to have landed a job as an electrical technician in the construction industry, and it exceeded my expectations. I was moved to various locations based on construction sites, and I worked in the sun or in dusty construction environments...However, after a year, I couldn't afford to keep this job, so I switched to being a van driver with the primary responsibility of transporting materials to construction sites. Even though there was no promotion for this position, the working conditions were better than the previous one... (EL1).

I started working as a worker for Vietnam Vinh, a company that specializes in producing Adidas shoes. The environment could become polluted due to the need to use glue to connect many parts of the shoes...After six months, I decided to work as a mechanical technician for a small firm in my town. However, since this firm is small, there is no promotion, and sometimes there is no work to do. I have held this job until now...(M1).

The lack of resilience among TVE students in Vietnam was attributed to their limited opportunities to secure jobs that meet their expectations. This predicament is often accompanied by feelings of dissatisfaction, as suggested by Cheung et al. (2020). Furthermore, this issue is not exclusive to Vietnam, as TVE students in other nations have also experienced similar challenges, highlighting the prevalent lack of support and value accorded to TVE programs. This trend has been linked to various problems encountered by TVE students worldwide, including poor promotion prospects (Forster et al., 2016) and unfavourable working conditions (Kratz et al., 2019). It is therefore imperative for stakeholders in the education sector to address this issue through policy reforms and increased funding to enhance the quality of TVE programs and equip students with the skills necessary for success in the labour market.

4.2 Strategies to Reach Sustainable Goals for Career Promotion and Professional Development

All TVE graduates expressed a clear desire to obtain employment that would provide ample opportunities for career promotion and professional development. To do so, they figured out some strategies to reach sustainable goals, before getting to their targets.

i) Accepting low-paying jobs for sustainable goals

All participants mentioned various strategies they employed to achieve their sustainable goals. Firstly, they accepted low-paying jobs to avoid the continued financial burden on their parents. Secondly, they spent time updating their skills in preparation for long-term career development. For instance, accepting low-paying jobs helped them gain work experience and time to scale up their occupational skills.

I attempted to apply for a job as an electrical technician at a construction company. My job was challenging for me because I had to perform all the labour-intensive tasks, including digging the ground to lay the pipes, correctly inserting the electronic strings into the pipes, and carrying soil and other materials to cover the pipes. Since most of the work was done in the fields, I was forced to work in intense sunshine... However, I had to keep that job to earn for a living. My parents borrowed money to assist me in getting educated, so I could not be unemployed and be their burden anymore... (EL1).

I received a job offer as an electrical technician just 2.5 months after graduating. Although the job was relevant to my learning program, the salary was too low at 4.5 million VND per month. Despite this, I had to keep the job to earn a living, while I worked on gaining the necessary knowledge to start a business, as it is the best way to reach my goal of career prosperity... (EL3).

I had to accept low-paying jobs as all high-paying jobs require work experience, and accepting low-paying jobs allows me to have money to support my living while managing my new plan to reach expected goals... (M1).

Research shows several reasons for accepting low-paying jobs by employees, such as health benefits (Olson, 2002) or having meaningful work (Hu & Hirsh, 2017). TVE graduates in Vietnam accepted low-paying jobs for a couple of reasons. Firstly, supporting children to pursue higher education, including TVE, has been a burden for households from rural areas in Vietnam (Ha, 2020). As perceived from TVE students' perspectives, their parents had to manage the money for them during the time they pursued learning at LILAMA II, and mostly their parents had to borrow money from others to assist them in completing their learning programs at college. To avoid burdening their parents, TVE graduates had to accept low-paying jobs, although they might not enjoy those jobs. Secondly, TVE students had to accept low-paying jobs due to a lack of working experience, an important element for getting high-paying jobs and thus demanding nurturing strategies for those who lacked the ability to get higher incomes (McKnight et al., 2016). The reasons that make employees accept low-paying jobs include disability, ethnic groups, lack of experience, and low-skilled workers. So, as the philosophical nature of the labour force, TVE students had no way but to do low-paying jobs to earn a living for achieving sustainable goals.

ii) Scaling up or updating essential skills to obtain desired jobs

As commented by all the participants, looking for new jobs that were suitable and satisfying their expectations was the best alternative for them. For example, they planned to get jobs that support their career and professional development. To achieve this, during the time they were in their first jobs, they had to prepare to update their skill and competency. Firstly, they improved their understanding of labour market needs since the labour force demands in the region and sector differ from each other. TVE students perceived that comprehension was crucial to assist them to figure out what they need to prepare to get desirable jobs. Besides this understanding, they claimed to scale up and prepare both soft skills and technical skills for getting expected jobs.

I spent a year working for the first company, and this job did not give me opportunity for future development in both career promotion and professional development... So, I had to figure out the strategy to support my expectation... Currently, in leisure time, I had to learn from the needs for the jobs that offer what I expect... For instance, as I plan to be an mechanical technician of FEDEX company, so I need to improve my skills in cutting the metals to make them to be the vital tools... (M 2).

As described by TVE graduates, the preparation of the skills for getting the desirable jobs includes the cultivation of soft skills and understanding the labour force dynamics.

I realized that I lacked an understanding of the labour force demand during my time in college, so I failed to prepare well to get the expected jobs upon graduation. Now, I understand that even though jobs may be the same, different companies require different qualifications from applicants. For example, I looked at the requirements for an electrical technician position at two firms, one in Ho Chi Minh and one in Dong Nai. The firm in Ho Chi Minh requires applicants to be able to speak English fluently and have good communication skills, while the firm in Dong Nai requires leadership skills in addition to hard skills related to the field of electrical engineering. Therefore, I need to learn from each specific requirement of the firm I desire to apply for and prepare both hard skills and soft skills... (EL2).

I planned to start a small business with my friends, as it has been my main interest. Therefore, while I was in my first job, I tried to cultivate my management and leadership skills. I learned from books, YouTube, as well as from short online training programs provided by universities located in Ho Chi Minh...(EL3).

Scaling up essential skills demanded in the labour market is considered the best strategy for graduates worldwide to obtain suitable and expected jobs (Kawar, 2011; Villanger et al., 2020). TVE students in Vietnam also figured out this strategy to assist them in obtaining their desired jobs and perceived that enhancing skills was a vital investment for future development, as claimed by Goel et al. (2022). Therefore, some TVE graduates spent large amounts of money to develop their skills. For example, M2, a graduate of mechanical engineering, had to purchase machines to practice cutting metal skills sufficiently. TVE students also proclaimed that developing an understanding of the labour force was the key factor that helped them develop the skills required to get desirable jobs. Knowledge of labour force demand is essential to reduce the cost of cultivating skills (Sparreboom, 2013), as information on labour force demand can assist individuals in selecting the types of skills they need to improve. Moreover, learning about the labour force's needs helps individuals cultivate skills that fit the demand for expected jobs (Wheelahan & Moodie, 2016). In short, to scale up their skills suitable for desired jobs, TVE graduates had to improve their understanding of the labour market by concentrating on getting information related to their desirable jobs to sufficiently prepare the skills that suit such jobs. The knowledge of the labour force includes understanding the information and requirements of desired jobs in different sectors, companies, and even regions. For example, based on each specific company's requirements that they desired to apply for, TVE graduates had to prepare and enhance both hard and soft skills to meet those companies' requirements.

iii) Changing jobs as the sustainable strategy

All the participants claimed that they quit their first jobs to obtain other jobs that were more sustainable. The average duration of their first jobs was approximately 8 months, and they all believed that the working conditions of their second jobs were better than their first. However, they stated that changing to a second job was a strategy to gradually achieve their goals. Although the working conditions of their second jobs did not completely meet their expectations, it provided them with more advantages such as additional leisure time, higher income, more opportunities to improve their hard skills and gain working experience.

After one year, I dropped my first job and applied to be a driver for a small firm that sells construction materials. I browsed for information on the working conditions of a driver, and I think that while this job is not the best, it at least helps me earn more money to cover my living expenses. Additionally, I have more leisure time to work on cultivating and enhancing my competencies to secure a job as an electrical technician in a big company located in Dong Nai...(EL1).

I decided to leave my job as an electrical technician after 7 months because the pay was too low. I frequently needed to borrow money from my sister to make ends meet. Then, my buddies and I decided to start a business to purchase farm products from farmers and sell them to China. The start-up was harder than my previous employment, but I am glad I did it because I'll be earning more money and advancing in my career... (EL3).

I got my second job after six months of working as a labourer in a shoe company. I have kept this second job until now, and it is suitable for me as the working conditions are good. As a major engineer at the firm, I receive more benefits such as a higher income, more leisure time, and more opportunities to develop my professional skills. I applied to work here to improve my working conditions and practical skills in the field, which will be essential for me to apply for a job at a German company in Vung Tau...(M1).

During the first two years after graduation, TVE students still struggled to find jobs that suited their desires, including high incomes, more leisure time, opportunities for career promotion, and professional development. The employment situation revealed a different picture than what was discovered by Camargo et al. (2021), who indicated that TVE graduates earned more money and advanced further in their professions after two years in the job market. Camargo et al. (2021) demonstrated that after two years of participating in the labour market, TVE students' employment rate increased by 21% and their income by 50%. However, Camargo et al. (2021) did not mention whether the TVE students in their study remained in the same jobs or changed to other jobs over two years, nor did they discuss what factors led to the increase in employment rate and income for TVE students after two years.

In contrast to Camargo et al. (2021), who did not elaborate on the reasons behind the increase in the employment rate and salary of TVE graduates in the labour market, this study revealed the various benefits that TVE graduates gained by changing jobs. For example, EL1 claimed that in his second job as a driver, he could manage his time to improve the skills needed for his desired job. Meanwhile, M1 worked as a technician in a small firm in his second job, which provided him with opportunities to improve his practical skills through work-based learning (UNESCO, 2018), thus strengthening his work experience in a field that was perceived as an essential element for obtaining his desired job.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

With a qualitative approach as the design for both data collection and data analysis, in-depth semi-structured interviews were used as the tool to collect data. This study was able to explore two objectives related to the life cycle of TVE students in the labour market for the duration of two years since their graduation. Overall, the findings of this study unfolded that during two years of entry into the labour force, TVE graduates could not get the desirable jobs that could help them obtain career and professional development. However, it does not mean that they were unemployed. For various reasons, TVE graduates had to accept low-paying jobs as a sustainable strategy to maintain their living standards, without depending on support from their parents anymore. Accepting low-paying jobs does not mean that they decided to keep the first jobs over two years, but practically, they changed to other jobs respectively. This strategy assisted them in gaining more benefits, such as higher incomes, more leisure time, better working conditions, and more opportunities to enhance their competency. Additionally, this study revealed that scaling up skills is perceived as a vital element to assist TVE graduates in reaching their expectations of having conditions for career and professional development.

This study contributes to the enrichment of literature on technical and vocational education on the topic of employment while also providing practical applications to multiple stakeholders for the purpose to reach sustainable development goals. TVE students can benefit from the study's findings and acquire practical solutions that may aid in their preparation for pre-entry into the workforce and the achievement of long-term objectives while they are working. Critically, the findings of this study help TVE students understand the realistic conditions of the workplace in Vietnam, so they can prepare not only technical skills but also a psychological understanding of a variety of workplace-related issues, such as salary, job demands, nature of work, and strategies for career advancement. Also, this study urges TVE students to be concerned about lifelong learning as a necessary component for their success and advancement in the workplace (Puii, 2013).

Furthermore, to support or provide a more comprehensive picture of the job experiences of TVE students in the labour market in Vietnam, this study employed a qualitative method as a design on the employability of TVE in the labour market over the long term. Hence, the findings of this study are sufficient to provide useful evidence for policymakers of the TVE institutions in developing countries, with a focus on Vietnam, to establish sufficient strategies to assist TVE students to be able to develop suitable strategies to reach the career prospect and professional development when they participate in the labour market. Additionally, in terms of the sustainable goal, this study may be vital to the government policymakers of the developing nations, who are working on the development and enhancement of a national occupational framework for TVET, to use the evidence from the findings to develop and enhance the elements of work-based learning strategies to assist TVE institutions on the right track to prepare learners with the essential knowledge to reach their goals of career prospect and professional development.

Conflict of Interest

The authors of this work have no conflicting interests to disclose.

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