



Curriculum as a verb: Reimagining TVET lecturer education through student narratives of justice and inclusion

Ezekiel Majola

Post School Department, Faculty of Education, Nelson Mandela University, Gqeberha, South Africa
Ezekiel.Majola@mandela.ac.za,
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5887-7134>

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Abstract

The urgency of curriculum transformation in South Africa's technical and vocational education and training (TVET) sector arises from converging global and local pressures—technological disruption, youth unemployment, sustainability challenges, and the unfinished project of decolonisation. While lecturer education programmes such as the Advanced Diploma in TVET at Nelson Mandela University claim to advance humanising pedagogy, they often remain shaped by technicist logics, monolingual practices, and the marginalisation of African epistemologies. Drawing on qualitative narratives from 15 graduates of the National Certificate (Vocational) programme, this article argues that meaningful transformation of TVET lecturer education requires centring students' lived experiences, critiques, and aspirations as catalysts for reimagining curriculum and pedagogy. Their accounts reveal how current practices reproduce exclusion through English-only instruction, limited recognition of Indigenous knowledge, and work-integrated learning framed as bureaucratic compliance rather than critical praxis. By situating these insights within Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy and Le Grange's notion of curriculum as a verb, the study positions students as epistemic agents rather than passive recipients. It addresses a gap in scholarship that rarely connects student-voice research to TVET lecturer-education reform, demonstrating how participatory, justice-oriented pedagogy can advance epistemic inclusion. The article contends that preparing TVET lecturers to navigate volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) contexts demands a shift from narrow professionalisation toward transformative, Africanised, and socially responsive praxis.

Keywords: technical and vocational education and training (TVET), lecturer education, curriculum transformation, Freirean pedagogy, epistemic justice, student voice and agency, curriculum as a verb

Introduction

Curriculum transformation in South Africa's technical and vocational education and training (TVET) sector is an urgent and complex undertaking, shaped by intersecting pressures of technological change, youth unemployment, epistemic injustice, and global sustainability imperatives (McGrath & Ramsarup, 2024; Vally & Motala, 2022). While national frameworks

such as the *White Paper for Post-School Education and Training* (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2013a) and the three-stream model aim to reposition vocational education as a driver of inclusive development, implementation remains uneven and often reproduces the very inequalities it seeks to redress (Akoojee, 2016; Spreen & Vally, 2006). These tensions underscore that curriculum is not a neutral or technical artefact but a deeply political process of becoming, entangled in social, cultural, and economic contestations (Fricker, 2007; Le Grange, 2019).

A critical site where these tensions manifest is TVET lecturer education. Programmes such as the Advanced Diploma in TVET are designed to professionalise teaching and advance humanising pedagogy. Yet empirical and theoretical analyses reveal that such programmes are frequently constrained by technicist logics, neoliberal accountability frameworks, and limited engagement with African epistemologies and multilingual realities (Allais & Marock, 2024; Hodgkinson, 1998; Majola, 2025). Consequently, compliance often takes precedence over critical praxis, and standardisation eclipses contextual responsiveness (Adendorff, 2020a, 2020b).

Despite being the primary stakeholders in vocational learning, TVET students are rarely positioned as epistemic contributors to curriculum debates. Their voices—rich with lived experience, critique, and aspiration—remain marginal in discussions about pedagogical transformation (Balwanz & Hlatshwayo, 2016; Ezomo & Prinsloo, 2024). This article addresses that gap by foregrounding student narratives as empirical evidence for reimagining lecturer education and curriculum transformation.

To interpret these experiences, the study draws on Paulo Freire's concepts of dialogue, humanisation, and education as the practice of freedom (Freire, 1970; Freire & Shor, 1987), and Le Grange's (2016, 2019) notion of curriculum as a verb—a dynamic, co-constructed process of becoming. These perspectives are deepened through Africanisation and curriculum justice, which locate transformation within broader struggles for epistemic inclusion, multilingualism, and sustainability (Adonis & Silinda, 2021; Allais & Ngcwangu, 2025; Assié-Lumumba, 2017; Walker & Loots, 2018). Together, they underpin this article's central argument: that preparing TVET lecturers to navigate volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) contexts requires a shift from narrow professionalisation toward pedagogical justice—education that is dialogical, relational, and socially responsive.

Accordingly, the study asks: "How do TVET students experience current curriculum and pedagogical practices within their learning environments, and what do their narratives reveal about the forms of transformation needed in lecturer education to realise a more just and inclusive vocational pedagogy?" The article proceeds as follows: the next section outlines the theoretical framework that integrates Freirean critical pedagogy, Africanisation, and curriculum justice; this is followed by a review of relevant scholarship on curriculum transformation and lecturer education. The methodological design and participatory research process are then described, leading into the presentation of student narratives and thematic analysis. The discussion interprets these findings in relation to the proposed framework, and

the conclusion considers implications for transforming TVET lecturer education in South Africa.

Theoretical framework

This study adopts a composite theoretical framework that integrates Freirean critical pedagogy, Africanisation and decolonial thought, and the concept of curriculum justice, all situated within the overarching idea of curriculum as a verb (Le Grange, 2016, 2019). These perspectives collectively offer a relational, ethical, and justice-oriented lens for analysing how TVET students experience pedagogy, and for reimagining lecturer education as transformative practice. While each framework contributes a distinct theoretical emphasis, their interaction is central to the study's analytical process. Freire provides the pedagogical and methodological orientation, Africanisation and decoloniality offer epistemic grounding and cultural critique, and curriculum justice supplies the evaluative and normative lens for determining equity and inclusion.

Curriculum as a verb

Le Grange (2019) reconceptualised curriculum as a verb to shift discourse from curriculum as a static product toward a dynamic, relational, and co-constructed process. This view resists technicist approaches that equate curriculum with policy compliance and standardised outcomes (Allais & Marock, 2024; Hodgkinson, 1998). Within South Africa's TVET landscape, such instrumentalism constrains educators' agency and narrows their pedagogical vision (Gjelstad, 2025; Gonon & Bonoli, 2025). Viewing curriculum as an ongoing process of becoming positions both students and lecturers as co-creators of knowledge through dialogue and praxis—a key orientation that underpins this study's participatory and narrative methodology.

Paulo Freire: Dialogue, praxis, humanisation, and conscientisation

Freire's critical pedagogy provides the ethical and dialogical foundation of this framework. His notions of dialogue, praxis, and humanisation reject authoritarian and decontextualised pedagogies (Freire, 1970; Freire & Horton, 1990; Freire & Shor, 1987). Education, for Freire, was the practice of freedom, where learners engage the world as agents of transformation rather than passive recipients. Within TVET, this means reimagining teaching as an act of ethical and political engagement (Majola et al., 2025a; Porres et al., 2014). Freire's concept of *conscientisation*—recognising and responding to structural oppression—guides how this study interprets student narratives that reveal exclusion, silence, and aspiration for justice-oriented pedagogy (Hyslop-Margison & Dale, 2010; Majola et al., 2024).

Africanisation and decolonial thought

Africanisation and decolonial theory deepen this framework by providing the epistemic and cultural grounding for curriculum transformation. Centring Ubuntu, epistemic freedom, and multilingualism, these perspectives challenge Eurocentric epistemologies and the linguistic

hierarchies that reproduce alienation in African classrooms (Heleta, 2016; Mbembe, 2016; Moll, 2023; Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, 1986). Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2020) emphasised dismantling colonial hierarchies of knowledge, while Ngubane and Makua (2021) advanced Ubuntu-informed pedagogy as a moral and dialogical basis for rehumanising lecturer education. In the TVET context, Africanisation thus shifts transformation from content inclusion to epistemic reconfiguration—legitimising local knowledges, languages, and community-based practices as valid foundations for teaching and learning (Ezomo & Prinsloo, 2024).

Curriculum justice

The concept of curriculum justice (Luckett & Shay, 2020) complements Freirean and Africanised perspectives by framing curriculum as a site of epistemic inclusion and equitable access to powerful knowledge. It highlights the need to balance employability and capability, recognising diverse ways of knowing (Powell & McGrath, 2019; Wheelahan, 2007). Within TVET lecturer education, curriculum justice repositions educators as mediators of both economic and humanistic imperatives—ensuring that vocational learning advances social, ethical, and ecological well-being (Allais & Ngcwangu, 2025; McGrath & Ramsarup, 2024).

Integrating the frameworks: Productive tensions and analytical roles

While these frameworks converge on a commitment to justice, they also generate productive tensions. For instance, curriculum justice’s emphasis on access to “powerful knowledge” can appear to privilege Western epistemologies, whereas Africanisation cautions against such dominance. This study deliberately holds these frameworks in dialogue rather than hierarchy, using tension as an analytic resource. In data interpretation, Freirean pedagogy guides the reading of student voice and agency, Africanisation informs the critique of epistemic and linguistic exclusion, and curriculum justice frames evaluation of how pedagogical structures enable or constrain equity. Together, they render visible the contradictions between policy rhetoric and lived curriculum—and enable a more complex understanding of transformation that is simultaneously epistemic, pedagogical, and ethical. In this way, the integrated framework views education as an ethical, political, and relational act. Framed through curriculum as a verb, the synthesis of Freirean critical pedagogy, Africanisation, and curriculum justice provides both conceptual coherence and interpretive flexibility for analysing how student narratives illuminate pathways toward a more just, inclusive, and sustainable TVET lecturer education.

Literature review

Global and South African curriculum transformation debates

Curriculum transformation within vocational education and training (VET) is a global imperative, driven by rapid technological change, shifting labour markets, and the pursuit of sustainable development (McGrath & Ramsarup, 2024; Ramsarup et al., 2024). Internationally, these pressures have reignited debate around academisation—the growing influence of higher education norms and credentialism within vocational systems—and its implications for

practice-based learning (Gonon & Bonoli, 2025; Haasler, 2020; Kyvik, 2009). While some view academisation as enhancing VET's theoretical legitimacy, others caution that it risks eroding contextual and relational learning by privileging formal theory over experiential and community knowledge (Gjelstad, 2025; Kaiser, 2021; Porres et al., 2014).

In the Global South, these debates intersect with broader concerns of postcolonial justice and epistemic transformation. The VET Africa 4.0 Collective (2023) and Monk et al. (2025) argued that vocational education must move beyond narrow employability agendas to embrace capabilities, agency, and sustainability. Such perspectives foreground the importance of local knowledges and participatory pedagogies that resist Northern dominance in VET scholarship. These international and Southern debates together illuminate a key concern at the heart of this study: that curriculum reform often speaks about students but rarely with them. Without integrating student perspectives, vocational transformation risks reproducing the very hierarchies it claims to undo.

In South Africa, post-apartheid reform has been shaped by frameworks such as the *White Paper for Post-School Education and Training* (DHET, 2013a) and the *Policy on Professional Qualifications for TVET Lecturers* (DHET, 2013b), which aim to align education with inclusive development. Yet, critical scholars argue that these reforms remain overly influenced by human capital theory, prioritising labour-market responsiveness over epistemic justice and pedagogical transformation (Kraak & Paterson, 2016; Ngcwangu, 2015; Vally & Motala, 2017). The result, as Allais (2019) and Allais and Marock (2024) warned, is a compliance culture that privileges standardisation at the expense of relational, context-sensitive teaching. The challenge of curriculum responsiveness—the ability to adapt to learners' diverse contexts—thus persists (Powell & McGrath, 2019; Walker & Loots, 2018). For this study, these debates provide an essential backdrop; they reveal how the tension between economic instrumentalism and educational humanism shapes the conditions under which TVET students' voices are heard or silenced.

Critiques of the Nelson Mandela University Advanced Diploma in TVET

Within this policy and theoretical landscape, lecturer education becomes a crucial site for examining the contradictions of curriculum transformation. The Advanced Diploma in TVET—offered at institutions such as Nelson Mandela University (NMU)—was established to professionalise teaching and promote humanising pedagogy. However, empirical analyses suggest that in practice it remains anchored in technicist and neoliberal paradigms that limit transformative intent (Majola, 2025; Majola et al., 2024).

Studies by Majola (2024) and Majola et al. (2025a) demonstrated that the programme often fails to engage African epistemologies, multilingual realities, or students' lived experiences, reproducing a curriculum that equates quality with procedural efficiency rather than critical praxis. This echoes Hodkinson's (1998) critique of technicism—where teaching is reduced to content delivery—and Gamble's (2006) and Wedekind et al.'s (2024) analyses of the persistent theory–practice divide in vocational education. Institutional documents (NMU, n.d.) further

reveal a disconnect between the rhetoric of humanising pedagogy and the endurance of Eurocentric and monolingual frameworks.

These patterns mirror Freire's (1970) warning that education without praxis risks reinforcing domination rather than enabling liberation. The NMU case thus exemplifies how curriculum transformation rhetoric can coexist with pedagogical conservatism, exposing the structural conditions that marginalise student voice. The silence of students in reform processes is not incidental—it reflects deeper epistemic hierarchies that position them as recipients rather than co-authors of curriculum change. This disjuncture motivates the central inquiry of this study: “How might listening to students reveal new possibilities for transforming lecturer education from compliance toward critical engagement?”

The gap around student voice in vocational education

Despite being primary stakeholders, TVET students remain largely invisible in curriculum debates. Their insights—grounded in lived experience—are seldom recognised as legitimate sources of pedagogical knowledge (Balwanz & Hlatshwayo, 2016; Ezomo & Prinsloo, 2024). This exclusion constitutes a form of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007), where learners' capacity as knowers is systemically undervalued. Freirean pedagogy offers a powerful counterpoint; it insists on dialogue and co-construction as ethical imperatives for learning (Freire, 1970; Freire & Shor, 1987). Within TVET, this entails creating spaces where students actively shape curriculum and teaching practices (Hyslop-Margison & Dale, 2010; Majola et al., 2025b). Moll (2023) similarly advocated for participatory and context-sensitive pedagogies in adult and vocational learning—approaches often absent in technicist systems.

By foregrounding student narratives as empirical evidence, this study responds directly to these gaps. Listening to how students experience curriculum and envision transformation contributes to emerging work that seeks to democratise curriculum reform in the post-school sector (Khoza & Ngqula, 2025; Maistry & McCann, 2025; Russon & Wedekind, 2023; VET Africa 4.0 Collective, 2023). Across the literature, a shared tension emerges: between academisation and practice, neoliberal policy and justice-oriented pedagogy, and lecturer education and student experience. Yet few studies have centred student voice as an epistemic resource for reimagining lecturer education. This study positions student narratives not simply as reflections of experience but as epistemic interventions—critical acts of knowledge-making that challenge technicist paradigms and expand the possibilities of TVET transformation. Through this lens, the review situates the research within and against existing scholarship, marking its contribution as both empirical and conceptual—to reframe curriculum as a living, participatory, and justice-oriented process animated by the voices of those most affected by it.

Research methodology

This study adopts a critical qualitative methodology grounded in participatory action research (PAR) and informed by Paulo Freire's (1970, 1974) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. PAR aligns with Freire's commitment to humanising education by positioning participants as co-researchers—active agents in producing knowledge and transforming the social conditions that

shape their lives (Herr & Anderson, 2016; Hyslop-Margison & Dale, 2010). In South Africa's TVET sector, where students are frequently constructed through deficit discourses and excluded from curriculum decision-making, PAR provides a fitting methodology for enacting epistemic justice (Majola, 2024; Vally & Motala, 2022).

Research design and context

The study was conducted in the Eastern Cape, focusing on graduates of the National Certificate (Vocational)—NC(V)—programme at Algoa TVET College. Fifteen participants were purposively selected based on their willingness to engage critically with their learning experiences and post-graduation trajectories. The group represented three vocational streams—office administration, hospitality, and tourism—and diverse employment outcomes, ranging from informal sector work to ongoing unemployment. This diversity provided a rich lens on curriculum responsiveness and transition to work, exposing how structural inequalities shape vocational outcomes (Khoza & Ngqula, 2025; Ngcwangu, 2019). NC(V) graduates were chosen because they had completed a full cycle of vocational learning, allowing them to reflect retrospectively on curriculum design, pedagogy, and employability. Their post-college perspectives offered valuable insight into how curriculum functions as a living process—or curriculum as a verb—as they navigate between learning, work, and community life.

Data generation: Learning cycle groups and critical life narratives

Two complementary methods were used: Learning cycle groups (LCGs) and critical life narrative interviews.

The LCGs, inspired by Freire's culture circles, served as dialogical spaces for collective reflection and analysis. Over six months, five sessions (each two to three hours) were held in accessible community venues and conducted bilingually in isiXhosa and English. Participants co-designed discussion prompts during the first session, ensuring the process addressed their priorities. Participatory tools—story circles, timeline mapping, problem trees, and visual metaphors—supported collaborative meaning-making. These gatherings functioned both as data-generation spaces and pedagogical interventions, enacting Freire's principles of dialogue, praxis, and conscientisation (Majola et al., 2025b; Porres, 2022).

The life narrative interviews deepened the analysis by providing individual context and nuance. Conducted in a semi-structured, conversational format (60–90 minutes), they enabled participants to situate their educational trajectories within broader socio-economic and cultural conditions. Together, these two methods were analytically complementary: LCGs revealed collective themes and shared vocabularies, while narratives illuminated personal contradictions and agency within those shared contexts.

Researcher positionality and reflexivity

As researcher, I assumed the dual role of facilitator and co-learner, adopting a reflexive stance that sought to flatten hierarchies and encourage reciprocity (Herr & Anderson, 2016). Participants and I engaged in mutual storytelling, using vulnerability to build trust and co-

analysis. Throughout, I maintained field notes and analytic memos documenting affective moments—solidarity, discomfort, humour, and silence—that often escape transcripts (Majola et al., 2024). My own background in TVET lecturer education inevitably shaped interpretation; my familiarity with institutional discourse risked normalising systemic constraints. To counter this, participants were invited to co-analyse excerpts during feedback sessions, ensuring that interpretive authority was shared. Bilingual discussions also surfaced linguistic power dynamics, particularly the privileging of English in academic spaces; these were negotiated through collective translation and validation, affirming participants' linguistic agency.

Data analysis

Data analysis followed an iterative thematic process consistent with critical qualitative traditions. Transcripts and field notes were repeatedly read to identify emergent motifs and shared metaphors. Freirean constructs—conscientisation, praxis, and the banking model—served as sensitising concepts, guiding but not constraining interpretation. Codes were organised using analytic matrices and reflective memos to trace relationships between collective and individual themes. Provisional categories were refined through participant validation during follow-up dialogues, ensuring analytic transparency and reinforcing the participatory ethos of PAR (Herr & Anderson, 2016; Powell & McGrath, 2019).

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the NMU Research Ethics Committee (Ref. No. H21-EDU-PGE-021). Participants provided written informed consent and approved transcript content and interpretive summaries. Given the relational nature of PAR, ethics extended beyond procedure to ongoing dialogue about representation and authorship. Pseudonyms were used to preserve anonymity, and participants retained the right to withdraw or redact material at any stage.

Trustworthiness and limitations

While the study does not claim statistical generalisability, its strength lies in transferability and analytical depth. Triangulation across LCGs, individual narratives, and field notes enhances credibility; reflexive documentation and member validation ensure epistemic rigour consistent with curriculum justice (Luckett & Shay, 2020). The main limitation lies in geographic and sample scope; however, this is offset by the study's emphasis on foregrounding marginalised epistemologies and creating dialogical spaces for co-theorisation. Ultimately, this methodology operationalises “curriculum as a verb”—transforming research itself into a pedagogical and emancipatory act. Through Freirean dialogue, Ubuntu-informed participation, and curriculum justice principles, the study not only examines transformation but enacts it, positioning TVET students as agents of curriculum reimagination and co-authors of new, inclusive possibilities for lecturer education in South Africa.

Findings: TVET student voices on curriculum and pedagogy

The narratives gathered from TVET students reveal a layered and sometimes contradictory picture of vocational education in South Africa. While students recognise TVET's transformative potential—opening pathways to employment, dignity, and social mobility—their accounts also expose structural and pedagogical barriers that limit this promise. Analysis combined insights from both LCG dialogues and critical life narratives. Thematic patterns were generated through collaborative reflection with participants, who validated and elaborated categories in follow-up sessions. Four interrelated themes emerged: epistemic injustice, language and cultural exclusion, the tension between professionalisation and transformation, and work-integrated learning (WIL) as compliance rather than praxis. Across these themes, moments of frustration coexist with expressions of hope, critique, and agency.

Epistemic injustice: Whose knowledge counts?

Students repeatedly described disconnections between curriculum content and their lived realities.

We are taught things that don't speak to our lives. It's like we are learning someone else's story, not ours. (Participant AXM, Primary Health graduate, Life Narrative, 12-10-2021)

Such reflections illustrate what Lockett and Shay (2020) termed curriculum injustice—a mismatch between learners' cultural worlds and the epistemic foundations of the curriculum. Several participants linked this alienation to the perceived irrelevance and low social value of their qualifications:

We were told we'd be ready for work, but most employers don't even recognise our qualification. It feels like we were trained for jobs that don't exist. (Participant MZ, Office Administration graduate, LCG meeting, 16-10-2021)

Yet not all narratives were entirely negative. Some students valued the technical and digital skills they gained, even as they criticised the lack of contextual grounding:

I learnt computer skills and confidence to apply for jobs online, but nothing to do with starting our own businesses and community projects. I have a qualification, but I cannot get a job. Some people even ask me, What is NC(V)? It's like our qualifications are invisible. (Participant AXM, Primary Health graduate, Life Narrative, 12-10-2021)

These mixed accounts reveal ambivalence rather than uniform disillusionment. They show that epistemic injustice is experienced alongside moments of learning and self-development. Analytically, this theme underscores how lecturer education must equip educators to mediate between global knowledge frameworks and local realities, enabling curriculum relevance without sacrificing rigour.

Language and cultural exclusion: Speaking but not being heard

Language surfaced as both a medium of exclusion and a site of resistance. Students described English-dominant instruction as intimidating and silencing:

I know the answer in isiXhosa, but I can't say it in English, so I stay quiet. (Participant LKG, Hospitality graduate, Life Narrative, 15-10-2021)

Others noted that some lecturers made genuine attempts at translanguaging, which they found empowering:

When the teacher allowed us to mix languages, the class was alive. Everyone spoke. (Participant URS, Office Administration graduate, LCG 16-10-2021)

Furthermore, some students also described a cultural disconnection between their life worlds and classroom practices:

They are just letting us figure things out on our own, you know in communities and families we understand the importance of helping and being patient with one another especially on learning things which are new to which always lacks in our classroom (Participant TKZ, Office Administration graduate, LCG meeting, 16-10-2021)

These contrasts highlight that linguistic justice in TVET is not only a structural issue but also a pedagogical skill. Lecturers trained in multilingual facilitation can transform the classroom from a site of silence to one of participation. Beyond language, students lamented the absence of Ubuntu-informed engagement—a pedagogy grounded in care and community. The sense of isolation described by participants signals a need for lecturer education programmes that cultivate relational, empathic teaching practices rooted in Africanised values of mutual recognition (Ngubane & Makua, 2021).

Between professionalisation and transformation: Pedagogy as transmission

Many participants experienced teaching as lecture-centred and exam-driven, echoing Hodkinson's (1998) critique of technicism:

I feel like we were only receiving information for exams, with no engaging questions that tested our understanding. It was always the teacher talking, talking no chance for us to ask questions or say anything. (Participant BTO, Hospitality graduate, LCG meeting, 16-10-2021)

They just tell us what to write in the exams, like it's a script we must cram. It's not about understanding or learning for life it's just about memorising what they say so you can pass and move on. (Participant MZ, Office Administration graduate, Life Narrative, 11-10-2021)

Our lecturers just read from slides. They don't ask us what we think or how we learn best. We were not really involved. The teacher was the only one that counted. (Participant LKG, Finance graduate, LCG meeting, 16-10-2021)

However, some recognised lecturers who encouraged participation and reflection:

One lecturer made us do group debates about tourism problems. That's when I really understood. (Participant DNL, Tourism graduate, Life Narrative, 14-10-2021)

These contrasting accounts point to variation within the system rather than universal failure. They also reinforce Freire's (1970) caution against the banking model and support his call for dialogical praxis. Students' yearning for more interactive and responsive pedagogy implies that lecturer education must move beyond procedural professionalisation toward cultivating critical, relational, and reflective competence.

Work-integrated learning: Compliance without praxis

Work-integrated learning (WIL) was widely described as bureaucratic and disconnected from authentic workplace learning:

We just go to the workplace, sit there, and do nothing. Then we come back and write a report. (Participant SRT, Tourism graduate, Life Narrative, 14-10-2021)

You just finish, and that's it. You don't even know the next step. They don't check on you, they don't help with CVs or anything. (Participant TKZ, Office Administration graduate, LCG meeting, 16-10-2021)

Yet a few students recounted more meaningful placements where lecturers explained real-world tasks or guided reflection:

In my second placement, my supervisor let me plan events and talk with clients. That helped me see how theory fits in practice. It was easy to remember all these things we were doing at my work placement station because my lecturer talk through them in class during our lecture (Participant MTS, Hospitality graduate, LCG 16-10-2021)

These experiences suggest that WIL's potential lies not in its structure but in how lecturers and supervisors mediate reflection and praxis. When framed dialogically, WIL becomes a space for conscientisation rather than compliance (Allais & Ngcwangu, 2025; Freire, 1998).

Aspirations for transformation: Reimagining TVET and lecturer education

Despite frustration, students expressed enduring hope for TVET's capacity to transform lives:

I hoped that after completing NC(V) Level 4, I would be helping my family escape poverty, but nothing has changed. We were promised jobs, but where are they? (Participant LKG, Hospitality graduate, Life Narrative, 15-10-2021)

Their aspirations centre on curricula that affirm identity, honour community knowledge, and prepare graduates for agency and contribution. Students imagined lecturers as facilitators of transformation rather than gatekeepers of assessment—a vision aligning with Powell’s (2012) call to expand vocational learners’ capabilities to aspire.

Across all themes, student voices reveal contradictions between systemic constraint and personal agency. They expose the persistence of epistemic, linguistic, and pedagogical exclusions yet simultaneously articulate pathways toward humanising and Africanised curriculum practice. Framed through curriculum as a verb (Le Grange, 2019) and curriculum justice (Luckett & Shay, 2020), these narratives reposition learners as epistemic partners in transformation. They invite lecturer education programmes to integrate dialogical pedagogy, multilingual inclusivity, and reflective praxis—preparing educators not merely to deliver curriculum but to co-create it alongside their students.

Discussion: Reimagining lecturer education through student voice

The findings of this study reveal a profound disjuncture between the policy rhetoric of transformation in South Africa’s TVET sector and the lived realities of students navigating vocational classrooms. National frameworks such as the *White Paper for Post-School Education and Training* (DHET, 2013a) and the *Policy on Professional Qualifications for TVET Lecturers* (DHET, 2013b) imagine TVET as a vehicle for equity, employability, and inclusive growth. Yet, as students’ narratives demonstrate, these aspirations are often undermined by technicist pedagogies, Eurocentric epistemologies, and linguistic exclusions that reproduce rather than redress apartheid’s educational inequalities (Kraak & Paterson, 2016; Ngcwangu, 2015; Vally & Motala, 2022).

The discussion that follows mobilises student voices as interpretive evidence—not merely as illustrations of deficit, but as critical interventions that illuminate the conceptual limits of current lecturer education. Their testimonies ground a rethinking of pedagogical transformation through three intersecting lenses: Freirean critical pedagogy, Africanisation and decolonial thought, and curriculum justice. Together these frameworks foreground the shift needed from professionalisation as compliance to pedagogical praxis as justice, situating lecturer education as a moral and epistemic project rather than a technical one.

Technicism and the erosion of pedagogical humanity

At the heart of students’ critique lies the persistence of technicism—the reduction of teaching to the efficient delivery of standardised content and narrowly defined competencies. As Hodkinson (1998) and Gamble (2006) observed, technicism strips vocational education of its ethical and relational substance, privileging control over care and procedure over purpose. This pattern was vividly reflected in students’ accounts of lecturers “reading from slides” or “teaching to the exam,” where dialogue, empathy, and curiosity were largely absent. Such

practices exemplify what Freire (1970) termed the banking model of education, in which learners become passive recipients of deposited knowledge rather than co-creators of meaning.

However, students' narratives also pointed to pockets of dialogical practice—instances where individual lecturers encouraged participation or reflective discussion. For example, group debates and multilingual discussions were remembered as moments when “the class was alive” and students felt genuinely engaged. These counter-examples, though limited, illustrate that technicism is not uniform but contextually mediated; within the same institutional constraints, some educators enact more humanising approaches.

Despite such moments, the overall pedagogical culture remains shaped by bureaucratic accountability and neoliberal efficiency discourses (Majola, 2024; Majola et al., 2025a). Even the Advanced Diploma in TVET—which formally espouses humanising pedagogy—is often implemented through performative professionalism (Allais, 2012) that emphasises measurable outcomes over transformative learning. The result is a pedagogy of compliance rather than co-construction, where lecturers' agency is constrained and students' knowledge remains peripheral.

In contrast, Le Grange's (2019) conception of curriculum as a verb offers an alternative paradigm: curriculum as dynamic, participatory, and emergent—always in motion and co-authored through lived experience. The dialogical and hopeful tones in several students' accounts reflect this potential. Their calls for respect, empathy, and voice align with Freire's (1974, 1998) insistence that education be a practice of freedom, grounded in humanisation and mutual inquiry. For lecturer education, this implies preparing practitioners not simply to deliver prescribed curricula, but to create conditions where curriculum becomes a living, relational act—responsive to context, language, and dignity.

Epistemic and linguistic injustice: The silence of excluded knowers

Students' experiences of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007) expose how Eurocentric content, monolingual instruction, and the exclusion of African cultural frameworks render them invisible as knowers. Mbembe (2016) and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2020) described this as the coloniality of knowledge—the persistence of epistemic hierarchies that devalue indigenous and working-class epistemologies. The finding that many learners “know the answer in isiXhosa but stay quiet” (Participant LKG, 2021) exemplifies this systemic silencing. Such moments affirm Ezomo and Prinsloo's (2024) argument that English-dominant pedagogies perpetuate precarity by positioning linguistic diversity as a deficit rather than an asset.

Africanisation, as articulated by Ngubane and Makua (2021) and Assié-Lumumba (2017), offers a vital corrective to inherited colonial structures in education—a movement toward an Ubuntu-informed, multilingual, and relational pedagogy that affirms learners' identities while restoring cultural dignity within teaching and learning. In practical terms, the implementation of multilingual pedagogy in lecturer education could take several interconnected forms. Translanguaging practices, for instance, could be embedded within classroom dialogue and assessment, enabling students to articulate complex ideas across languages and thus

demonstrate deeper conceptual understanding. Likewise, language-inclusive curriculum design could ensure that examples, case studies, and learning materials reflect South Africa's linguistic and cultural plurality, positioning language as a resource rather than a constraint. Complementing these initiatives, lecturer development modules could be introduced to build educators' capacity for bilingual facilitation, ethical translation practices, and the effective pedagogical use of indigenous languages.

Together, these practices would align closely with Lockett and Shay's (2020) notion of curriculum justice, where language functions as a bridge to epistemic access and participation rather than a barrier. Ultimately, such an approach underscores that curriculum transformation cannot be confined to content reform alone; it demands epistemic reconstitution—a fundamental reimagining of who is acknowledged as a producer of knowledge, and how that knowledge is valued, transmitted, and sustained within higher education (Biccard & Meeran, 2024; Heleta, 2016).

The failure of WIL as praxis

Students' experiences of WIL illuminate another dimension of disjuncture between transformation policy and practice. Designed to bridge theory and application, WIL has instead become a bureaucratic exercise mirroring the banking model that Freire (1970, 1998) critiqued. Students' descriptions of "sitting at workplaces doing nothing" reflect how the absence of mentorship, reflection, and dialogical integration renders WIL a hollow ritual. This finding resonates with Allais and Ngcwangu (2025) and Wedekind et al. (2024), who argued that South Africa's employer-engagement models often prioritise reporting and compliance over relational pedagogy. The bureaucratisation of WIL is not merely pedagogical but structural; limited employer partnerships, under-resourced campuses, and inconsistent institutional coordination all constrain meaningful supervision and reflective practice (Ramsarup et al., 2024).

Freire's (1974) concept of praxis—the unity of reflection and action—offers a productive reorientation. If integrated dialogically, WIL could become a site of conscientisation, where students link their workplace experiences to broader social critique and agency. Achieving this requires lecturers who are critically reflexive facilitators—able to mediate between theory and practice, guide reflection, and situate vocational learning within social realities. Cultivating such educators demands that lecturer education programmes prioritise critical pedagogical formation over procedural training—the very transformation this study calls for.

Rethinking responsiveness: Beyond employability to capability

Policy discourses in South African TVET often invoke curriculum responsiveness as alignment with labour-market needs (DHET, 2013a). However, students' narratives expose the inadequacy of this narrow framing. Their frustration that "we were trained for jobs that don't exist" reveals how an employability model, detached from lived socio-economic realities, reduces education to instrumental utility. Allais and Marock (2024) argued that responsiveness must be reframed to include epistemic inclusion, cultural relevance, and the development of

human capability. Similarly, Walker and Loots (2018) advanced a capabilities approach that values education for agency, well-being, and social participation—not only for work. Powell and McGrath (2019) extended this view, proposing that vocational education should cultivate the capability to aspire—the freedom to imagine and pursue alternative futures.

Students' calls for curricula that affirm identity, recognise community knowledge, and prepare them for dignified life beyond wage labour embody this broader understanding of responsiveness. Their narratives reassert the moral and social purpose of TVET as more than a pipeline to employment—it is a site for reclaiming dignity, fostering agency, and building collective capacity (Khoza & Ngqula, 2025; McGrath & Ramsarup, 2024; Monk et al., 2025). For lecturer education, adopting a capabilities-oriented pedagogy would mean training educators to design learning that develops not only technical competence but also critical reasoning, relational awareness, and imagination. For example, lecturers could use project-based learning that links vocational content to local community challenges, reflective dialogues that connect skill acquisition to personal goals, or multilingual group work that values diverse voices. Such practices align with Freire's (1970) vision of education as the practice of freedom and with Le Grange's (2019) conception of curriculum as a verb—a continuous, participatory unfolding rather than a fixed set of outcomes.

Toward transformative lecturer education

If TVET is to serve as a vehicle for justice and inclusion, lecturer education must itself be transformed. As Porres (2018) and Porres et al. (2014) argued, vocational education should move beyond qualification toward emancipation. This reorientation demands preparing lecturers not as content transmitters but as facilitators of dialogue, critical inquiry, and community engagement. Freirean pedagogy offers a guiding vision: lecturers as co-learners engaged in mutual humanisation (Freire & Horton, 1990; Freire & Shor, 1987). Africanisation deepens this transformation by grounding pedagogy in Ubuntu and multilingualism (Ngubane & Makua, 2021), while curriculum justice (Lockett & Shay, 2020) demands both access to powerful knowledge and recognition of plural epistemologies. Preparing lecturers for VUCA contexts (Majola et al., 2024) therefore requires pedagogical courage and epistemic humility—the willingness to unlearn, adapt, and co-create meaning with students.

Practically, this transformation could be embedded in lecturer education programmes such as the Advanced Diploma in TVET through several interconnected strategies. For example, reflective teaching portfolios can be developed to document each lecturer's growth in dialogical and inclusive practice, allowing them to critically engage with their own teaching and learning processes. Community-engaged learning cycles could further enhance this by encouraging lecturers to collaborate with local enterprises and civic groups to co-design learning projects that bridge classroom theory and real-world application. In addition, peer inquiry circles—modelled on Freirean culture circles—would create spaces for collective reflection on pedagogy, power, and social justice, deepening lecturers' critical awareness and professional community. Complementing these approaches, multilingual lesson design workshops could train lecturers to facilitate translanguaging and promote cultural relevance, ensuring inclusivity in diverse learning contexts.

Together, these interventions would move lecturer education from rhetoric to praxis, aligning with NMU's humanising ethos and operationalising transformation as lived experience. In doing so, they would cultivate the kind of transformative intellectuals described by Giroux (1988)—educators who understand curriculum as a dynamic, active process and who teach not merely for employability, but for justice, humanity, and hope.

Reclaiming curriculum as a verb

The findings underscore that curriculum transformation in TVET cannot be achieved through policy pronouncements alone. It must be lived, enacted, and co-authored—a true curriculum as verb (Le Grange, 2019). Students' testimonies reveal that transformation begins not with system reform but with listening: recognising learners as epistemic partners whose experiences offer generative insights for lecturer education. Reimagining curriculum through student voices embodies what Freire (1998) described as education as the practice of freedom—a relational, dialogical, and socially situated process of becoming. It demands lecturer education that nurtures reflective practitioners capable of advancing epistemic justice, sustaining cultural pluralism, and building more humane futures through vocational learning. Transformation, therefore, is not an administrative objective but a moral and political imperative (Majola, 2025; Vally & Motala, 2022).

However, the transition from policy rhetoric to lived praxis is rarely straightforward. Institutional cultures within the TVET sector—characterised by bureaucratic inertia, audit-driven governance, and hierarchical decision-making—often resist dialogical and participatory pedagogies. These systemic constraints do not invalidate the vision of curriculum as a verb but highlight the need for institutional accompaniment: leadership, policy alignment, and resources that enable lecturers to practise humanising and multilingual pedagogy without fear of punitive evaluation. As this study demonstrates, the voices of TVET students do not merely critique the system—they chart the path toward its renewal. Their narratives remind us that transformation is not a policy milestone but a continuous ethical practice, enacted daily in classrooms where teaching, learning, and justice converge.

Implications: Reimagining TVET lecturer education as a site of justice

The findings of this study underscore the urgent need to reconceptualise TVET lecturer education in South Africa not merely as a mechanism of professionalisation, but as a transformative space for pedagogical justice, epistemic inclusion, and sustainable futures. Students' narratives reveal that current lecturer preparation programmes—such as the Advanced Diploma in TVET (NMU, n.d.)—remain constrained by technicism, standardisation, and neoliberal accountability frameworks (Allais & Ngcwangu, 2025; Hodkinson, 1998; Majola, 2024). These models prioritise procedural competence over reflective praxis and thus fail to equip educators for the relational, ethical, and contextual demands of post-apartheid vocational classrooms. Reimagining lecturer education as a site of justice therefore requires multi-layered reform—pedagogical, epistemological, ecological, and institutional.

Beyond technicism: Embedding humanising pedagogy

To transform lecturer education meaningfully, programmes must move beyond a narrow focus on compliance-driven professionalism and instead nurture a pedagogy that is critical, dialogical, and relational. Freire's (1970, 1974) conception of education as the practice of freedom provides a powerful framework for such a shift, inviting educators to ground their teaching in dialogue, praxis, and conscientisation, as further elaborated by Freire and Shor (1987) and Freire and Horton (1990). Embedding these Freirean principles within lecturer education entails preparing lecturers to engage learners as co-creators of knowledge, to reflect critically on their own positionalities, and to design classrooms as dynamic spaces of inquiry rather than static sites of instruction. In this sense, the notion of curriculum as a verb (Le Grange, 2019) operates both as a philosophical stance and as a pedagogical strategy, positioning curriculum as a living, co-constructed process that evolves through interaction and reflection. Practically, this reorientation could be realised through the inclusion of reflexive teaching portfolios, dialogical microteaching sessions, and community-engaged learning components within lecturer training programmes. These approaches would not only deepen professional competence but also foster educators who are ethically grounded, socially responsive, and capable of navigating educational complexity with purpose and humanity.

Africanisation and multilingualism as foundational principles

The exclusion of African languages and indigenous epistemologies from vocational curricula remains a persistent form of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007; Mbembe, 2016). As participants revealed, being "silent" in English-dominated classrooms diminishes both comprehension and dignity. Lecturer education must therefore foreground Africanisation and multilingual pedagogy as central to transformation, not peripheral.

Following Ngubane and Makua (2021), Africanisation should cultivate Ubuntu-informed pedagogy, relational ethics, and recognition of learners' cultural repertoires as legitimate sites of knowledge. In practice, this could include bilingual instruction models and translanguaging pedagogies, the integration of local community knowledge into assessment design, and lecturer reflection on language ideologies and epistemic positionality. By legitimising diverse ways of knowing, lecturer education can begin to dismantle the colonial hierarchies of knowledge that continue to shape legitimacy in TVET (Assié-Lumumba, 2017; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020).

Reclaiming work-integrated learning as praxis

Students' experiences of WIL as bureaucratic and hollow highlight the need to reposition it as a site of critical praxis rather than procedural compliance. Effective WIL should foster reflection, agency, and mentorship, connecting workplace learning to social, ethical, and community contexts (Allais & Ngcwangu, 2025; Rudman & Meiring, 2018). For this to occur, lecturers must be trained as facilitators of praxis (Freire, 1998), capable of mediating workplace experiences through critical dialogue and collective inquiry. Incorporating structured reflective journals, peer debriefing sessions, and joint evaluation frameworks between colleges and employers could transform WIL into a dialogical encounter where learners analyse the

contradictions of labour, inequality, and sustainability in South Africa's VUCA world (Majola et al., 2024).

Preparing lecturers for complexity and change

Lecturer education must also equip educators to navigate the technological, ecological, and social disruptions defining 21st-century VET. McGrath and Ramsarup (2024) stressed that sustainable futures depend on educators who can integrate digital tools and green skills meaningfully while retaining humanising values. This demands cultivating adaptive expertise—the ability to innovate pedagogically in volatile contexts. Programmes should integrate modules on sustainable development and climate justice, critical digital pedagogy and AI literacy, and global–local linkages in vocational training. Such training would prepare lecturers not as technicians but as transformative intellectuals—educators who can critically engage change while sustaining ethical and contextual responsiveness.

Policy and institutional reform

Finally, pedagogical transformation must be supported by systemic change. Current qualification standards, funding models, and accreditation frameworks often reinforce compliance rather than creativity (Terblanche & Bitzer, 2018). Policy reform should incentivise innovation, not penalise it, by embedding flexibility in programme design and allowing for community-embedded projects and multilingual practice within national accreditation systems. Equally, intersectoral collaboration—between education, labour, and community organisations—is essential to ensure lecturer education aligns with developmental and sustainability goals (Balwanz & Hlatshwayo, 2016; Vally & Motala, 2022). Institutions such as NMU, with its humanising ethos, are uniquely positioned to model transformative praxis if they move beyond rhetorical commitment to provide structural support, mentoring systems, and resources for socially responsive teaching.

Reimagining TVET lecturer education as a site of justice requires structural courage and epistemic humility. It calls on institutions to see lecturers not as functionaries, but as agents of societal transformation—and on policy to enable rather than constrain humanising pedagogies. The student narratives in this study illuminate both the cost of exclusion and the transformative potential of dialogue, multilingualism, and praxis as the foundations for a more just vocational future.

Conclusion

This article has argued that meaningful curriculum transformation in South Africa's TVET sector must begin with lecturer education as the linchpin of change. Drawing on the narratives of TVET students—voices too often marginalised yet deeply insightful—the study has revealed the contradictions between progressive policy rhetoric and the regressive pedagogical realities of vocational classrooms. Students' experiences of alienation through monolingual instruction, Eurocentric content, and technicist teaching expose the enduring epistemic and structural inequities within lecturer education programmes (Ezomo & Prinsloo, 2024;

Hodkinson, 1998; Majola, 2024). Reimagining lecturer education as a site of justice requires shifting from curriculum as a static, compliance-driven product to curriculum as a verb—a living, relational, and co-constructed process (Le Grange, 2019). Anchored in Freirean (1970) humanisation, Africanisation (Mbembe, 2016; Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, 1986), and curriculum justice (Lockett & Shay, 2020), this vision positions educators as transformative intellectuals rather than technicians, and learners as epistemic agents rather than recipients. By centring student voice, lecturer education can cultivate dialogical pedagogy that affirms identity, fosters agency, and develops capability (Powell & McGrath, 2019; Walker & Loots, 2018). Reframing WIL as a space of reflection and conscientisation, and embedding multilingual, community-responsive curricula, can bridge the gap between vocational institutions and the social realities they serve. In this sense, transformation is not simply a technical reform but a moral and political project—a call to educate educators otherwise, for dignity, relevance, and justice.

While this study was geographically and contextually bounded, its analytical contribution lies in demonstrating how student narratives can act as epistemic interventions, informing lecturer education and curriculum design across diverse contexts. Future research could extend this participatory approach by engaging lecturers and policymakers in dialogical cycles with students to co-create sustainable models of TVET transformation. The transformation of TVET lecturer education is central to building inclusive, Africanised, and future-responsive vocational systems. In doing so, South Africa can contribute meaningfully to global conversations on decolonial, justice-oriented pedagogy, positioning curriculum as a verb and transformation as lived praxis toward more sustainable, humane futures.

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