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Citation

Andiema, N. C., & Dietz, A. J. (2023). The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on vocational education and training in Kenya: a study of West Pokot County. *European Journal Of Education Studies*, 10(3), 93-103. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3570763>

Version: Publisher's Version

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Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3570763>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).



THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN KENYA: A STUDY OF WEST POKOT COUNTY

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Abstract:

This paper focuses on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the education system in Kenya with reference to vocational training institutions. The paper analyses how the provision of vocational training was impacted after Covid-19 from the perspective of principals of colleges, tutors, and students. The paper collected qualitative experiences of the above-mentioned stakeholders to understand to which degree vocational education has been affected by Covid-19. This was accomplished through the use of interviews, questionnaires, and document analysis. The study has found that the Covid-19 pandemic completely disrupted learning in six public VTCs as institutions were closed and students and tutors did not meet or interact for more than eight months. It was impossible for a work-based learning model to be used by students after institutions were closed because even the industries and businesses where they were supposed to undertake their practicum and internship programmes downscaled their operations, while others closed down completely. After reopening of VTCs in January 2021, close to 34.8% of their former students did not report back because some of them dropped out, some could not pay fees, some engaged in alcoholism, drugs, and substance abuse, some emigrated to other areas to look for opportunities while some settled down in marriage. It is recommended that guidance and counselling should be continuously provided to tutors and students as a way of addressing the psychological and behavioural challenges brought about by Covid-19, tutors need to be trained on remote learning methodologies (digital skills) and county governments need to invest in setting up infrastructure to support online learning in VTCs. This research provides a realistic picture of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on vocational education and training in public institutions in West Pokot County which is considered to be a marginalised and arid and semi-arid region in the North-western part of Kenya.

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Keywords: impact, Covid-19, vocational, education, training

1. Introduction

The social, economic, and political development of Kenya depends on the number of educated and skilled workers produced by the teaching institutions to enter the career professions. This can be provided through university education or through Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET). This paper focuses on the TVET segment that has received considerable focus from the government of Kenya in the last 10 years. The purpose of TVET is to prepare young people to enter the labour market through the development of skills, knowledge, and attitudes. Research studies conducted by ILO in recent years have shown that there has been a mismatch between the human resource produced by the education sector and the labour demands (ILO-UNESCO-WBG; 2020).

There have been complaints that the labour market is short of individuals with the right skills and competencies to enable the attainment of industrial goals by ILO member nations. This shortage has made the majority of developing countries like Kenya to invest more in the TVET sector which has seen an increasing number of students graduating with craft courses, certificates, and diplomas in recent years. These developments in the TVET sector had been on an upward trend until early 2020 when the Covid-19 pandemic emerged. The COVID-19 virus was declared to be a pandemic by the World Health Organisation (WHO) in early 2020 and it affected the education sector across the world resulting in the near-complete closures of schools (primary and secondary) and higher education institutions (colleges and universities). UNESCO (2021) monitoring data for the Covid-19 pandemic's impact on the education sector showed that by April 2020, more than 1.8 billion students were affected by the pandemic due to sudden school closures. This happened in more than 90% of countries across the world (Areba, 2020).

The decision was a result of the guidance provided by WHO to limit people's movements and maintain social distance as a way of reducing the spread of the Covid-19 virus. This resulted in many schools being temporarily closed (including TVET institutions). The Ministry of Kenya provided guidelines in April 2020 (Republic of Kenya, 2020) on the continuation of learning through remote learning but these guidelines favoured only primary and secondary schools, as well as colleges and universities and they did not factor in the needs of vocational training centres. This paper, therefore, looks at the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on education systems in Kenya with reference to vocational training centres (VTCs) previously called youth polytechnics and currently managed by County governments across Kenya. The lack of proper guidelines on the mitigation measures for early closure of academic institutions for VTCs could have been due to their decentralised management structure and research examining the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on this critical sector has not yet been undertaken in Counties like West Pokot.

2. Problem Statement

ILO-UNESCO-WBG (2020) conducted a global survey of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on technical vocational education and training. As a result of TVET institution closure (very few across the world were partially opened), there was a total disruption of training in those institutions. Tutors encountered various challenges when organising remote training for their students because of a lack of skills to use remote methods of learning, inadequate preparation, and low internet access. And it only was possible for institutions that had the capacity to transform their training to digital platforms. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on vocational education and training (the lower level of technical education in Kenya) has not been adequately studied yet, especially not in the marginalised Countries of Kenya with West Pokot being the focus of this investigation. How the vocational education and training system was affected by the Covid-19 pandemic mostly remains unknown as most research studies conducted in Kenya and the rest of the world have focused on primary schools, secondary schools, colleges, and universities. Considering that the training in VTCs involves practical activities, it was impossible to conduct face-to-face learning and therefore this research seeks to unearth the full impact of Covid 19 on the VTC education subsector, specifically by focusing on the impact it had on the VTC school calendar (in terms of curriculum planning and implementation), students' participation (did it affect student attendance patterns after education institutions were reopened?), management of VTC and how tutors were affected. These are some of the questions that the research seeks to answer with the aim of coming up with recommendations on how to overcome and address the challenges that vocational training centres in West Pokot County and Kenya at large experience.

2.1 Objective of the Paper

To find out the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on vocational education and training in the following areas:

- 1) Tutors' capacity to conduct training activities during the Covid-19 pandemic;
- 2) Students' participation in vocational education and training during college closure and after they were reopened;
- 3) Resource utilisation during college closure and afterwards;
- 4) Curriculum implementation issues arising from the Covid-19 pandemic (practical training);
- 5) Measures undertaken to address challenges brought by Covid 19-pandemic in vocational education and training centres.

3. Literature Review

Chepyegon (2020) examined how TVET instructors and managers (staff) were affected by COVID-19 and how they responded to the training and learning needs of their

students. Data was collected across Kenya from 104 staff from CAP YEI (49%) and VTC staff (51%) from partner institutions who benefit from CAP YEI capacity building training support to adopt and implement her Basic Employability Skills Training (BEST) model. The research found out that most respondents had been affected financially, socially, and psychologically. Chepyegon's research focused on the impact that Covid-19 had on tutors in VTCs whereas this paper focuses on the whole VTC system. Another research by Odondi, Mukiria and Wawira (2022) explored the impact of COVID-19 on TVET training and the response mechanisms employed by TVET institutions both in the short term and in the long term. The study combined knowledge generated from a desktop literature review and primary data based on a random sample of 211 TVET institutions targeting 315 trainers and 644 trainees in all 8 regions of Kenya. Emerging evidence on the effect of this closure points to youth despair indicated by drug abuse, school dropout cases, and early pregnancies. This study was in TVET institutions (offering diploma programmes), which are under the management of TVETA authority, whereas the current paper focuses on VTCs which are under County governments and which are mostly located in rural areas of Kenya.

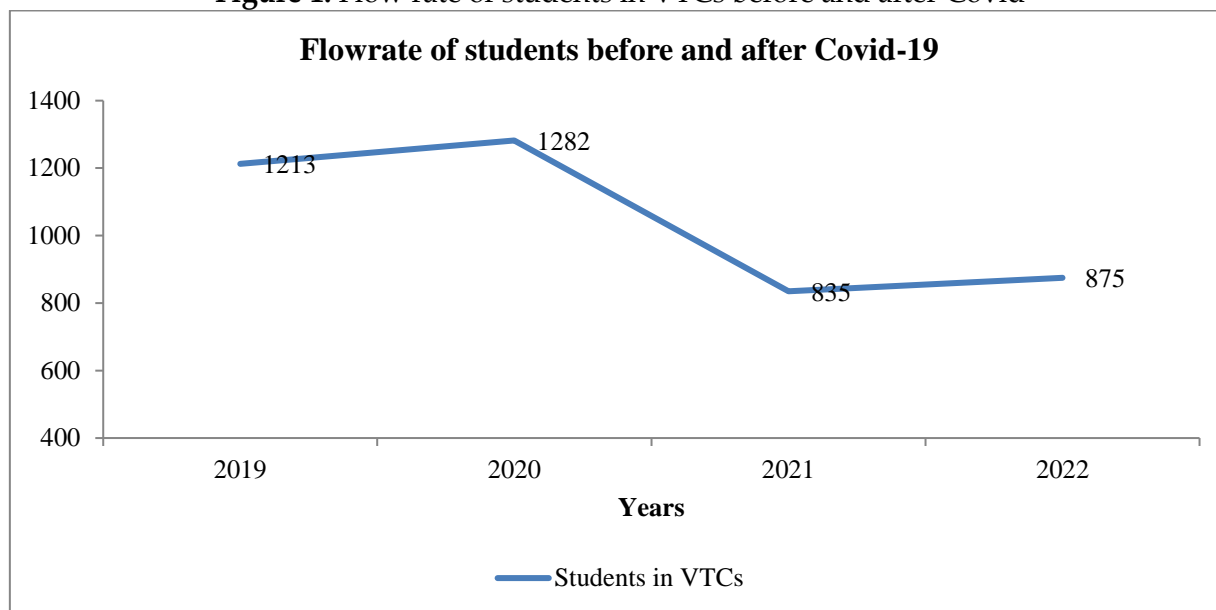
4. Methodology

This study has been conducted in West Pokot County, Kenya targeting the six public vocational training centres (VTC) which are under the county government of West Pokot; Kapenguria, Kodich, Ortum, Sigor, Sina and Chepareria. They are spread across the County's four sub-counties; Kapenguria, Pokot South, Sigor and Kacheliba. The study selected six heads of VTCs (principals), 42 tutors and 87 students undertaking various vocational training programs to act as the sample for the research. The research used a mixed method involving quantitative and qualitative approaches. Data collection was done through a document collection sheet, questionnaire administration to students and tutors and interviews with VTC principals. A data collection sheet was used to collect information on the number of teaching staff (pre and post Covid-19 periods), as well as student enrolment and completion rates from the year 2019 to 2021. This was done so that the research can observe the trends and make deductions from them. Furthermore, telephone interviews have been conducted with principals of six public VTCs to understand their views on the impact of Covid-19 on the vocational education and training system in their institutions.

5. Findings and Discussions

Students' participation in vocational education and training during college closure and after they were reopened. The flow rate of learners in public VTCs in West Pokot County before and after the Covid-19 pandemic was established by collecting data from VTC principals of the six vocational training colleges. The combined data from the six institutions on the flow rate of students in those years is presented in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Flow rate of students in VTCs before and after Covid



The result shows that in 2019, the total number of students in the six VTCs was 1213, the number increased by January 2020 to reach 1282. However, during the resumption of physical learning by all schools at the beginning of 2021, the number of students declined to around 835 which means that 447 learners, representing 34.8% of the number in early 2020, did not resume their education to which they had been admitted in January 2020 as most of the courses take one year to complete. In January 2022, the enrolment increased to 875 but at a slower pace compared to the preceding years before the Covid-19 pandemic struck. When asked as to whether their institutions were affected by the Covid-19 pandemic in terms of student's enrolment and participation, most students, tutors, and principals of VTCs affirmed that after the re-opening of academic institutions, there was a significant number of learners who did not return. Various factors could have influenced the participation of students in vocational education, stretching from the home background, the country's economy, social evils, policy changes and also government factors. Whereas the government recommended that academic institutions (primary, secondary, tertiary and universities) should migrate their learning to virtual platforms, all public VTCs in West Pokot County closed indefinitely as their mode of learning was through physical meetings/interactions. This means that the period of institution closure resulted in a loss of interest in learning among students.

5.1 Tutors' Capacity to Conduct Training Activities During the Covid-19 Pandemic

The paper also collected information on the experiences of tutors during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. Most of the tutors reported that Covid-19 resulted in a disruption of learning as their institutions were permanently closed because of the guidance of maintaining social distance and halting the spread of infection. The period from March to December 2020 during the school closure was described by many tutors as challenging in their professional and personal life. For example, most tutors said that they could not

make a follow up with their students and this resulted in a number of them not returning back to college after reopening in January 2021. Some felt that they had a responsibility of checking their learners' progress but due to movement restrictions, the majority of them could not follow their students' progress.

The tutors mentioned that some students started to look for employment in other areas, abandoning their education questions. Some female students got married while others got pregnant which resulted in discontinuing their education. To some students, the teachers reported that they turned to what they called 'social evil activities'; drugs and substance abuse and alcoholism. Even some tutors were not spared as some, due to lack of jobs, fell victim to alcoholism, while others had to look for other jobs to fend for their families. Some even reported that they went almost six months without being paid by the County government, putting them into serious debt and depression as they could not cater for their individual and family needs. Whereas other colleges and universities migrated to online platforms, the tutors of VTCs did not have the capacity to provide a virtual mode of learning as they did not have the required infrastructure and tutors needed training to help them conduct virtual lessons, and that training has not been provided. The experiences after the opening of VTCs were overwhelming for many tutors as most of them had to conduct their lectures using blended learning methods in order to meet the learning needs of all students in their institutions. New methods of teaching came up from the year 2021 onwards, and therefore the tutors had to remodel their lesson preparation practices in order to make sure they complied with Ministry of Health regulations. However, their institutions were not fully prepared to support instruction activities and therefore most tutors found themselves in a difficult position in undertaking their classroom responsibilities.

5.2 Resource Utilisation during College Closure and Afterwards

Both infrastructural and instructional resources are critical towards the implementation of the vocational education curriculum. The study found out that across the six VTCs, not all the required resources were provided adequately to ensure all courses were effectively conducted. The study found out that after re-opening these institutions were not fully stocked with the right infrastructure to support blended learning. Because of low resource utilisation, all institutions in West Pokot County could not conduct virtual learning since they did not have computers or access to networks to support online learning. The low resource utilisation rate affected learners' morale to continue with their studies after VCTs were reopened in January 2021. This means that the vocational education objectives were not met by the VTCs to ensure that an adequate quality standard of learning was attained. The only area of resource provision was on putting up hand washing facilities as reported by one principal: *"The school improved hand washing points in the school, [and] added the number of chairs and classrooms to ensure maintenance of social distance."*

Even on the students' side, courses like auto mechanics, cloth production, tailoring, baking, electrical installation, plumbing and pipefitting, which were offered in

these institutions, needed students to purchase some workshop tools and the majority of them were not able to purchase them, which contributed to dropping out of school. Sadly, for girls who could not purchase kitchen or tailoring tools, some of them dropped out of school and got married. This situation of low resource utilisation usage after the re-opening of schools in January 2021 forced the majority of the courses like welding and fabrication to be dropped as their implementation required more investments from the institutions and students as well. Considering that VTCs courses are practice-oriented, technological resources were not required as such by the colleges before and after Covid-19 pandemic.

5.3 Curriculum Implementation Issues Arising from the Covid-19 Pandemic (Practical Training)

Practical training by students undertaking vocational courses is essential for them to acquire new knowledge skills. However, the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in the early closure of VTCs and therefore all curriculum activities were halted from March to December 2021. The VTCs did not have systems in place to monitor their students while at home to determine their situation and therefore the tutors reported that they had a difficult time to re-orient students back to VTC in January 2021. Neither were the students provided with apprenticeship programmes in industries or eEnterprise providing products and services for the courses they were undertaking. The problem was further exacerbated by the fact that the majority of businesses and small cottage industries located in West Pokot County closed down and therefore students had no place to seek attachment or internship while waiting to resume their training once their institutions were reopened. Even the remaining manufacturing industries within urban centres suspended practicum / industrial attachment for students as a work-based learning model that used to exist before the Covid-19 pandemic. The strict health and safety measures that were put in place by the Kenyan Ministry of Health restricted (and in some cases stopped) all academic and training activities across the country. This means that most students just stayed at home with nothing to do. After the resumption of learning in January 2021, the principals of the VTCs reported that they were not fully prepared to continue with curriculum implementation as their institutions were not ready with the right curriculum materials for practical training as some materials needed for curriculum implementation were not available in the country due to closure of borders and restriction of exports by source countries. This made them suspend some of the courses that needed heavy investment which was not available for them.

5.4 Measures Undertaken to Address Challenges Brought by the Covid 19-Pandemic

Not much was done to ensure that VTCs adhered to the recommended training guidelines, and health and safety measures for learning. For instance, only hand washing facilities were put up, but the other infrastructural facilities and resources remained the same. Some tutors took personal initiatives to re-orient themselves with knowledge on how to operate ICT infrastructure and online learning modes. Further, at their own cost,

the VTCs tutors did attend training on the implementation of blended learning modules that were not existing in their colleges. Another measure that the VTCs undertook was to introduce guidance and counselling services to their institution, which was inexistent before, in order to address psychosocial and behavioural challenges that students faced after the resumption of learning. Reduction in courses offered in the VTCs happened as some institutions were not fully prepared to offer them and instead of admitting students, some of them were deferred to subsequent terms. Physical seating arrangements were changed by classroom lecturers through observing social distance and everyone in the institution was required to sanitise, check the temperature, and wear a mask throughout the day. Some principals also engaged community leaders and religious leaders to encourage students to resume their training. Some colleges went further to look for bursaries for students who were unable to pay college fees as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. To girl students, two VTCs initiated a programme of providing sanitary materials in order to attract and keep them in college after reopening. Considering the fact that VTCs depended on County government support, they could not do much and this explains failure by many students report back to college after the resumption of learning in January 2021.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

The vocational education and training sector was significantly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. All institutions were closed and students were sent home. There were no measures put in place to support remote learning as their form of learning was mainly practical oriented. The paper has found out that the work-based learning system that existed before the Covid-19 pandemic struck did not continue since many businesses and cottage industries closed while others did not allow students to undertake practicum activities because of restriction guidelines on physical interaction by the Ministry of Health. Tutors' capacity to monitor their students at home was limited and this resulted in quite a number of them not reporting back to school when their VTCs were re-opened in January 2021. The Covid-19 pandemic demotivated many students undertaking vocational training programmes as many could not access training or even workshops for their courses. Because of the economic crisis that faced nations across the world during the pandemic, a significant number of students failed to resume schooling (34.8% in our case) partly because of the inability to pay school fees. Tutors were demotivated also as they did not have the required skills to conduct remote learning and monitor their students' progress while at home. The infrastructure available to support remote learning was non-existent in the six VTCs centres in West Pokot and therefore the following recommendations are made to various stakeholders with the intention of improving the delivery of vocational education and training to students in VTCs to enable them to better cope with crises like the one they now experienced:

- 1) There is a need for equipping all VTCs centres with the right infrastructural facilities to enhance remote and online learning;

- 2) Tutors and students in all VTCs need to be trained in digital skills to enable them to acquire the competencies to use the system whenever it is possible;
- 3) There is a need for VTCs management to set up systems of monitoring and assessment of students' progress when they are in and when they are out of school in order to reduce the dropout rates;
- 4) There is a need for training of tutors on blended and flexible learning methodologies to enable them to cope with any challenge to face-to-face learning that may happen in the future; and
- 5) There is a need for the establishment of guidance and counselling departments in public VTCs.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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