Exploring the School Students' Awareness, Perception, and Demand for Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) in Sri Lanka

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Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) is recognized as a critical pathway for reducing youth unemployment and developing a skilled workforce. However, its potential remains underutilized in Sri Lanka due to limited student awareness and persistent social misconceptions. This study examines the awareness, perception, and demand for TVET among school students in the Matale Education Zone, Sri Lanka, where conventional university education continues to dominate career aspirations despite growing labor market demand for technical skills. This study aims to: (1) assess the level of awareness about TVET opportunities among Advanced Level students, (2) examine students' perceptions of vocational careers and TVET pathways, and (3) identify the socio-cultural and institutional factors that influence students' demand for TVET programs. A mixed-methods research approach was adopted within a pragmatic paradigm. Quantitative data was collected through cross-sectional survey questionnaires administered to 60 Advanced Level students purposively selected from five schools representing boys', girls', and mixed school categories in the Matale Education Zone. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 participants, including students, teachers, and principals, and other TVET officers to obtain in-depth qualitative insights. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, and mean scores), while qualitative data were subjected to thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes. Findings reveal a medium level of awareness of TVET among students, with limited understanding of available pathways and career prospects. Key themes identified through qualitative analysis include: a social prestige deficit, where vocational education is perceived as less prestigious than university education; influence of social agents, particularly parental expectations, gender norms, and peer pressure; inadequate career guidance, reflecting weak institutional support and limited exposure to TVET information; and labor market disconnect, indicating students' lack of awareness about industry demand for technical skills. Despite growing labor market needs, students demonstrate low demand for TVET, shaped predominantly by socio-cultural stigma and institutional constraints rather than informed career decision-making. The study concludes that enhancing TVET uptake requires multifaceted interventions, including strengthening school-based career guidance, challenging social perceptions through awareness campaigns, and improving the visibility and status of vocational pathways. Addressing these barriers is essential for aligning students' educational choices with labor market realities and national development goals.

Keywords: awareness, perception, demand, school students, TVET