

# Regional Integration of Technical and Vocational Education and Training in ECOWAS Region

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores the current status of the TVET system in West African countries and identifies strategies for effective integration within the ECOWAS region. The study used a mixed-methods research design to investigate regional TVET system integration within ECOWAS. Data was collected from 83 participants randomly selected from Benin, Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal, and Togo. The collected data was analysed using thematic analysis. The findings show that each member state has a unique TVET system with some cross-border initiatives to collaborate and share best practices. Similarly, the results reveal that the integration of TVET systems faces multifaceted challenges rooted in the socio-economic fabric of regions and the perception of vocational training. The findings show a lack of coherence and coordination, leading to inconsistencies in training quality, limited resources, and limited mobility of graduates. To address these challenges, there is a need for customized strategies and a concerted effort from policymakers, educators, industry stakeholders, and the community to develop a robust, adaptable, and forward-looking regional TVET system for ECOWAS member states. Therefore, it is imperative to harmonize standards and develop a regionally integrated TVET model so as to improve the quality and relevance of TVET in ECOWAS. This can create a skilled

workforce, promote youth employment, and foster the sustainable development of the region, like other regions that have an excellent harmonized and integrated regional TVET system within the region.

**Keywords:** Challenges, ECOWAS, Regional integration, Strategies, TVET system

## INTRODUCTION

The countries under Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) comprised with 15 countries located in West Africa, these countries are as Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, The Gambia and Togo. The total Population 413,625,581 resides in these 15 countries' (Countryeconomy, 2024).

As the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] (2021a) highlights, Technical and Vocation Education Training (TVET) plays a key role in any society when it comes to providing qualified labor for the economy and transitioning young people from 'learning to earning'. It is the education sector closest to the labor market. This means that should provide learners with practical skills so as to become competent at the labor market for solving the problem of demand and supply (Rwamu, 2019). Meanwhile, the massive expansion of TVET activities in Africa, particularly in West Africa as well as the growing demand

of qualified workforce in international market need to be taken into consideration (Freeman, 2007). This could be seen as a bridge to individual skills development, youth employability and regional economic growth. Skills development is a priority field and aims at addressing the youth unemployment issue globally. It helps to address and develop skills policies that meet labor market needs to promote decent work (Sparreboom & Powell, 2009).

Nowadays, while looking at the West African TVET system, it appears that this region has seen an increase in demand for skilled professionals due to the rapid growth of industries and the need for a skilled workforce to sustain its economic growth (Sleezer & Denny, 2004). Thus, there has been a push towards regional integration in TVET to ensure that workers in the region are equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge required to meet the demands of the various sectors. However, there is a big problem of labor market integration and adaptation in the West Africa regional TVET system (Blyzniuk & Guk, 2015). Therefore, it is important to examine the state of regional integration in West African TVET system, identify the challenges hindering its progress and propose possible solutions to address them.

This study seeks to explore the current status of the TVET system in West African countries so as to identify strategies for effective integration of the TVET system in West Africa, specifically within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) region.

### **Problem statement**

Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) region has different system of Technical, Vocational Education and Training (TVET). It has created difficulties to the human capital movement one country to another country within ECOWAS region. The HR where shortage in certain areas could move and work to accomplish tasks without any equivalency, it will make acceptance one another and

improve the quality. The quality of the TVET training could be examined in the source of origin one another; at present there is no such mechanism and the people have to go through the process of recognition and so on, it has also hampered the development of the West African countries.

### **Objective of the study**

The objective of this study is to explore the regional integration of the TVET system within the ECOWAS region.

### **Research questions**

Based on the objective of the study, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What is the current status of the TVET system in West African countries/region?
2. How can the TVET system be effectively integrated at the regional level within ECOWAS?

### **Significance of the study**

This research on the regional integration of TVET systems in ECOWAS offers valuable insights into the challenges, opportunities, and best practices involved in integrating these systems across member states. The findings can be used by policymakers to make informed decisions, develop targeted interventions, and design collaborative initiatives that promote skill mobility. Knowledge-sharing efforts are also facilitated by this article which highlights successful models of regional integration and innovative approaches from different regional experiences in TVET integration. This article also plays a critical role in assessing the impact of regional integration efforts on TVET systems, identifying areas for improvement and recommending evidence-based solutions. Furthermore, the findings of this study contribute to building research capacity and expertise in the field of TVET within the ECOWAS region, generating new knowledge and insights that inform decision-making and shape the

future direction of TVET. Finally, this paper empowers stakeholders, practitioners, and policymakers to drive positive change, innovation, and sustainable development in the TVET sector across ECOWAS member states.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Three key themes emerged from the literature review, each having relevance and implications for this study. These include flash on African TVET systems, overview TVET systems in ECOWAS, and models of TVET regional integration followed by the objective of the study, the research questions, and the significance of the study.

### Flash on African TVET systems

TVET in Africa plays a crucial role in addressing youth unemployment, enhancing skills development, and promoting economic growth (Aman, 2023). African countries have been increasingly recognizing the importance of TVET in equipping individuals with practical skills and competencies needed for the workforce. Nowadays, many African countries, the TVET sector is overseen by various government ministries responsible for education, training, and labor in many African countries (African Union [AU], 2019a). It appears that TVET programs in Africa are diverse and vary from one country to another. They are taught at different levels in different types of schools and colleges, including private and public institutions (African Union [AU], 2007; AU, 2019b). Similarly, efforts are being made to align TVET programs with industry needs, promote entrepreneurship, and improve the quality of training provided. Partnerships with the private sector, international organizations, and donor agencies are also being established to support TVET initiatives in Africa (Okoye & Chijioke, 2013; AU, 2015). However, TVET systems in Africa face several challenges, including fragmented structuring, unregulated traditional apprenticeship, growing importance of

private TVET centers, supply-driven TVET systems, mismatch between supply and demand for skills, low prestige and attractiveness of TVET, gender-based inequality of opportunity, geographic and economic disparities, low quality and ineffective training, insufficient funding, weak policy implementation structures, and policy and legislation (AU, 2007).

Addressing these challenges requires increased investment in TVET, curriculum reform to make programs more relevant to labor market demands, and capacity building for teachers and trainers. That is the reason why there are promising initiatives at the national level, and TVET systems in a growing number of countries are undergoing or have undergone positive transformations (Montague, 2009; Msasa, 2014). To this end, the African Union has developed a continental TVET strategy to transform TVET into a mainstream activity for African youth development, youth employment, and human capacity building (AU, 2007). The strategy aims to deliver quality TVET, assure employability of trainees, improve coherence and management of training provision, promote lifelong learning, and enhance the status and attractiveness of TVET (AU, 2016). Based on that, some countries, such as Ghana, Morocco, and South Africa, have embraced innovative approaches to TVET, resulting in concrete economic growth and industrial development (Msasa, 2014). These countries have focused on aligning TVET with economic realities, ensuring access and inclusion, and strengthening the quality and management capacities of TVET systems (AU, 2015). The African Union Commission is also spearheading the development of a new strategy to revitalize TVET in Africa, recognizing its importance in empowering individuals for sustainable livelihoods and socio-economic development (AU, 2019; ILO, 2020).

Moreover, there have been notable success stories in TVET in Africa. Countries like South Africa, Kenya, and Rwanda have implemented innovative TVET programs

that have successfully linked training to employment opportunities and entrepreneurship (Rwamu, 2019; Ogbuanya & Obierika, 2015). These initiatives serve as models for other African countries looking to strengthen their TVET systems (AU, 2019b). From this, it is noted that TVET in Africa has the potential to contribute significantly to the continent's socio-economic development by providing individuals with the skills and knowledge necessary to secure gainful employment, drive innovation, and contribute to sustainable growth.

### **Overview of TVET systems in ECOWAS**

In our contemporary society, TVET system plays a crucial role in the economic and social development of a region. In the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) region, TVET is instrumental in enhancing vocational capacities, facilitating employment, and responding to industrial demands. A study by Cong and Wang (2012) highlighted that TVET system in ECOWAS is enhancing vocational capacities for labor market entry and career development. Similarly, Na (2014) found that TVET systems are integral to employment, with a dual focus on improving vocational capacities for labor market entry and fostering job creation and career development. It appears that TVET is increasingly adapting to rapid technological changes through re-training and boosting employee capacities, emphasizing autonomy and industry cooperation. More importantly, the evolution of TVET includes a shift from purely academic-based vocational education to a combination that incorporates field work, reflecting workplace demands (Na, 2014). This is evident to the study by Pavlova (2014) which found that TVET is recognized as a vital factor in economic development, with a correlation between TVET student proportions at the post-secondary level and per capita income. This means that countries are therefore enhancing policy guidance, regulatory frameworks, and private sector partnerships

to leverage TVET for productivity and poverty reduction.

Looking at the current status of TVET in ECOWAS, it is noted that TVET plays a crucial role in addressing skills gaps, promoting economic growth, and enhancing employment opportunities in each country (ILO, 2020; UNESCO, 2021b; UNESCO, 2022). To this end, each member states has a unique TVET system with tailored and contextualized features. In Nigeria, TVET system is coordinated by the Federal Ministry of Education and the National Board for Technical Education (NBTE). The country has made efforts to improve TVET quality through curriculum revisions, partnerships with industries, and infrastructure development (Okolie, 2018; Okoye & Okwelle, 2013). Ghana has also been working on enhancing its TVET system, with initiatives such as the Council for Technical and Vocational Education and Training (COTVET) and the Skills Development Fund (SDF) to promote skills training and certification (African Union, 2019c). In Senegal, the National Agency for Vocational Training (ANFP in French) oversees TVET programs aimed at providing practical skills for employment, particularly in key sectors like agriculture and construction (Bâ et al., 2020).

Furthermore, in Benin Republic, the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) system is overseen by the Ministry of Secondary and Technical Education and Vocational Training (Nouatin et al., 2018). The country has been focusing on improving the quality and relevance of TVET programs to meet the needs of the labor market. Initiatives such as the National Agency for Vocational Training and Employment Promotion (ANPE in French) aim to enhance skills development and promote youth employment through vocational training (Association for the Development of the Education in Africa [ADEA], 2018). Besides, UNESCO (2019) notes that Togo TVET system is coordinated by the Ministry of Higher Education and Research. The government



has been working on strengthening the TVET system by aligning curricula with industry requirements, providing teacher training, and establishing partnerships with the private sector. In that country, the National Office for Professional and Technical Training (ONFPT) plays a key role in promoting TVET programs and facilitating the transition of graduates into the workforce (UNESCO, 2019).

It denotes that the current status of the TVET system in ECOWAS reflects a dynamic and responsive educational framework that is closely linked to employment and economic development (Yaya et al., 2019). Aligning with this, Salleh and Puteh (2017) found that TVET system is evolving to meet the changing demands of the labor market and industries, with a growing emphasis on practical skills, re-training, and industry collaboration. From this point, it is noted that this approach is not only aimed at individual career growth but also at broader economic and social advancements within the region. Thus, West African TVET system contributes to addressing skills gaps and promoting economic development, political will to enhance the quality and relevance of TVET programs, regional collaboration to harmonize policies, and public-private partnerships between governments, industry stakeholders, and educational institutions (Sleezer & Denny, 2004; UNESCO, ECOWAS, UNDP, 2013).

Despite progress in promoting regional integration, there are still significant challenges to maximize the potential of TVET in driving inclusive growth, fostering innovation, and empowering the workforce (Pavlova, 2014). These challenges include concerns about the quality and relevance of TVET programs, resource constraints such as limited funding, outdated infrastructure, inadequate facilities, and shortages of qualified instructors, fragmentation of TVET systems, high youth unemployment rates in several ECOWAS countries, and gender disparities in skill acquisition and employment opportunities (Salleh & Puteh,

2017). To this end, continued efforts to harmonize TVET systems and enhance skills development for sustainable economic growth of the region.

### **Models of Regional Integration of TVET System**

Nowadays, there are various models of regional integration in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) that have been implemented in different parts of the world. According to Kaleja and Egetenmeyer (2017), the European Union (EU) has a well-established regional TVET system that promotes collaboration among member countries to enhance the quality and relevance of vocational education and training. This model is known as “Erasmus+ VET program” which aims to support TVET learners, teachers, and institutions across Europe to collaborate with each other and benefit from shared expertise (Kaleja & Egetenmeyer, 2017). This model includes policies and programs that support the mobility of students, teachers, and workers across borders, as well as harmonization of qualifications and standards. Similarly, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has established a TVET network to enhance cooperation and collaboration among the member states in TVET as well as to promote economic integration (Schröder, 2018). This led to the development of the ASEAN Qualification and Recognition Frameworks (AQR) which promote mutual recognition of qualifications and facilitate mobility of skilled workers within the region (Schröder, 2018). This framework aligns national qualifications frameworks of member countries to enhance transparency and comparability of qualifications. Likewise, Thorsen (2014) found that the East African Community (EAC) member states have developed a common TVET framework to facilitate the recognition and transfer of qualifications among member states. This EAC regional TVET strategy aims to harmonize TVET policies, standards, and systems across member states and improve

the quality and relevance of TVET programs, enhancing teacher training, and promoting industry partnerships to address skills gaps in the region (Thorsen, 2014). Furthermore, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) has developed a Regional Qualifications Framework (RQF) to facilitate recognition of qualifications and promote mobility of skilled labor within the region (Karingi, 2016). The framework provides guidelines for aligning national qualifications frameworks and establishing mechanisms for quality assurance and credit transfer. Additionally, the Pacific Islands Forum has developed a regional TVET strategy that promotes cooperation among member countries to strengthen TVET systems and improve skills development (Asian Development Bank, 2007). The strategy emphasizes the importance of industry engagement, competency-based training, and lifelong learning opportunities. Moreover, under the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) which replaced the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), there are provisions for the recognition of TVET qualifications between the three countries, which can facilitate the mobility of TVET professionals across borders (Gantz, 2018). In addition, the Caribbean Vocational Qualifications (CVQ) Framework is a regional qualification that is recognized across 16 Caribbean countries. It aims to provide a common standard for TVET qualifications across the region, which can facilitate the mobility of skilled workers

among member states (Allais, 2017). These are just a few examples of regional TVET models that aim to improve the quality and relevance of TVET programs, facilitate the recognition of qualifications across borders, and enhance the mobility of skilled workers among member states. Interestingly, each model has unique features and strategies tailored to the specific needs and challenges of the region. Therefore, it is important for ECOWAS to established a unique and adapted TVET integration model to enhance the quality, relevance, and effectiveness of TVET system in the region.

## MATERIALS & METHODS

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design to explore the regional integration of the TVET system within ECOWAS (Creswell, 2012). Data was collected through semi-structured interview questionnaires and document analysis (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The questionnaires were designed to solicit detailed responses on the current status of TVET within ECOWAS, challenges faced, and strategies for enhancing regional integration. Document analysis provided additional context and background information to complement the questionnaire responses. A total of 83 participants were selected using simple random techniques among TVET students, graduates, teachers, trainers, leaders and managers from ECOWAS countries, with a focus on Benin, Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal, and Togo (Creswell, 2014; ECOWAS, 2016). (see Table 1).

Table 1: Number of selected participants

Selected ECOWAS countries	TVET students and graduates	TVET teachers and trainers	TVET leaders and managers	Total
Benin (29)	20	07	02	29
Ghana (08)	04	02	02	08
Nigeria (14)	08	04	02	14
Senegal (08)	04	02	02	08
Togo (24)	15	07	02	24
Total	51	22	10	83

This includes 51 TVET students and graduates; 22 TVET teachers and trainers,

and 10 TVET leaders and managers across the region

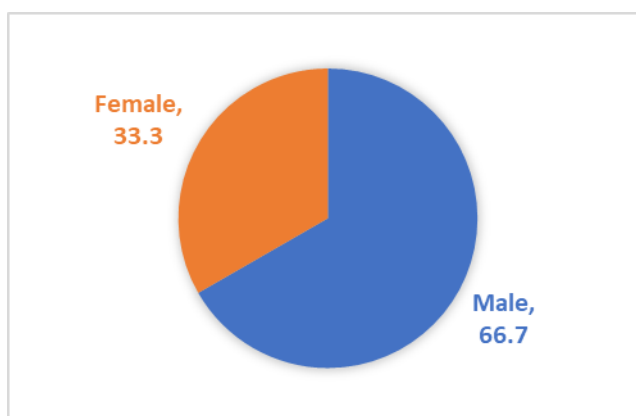
The collected data was analysed using thematic analysis and, which involved coding, data tabulation, thematizing, and interpretation (Maxwell, 2020). The findings were used to formulate strategies for enhancing regional cooperation and collaboration in TVET across ECOWAS member states. The researcher-maintained adherence to quality standards and ethical considerations throughout the research process, ensuring data accuracy and protecting participant rights (Tolich & Tumilty, 2021).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results and discussions of this study are presented in three sub-sections. The first sub-section is about the current status of ECOWAS TVET system which answers the research question 1 while the second sub-section deals with the strategies to enhance and improve the regional integration of TVET across EICOWAS through the research question 2. The data presentations and analysis are combined with the discussion of the findings.

Current Status of ECOWAS TVET system

### Stakeholders' gender



(Source: Primary data/ Figure 1: Stakeholders' gender)

Figure 1 presents the stakeholders' gender. According to the data collected, 66.7% of TVET students, graduates, teachers, trainers, leaders and managers are male, while 33.3% are female. The results show that, in TVET system within ECOWAS region, the gender distribution of stakeholders plays a significant role in shaping the dynamics and inclusivity of the TVET sector.

This gender disparity in the TVET system reflects a predominance of male representation among stakeholders in the ECOWAS countries, mainly in Benin, Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal, and Togo. This showed the gender disparities have become an important aspect to be taken into consideration while developing a regionally integrated model for ECOWAS member states. Addressing gender disparities in

TVET stakeholders within the ECOWAS region is essential for creating a more diverse, inclusive, and gender-responsive TVET system that empowers all individuals to fully participate and contribute to the development of skills and competencies for the workforce and sustainable growth in the region (Hollander & Mar, 2009).

### Participants' age group

Table 2: Participants' age group

Participants' age group	Frequency	Percentage
20-30	51	61.45%
31-40	10	12.05%
41-50	22	26.50%
Total	83	100%

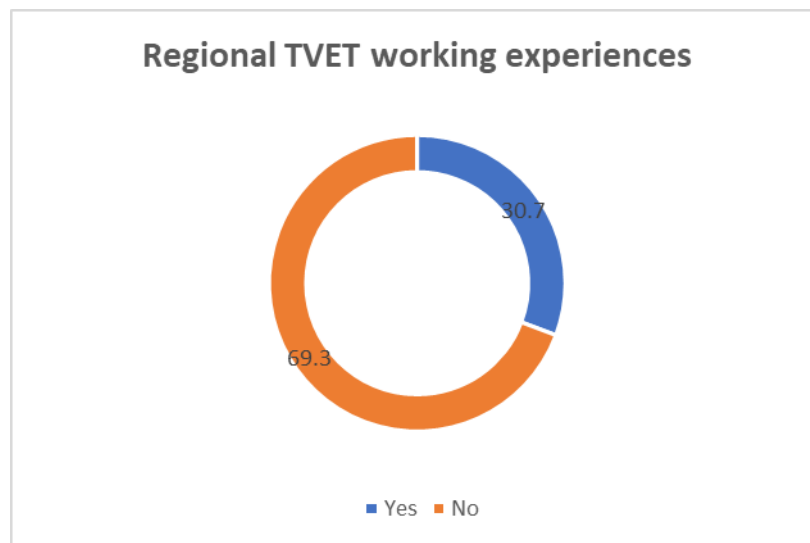
Source: Primary data

Table 2 presents the age group of the participants. According to the data, the age groups among TVET stakeholders are as follows: 61.45% are between 20-30 years old, 12.05% are 31-40 years old, and 26.50% are 41-50 years old. The results reveal that a significant proportion of TVET stakeholders in the ECOWAS region fall within the younger age group of 20-30 years old. This suggests a relatively youthful demographic among individuals engaged in TVET programs, teaching roles, and managerial positions within the TVET sector across member states such as Benin, Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal, and Togo. The lower percentages in the older age categories indicate a potential need for succession planning, skills transfer, and

professional development opportunities to ensure the sustainability and continuity of expertise within the TVET system in the ECOWAS region.

To this end, ECOWAS member states have to design a regional inclusive policies, programs, and initiatives that cater to the needs and aspirations of TVET practitioners and learners of all ages to harness the diverse perspectives, experiences, and talents of stakeholders across different age groups (ECOWAS, n.d.). By promoting intergenerational collaboration and knowledge exchange, the ECOWAS TVET system can enhance its relevance, quality, and impact in driving sustainable development and economic growth within the region.

### ***Regional TVET working experiences***



(Source: Primary data/ Figure 2: Regional TVET working experiences)

Figure 2 displays the regional TVET working experiences among stakeholders. The data on TVET working experiences across ECOWAS region reveals an interesting trend. According to the figure 2, 30.7% of students, graduates, teachers, trainers, leaders, and managers are working abroad, while a significant majority of 69.3% are employed in their home countries.

This indicates a sizeable percentage of individuals within the TVET sector seeking opportunities outside their home countries,

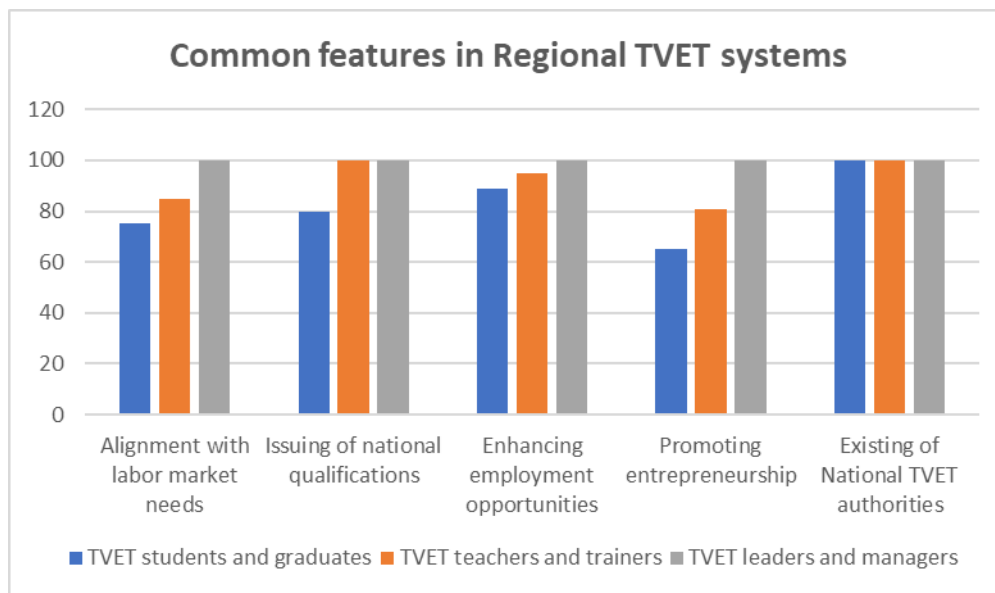
possibly driven by factors such as better remuneration, career prospects, or specific skill demands in other ECOWAS nations. The presence of a considerable number of TVET professionals working abroad can have both positive and negative implications for the regional integration of TVET systems in ECOWAS. On one hand, it signifies a level of expertise and experience being shared across borders, potentially enriching the knowledge pool and fostering collaboration among member states. These individuals could bring back valuable



insights and best practices from their international experiences, contributing to the enhancement of TVET policies and practices at home (ECOWAS, 2016). However, on the flip side, a high percentage of TVET professionals working abroad may also indicate certain challenges within the domestic TVET sector, such as limited job opportunities, inadequate resources, or gaps

in training and professional development. Addressing these underlying issues is crucial for retaining talent within the region and ensuring the sustainability and growth of the TVET sector across ECOWAS countries. Based on that ECOWAS can develop a unique regional TVET system which provides equal training and employment opportunities across the region.

**Common features in Regional TVET systems**



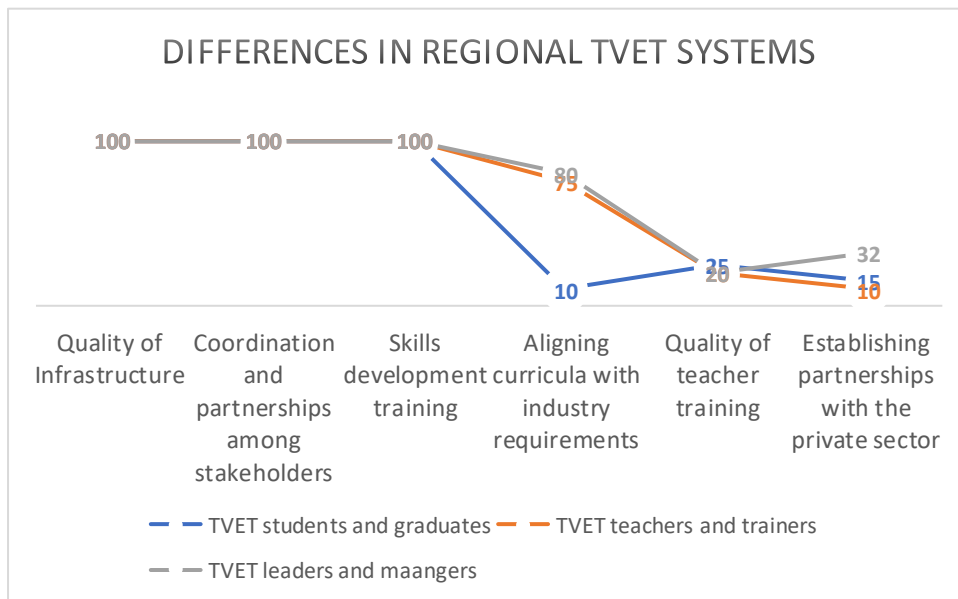
(Source: Primary data/ Figure 3: Common features in regional TVET systems)

Figure 3 displays the common features in the TVET systems across the region. The results show that the TVET systems within the ECOWAS region share common features in their approach to TVET. These include aligning training programs with labor market demands, issuing national certificates upon completion, enhancing employment opportunities for graduates, promoting entrepreneurship, and ensuring quality assurance through national authorities.

An analysis of these common features reveals that the national TVET systems provide practical, hands-on training and work-based learning experiences, bridging

the gap between education and employment. They also promote entrepreneurship by integrating entrepreneurship education, business management training, and mentorship programs. From the figure above, it appears that there are national authorities who oversee the TVET sector, ensuring quality assurance and promoting continuous improvement. Based on the above notes, it appears that member states can collaborate more effectively, share best practices, and harmonize policies and strategies to strengthen vocational education and training across the region (Dambudzo, 2013).

**Differences in Regional TVET systems**



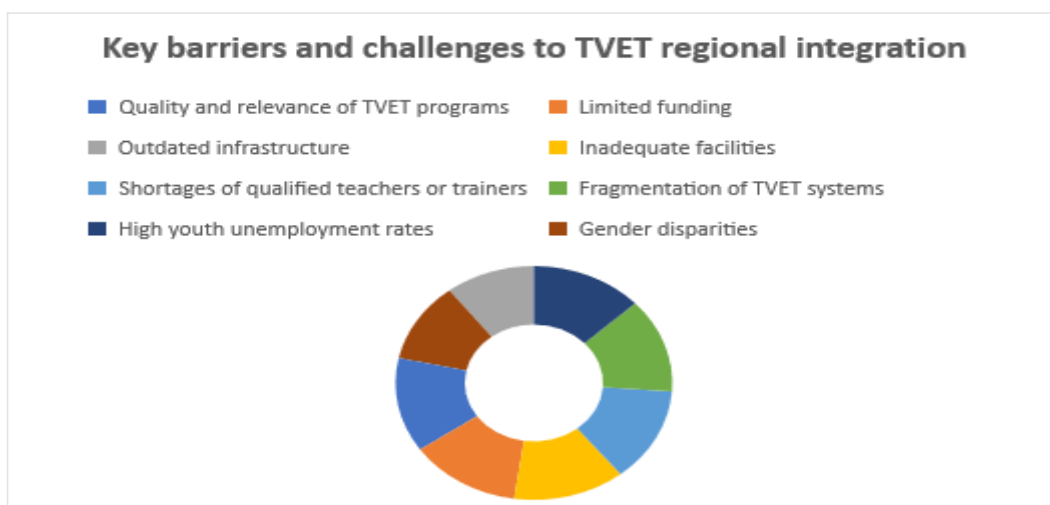
(Source: Primary data/ Figure 4: Differences in regional TVET systems)

Figure 4 presents the key differences that affect the effectiveness and efficiency of TVET programs across ECOWAS member states. The results show that the differences include the quality of infrastructure, coordination and partnerships among stakeholders, skills development training, curricular alignment with industry requirements, teacher training, and establishing partnerships with the private sector.

This reveals the importance of aligning curricula with industry requirements,

ensuring teachers have the necessary skills for the labor market, and establishing partnerships with the private sector to enhance the relevance and employability of TVET graduates across the region (ECOWAS, 2018; Ananiadou, 2013). By addressing these differences, ECOWAS countries can work towards harmonizing and improving their TVET systems, promoting sustainable development and meeting the evolving needs of the labor market.

**Key barriers and challenges to TVET regional integration**



(Source: Primary data/ Figure 5: Key barriers and challenges to TVET regional integration)

Figure 5 displays the key barriers and challenges to TVET regional integration. The results show that there are eight group of challenges to regional integration in ECOWAS. These challenges include quality and relevance of TVET programs, Limited funding, outdated infrastructure, inadequate facilities, shortage of quality teachers and trainers, fragmentation of TVET programs, high youth unemployment rates and gender disparities.

A study by Majumdar (2011) found that challenges and barriers to regional integration of TVET systems are the current status and trends of individual systems, the low status of TVET, questioning traditional economic slants, ensuring equitable access, improving education quality, efficient resource management, poor perception, lack of labor market linkage, addressing 21st-century skills, and issues with resources, infrastructure, and technology implementation. This showed that the integration of TVET systems faces multifaceted challenges that are deeply rooted in the socio-economic fabric of regions and the perception of vocational training. To this end, there is a need for customized approaches as well as a concerted effort from policymakers, educators, industry stakeholders, and the community to reframe the value of TVET and to develop robust, adaptable, and forward-looking regional TVET system for ECOWAS member states.

### ***Successful cross-border cooperation TVET initiatives in ECOWAS***

This sub-section sheds light on effective practices that have enhanced collaboration and coordination among ECOWAS countries in the TVET sector. The participants do not provide specific examples of successful cross-border cooperation TVET initiatives in ECOWAS. However, the document analysis reveals that there are some promising TVET initiatives in Africa, such as Ghana, Morocco, and South Africa (Aman, 2023). It appears that these countries have embraced innovative

approaches to TVET, resulting in concrete economic growth and industrial development. Similarly, the African Union has also developed a continental TVET strategy to transform TVET into a mainstream activity for African youth development, youth employment, and human capacity building (AU, 2007). At ECOWAS, the existing initiatives show that the ECOWAS Commission has developed a TVET revitalization strategy that focuses on key strategic issues (ECOWAS, n.d.). These include policies and action plans for TVET, structures, current laws and legal frameworks, financing, staffing, qualifications frameworks, career guidance and counselling, employability curricula, access and participation, and linkages between formal, informal and informal sub-sectors (ECOWAS, 2016; Itumo, 2017). Similarly, in late 2018, ECOWAS approved the draft System for Recognition and Equivalence of Higher Education Degrees, and UNESCO Regional Office for West Africa, based in Abuja, Nigeria, launched a quality assurance project (Adotevi & Kyari, 2020). Such great initiatives can serve as valuable case studies for understanding the challenges and opportunities for regional integration, as well as providing insights into the best strategies for fostering cross-border cooperation in TVET within the ECOWAS context.

### **Strategies for TVET regional integration in ECOWAS**

This question aimed to identify some strategies that could be put into place to enhance the regional integration of the TVET system in ECOWAS. The responses collected from the participants show that ECOWAS region is working towards a regional integration of the TVET system to promote cooperation, share best practices, and enhance the quality and effectiveness of vocational education and training. It is noted that 69 out of 83 participants, i.e. 83.14% proposed some policy recommendations which include standardizing qualifications, enhancing mobility of skilled workers,

implementing robust quality assurance mechanisms, encouraging collaboration among stakeholders, developing regional recognition and accreditation frameworks, promoting regional recognition and accreditation through awareness-raising campaigns, and providing capacity building training at the regional level. Besides, 14 participants, i.e. 16.86% suggested strategies like establishing harmonized standards and qualifications for TVET programs across ECOWAS countries is crucial for ensuring consistency and comparability in skills development. Thus, if ECOWAS take relevant policy recommendations, this can lead to streamlined visa procedures, mutual recognition agreements, and cross-border employment opportunities across the region (Kanwar et al., 2019).

Based on the results, it denotes that a harmonized TVET system will ensure consistent training and education, making it easier for students to move between countries and have their skills recognized. This can also facilitate the mobility of skilled workers across ECOWAS member states, addressing skills shortages and providing employment opportunities. For instance, Japan International Cooperation Agency [JICA] (2021) found that over 270 industry-demanded programs have been developed to enhance the quality of TVET programs in the region, aiming to meet the demands of the labor market and support regional integration efforts. As JICA highlighted, more than 60,000 individuals have been trained, indicating a significant investment in skills development and capacity building within the TVET sector in ECOWAS (ILO, n.d.; JICA, 2021). In other words, it can be said that TVET sector in ECOWAS is responding to global and regional trends, aligning its programs with the evolving needs of the labor market and focusing on enhancing the quality, relevance, and efficiency of TVET systems to promote economic growth and development. Then it is important to share best practices, joint assessments, and quality

control measures through sophisticated quality assurance mechanisms across the region.

Furthermore, a well-integrated and standardized TVET system can contribute to the economic development of ECOWAS member states by providing industries with a skilled workforce that meets their needs, boosting productivity, innovation, and competitiveness in key sectors. As noted by Dambudzo (2013), collaboration between academic education and TVET through Open Distance Learning is supported by various stakeholders, including corporate bodies, individuals, and policymakers, due to its potential to extend educational opportunities cost-effectively. This acknowledged that TVET is a crucial process for preparing information-literate and knowledgeable workers, with its integration seen as beneficial for economic, social, and political development (Osidipe, 2017).

Moreover, a study by Dixon and Hutton (2015) showed that the integration of TVET within the educational framework is increasingly recognized as a vital component for economic development and workforce preparation. This shows that integrating TVET with both academic education and industry, as well as including STEM, can lead to more equitable access to education, enhanced quality, efficient resource use, and a workforce better prepared for the knowledge-based economy in the ECOWAS region (African Union [AU], 2019b; Adotevi & Kyari, 2020). As noted by Dambudzo (2013), successful integration of TVET requires supportive policy frameworks and may involve different models at various educational levels, with recommendations for pilot projects to precede regional implementation. From this point, UNESCO (2021b) proposed that a framework for integrating STEM and TVET emphasizes goal orientation, constructivism, systems thinking, and situated learning, aiming to achieve integration across primary, secondary, and tertiary education levels.

Thus, integrating the TVET system within ECOWAS allows member states to work together to improve the quality, relevance, and accessibility of vocational education and training programs, contributing to the socio-economic development and integration of the region.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This paper explores the current status of TVET system in ECOWAS member states and the implications for its integration in the region. It is noted that ECOWAS countries have different approaches, structures, and levels of development in their TVET systems. These systems aim to boost the collaboration and coordination efforts within TVET sector. Similarly, there is a general consensus that the ECOWAS countries need not only to enhance its TVET system to meet the demands of the world of work but they also need to develop a strong and relevant regional TVET system to foster youth employment and regional economic growth. To this end, TVET, ECOWAS TVET system needs a diverse range of institutions, policies and practices that aim to develop competencies, skills and knowledge for employment and entrepreneurship. However, there is a lack of coherence and coordination among West African countries in the development and implementation of TVET programs. This lack of coordination leads to inconsistency in the quality of training and accreditation standards, limited access to resources and funding, and limited mobility of TVET graduates across the sub-region. It denotes that development of a regional integrated TVET model within ECOWAS requires careful planning, coordination, and collaboration among member states. Thus, ECOWAS is working on a regional integrated model of the TVET system, which includes strategies to establish national standards for qualification awarding.

Based on the findings, it is recommended the development of a Regional

Qualifications Framework (RQF). This framework can serve as a communication tool and a regulatory mechanism for the development and classification of qualifications according to a set of criteria or learning outcomes specified for each level of achievement within the region. Similarly, harmonizing TVET curriculum across ECOWAS member states can ensure that TVET programs are aligned with labor market needs and promote regional mobility of skilled workers. This can guarantee that vocational programs meet labor market demands and facilitate the movement of skilled workers across the region. To guarantee the accreditation of all TVET programs and uphold quality assurance in TVET delivery across member states, ECOWAS countries can also adopt a regional accreditation council, like the Accreditation Council of Trinidad and Tobago (ACTT). Furthermore, ECOWAS countries can promote regional cooperation and integration in TVET through the formation of partnerships between TVET institutions in various member states. This initiative can facilitate the sharing of best practices, foster the creation of collaborative TVET programs, and bolster the mobility of skilled workers across the region. From all of the above, these recommendations aim to ensure consistency, quality, and regional integration, promoting labor mobility, enhancing employability, and attracting investment in skills development. Hence, ECOWAS can create a skilled workforce, promote youth employment and foster the sustainable development of the region like other regions that have an excellent harmonized and integrated regional TVET system.

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