Understanding Student Preference for Universities Over TVET Colleges

A Conceptual Analysis of Perceptions and Institutional Factors

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21 YEARS OF IMPACT

Our Future Reimagined

PRESENTATION OVERVIEW

01 Background of the study

02 Theoretical Foundation

03 Research Methodology

04 Findings (6 Themes)

05 The Integrated Framework

06 Implications & Conclusion

Three Decades On, the Pattern Hasn't Moved

1994

TVET redesigned to bridge skills gap

An explicit mandate to address mass post-school enrolment and a labour market starved of intermediate skills

30yrs

Students still choose university first

Low enrolment, low public esteem, weak throughput, graduate unemployment, despite the sector's developmental promise

4IR

The puzzle sharpens

Employers now expect digital fluency too. COVID-19 exposed TVET's digital fragility, widening the perceived gap with universities

Research question: What factors shape student preference for universities over TVET colleges, and how do perceptions of digital readiness contribute?

Three Lenses on Why Students Choose

HCT

Human Capital Theory

Education as investment

Students compare expected returns across pathways. Digital competence is now central to perceived returns.

SIT

Social Influence Theory

Informational & normative channels

Parents, peers, teachers and media shape evaluation , consistently shown across African career-choice scholarship.

InT

Institutional Theory

Legitimacy & reputation

Legitimacy is conferred by reputation and visible quality markers; digital readiness is now one of them.

All three converge on one point: students choose on PERCEIVED returns, socially mediated, legitimised by visible markers, not on directly observed reality.

Narrative & Critical Literature Review

DESIGN
Conceptual research — secondary data only, no human participants. Creswell & Creswell (2017) design; Saunders et al. (2019) narrative review

SEARCH
Scopus

SCOPE
English-language sources, 2011–2025, South African & comparable developing-country contexts; foundational pre-2011 theory retained where indispensable

ANALYSIS
Braun & Clarke (2006) six-phase thematic synthesis: familiarisation → coding → theme search → review → naming → reporting

TRUSTWORTHINESS
Lincoln & Guba criteria — credibility (triangulation), transferability, dependability, confirmability (traceable coding trail)

EVIDENTIAL RULE
Every directional pathway in the framework anchored to at least two independent sources — not conceptual assertion alone

Stigma Runs Deep · Employability Is Now Digitally Framed

Theme 1

Societal Perceptions of TVET

Three accounts of the SAME stigma:

Structural: articulation failures (Majola)

Intersectional: disability & vocational identity (Muzite & Gasa)

Historical-symbolic: the differentiated system's ordering (Papier & Needham)

Students rarely see employment data — they encounter narratives via family, peers, media that position TVET as second-best. The stigma-transmitting channels must become the repositioning channels.

Theme 2

Perceived Employability Differences

Three loci one digital frame:

Supply-side: graduates lack digital competencies (Mbambo & du Plessis)

Self-perception: students underestimate readiness (Mkhize & Reddy)

Curriculum design: limited industry exposure (Thakalekoala)

Under Human Capital Theory in 4IR terms: expected returns to TVET depend on perceived digital readiness as much as perceived technical training. University preference partly tracks a digitally inflected employability calculation.

Real Deficits, Perceptual Lag · Reputation Outruns Reality

Theme 3

Digital Readiness & Technology Infrastructure

Documented deficits at multiple levels: infrastructure, lecturer skills, student competency — traced upstream to under-resourced secondary schools (Flowers & Tanner).

TWO FACES OF READINESS

Institutional-real (actual capability) vs Perceptual (what's visible). Under Institutional Theory, what shapes preference is the VISIBLE markers, not underlying capability. Improving infrastructure without communicating it leaves the perception lag intact.

Theme 4

Institutional Reputation & Credibility

Two competing accounts: reputation as a reflection of quality, vs Institutional Theory's view — legitimacy as its own resource, partially DECOUPLED from performance.

Mutungi shows credibility perceptions persist even after programmes improve. Students judge on visible markers — devices, connectivity, modern facilities — which can change faster than reputation does. A credibility ceiling depresses TVET enrolment even where quality is sound.

Choice by Default · 4IR as the Lens Over Everything Else

Theme 5

Awareness & Understanding of TVET Pathways

Where students don't understand what TVET offers or leads to, the choice isn't a genuine comparison — it's a default to the more familiar option.

THE DIGITAL TWIST

Awareness intersects with digital readiness: students who learn about TVET through outdated websites or thin digital outreach infer that TVET itself is digitally underdeveloped. The communicative infrastructure becomes part of how institutional substance is perceived.

Theme 6

4IR Preparedness & Future Employability

This theme draws the other five together. Three readings of what 4IR preparedness requires — a skills agenda, an institutional reorientation agenda, a self-efficacy agenda — implying complementary, not competing, investments.

Perceptions of 4IR preparedness operate as a LENS through which all five other themes are refracted. Where TVET is seen to lag the 4IR, every other determinant tilts further toward university choice.

Four Layers, Eight Constructs

ANTECEDENT LAYER

Awareness · Social Influence · 4IR Preparedness

Contextual forces in which choice is made

MEDIATING INSTITUTIONAL LAYER

Digital Readiness · Institutional Reputation · Employability Expectations

Institutional-level evaluations student's form

SYNTHESISING PERCEPTUAL LAYER

Student Perceptions

Where all other layers translate into preference — the BINDING pathway

OUTCOME LAYER

Student Preference Decisions

University vs TVET — the observable choice

Eleven Directional Pathways — Three Integrating Mechanisms

1

4IR as cross-cutting force

Feeds digital readiness (R4), employability (R5) & reputation (R6). 3 of 4 mediating pathways are 4IR-conditioned — TVET lag compounds across all of them.

2

Social influence, doubly mediated

Acts directly on perceptions (R2) AND indirectly via awareness (R3). TVET perceptions are shaped twice over by the social environment.

3

Mediating layer is interconnected

Digital readiness shapes both reputation and employability, each of which then shapes perceptions — compounded, not additive, effects.

R11 — THE BINDING PATHWAY

Student perceptions → Student preference decisions. Every one of the other ten pathways feeds into perceptions; perceptions alone drive choice. Students never directly observe infrastructure, lecturer capability, or graduate outcomes — they observe perceptions of these things, transmitted through social, informational and digital channels.

Four Testable Propositions

P1 Preference is shaped by an interacting SYSTEM of layers — not any single determinant

P2 4IR preparedness perceptions CONDITION the influence of digital readiness, reputation & employability on perceptions

P3 Social influence operates through BOTH direct and information-mediating pathways — doubling its effect

P4 Shifting preference requires engaging capability AND perception simultaneously — perception is the binding pathway

Each construct is measurable — survey scales, validated perception instruments, legitimacy/image scales — enabling structural equation modelling on cross-sectional data.

Capacity and Perception, Moved Together

Policy

- DHET + employer associations reposition TVET as a credible 4IR pathway
- Fix TVET-university articulation so vocational choice isn't penalised
- Pool resources regionally — SADC, South-South cooperation on shared challenge

Institutional

- Visible markers matter: modern LMS, lecturer digital fluency, student-facing digital experience
- Communicate capacity as it's built — don't let perception lag persist
- Track monitorable indicators: awareness levels, digital outreach reach, LMS adoption

Curriculum

- Embed 4IR competencies across programmes — not bolt-on modules
- Industry exposure & work-integrated learning close employer-expectation gaps
- Graduate-destination tracking to build the missing employability evidence base

CONCLUSION

No Single Determinant Explains This Choice

1

It's layered, not singular

University preference is the product of economic calculation, social influence, institutional legitimacy and digital perceptions interacting — not any one factor alone.

2

4IR intensifies every layer

Perceptions of digital readiness and 4IR preparedness condition every other determinant. Where TVET is seen to lag, every mediator tilts toward university choice.

3

Repositioning TVET = part of the 4IR response

This isn't a side issue for South Africa's industrial strategy — it's a core component of it. The framework offers the scaffolding; the four propositions await empirical testing.

Thank You

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