



# **Structural Constraints and Recruitment Practices in the Public Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Sector: A Critical Analysis of Lecturer Qualification Gaps in South Africa**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Finding and keeping competent lecturers is a recurring problem for South Africa's public TVET system. The structural and institutional barriers that lead to the widespread use of underqualified teaching staff are examined in this article, with an emphasis on hiring procedures, incentives for professional growth, and union influence. To investigate the systemic problems causing qualification gaps among TVET lecturers, the study examines public documents, official departmental reports, and sectoral legislation using a qualitative policy analysis approach. The results demonstrate how quality assurance procedures are frequently superseded by short-term employment needs, especially in engineering and business studies, which leads to the hiring of job seekers rather than career educators. Furthermore, there is a lack of intrinsic professionalisation in lecturer development since it is still driven by outside sources and depends on departmental bursaries, Sector Education Training Authorities (SETAs) funding or college-specific capital expenditure (CAPEX) funding. The abuse of the "scarce skills" defence in hiring decisions, which usually circumvent legal hiring processes, is also criticised in the article. Union pressures that present self-development as an institutional duty rather than an individual one exacerbate these practices. The study concludes that the TVET sector runs the risk of solidifying educational mediocrity in the absence of a clear policy alignment between hiring, continuing professional development, and quality assurance. To promote a professionalised TVET teaching corps, the article suggests a national qualification tracking framework, recruitment audit procedures, and an updated incentive structure.

**Keywords:** TVET, Lecturer Qualifications, Recruitment Practices, Continuing Professional Development, South Africa.

## **1. Introduction and Background**

In South Africa, the post-school education system (PSET) heavily relies on the TVET sector. Its duties include encouraging youth employment, fostering industrial development, and creating intermediate skills for the labour market (DHET, 2023). Notwithstanding its strategic significance, the industry still faces ongoing operational and structural difficulties, especially regarding hiring and certifying lecturers. Even though lecturer competency is widely acknowledged as a crucial factor in determining the quality of education and the success of learners, South African TVET Colleges routinely hire underqualified people, particularly in the fields with high demand like business studies, engineering, and mathematics (Mahlomaholo & Hlekiso, 2022). These staffing choices often stem not from deliberate workforce planning but from reactive responses to skills shortages and systemic inefficiencies in recruitment.

The qualification gaps are more than just technical errors; they reflect more fundamental structural constraints in the industry, such as uneven national policy enforcement, inadequate human resource planning, and a lack of accountability systems. Although the National Policy on the Minimum Requirements for TVET College Lecturers (DHET, 2021) establishes a precise standard for lecturer qualifications, different institutions' implementations differ greatly. Colleges frequently select lecturers based on their immediate availability and rudimentary technical skills, frequently disregarding their pedagogical training or professional teaching credentials (Nxumalo & Dube, 2021). This strategy maintains a discrepancy between national standards and institutional objectives.

Furthermore, socioeconomic realities influence the hiring environment. Many people become TVET lecturers as a survival tactic in response to high unemployment rates rather than as a career choice. As a result, the workforce is frequently underprepared for the pedagogical demands of the classroom and absent incentives, lacks the intrinsic drive to pursue further development (Zhou, 2023). When development opportunities do present themselves, they are typically driven by outside forces, such as DHET bursaries or SETAs' fundings and CAPEX allocations. A culture where self-improvement is conditional rather than proactive is reinforced by such patterns.

Another level of complexity is introduced by labour unions. Although they legitimately support worker rights, their participation in discussions about CPD has occasionally had unexpected repercussions. Instead of encouraging members to invest in their own development, unions frequently portray upgrading qualifications as a managerial duty, forcing colleges to allocate funds for staff development (Mashiloane & Sehoole, 2022). Leadership tactics in TVET institutions are complicated by the conflict between collective bargaining and educational accountability.

Given these overlapping institutional, structural, and cultural dynamics, this article critically investigates why qualification gaps among lecturers persist despite the clear policy emphasis on professionalisation. By focusing on recruitment practices, union involvement, and policy implementation, the study aims to illuminate the root causes of lecturer underqualification and propose contextually relevant policy recommendations.

### ***Research Questions:***

1. What institutional and structural factors contribute to the employment of underqualified lecturers in the TVET sector?
2. How do recruitment practices and union dynamics affect lecturer professionalisation?
3. What policy interventions could address the qualification gap sustainably?

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## **2. Literature Review**

### ***2.1 Growth in Scholarly Interest and Context***

Significant policy changes have been made to South Africa's Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) sector over the last ten years with the goal of improving the calibre and legitimacy of vocational education. The professionalization of TVET lecturers, a crucial area of scholarly research, is at the heart of these reforms. Researchers and policymakers have acknowledged that the quality of lecturers, particularly their educational backgrounds, pedagogical skills, and industry-relevant knowledge, has a direct impact on the sector's capacity to generate graduates with the skills needed to meet labour market demands (DHET, 2021; Cloete, 2021). In order to set baseline standards for lecturer qualifications, the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) issued the National Policy on the Minimum Requirements for TVET College Lecturers in 2021. According to the policy, all TVET lecturers must have a teaching credential and at least a diploma in their field, but research shows that different institutions continue to have varying degrees of compliance with these requirements (Jeptha & Mthombeni, 2023). As a result, the gap between the sector's official professionalization agenda and the real qualifications of its teaching staff has become a more prominent topic of discussion among academics.

An increasing amount of literature examines the legacy issues brought about by South Africa's disjointed post-apartheid educational system, which resulted in many TVET colleges employing instructors with little to no formal pedagogical training but industry experience (Letseka & Pitsoe, 2020). Researchers are examining the effects of these disparities on teaching quality and student outcomes because of the historical context that has solidified systemic inconsistencies in lecturer recruitment and development practices (Kruss, Wildschut, & Visser, 2020). Scholars have recently focused on TVET institutions' ability to successfully operationalize national policies. According to studies by Maluka and Mulaudzi (2024), institutional leadership frequently lacks the administrative skills and resource allocation techniques required to support lecturer development in accordance with policy directives. As a result, there is what some academics refer to as a "policy-practice gap," in which universities formally recognize the policy framework but do not carry it out in a way that is significant and long-lasting (Mashiloane & Sehoole, 2022).

This conversation has taken on a new dimension as a result of the global shift towards digital learning. As noted by researchers like Bester and Engelbrecht (2023), the COVID-19 pandemic revealed serious deficiencies in lecturers' digital pedagogical skills, underscoring the pressing need for focused professional development programs. As a result, scholars are becoming more interested in examining how traditional pedagogical skills and digital competencies interact to influence lecturers' efficacy in the changing TVET environment. An ongoing concern with coordinating institutional practices with policy goals is reflected in the scholarly focus on lecturer professionalization in South Africa's TVET sector. It also demonstrates the more general systemic issues that impede the sector's transformation agenda, solidifying lecturer development as a crucial area of study.

### ***2.2 The Credentials–Competency Mismatch***

The discrepancy between lecturers' professional and academic credentials and the pedagogical skills necessary for successful instruction is a recurring theme in the literature on South Africa's TVET industry. The professionalization of the TVET teaching workforce is thought to be significantly hampered by this credentials–competency mismatch (Cloete, 2021; Kruss, Wildschut, & Visser, 2020). Although both subject-matter expertise and pedagogical qualifications are listed as prerequisites in national policy frameworks like the National Policy on the Minimum Requirements for TVET College Lecturers (DHET, 2021), industry experience is frequently given precedence over formal teaching credentials in actual recruitment procedures. Cloete (2021) argues that the historical evolution of the TVET sector has entrenched a culture where practical work experience is overvalued at the expense of pedagogical proficiency. This is especially evident in fields such as engineering and business studies, where practitioners with extensive industry backgrounds are frequently appointed despite lacking foundational knowledge in instructional design, learner-centred teaching strategies, or curriculum assessment principles. The consequence, as highlighted by Letseka and Pitsoe (2020), is a dilution of teaching quality, which ultimately affects student progression rates and sectoral credibility.

These worries are further supported by empirical research. In their study of public TVET colleges in Gauteng Province, Maluka and Mulaudzi (2024) discovered that a sizable percentage of lecturers have only National Diploma degrees and little experience with formal teacher preparation. The lack of strong internal professional development programs exacerbates this issue, making it difficult for lecturers to convert their technical knowledge into efficient teaching methods. The authors came to the conclusion that this discrepancy seriously impairs student engagement, especially in courses that call for applied problem-solving and theoretical abstraction. Moreover, research by Bester and Engelbrecht (2023) identifies a troubling gap in lecturers' digital pedagogical competencies, a critical skill set in the context of South Africa's evolving educational landscape. Their study reveals that lecturers with formal teaching qualifications report higher confidence in integrating digital tools into their pedagogy, whereas those appointed solely on the basis of industry experience exhibit limited technological-pedagogical content knowledge (TPACK). This gap became particularly pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic, when colleges were compelled to adopt blended learning approaches without adequately prepared teaching staff.

Kruss et al. (2020) assert that institutional hiring practices, often justified by short-term staffing needs and "scarce skills" classifications, perpetuate this qualifications gap. Although these steps alleviate current labour market pressures, they do not create a long-term pool of TVET lecturers with professional training who can provide high-quality instruction. As a result, the industry is still mired in a cycle of reactive professional development tactics and ad hoc appointments, which compromise long-term learning goals. According to the literature, the ongoing discrepancy between lecturer credentials and pedagogical competencies is a systemic problem with roots in historical legacies, poor policy implementation, and opportunistic hiring practices rather than just a technical one. A planned, strategic strategy that strikes a balance between pedagogical excellence and industry relevance is needed to close this gap.

### ***2.3 Irregular Hiring Practices***

Irregular hiring practices within South Africa's TVET sector have been a focal point of scholarly critique, particularly concerning how these practices compromise the sector's long-term professionalisation agenda. Despite policy prescriptions that outline stringent qualification criteria for TVET lecturers (DHET, 2021), colleges frequently resort to ad hoc hiring mechanisms to address immediate staffing shortages. This tendency is especially prevalent in programmes classified under "scarce skills," such as engineering, information technology, and certain business studies, where industry experience is often prioritised over formal pedagogical training (Letseka & Pitsoe, 2020).

According to Letseka and Pitsoe (2020), lax enforcement of qualification requirements fosters an expediency culture in which filling open positions as soon as possible takes precedence over making sure that national professionalization standards are followed. This practice is not just the product of administrative oversight; rather, it is a reflection of systemic pressures such as strict hiring practices, financial limitations, and the pressing need to reach enrolment goals. As a result, universities and colleges frequently use their technical expertise as an excuse to hire lecturers who lack teaching credentials, thus continuing the cycle of mediocrity (Kruss, Wildschut, & Visser, 2020). Kruss et al. (2020) highlight that while industry experience is an essential component of vocational education, it cannot substitute the pedagogical competencies necessary for effective knowledge transfer, curriculum delivery, and learner assessment. The over-reliance on practitioners with limited teaching acumen results in a teaching force ill-equipped to navigate the complexities of classroom management, differentiated instruction, and student-centred pedagogies.

Maluka and Mulaudzi's recent empirical studies from 2024 offer more proof of irregular hiring practices. Short-term contracts and temporary appointments were frequently used to meet urgent staffing needs, with little regard for candidates' teaching qualifications, according to their study of public TVET colleges in Gauteng Province. This approach frequently results in a high staff turnover rate, which interrupts the continuity of instruction and has a detrimental effect on students' academic performance. Furthermore, these ad hoc hires have a harder time adjusting to the teaching environment because there are no formal induction programs in place. Mashiloane and Schoole (2022) note that organized labour's involvement exacerbates these hiring irregularities. Although unions are essential in promoting equitable working conditions, they frequently concentrate their lobbying efforts on wage negotiations and job security, placing less emphasis on upholding qualification requirements. Union interventions have occasionally unintentionally shielded underqualified lecturers from performance-based reviews, which has strengthened an institutional culture of low compliance.

The continuation of unethical hiring practices jeopardizes the long-term goals of developing a skilled, professional teaching workforce in addition to undermining the credibility of the TVET sector. According to scholars, the sector will continue to face systemic inefficiencies that impede its transformation agenda unless recruitment policies are rigorously enforced and bolstered by capacity-building initiatives (Bester & Engelbrecht, 2023).

### ***2.4 Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and Motivational Dynamics***

It is commonly acknowledged that improving teaching quality in the TVET sector requires continuing professional development, or CPD. Scholarly literature, however, continuously emphasizes that CPD programs in South Africa's TVET colleges are primarily compliance-oriented, reactive, and externally driven rather than being incorporated as a strategic element of lecturer professionalisation (Mahlomaholo & Hlekiso, 2022; Maluka & Mulaudzi, 2024). A professional culture where lecturers participate in development activities primarily to meet institutional or policy requirements rather than out of a desire to improve their pedagogical competencies has been created by this externally induced approach. Mahlomaholo and Hlekiso (2022) emphasise that many lecturers rely heavily on externally funded CPD opportunities, such as bursaries provided by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs), or internal college capital expenditure (CAPEX) budgets. While these mechanisms are essential for addressing financial barriers to professional development, they inadvertently foster a passive professional culture where lecturers wait for opportunities rather than actively seeking out growth pathways. This reactive stance perpetuates a cycle of minimal compliance, where CPD becomes a box-ticking exercise rather than a meaningful developmental process.

According to Maluka and Mulaudzi (2024), lecturer engagement with CPD is significantly shaped by institutional leadership. Their analysis of Gauteng's public TVET colleges showed that many of them lacked well-thought-out plans for encouraging a continuous learning culture. CPD programs are typically irregular, disorganized, and unrelated to the real pedagogical needs of lecturers. As a result, lecturers frequently view CPD as an administrative hassle rather than a way to advance their careers. Moreover, the literature suggests that the lack of alignment between CPD activities and lecturers' career progression pathways contributes to low motivation levels. Mashiloane and Sehoole (2022) note that performance appraisal systems in TVET colleges are frequently inconsistent and fail to link CPD participation with tangible career advancement opportunities. This disconnect discourages lecturers from investing in professional development, as the perceived benefits are minimal or unclear.

This discussion gains a digital component from Bester and Engelbrecht (2023), who point out that the COVID-19 pandemic revealed serious deficiencies in lecturers' digital pedagogical skills. According to their study, a large number of lecturers only participated in digital CPD after being forced to do so by urgent demands for remote instruction. However, these digital competencies remained shallow and undeveloped in the absence of consistent institutional support and planned follow-up interventions.

According to the literature, continuing professional development (CPD) is essential for lecturers to become more professional, but the current strategy in South Africa's TVET sector is disjointed, reliant on outside sources, and devoid of a framework for motivation that promotes proactive lecturer engagement. According to Kruss, Wildschut, and Visser (2020), academics support a more institutionally driven and structured approach to continuing professional development that complements both personal career development plans and more general sectoral transformation objectives.

### ***2.5 The Policy–Practice Gap***

One recurrent theme in the discussion of TVET lecturers' professionalisation in South Africa is the ongoing discrepancy between policy recommendations and institutional implementation. There is still a big gap between formal requirements and college-level hiring and professional development practices, even with comprehensive frameworks like the National Policy on the Minimum Requirements for TVET College Lecturers (DHET, 2021), which establish explicit standards for lecturer qualifications and competencies (Jeptha & Mthombeni, 2023; Cloete, 2021). Jeptha and Mthombeni (2023) argue that many TVET colleges adopt a “minimal compliance” approach, whereby policies are formally acknowledged but seldom fully operationalised. Colleges often meet only the most basic requirements—such as documenting recruitment processes or offering sporadic CPD workshops—without embedding these practices into their institutional culture. This superficial compliance is largely attributed to administrative capacity constraints, limited financial resources, and a lack of accountability mechanisms to monitor and enforce policy adherence.

Cloete (2021) further asserts that this policy–practice gap is not only a technical issue of weak implementation but also a reflection of deeper systemic challenges within the TVET sector. Due to the persistent lack of resources, high student enrolment, and erratic staffing in many colleges, management is forced to put short-term operational issues ahead of long-term strategic goals like professionalizing lecturers. As a result, the DHET's ambitious policy directives frequently stay aspirational rather than practical. Maluka and Mulaudzi (2024) point out that problems with governance and leadership in TVET institutions make the policy–practice gap even worse. According to their research, college administration frequently lacks the administrative skills and strategic vision necessary to convert federal policies into workable, locally relevant projects. Instead of being proactive tactics in line with institutional development plans, professional development initiatives are frequently reactive, motivated by funding availability or external audits. The inconsistent application of performance management systems also contributes to the gap. Mashiloane and Sehoole (2022) note that performance appraisals in TVET colleges are often irregular and disconnected from professional development trajectories. This lack of coherence weakens the incentive structures that could motivate lecturers to pursue qualifications and engage meaningfully in CPD activities.

A further layer of complexity is introduced by the influence of unions. Unions are vital in protecting working conditions, but their participation in HR procedures can lead to opposition to performance-based accountability measures, which prevents the full implementation of policy goals (Mashiloane & Sehoole, 2022). According to the literature, the policy–practice gap is a complex problem with multiple facets that stem from complex stakeholder dynamics, governance inefficiencies, institutional weakness, and resource constraints. A systemic change in institutional cultures is also necessary to close this gap, where policy compliance is connected to real developmental outcomes rather than merely minimal administrative conformance (Kruss, Wildschut, & Visser, 2020).

### ***2.6 The Role of Work-Integrated Learning (WIL)***

In order to address the ongoing competency gaps among lecturers in South Africa's TVET sector, Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) has become a strategic intervention. With the industry's focus on developing practical skills and vocational relevance, WIL is an essential tool for bridging the gap between academic teaching and real-world application. According to recent research, WIL is important for improving lecturers' pedagogical efficacy, especially in fields where industry alignment is essential (Mesuwini, Thaba-Nkadamene, & Kgomotlokoa, 2021; Oosthuizen, Spencer, & Chigona, 2021). Mesuwini et al. (2021) emphasise that WIL opportunities enable lecturers to acquire first-hand exposure to contemporary industry processes, technologies, and workplace dynamics, which they can then integrate into their teaching methodologies. Their study in KwaZulu-Natal found that lecturers who participated in structured WIL programmes demonstrated improved competencies in areas such as teamwork facilitation, troubleshooting, client interactions, and contextual problem-solving. These lecturers reported an enhanced ability to link theoretical content with real-world applications, thereby improving learner engagement and comprehension.

The implementation of WIL initiatives in TVET colleges in the Western Cape was also examined by Oosthuizen et al. (2021), who discovered that these programs greatly increased the relevance of lecturers' curricula. In order to ensure that students received instruction that was both theoretically sound and practically applicable, lecturers who participated in WIL placements were better equipped to match their lesson plans with industry standards. Additionally, after being given the chance to update and refresh their industry knowledge, these lecturers demonstrated increased motivation and professional confidence. However, while WIL is lauded for its potential to strengthen lecturer competencies, the literature also highlights systemic challenges that impede its widespread adoption. According to Bester and Engelbrecht (2023), logistical constraints, including limited partnerships between colleges and industry, as well as inadequate institutional frameworks for coordinating WIL placements, hinder the scalability of such initiatives. Furthermore, many colleges lack the administrative capacity to track and evaluate the impact of WIL on lecturer performance and student outcomes systematically.

The incorporation of WIL experiences into official frameworks for professional development is another crucial issue. Although WIL experiences may be beneficial to lecturers, Maluka and Mulaudzi (2024) contend that they are frequently handled as stand-alone interventions rather than being incorporated into larger CPD strategies. Because colleges are not using these experiences to cultivate a long-term culture of pedagogical innovation, the long-term developmental impact of WIL is still underutilized.

Moreover, the absence of clear policy directives mandating lecturer participation in WIL further limits its institutional prioritisation. WIL is not specifically required for lecturers as part of their professional qualification trajectory, despite the fact that national policy frameworks recognize the value of industry alignment (DHET, 2021). The effectiveness of WIL depends on strategic institutional partnerships, supportive policy environments, and integration into comprehensive CPD frameworks, even though it offers a great chance to improve lecturer competency and curriculum relevance. WIL runs the risk of continuing to be an intermittent, underutilized tool in the professionalization of TVET lecturers in the absence of these systemic supports.

### ***2.7 Union Dynamics and Institutional Culture***

The influence of organised labour on human resource practices in South Africa's TVET sector is a significant but often contentious topic in scholarly discourse. Unions have two roles: on the one hand, they are important advocates for job security and fair working conditions; on the other hand, their interventions frequently make it more difficult for managers to implement professional development programs and performance standards (Mashiloane & Schoole, 2022; Cloete, 2021). This dichotomy highlights the intricate connection between institutional culture and union dynamics in TVET colleges. Mashiloane and Schoole (2022) argue that union activities, while rooted in legitimate concerns over labour rights, have inadvertently shifted the responsibility for Continuing Professional Development (CPD) from individual lecturers to institutional management. In many cases, unions have successfully lobbied for professional development to be framed as an organisational obligation rather than a personal career advancement initiative. This dynamic, while protecting lecturers from exploitative expectations, also fosters a compliance-driven culture where CPD is often reduced to fulfilling minimal policy requirements rather than promoting genuine professional growth.

Cloete (2021) further points out that union influence can lead to a rigid institutional culture that resists performance-based accountability measures. Attempts by college administration to implement performance evaluation systems related to lecturer development and promotion are usually met with resistance from unions, primarily due to concerns that the systems may be misused to unfairly single out workers. This tension not only produces an environment where managerial authority is limited, but it also makes performance management inconsistent or symbolic rather than an effective tool for development. The antagonistic relationship between unions and management also makes it difficult to implement policies. According to Jephtha and Mthombeni (2023), lengthy negotiations with unions frequently result in implementation delays or dilution at the institutional level of policy directives, such as those set forth in the National Policy on the Minimum Requirements for TVET College Lecturers (DHET, 2021). Even though these discussions are necessary to guarantee fair labour practices, they usually lead to concessions that lessen the revolutionary potential of national policies.

However, not all scholarly perspectives are critical of union involvement. Kruss, Wildschut, and Visser (2020) acknowledge that unions have played a vital role in advocating for the professionalisation of TVET lecturers by pushing for formalisation of employment contracts, equitable remuneration, and improved working conditions. These efforts contribute to creating a more stable and secure workforce, which is essential for long-term sectoral development. However, the body of research indicates that the current union-management dynamic needs to be reevaluated. In order to align labour interests with institutional development goals, Bester and Engelbrecht (2023) support a more cooperative model of engagement in which management and unions jointly design performance management systems and CPD initiatives. Building trust, communicating openly, and establishing shared accountability frameworks would all be necessary for such a change. In summary, although unions are essential players in the TVET industry, their impact on institutional culture has the potential to help or impede the professionalization of lecturers. To guarantee that union dynamics favourably impact the sector's transformation agenda, a strategic, partnership-based approach is required.

### ***2.8 Summary of the Literature Review and Research Gap***

In South Africa's Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) sector, professionalizing lecturers is a complex issue influenced by institutional, systemic, and cultural factors, according to the reviewed literature. According to several studies (Cloete, 2021; Jephtha & Mthombeni, 2023; Mashiloane & Schoole, 2022), common themes include the mismatch between credentials and competency, irregular hiring practices, externally driven and compliance-focused CPD initiatives, persistent policy-practice gaps, and the complex yet significant role of unions in human resource management. According to studies, institutional practices frequently fall short of the clear professionalization pathways outlined in national policy frameworks, such as the National Policy on the Minimum Requirements for TVET College Lecturers (DHET, 2021). A diluted teaching workforce affects student

performance and the sector's reputation. This is caused by recruitment strategies that place a higher value on industry experience than pedagogical credentials (Letseka & Pitsoe, 2020; Kruss, Wildschut, & Visser, 2020). Additionally, CPD lacks the strategic intent to promote a culture of proactive professional growth and is still primarily reactive and externally funded (Mahlomaholo & Hlekiso, 2022; Maluka & Mulaudzi, 2024).

The literature also identifies structural barriers that worsen the implementation gap, such as insufficient administrative capacity, uneven performance management systems, and feeble policy enforcement mechanisms. Furthermore, although union dynamics are crucial for defending workers' rights, they occasionally conflict with managerial initiatives to uphold accountability and connect professional growth to career advancement (Mashiloane & Sehoole, 2022; Cloete, 2021). By increasing lecturers' industry relevance, Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) has been recognized as a promising intervention for closing competency gaps. However, its broad acceptance and incorporation into official CPD strategies are constrained by the lack of formal institutional frameworks and policy mandates (Mesuwini, Thaba-Nkadimene, & Kgomotlokoa, 2021; Oosthuizen, Spencer, & Chigona, 2021).

Despite these insightful observations, most research on the subject looks at these issues separately, frequently concentrating on discrete factors like union activity, CPD participation rates, or hiring practices. Few studies use a comprehensive analytical framework that examines the interactions between these factors as a component of a larger, interrelated system that influences the professional conduct and qualifications of lecturers in TVET colleges. Additionally, a large portion of the empirical research that has already been done is regionally fragmented, with case studies concentrating on particular provinces or institutions. As a result, the findings are not as broadly applicable to the entire TVET landscape in the country.

By providing a systemic analysis of the interconnected structural and cultural barriers influencing lecturer professionalization in South Africa's TVET sector, this article aims to close these gaps. This study intends to offer a thorough grasp of the institutional logics supporting contemporary qualification patterns by investigating the intersections of recruitment strategies, CPD practices, union dynamics, and policy implementation procedures. Such a comprehensive viewpoint is essential for guiding strategically sound and contextually grounded policy interventions.

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### 3. Theoretical Framework

This research is based on institutional theory, a framework that examines how social norms, cultural expectations, and structural limitations influence organisational practices in addition to technical effectiveness or logical planning. The functioning of public education systems, such as the TVET sector, where informal practices and bureaucratic structures frequently coexist and affect behaviour and decision-making, is a particularly good fit for institutional theory (Scott, 2014). The National Policy on the Minimum Requirements for TVET College Lecturers (DHET, 2021) and other formal regulations must be balanced against informal pressures that may arise from local politics, union demands, or resource constraints. This framework views organisations like public TVET colleges as functioning in complex institutional environments. Decoupling, in which formal policies exist in name but are not fully implemented in practice, is frequently the result of these informal influences (Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) introduction of institutional isomorphism is a crucial idea pertinent to this analysis. According to isomorphism, organisations in the same field often become similar over time, not always because these practices are the best, but rather because of pressures from norms, coercion, or imitation. When colleges duplicate one another's subpar hiring and development procedures, especially with the justification of a lack of skills or financial limitations, mimetic isomorphism is clearly visible in the TVET sector. Underqualified lecturers become accepted aspects of the system rather than abnormalities that need to be fixed, which feeds a cycle of poor performance (Mahlomaholo & Hlekiso, 2022).

Furthermore, in the South African TVET context, the normative pressures from professional associations and teacher education standards are frequently ineffective or inconsistently implemented. Although there are official procedures for evaluating lecturer qualifications, they are frequently disregarded or applied unevenly because of local discretion, staffing shortages, or union negotiations (Jeptha & Mthombeni, 2023). These pressures show how conflicting logics of resistance, expediency, and compliance shape institutional fields, particularly in public sectors.

A more thorough analysis that goes beyond managerial or individual flaws is made possible by the application of institutional theory. It makes it possible to structurally examine how public TVET colleges have responded to policy changes in ways that could jeopardise the reforms' primary objectives, which are the professionalisation and quality control of teaching staff. This theoretical lens highlights the need for policy designs that consider not only formal rules but also the institutional environments in which they are enacted.

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### 4. Methodology

The structural limitations and hiring procedures in the South African public TVET sector are critically examined in this study using a Qualitative Document Analysis (QDA) methodology. In education policy research, document analysis is a tried-and-true technique, especially when examining institutional behaviour, discourse, and regulatory compliance (Bowen, 2009). This study does not require ethical clearance because it only uses publicly available materials and does not directly involve human participants. Studies that seek to examine institutional routines, symbolic compliance, and policy-practice gaps are especially well suited for QDA. Researchers can find patterns of meaning in texts, policies, and official communications that reflect deeper systemic issues by using document analysis, as Mogashoa (2021) points out.

#### Data Sources

Data were collected from a purposive selection of publicly accessible documents published between 2019 and 2024, these include:

- Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) Annual Reports (2020–2023), which provide official statistics, institutional performance reviews, and expenditure reports;
- The National Policy on the Minimum Requirements for TVET College Lecturers (2021), which outlines qualification standards and expectations for professional development;
- Labour union policy submissions and media statements, which capture the political and organisational dynamics influencing professionalisation in the TVET sector;
- TVET college recruitment advertisements published in national newspapers, official gazettes, and online government portals, which provide evidence of actual qualification requirements and hiring practices;
- Supplementary academic and policy literature, used to triangulate institutional narratives and assess the consistency of implementation.

These documents were selected for their relevance, recency, and ability to represent different levels of policy discourse, national, institutional, and union-based.

### **Analytical Strategy**

Using both deductive and inductive reasoning, the analysis was coded according to a thematic approach. The theoretical frameworks of institutional theory, specifically the ideas of decoupling, isomorphism, and normative pressure, served as the foundation for an early deductive framework (Scott, 2014; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Thematic codes like qualification compliance, justification for scarce skills, externalised continuing professional development, and union influence were identified using this framework as a guide. Then, using inductive coding, new themes that had not been foreseen were discovered. These included indications of symbolic recruitment advertisements (for example, positions that only required a Diploma in TVET for lecturing roles) and variations in union demands between provinces. Refinement of categories and synthesis across data types were made possible by the continuous comparison process (Nowell et al., 2017).

Digital versions of documents were subjected to manual coding for analysis, with a focus on language use, policy intentions, and discernible discrepancies between institutional behaviour and formal frameworks. Interpreting the documents' institutional significance and implications for lecturer qualification gaps was the goal, in addition to simply summarizing their content.

### **Justification for Ethical Exemption**

As no human subjects were involved and all data are in the public domain, this research qualifies for ethical exemption under typical academic standards (Resnik, 2020). No identifying personal information, confidential institutional documents, or private correspondence were used.

## **5. Results**

Three main and connected themes emerged from the qualitative document analysis, demonstrating how structural and cultural limitations impact lecturer qualification trends in South Africa's public TVET sector. The nature of continuing professional development practices, the persistence of qualification gaps, and the impact of labour unions on institutional policy decisions are all clarified by these themes.

### **5.1. Qualification Gaps and Recruitment Loopholes**

The acceptance of minimal academic credentials, frequently a National Diploma or relevant work experience, without specific requirements for pedagogical training or formal teaching qualifications was a recurring theme in recruitment advertisements, especially in the fields of engineering and business studies. For example, even though the 2021 National Policy on the Minimum Requirements for TVET Lecturers requires teaching qualifications, job advertisements from a number of TVET colleges between 2021 and 2023 listed "industry experience" as a qualifying criterion while leaving out the need for one (DHET, 2021).

This tendency seems to be more common in technical fields, where the excuse of "scarce skills" is frequently used to get around accepted hiring practices. Posts were sometimes marketed as "urgently needed" or "immediate start," which further suggests that hiring speed took precedence over qualification alignment. These hiring shortcuts, as noted by Jephtha and Mthombeni (2023), are indicative of a larger compliance gap where institutional requirements take precedence over policy directives, thereby normalising underqualification in the name of operational continuity. Inconsistencies in the way qualification requirements were stated in various provinces and institutions were also discovered by the analysis. Some ads used ambiguous language, like "preferably with a teaching qualification," which suggests a non-binding interpretation of national standards, while others strictly followed the national policy.

### **5.2. Externalised Continuing Professional Development**

Lecturer development is primarily reactive and externally incentivised, according to evidence from DHET reports and union communiqués. Most of the CPD initiatives in the TVET sector takes place through DHET bursaries, SETAs' funding or college-funded CAPEX programs, according to the Annual

Report 2022/2023 (DHET, 2023). Despite their value, these programs are not always carried out by institutions and are usually dependent on budgetary constraints and funding cycles.

There wasn't much proof that lecturers upgraded their qualifications on their own. Rather than being presented as a professional duty, continuing professional development was presented as an institutional responsibility. In their statements, the South African Further Education and Training Staff Association (SAFETSA), for example, argued that staff members shouldn't be responsible for upgrading their qualifications and called for "mandatory development funding allocations" in college budgets (SAFETSA, 2022). This dynamic reinforces a culture of dependency, where qualification upgrades occur only when externally facilitated. Such patterns are indicative of what Mahlomaholo and Hlekiso (2022) describe as a "passive professionalisation process," where lecturers comply with development requirements when subsidised, rather than pursuing growth proactively as part of professional identity.

### 5.3. Union Influence on Development Incentives

The way that lecturer development is framed and funded has been significantly influenced by labour unions. Unions like NEHAWU and SAFETSA have continuously pushed for colleges to institutionalise lecturer development by incorporating it into operating budgets through public statements, meeting minutes, and media releases. Requiring lecturers to self-fund additional education would disproportionately disadvantage people from working-class backgrounds, according to these demands, which were frequently framed around the ideas of equity and transformation (Mashiloane & Schoole, 2022). In certain cases, institutional policies that tied professional development to tenure or performance were expressly opposed by union representatives. Rather, they contended that regardless of their initial qualifications, all lecturers ought to have access to opportunities for professional growth. This position has generated institutional tension, particularly where college management has attempted to prioritise staff who already meet baseline requirements for advancement. The analysis suggests that while union advocacy has contributed to broader access to funded development, it has also created a precedent where self-driven qualification upgrades are rare. This may unintentionally undermine the professional autonomy that should characterise the teaching vocation, particularly in post-school education where lecturer expertise directly affects student employability and sector credibility.

## 6. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate how, despite clearly stated national policies, structural and cultural limitations within South Africa's public TVET sector work together to sustain lecturer underqualification. A collection of hiring procedures that put immediate institutional requirements ahead of long-term capacity building are at the heart of this dynamic. Colleges can hire applicants with industry experience but no pedagogical training because of the widespread use of the "scarce skills" classification, especially for engineering and technical subjects (DHET, 2023). The National Policy on the Minimum Requirements for TVET College Lecturers is compromised and attempts to professionalise the industry are weakened, even though this fills the short-term staffing shortages.

These trends are indicative of decoupling, a state in which formal regulations are present but not fully internalised or implemented, according to institutional theory (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Institutions continue to function according to unofficial norms influenced by urgency, budgetary restraints, and union pressures, even though they symbolically comply by mentioning policy in reports or advertisements. This explains why national policies are coherent, but institutional implementations are inconsistent (Scott, 2014; Jephtha & Mthombeni, 2023). Under the pretence of pragmatism, colleges replicate each other's flawed practices, leading to a cyclical form of institutional isomorphism.

Furthermore, the study reveals that professional development within the sector is largely externalised and conditional. Rather than being pursued as part of professional identity or teaching vocation, development is seen as something that must be institutionally funded to be valid. This external dependency model discourages initiative and reinforces a passive workforce culture (Mahlomaholo & Hlekiso, 2022). Even when opportunities for professional development are available, uptake is inconsistent unless directly linked to bursaries or salary incentives.

Although they play a crucial role in promoting ethical labour practices, unions unintentionally support this dependent culture. The dominant narrative, found in union statements, is that employers, not individual employees, should oversee professional development. This framing encourages resource redistribution and equity, but it also limits the development of an independent professional culture in TVET colleges and undermines personal accountability (Mashiloane & Schoole, 2022). Professionalisation initiatives are unlikely to succeed without a well-rounded strategy that promotes both institutional support and individual accountability.

The necessity of a more comprehensive and legally binding qualification monitoring system is a significant implication of these findings. More openness and compliance might be guaranteed by a nationwide database of lecturer qualifications that is updated yearly and connected to promotions and performance reviews. A system like this would flag underqualified appointments, align recruitment with policy expectations, and establish a baseline for focused assistance. Furthermore, the institutional culture might be rebalanced from one of entitlement to one of aspiration by associating lecturer development with explicit incentive structures, such as workload modifications, promotion pathways, or recognition awards.

In the end, a change in institutional values as well as improved enforcement mechanisms are necessary for a sustained improvement in lecturer quality. To position teaching as a professional endeavour rather than a backup job, colleges must move away from reactive staffing models and toward developmental human resource strategies. Policymakers, unions, and institutional leaders must work together to rebalance the trade-off between professional agency and structural compliance considering this change.



## 7. Conclusion

The structural and cultural foundations of lecturer qualification gaps in South Africa's public TVET sector have been critically examined in this article. The study shows that these qualification deficiencies are not isolated instances of carelessness or poor managerial judgment by using institutional theory and a document analysis methodology. Rather, they are signs of more serious systemic issues that are ingrained in hiring practices, gaps in the enforcement of policies, and a culture of continuing professional development that is influenced by outside reliance. The frequent use of underqualified lecturers has been made possible by the reliance on temporary staffing fixes, which are frequently justified by citing the "scarce skills" of engineering and business studies positions. Such tactics jeopardise the long-term legitimacy and calibre of TVET education, even though they might meet short-term teaching demands. The uneven application of the National Policy on the Minimum Requirements for TVET College Lecturers (DHET, 2021), which is thorough on paper but lacks strong enforcement mechanisms across institutions, exacerbates this problem.

The externalisation of lecturer development is equally important. A passive professional culture is reflected in the widespread belief that credentials should only be upgraded when organizations or the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) offer bursaries. Labor unions that support institutionalised funding but infrequently encourage personal responsibility or self-directed development serve to further support this. Professional development is therefore viewed more as a privilege than a duty, which hinders the industry's long-term professionalisation initiatives. Systemic changes will be necessary to address these interconnected issues. A national qualification tracking system for lecturers, more stringent policy enforcement, open recruitment audits, and incentive programs that promote ongoing self-directed learning are a few of these. Such reforms must be complemented by a cultural shift within the sector, where continuing professional development is embedded not just in institutional budgets but also in individual aspiration and identity.

By examining comparative models from other developing contexts that have effectively professionalised vocational teaching, future research should build on this work. The downstream impacts of current recruitment and development strategies on learner outcomes, graduate employability, and institutional performance may also be evaluated with the aid of longitudinal studies. The TVET sector can only fulfil its mission as a reliable and efficient engine of social mobility and economic development by engaging in such multifaceted research and intervention.

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