

The Perceptions of Secondary School Students towards Vocational Education: A Case Study of Kampala District

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Abstract: - The call for more relevant education is increasing given the concerns of visible skills mismatch among school graduates in relation to the available job opportunities. Despite government efforts to popularize vocational education, many youths are shunning vocational education in preference to general academic programs. This study set out to establish the perceptions of secondary school students towards vocational education in selected secondary schools in Kampala district. The study was guided by the theory of constructivism which is based on the belief that learning occurs when learners are actively involved in the learning process. The study objectives were: 1) to establish the perceptions of secondary school students towards vocational education and 2) to establish the channels through which students access vocational education information. The study adopted an exploratory research design and used a mixed method approach for purposes of improving reliability of study findings through triangulation. The study's target population consisted of 194 senior 3 students conveniently selected from schools in Kampala District. Both primary and secondary data sources were used. A questionnaire designed by the researcher was used to collect information from the students. The self reporting survey instrument used in data collection was validated by a panel of vocational educational managers from schools with high curriculum content in vocational education and the pilot test results obtained a cronbach alpha coefficient of 0.72 indicating that the study instrument was reliable. The data collected using the questionnaire was analyzed using the excel sheet to generate descriptive statistics in form of frequencies, percentages and means. The study findings indicate that much as the students' perceptions of vocational education as opposed to general education are not negative per se, they still have apathy towards vocational education and, there is a general perception among students that schools are not offering sufficient information on vocational education making students rely mostly on social media. It is concluded that: students perception towards vocational education is still negative due to lack of adequate information and the students perceive the existing channels through which secondary schools transmit vocational education to be inadequate. It is recommended that: a policy framework that clearly shows how a student can transit from the path of vocation education to further education be developed and if it exists be popularized among all stakeholders and, the function of career masters in schools be supported and strengthened.

Key words: Perceptions, vocational education, constructivism, career masters, skills mismatch, general education

I. INTRODUCTION

The global education agenda 2030 aims at contributing to the eradication of poverty through the 17 Sustainable Development goals among which goal 4 is on education and aims to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting life long learning opportunities for all." The call for more relevant education is increasing given the concerns of visible skills mismatch among school graduates in relation to the available job opportunities. Many countries have called for the need to vocationalize the education system as a means of providing relevant and practical education to the youths. Pavlova (2005) has identified three components of vocationalization: learning for work, learning about work and understanding the nature of work. Education practitioners are calling for an education system that not only provide foundation skills, but also transferable skills like critical thinking, problem solving, advocacy and conflict resolution to learners through emphasis on learner centered approaches (Barth, 2015; Mezirow, 2000; Slavich and Zimbardo, 2012)

McGrath (2012) traces vocational education right from the Middle Ages up to the last century where craft or technical knowledge was transferred through apprenticeships. McGarey (2002) views the movement away from a classical curriculum towards a career oriented education to be the beginning of modern vocational education. McGarey, (2002) further notes that when in 1917, President Woodrow Wilson signed the Smith-Hughes Act that provided the initial federal funding for vocational education, the percentage of students in vocational education schools outweighed those in the classical curriculum. Psacharopoulos (1997) provides several justifications for Technical, vocational education and training (TVET) that includes: 1) ability to solve youth unemployment 2) leads to technological know-how associated with innovation and technical change development 3) an alternative to competitive general education for youth not able to thrive in general education 4) trains mid-level personnel who are much needed for the full functionality of the labor force

system5) means of promoting global technical skills 6) ability to reduce poverty by offering skills which can lead to employment and income.

In Australia, student's engagement in TVET programmes is based on the perception that it improves their chances of getting a job (Billet, 2014; Shrestha, 2013). In Germany TVET is considered with high status (Triventi 2013, Clarke and Winch, 2007) contrary to America where TVET is perceived as of low status and dominated by low income students (Rose, 2012). The many failings in TVET programmes are reflected in low pass rates, poor instructors, low progression into the labor market, lack of resources (McGrath, 2012) and the high costs of TVET (Akoojee, 2007).

Research shows that the Switzerland's dual system of vocational education and training is a key factor of Switzerland's own economic success and social cohesion (Swiss Agency for development and Cooperation SDC, 2016). Foster (1965) however challenged the notion that TVET was what Africans needed to address the problem of youth unemployment and instead advocated for small scale TVET that was more aligned to the actual on going development and one that was not within the formal education system. The African traditional education system laid emphasis on imparting skills to the young where, girls were taught crafts and handwork by their mothers while boys were taught skills to cater for the family like hunting by their fathers (Ssekamwa, 2000). The colonial administration set up technical schools in Uganda to train artisans to assist the colonial administration at the lower rank levels while schools like Kings College Buddo were set up to provide education for the children of chiefs.

The Government White Paper on education (1992 p116) identifies the two major aims of TVET as: 1) to stimulate intellectual and technical growth of students in order to make them productive members of the community; and 2) to produce craftsmen, technicians and other skilled manpower to meet the demands of industry, agriculture and commerce as well as the teaching of technical and vocational subjects. Several attempts to revive the relevance of the Business, Technical, Vocational Education and Training (BTJET) schools have been taken up by the Government of Uganda in response to the growing youth unemployment in the country. The BTJET ACT (2008) provides for the promotion and coordination of business, technical, vocational education and training; to provide for the principles governing BTJET; to establish the institutional framework for the promotion and coordination of BTJET; to establish the Uganda Vocational Qualifications Framework; to provide for the financing of BTJET and for other related matters and highlights the importance of the Public Private Partnership in the promotion of relevant practical VE based on market assessment (BTJET strategic plan 2012/3 to 2021/2).

McGarey (2002) uses the term vocational education to refer to skills training, industrial arts and technical education. Chafy (1997) credits technical education with enabling the United States (US) to ascend to the status of an economic super power. Bathmaker (2013) refers to vocational education as an umbrella term associated with the learning of practical and technical knowledge in a formal educational setting. The term technical and vocational education and training (TVET) is generally used to refer to vocational education. The literature looks at the purpose of both vocational education and vocationalization of education to be skills development. Akram (2012) provides a distinction between the two terms by referring to vocationalization of education as the skills development intended to build the capacity of a person to act in a variety of real life situations whereas vocational education provides skills for a particular vocation under well defined limits. In this study, vocational education is used to refer to the training offered in vocational schools/institutes after a student has completed his Ordinary level certificate (UCE)

Senge (1990) refers to perceptions as 'deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations, or even pictures or images that influence how people understand the world and take action'. In this study, perceptions are used to refer to the views/opinions of students on undertaking training in a vocational training institute as opposed to a general education training school like attending advanced secondary education (UACE). Secondary school students refer to students studying in general education schools offering the Uganda Certificate of Education (UCE) that take a minimum of four years to complete. From this level, a student can either join a two year advanced level of education (Higher school level- A-level) or join the various vocational institutes to obtain a certificate and join the world of work, and later upgrade if he/she wishes.

The Uganda education system

The Government policy on TVET aims at: the introduction of changes necessary to create a favorable environment for industrial training, improvement in the effectiveness and efficiency in public training; provision of training by employers and the private sector, changing the negative attitude towards technical and vocational education programs, integrating technical and business /entrepreneurial skills to enable students enter into self employment, provision of at least one vocational secondary school in every district and vocationalization of both primary and secondary education system to ensure provision of useful and employable skills at the end of each cycle. The contribution of the education sector to GDP is recorded to be fairly constant at 5% over the years 2006 and 2010 (Statistical abstract, 2010; UBOS)

In a bid to ensure quality education provision, the Ministry of education and Sports (MOES) provides support, guides, regulates, and promote quality education and sports to all persons in Uganda for national integration, individuals and national development. The regulatory framework consists of several bodies including: the Education Service Commission

(ESC) responsible for the recruitment and discipline of teachers; the National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC) responsible for initiating, development, evaluation of existing and new curricula for primary, secondary, technical, vocational and tertiary levels, as well as supervising the science and technology equipment production unit (STEPU); the Uganda Business and technical Examinations Board (UBTEB) which regulates the quality of BTVET exams in the country; the Joint Admissions Board (JAB) responsible for admitting students at tertiary level especially in public institutions and the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) which manages and enforces standards at tertiary education level.

Theoretical underpinning

The research was guided by the theory of Constructivism which postulates that humans construct knowledge and meaning from their experiences. Constructivist teaching is based on the belief that learning occurs as learners are actively involved in a process of meaning and knowledge construction as opposed to passively receiving information. The main proponents of this theory are: John Dewey (1933/1998), Bruner (1990), Piaget (1972) and Vygotsky (1978). The theory places the learner at the center of the learning process and the teacher as a facilitator of this process. This theory fits well in the BTVET programme as BTVET curriculum to be productive is meant to promote life long learning by integrating total experience with problem solving and human relations (Clark, 1989). The constructivist belief that humans construct knowledge and meaning from their experiences is in line with the increasing call today by many educators to provide education that mixes theory with practice (Chafy, 1997). Such learning is also credited with the ability to reduce the drop out rate in the school system (Bishop and Ferran, 2005).

There is a growing recognition that the existing BTVET has failed to produce graduates with the right skills needed in the job market. The BTVET strategic plan 2012/3 to 2021/2, p11 observes that 'fewer than 40% of large and medium sized firms consider courses offered by BTVET institutions to be relevant to their needs'. The BTVET strategic plan 2012/3 to 2021/2 has therefore called for a paradigm shift emphasizing education for employable skills and competences relevant to the labor market that is non discriminatory as opposed to the pre-existing education for certification that has failed to fill the skills gap in the labor market. A close examination of both the BTVET ACT (2008) and BTVET strategic plan 2012/3 to 2021/2 indicates the thinking behind the provision of BTVET to basically be the provision of practical and market oriented education especially to the economically vulnerable and disadvantaged groups of society. This no doubt has a great influence on the general perception towards the perception of BTVET among several sections of the society including secondary school students. The low perception that society holds of BTVET education is no doubt rooted in the very set up of the BTVET legal and operational frameworks that is

clearly stated in the BTVET ACT (2008) and BTVET strategic plan 2012/3 to 2021/2. This is further visible in the budget allocation to support BTVET in the overall MOES budget which is quoted to be a meager 4%.

Problem Statement

The call for more relevant education is increasing given the concerns of visible skills mismatch among school graduates in relation to the available job opportunities (Pavlova, 2005; Barth, 2015; Mezirow, 2000; Slavich & Zimbardo, 2012; BTVET strategic plan 2012/3 to 2021/2). Despite the perception held by many that vocation education is a solution to the rampant youth unemployment, there is a growing recognition that the existing BTVET has failed to produce graduates with the right skills needed in the job market. The BTVET strategic plan 2012/3 to 2021/2, p11 observes that 'fewer than 40% of large and medium sized firms consider courses offered by BTVET institutions to be relevant to their needs'. Many youths are also shunning vocational education in preference to general academic programs. For example, despite the improved enrolment in public BTVET institutions by 25% between 2007 and 2009 many BTVET institutions still operate below capacity, the BTVET share in the MOES budget is a meager 4% which constrains staff recruitment, and rarely are the expertise of core BTVET stakeholders like employers and business sector representatives involved in BTVET planning, policy development and monitoring (BTVET strategic plan 2012/3 to 2021/2). The anomalies highlighted above seem to indicate a lack of clear emphasis on BTVET as a means of solving the skills gap and youth unemployment in the country and may explain the continued low perceptions of BTVET programs to many stakeholders. It is on the above background that the researcher set out to establish the perceptions of secondary school students towards vocational education in selected secondary schools in Kampala district.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study was to establish the perceptions of secondary school students towards vocational education in selected secondary schools in Kampala District. If learners in secondary schools who form the bulk of the future labor have a low perception of vocational education, the government effort of promoting vocational education as a means of solving youth unemployment may result in a waste of efforts and resources and the contribution of vocational education towards income and productivity of individuals, enterprise and the economy will not be realized. The specific objectives were: 1) To establish the perceptions of secondary school students towards vocational education 2) To establish the channels through which students access vocational education information.

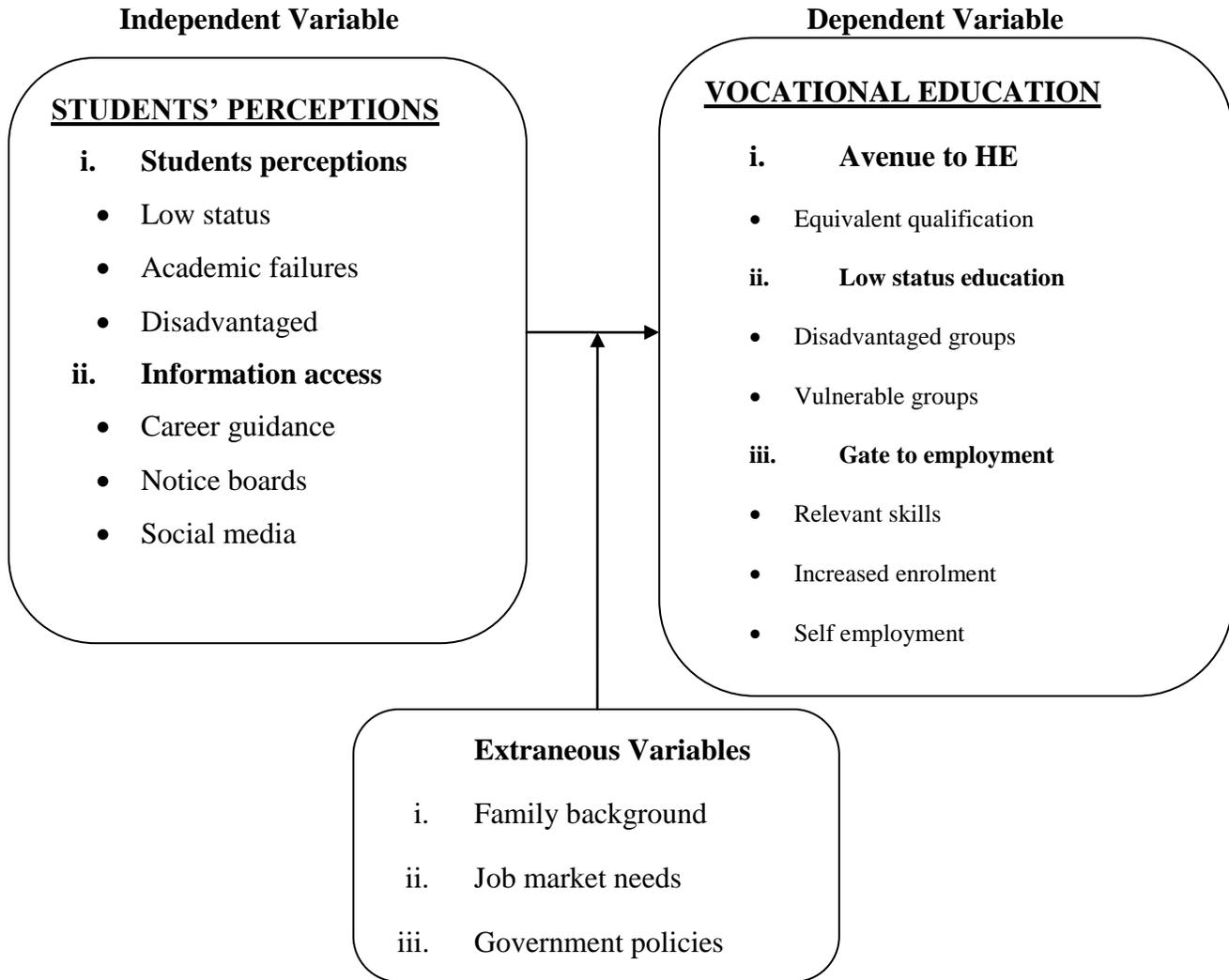
Scope of the study

This study was limited to establishing the perceptions of secondary school students towards vocational education and

how secondary school students access information on vocational education. The study was carried out in selected schools in Kampala District which is a home of some of the secondary schools with the highest student population in the country that cut across the various socio – economic status and thus would ably give a representative picture of secondary schools students’ perception of vocational of education. The study covered a period of five months. That is, from May to October 2018. The study was carried out among senior three students in their second term on the assumption that this is a period when the students are in their second term of the class

and have at least experienced a term after the selection of the Uganda Certificate of Education (UCE) subjects to finally offer during the UCE examinations. It is also assumed that by this time, students who have a second thought on subjects selected as they entered senior three and have finally made their final choice and can ably give their views on the subjects selected.

The Conceptual Framework



Source: Researcher

Figure 1 The Conceptual Framework on secondary school students’ perceptions on vocational education

The perceptions that secondary school students hold on vocation education have a great influence on the demand for vocation education. If students perceive vocation education as of low status, and meant for vulnerable groups, their demand for vocation education will be low. This negative perception towards vocation education may at times be a result of lack of

adequate information on the value of vocation education. The increased access to information on what vocation education is and its relevance in providing skills to employment and opportunities to further education may positively improve the image of vocational education leading to increased demand for vocational education. The students’ perceptions on

vocational education are also influenced by the family background, job market needs and government policies.

Perceptions of secondary school students towards vocational education

McGarey (2002) examined the relationship between students' personal factors (ie gender, race, academic performance, career awareness and social economic factors) and the perception of secondary students regarding vocational education in the State of Florida. McGarey (2002) defined vocation education as: skills training, industrial arts and technical education. Skills' training was referred to as a form of instruction in which discipline or drill is used to teach so as to make the trainee fit, qualified or proficient in a given skill and according to McGarey (2002), its original purpose was: to keep boys in school; develop leisure –time interest and provide vocational skills. Industrial arts was linked to manual training and was about people, clothing and shelter yet technical education was viewed as the practical application of knowledge, especially in a particular area like engineering to accomplish a task using highly technical processes, methods or knowledge. From all this, McGarey (2002) conceptualization of vocational education stresses the element of practical education meant to create skills relevant for use by the trainee.

Womble & Jones (1995) examined the characteristics of students enrolled in business education courses in urban setting (e.g gender, grade level, post graduation plans) and aimed at describing the perceptions of secondary students enrolled in business education courses in urban settings towards work and career related issues. Chambliss & Chiariello (1988) study on vocational education indicate that a problem exists in attracting students with an interest in vocational education to vocational programs which may be attributed to lack of diversity of vocational education programs and the perceived quality of vocational educational programs. The literature provides several reasons for the declining interest in vocational education which include among others: lack of appeal of the programmes to meet the needs of students, employers, and the community; low image of vocational education; the thinking that vocational education is for the academically weak and disadvantaged students (Csaba Fejos, 2000; Aynsley & Crossouard, 2010; Swift & Fisher, 2012), and the general perception that vocational education inhibits the youths' future career and education choices. The uncertainty surrounding the recognition of TVET courses, expectations about job opportunities and access to high salaries are also cited as factors shaping perceptions on TVET (Christophe, 2005). McGrath (2012) acknowledges failings in many TVET programs to be reflected in low progression into the labor market.

An integration of career technical education and academic course taking has a significant potential to reducing drop out rates (Plank 2001). According to Bishop & Ferran (2005), a 10% increase in the share of upper secondary students in

vocational and pre vocational programs is associated with a 2.6% increase in the secondary school graduation rate and a 1.9% increase in the proportion of 15-19 year old in school. Briguglio & Pace (2004) wrote a paper on 'education for sustainable development in Malta' where Malta places emphasis on interdisciplinarity as a way to promote education for sustainable development. In countries like Nigeria, the issue of interdisciplinarity has been taken on through attempts to vocationalize secondary schools by introducing vocational subjects and practical skills into the secondary school curriculum (Ikeoji & Agwubike, 2006). The Government White Paper on education (1992) has highlighted this when it provided for the introduction of comprehensive secondary schools that would offer both the general and vocational curriculum. The integration of theory with practice is what (Chafy, 1997) refers to as technology education that has enabled the US to ascend as an economic super power. Chafy (1997) supports Dewey (1964) observation that both theoretical subjects and practical subjects are vitally and formally unified.

Oketch (2014) has argued for the need to integrate TVET with general education as a remedy to limit TVET rating as a second class education. The success of the Swiss Vocational skills development with its partners has been attributed to its key elements of the dual system that integrates theory with practical training (Swiss Agency for development and Cooperation SDC, 2016). The dual system permits the transition from vocational to general education where individuals with a VPET qualification can join academic education and vice versa. The SWISS VET qualifications are equivalent to general education and lead to (applied) university entrance qualifications.

In Germany TVET is considered with high status (Triventi 2013, Clarke and Winch, 2007) attributed to the German secondary school system that provides links between higher education and the labor market. Students in Australia engage in TVET because of the students' perceptions that TVET courses improve their chances of getting a job (Billet, 2014). In a study carried out on secondary school students' perceptions of, and the factors influencing their decision making in relation to, VET in schools, Leanne et al. (2008) found out that 81% of students participated in VET programmes because they associated VET with future job opportunities (also see Sagli, 2017), 73.1% associated VET with a recognized qualification, while 62% perceived VET as good for students who are not suited for academic careers. The critical learning points in all this is that, if we are to improve students' perceptions towards VET, efforts must be made to link what is taught under VET with what the Job market demands.

Channels through which students access vocational education information

Information availability and access is critical for a person to make informed decisions. The perceptions held about

vocation education is most often influenced by the inadequate information that people actually have on vocational education. People access information through various channels like: radios, television, seminars, workshops and social media. There seems to be a misconception among the population across the world that vocational education is for the academically weak learners and for second class students unable to meet the requirements of a general academic program. To correct this misconception, it's quite imperative that factual information be provided to all sections of society on what vocation education is and all efforts be made to integrate vocational education with academic education in line with the current emphasis on inclusive education. There should be flexibility of entry from vocational education to academic education and vice versa.

McGarey (2002) examined the relationship between students' personal factors (ie gender, race, academic performance, career awareness and social economic factors) and the perception of secondary students regarding vocational education in the State of Florida. During the literature survey, McGarey (2002) concluded that little had been done in the area of understanding perceptions from the perspective of all students on vocational education as earlier studies were targeting especially students offering vocational subjects as well as perceptions of administrators, educators, employers, and parents. Most had focused on understanding perceptions of those currently enrolled or graduates of business and marketing vocational educational programs which is equivalent to preaching to the already converted.

The apathy towards vocation education programs is at times due to lack of information on the value of vocation education. Vocational education suffers from relative low standing in most countries compared to higher education and even the upper levels of secondary education (Billett, 2013). The literature provides several reasons for the declining interest in vocational education among the population including but not limited to: vocational educational programs seen as not meeting the needs of students, employers, and the community; vocational education packaged as a competitor with academic education programs; the low image that people have on vocational education as a second grade education which a person can learn even without attending a vocational institute; the tendency by education managers to design vocational educational programs primarily targeted to educationally disadvantaged students; the misleading elitist view that any formal context of education for work is not appropriate for students aspiring to attend college or university education and the general perception that vocational education will inhibit rather than enhance the youths' future career and education choices. To manage these negative perceptions about vocational education will require concerted efforts aimed at providing information about the relevance of vocation of education to the world of work and as an alternative pathway to further education. Once such information is provided, possibly the fears that students hold with regard to vocational

education will reduce and more students are likely to aspire for more vocational education from an informed point of view.

According to Leanne et al., (2008), students are not well informed about VET making decisions, subject selection and pathways available to them at secondary schools and calls for the need to improve the image of through providing relevant information to students on the various VET path ways. An integration of career technical education and academic course taking has a significant potential to reducing drop out rates (Plank 2001). Chambliss & Chiariello (1988) study on vocational education indicate that a problem exist in attracting students with an interest in vocational education to vocational programs which may result from the limited information provided to the students on the marketability of vocational educational programs.

In Hungary, there is a mutual recognition of degrees and certificates for graduates from vocational institutes in Hungary and the neighboring European states. There also exist functional career masters that provide career counseling to students to inform them of employment prospects and associated employment opportunities in alternative occupations. To improve the relevance of training programmes, there exists a network of regional Human Resource Development centers, to updates skills, to upgrade skills and to support a move from occupation to another. Emphasis is also placed on quality training where teachers are expected to undertake further training atleast once every seven years and those with an interest in teaching in vocational schools undergo practical teacher training programs to obtain a certificate as technical teachers (CsabaFejos, 2000)

In the research conducted by Leanne et al.,(2008) on secondary school students' perceptions of, and the factors influencing their decision making in relation to, VET in schools, it was found that students in Australia were not well informed about VET making decisions, about subject selection and pathways available to them at secondary schools and called for more to be done on the image problem of VET by providing relevant information to students. Readily available pre-enrolment advice and academic counseling is likely to assist retention and improve students' outcomes. Prebble et al., (2004) attribute the high drop out rates in certain education programs to lack of adequate information where students end up making wrong choices in terms of: choice of institution, field of study, programme or course etc. Prebble et al., (2004) have called on institutions to provide information on career possibilities and likely prospects to students in time. The literature surveyed underpins the relevance of information provision on VET education in guiding the provision of relevant market oriented VET education and correcting the low image people have on VET system especially that it inhibits further education training opportunities.

II. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study followed an exploratory research design which is suited for studies inquiring insight into a relatively unknown field (Creswell, 2011). Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used in the study much as more a qualitative approach was used given its emphasis on exploration and investigation of a human phenomenon (Sagli, 2017). Creswell and Clark (2011) support a mixed method approach in cases where one data source may be deemed insufficient or when dealing with exploratory findings. The mixed method allowed the researcher to maximize the strengths and compensate for weakness in each of the two methods. The study's target population consisted of senior three secondary school students in selected secondary schools in Kampala District. A sample of 200 senior three students conveniently selected participated in the study.

Source of data

Both primary and secondary data sources were used. Primary data was obtained from the selected participants through the use of questionnaires and interview guide while secondary data was obtained through reviewing the existing literature on VE.

III. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The researcher employed a self-administered questionnaire as a tool to collect quantitative data from the participants. The constructed questionnaire was distributed among the selected participants using drop and pick method. The questionnaire was divided into three sections. Section A was eliciting information on the demographic characteristics of the participants, Section B elicited information on students' perceptions towards VE while Section C elicited information on how students access information on VE. The researcher used a self completion closed ended Likert type scale questionnaire which according to Best and Khan (1996) is the most suitable instrument for measuring views and impressions. A four point Likert scale was used for the questionnaire in preference to the conventional five point scale because when an ordinal no response scale is used, there is a tendency for individuals to select responses like 'not sure' or undecided usually in the middle of the scale to avoid making a real choice (Casley & Kumar, 1988).

Data management and Quality control

Validity is the extent to which an instrument measures what it purports to measure (Oso & Onen, 2008). The self reporting survey instrument was validated by a panel of vocational educational managers from schools with high curriculum content in VE. Suggestions and comments made were considered, the questionnaire revised accordingly and pilot tested to a sample of 20 respondents from one of the senior three secondary schools students not involved in the study to understand if the desired response was as per the objectives of

the study. The reliability Cronbach coefficient of 0.72 was obtained indicating that the study instrument was reliable (Best and Khan, 1996). After collecting the data using the designed instrument, the researcher edited, coded, classified and tabulated collected quantitative data to make the data ready for analysis. The data collected using the questionnaire was entered and analyzed using the excel sheet to generate descriptive statistics in form of frequencies, percentages and means. The data from the questionnaire used to answer the study objectives was analyzed by computing the mean rating for each item in the questionnaire. The questionnaire design followed a four type Likert scale of: 1. Strongly Disagree (SD) 2. Disagree (D) 3. Strongly Agree (SA) 4. Agree (A). Each computed mean was then compared with the theoretical mean rating (assuming a normal distribution of responses) of 2.5. Statements which had their computed means above 2.5 indicated that respondents agreed with them while statements with computed means below 2.5 showed that respondents disagreed with them (NSoh and Amedorme (2015)). The research process was guided by sound ethical principles that ensured voluntary participation of the participants, informed consent, respect, confidentiality and anonymity of respondents.

IV. STUDY FINDINGS

Demographic Characteristics

More than half of the respondents 54% were female while only 46% were male. The majority of the respondents were within the age bracket of 16-20 years 142 (73%), followed by those below 15 years of age 48 (25%) and very few students were above 20 years 4 (2%). The majority of the respondents' parents had attained at least a diploma or degree level of education 132 (68%) while a few of the respondents 26 (13%) were not sure of their parents' highest level of education. The majority of the respondents' parents 91 (47%) were employed in the business sector, followed by Education 34 (18%), manufacturing 31 (16%) and 20 (10%) were engaged in agriculture contrary to what is known in the country that the majority of the population are engaged in agriculture. Only 18 (9%) of the parents fell under the category of others (Doctors, engineers etc).

The researcher also sought to establish the type of subjects that students in senior three are offering which are not part of the compulsory subjects. In Uganda, there are subjects which every student in the lower secondary school "O level" must offer. These include: 1) Maths 2) English language 3) Physics 4) Chemistry 5) Biology 6) Geography 7) History. A student in senior four is expected to register for a minimum of eight (8) subjects and a maximum of ten (10) subjects. Given that the students have to register for 7 seven compulsory subjects at this level, it leaves the student with a choice of between one to three subjects to add on the subjects to offer over a wide range of subjects that slightly exceed 20 in number. The students were asked to add on the compulsory 7 subjects list only subjects that fit in the category of vocation subjects. The

findings revealed that: The most popular vocational subjects at senior three are: Computer studies 104(54%), Technical drawing 48 (25%), Fine Art 35 (18%), Agriculture 34 (18%), Entrepreneurship 29(15%), commerce 21(11%), Food and Nutrition 19(10%) and Principles of accounts 15(8%). The popularity of computer studies at this level can be explained by the Government policy to promote ICT in schools and also the fact that students seem to use the computer for many of their own personal interest like: searching the net, face book, google, computer games etc. Technical drawing is in second

position and this can be explained by the fact that in the schools selected, there is a lot of value attached to this subject by the school management.

Perceptions of secondary school students towards vocational education

The first objective of the study aimed to establish the perceptions of secondary school students towards vocational education in selected secondary schools from Kampala District. The descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics on students' perceptions towards vocational education

	Items	SD	D	A	SA	Mean	Decision
1	The community attaches high value to vocational education	39	58	64	33	2.46	Disagree
2	Vocational subjects have a high status	47	44	68	35	2.46	Disagree
3	Vocational education subjects should be taught only in vocational institutions	70	64	39	21	2.05	Disagree
4	The teachers handling Vocational subjects are competent and friendly	36	36	73	49	2.69	Agree
5	Vocational education programs are not useful for students aspiring to join university education	91	72	18	13	1.75	Disagree
6	Vocational education courses are better designed for children from poor families	95	55	24	20	1.84	Disagree
7	Vocational education is for academically weak students	98	54	27	15	1.78	Disagree
8	Vocational programs are primarily established to cater for the educationally disadvantaged students	63	53	49	29	2.22	Disagree
9	Teachers teaching vocational subjects provide students with helpful advise	32	32	65	65	2.84	Agree
10	I prefer joining a vocational education institute after my secondary school to Higher education	67	54	43	30	2.18	Disagree
11	Students who attend higher education get higher pay as compared to those who attend vocational education	58	55	43	38	2.31	Disagree
12	Vocational educational programs offer sufficient opportunities for work experience	34	35	69	56	2.75	Agree
13	Vocational subjects provide good academic base for students interested in pursuing higher education	36	35	75	48	2.69	Agree
14	Graduates from vocational schools can easily pursue further education	31	38	76	49	2.73	Agree

Source: Primary data, 2018

Table 1 indicates that teachers teaching vocational subjects do provide students with helpful advice (Mean 2.84) and are competent and friendly (Mean 2.69). This finding seems to indicate that the apparent apathy secondary students have towards secondary education is not originating from unfriendly or incompetent teachers.

The students disagreed with the thinking that vocational education programs are not useful for students aspiring to join university education (Mean 1.75) and they emphasize the importance of vocational education when they agreed that vocational subjects provide a good academic base for students interested in pursuing higher education (Mean 2.69) and that graduates from vocational schools can easily pursue further education (Mean 2.73) and vocational educational programs offer sufficient opportunities for work experience (Mean 2.75).

The also disagreed with the thinking that vocational education programs are better designed for children from poor families (Mean 1.84) implying that these programs are beneficial to

both the poor and rich families children. The students are also of the view that vocational subjects are non discriminative of the gifted and weak students (Mean 1.78) which they further emphasize by disagreeing with the view that vocational programs are primarily established to cater for the educationally disadvantaged students (Mean 2.22). The students also expressed the opinion that vocational education subjects be taught in both general (academic) and vocational institutes (Mean 2.05)

The students also disagreed with the view that students who attend higher education get higher pay as compared to those who attend vocational education (Mean 2.31) implying that in the mind of students, the earning of the person may not be determined by the whether he/she has attended higher education or vocational education. Surprisingly, the students would prefer to attend higher education (HSC) institutions to vocational institutes after their 'O' level (Mean 2.18). This could be influenced by the perception the students have of vocational education education rooted in the societies in which they are raised. The community does not seem to attach high

value to vocational education (Mean 2.46) and neither do the students feel vocational subjects have a

higher status (Mean 2.46). However, the very close range of Mean 2.46 to the Agree decision of Mean 2.5 of the perceived status of vocational education by both the community and the students that participated in the study raises hope for the future of vocational education. It seems the perceptions towards vocational education are steadily becoming positive day by day especially as nations struggle with the problem of youth unemployment and the thinking that vocational education is the way to go as exemplified by the government programmes of skilling Uganda which is the catch word of BTVET strategic plan 2012/3 – 2021/2.

The researcher also tried to probe deeper into the perceptions students have on vocational education by including a question that required students to reveal their study plans after senior four. The question was **“What are your study plans after senior four? Join a Skills training center, polytechnic, A level, others, specify”**. Out the 194 students, 92 students responded to this question and their responses are presented in the order of highest to lowest preference. I want to join “A” level 76 (83%), I want to join a polytechnic 10 (11%) while 6

(6%) said they want to get married. The high preference to joining ‘A’ expressed by these students confirms the information they provided in Table 4.6, item 11 where they chose preference of secondary education to vocation education. The small number of students that expressed preference for polytechnics 10 (11%) is an indication that the apathy towards vocational education still exists among the youth despite some efforts by government to popularize and prioritize the ‘Skilling Uganda Agenda’. The choice by some students to prefer marriage after senior four to any other form of further education though small 6 (6%) is not surprising given the context of our country/cultural setting where some people attend school to simply obtain literacy and basic numeracy skills.

Channels through which students access vocational education information

The second objective of the study aimed to establish the channels through which secondary school students’ access information on vocational education in selected secondary schools from Kampala District. The descriptive statistics are presented in Table 2

Table 2: Descriptive statistics on the channels through which students’ access information on vocational education

	Items	SD	D	A	SA	Mean	Decision
1	Our school provides information on vocational education most often	82	60	39	13	1.91	Disagree
2	Career masters organize talks on vocational education	51	61	49	33	2.32	Disagree
3	Information on vocational education is provided on the school notice boards	76	75	31	12	1.89	Disagree
4	Our teachers provide us with information on vocational education	60	63	51	20	2.15	Disagree
5	Information on vocational education is provided on school assemblies	89	66	29	10	1.79	Disagree
6	My parents encourage me to join vocational schools	80	71	29	14	1.88	Disagree
7	I received information about vocational education from my church	62	60	53	19	2.14	Disagree
8	I received information about vocational education from newspapers	35	42	65	52	2.69	Agree
9	I received information about vocational education from my guardians	47	60	58	29	2.35	Disagree
10	I received information about vocational education from my friends	51	54	56	33	2.36	Disagree
11	I received information about vocational education on the school parents day	79	63	33	19	1.95	Disagree
12	I learnt about vocational education from the social media	49	46	55	44	2.48	Disagree
13	Information on career choices is available on the school website	75	38	45	36	2.21	Disagree

Source: Primary data, 2018

Table 2 indicates a deficiency on the way information on vocational education is transmitted to students. The newspapers seem to be a key channel where students learn about vocational education (Mean 2.69) and next to it is the social media (Mean 2.48) which shows the growing relevance of social media in our society and the need for the government to use the social media to change the negative perception towards vocational among the targeted youths.

The schools have done little to popularize vocational education among students as they rarely provide information

on vocational education to students (Mean 1.91), the careers seem not to be on the spot as they rarely organize talks with a vocational education flavor (Mean 2.32). The school notice boards have also not been well utilized to provide relevant information on vocational education (Mean 1.89) and neither have the school managers captured the opportunities provided by the regular school assemblies to provide students with information on vocational education (Mean 1.79). Similarly, the teachers have been less helpful in the provision of information on vocational education to their students (Mean 2.15).

The schools have not utilized their websites to avail students with information on career choices (Mean 2.21) neither have they used the opportunities provided by the school parents' days to provide students with relevant career information (Mean 1.95). This implies that that schools should think of more innovative ways of reaching out to students as far as provision of information on career choices is concerned

The churches have also not been very useful in providing information to learners on career choices (Mean 2.14), guardians have played a minimal role in career information provision (Mean 2.35), and this has not been any different from friends (Mean 2.36). The parents have also not done enough to encourage their children to join vocational schools. All this leaves our students in a state of making career choices not based on adequate information which in the end may be one of the explanations for the increased youth unemployment in the country.

The researcher also probed further on the channels schools use to provide career education to learners by including in the questionnaire an open ended question which required students to specify the methods they use to access information on vocational education in their schools. The question read as follows: "Specify any other method (s) students' access information on vocation education in your school". The findings revealed the following: students access information on vocational education through; social media (28), teachers (16), peers (14), friends from vocational institutes (11), Career days (8), seminars (6), notice boards (4), guest speakers (3), Alumni (4), website (3), Surrounding community e.g. builders (2), Consulting elders (2), Information prefect (2), school assemblies (1), Television (1), newspapers (1), debates (1), posters (1) and listening to radio (1).

The findings reveal the increased role of social media among the youths and the need for school management to utilize this channel to influence the career choices of the students. One student when responding to how they access information on career guidance wrote "Through the school website but our school does not really care about this". The teachers' role in career guidance though rated next is at a far distance compared to social media implying the likelihood that teachers are not actively participating in guiding learners' career choices. A student wrote "I don't think they really care about it". The combined effect of peers (14) and friends from vocational institutes (11) though not at the same rating with social media is quite impressive and draws us to the need to actively use peers to guide students' career choices. Career days (8), seminars (6), and guest speakers were next in line and one student wrote "information on vocation education is provided to the students on careers days when visitors are asked to talk to us". The role of the Alumni (4) was also singled out and one student wrote "through MACOSA only (some career guidance thing)". My own understanding of MACOSA is that it stands for old boy and girls of one of the schools under study. Two students said they access career information by

seeing what others do, for example, builders around the school.

The school notice boards (4) though meant to provide relevant information to students seems not to be well utilized to provide information on vocational education. This corroborates the students' low feedback on school information prefect (2) as a channel of accessing information on vocational education. The limited attention given to the other identified channels as avenues through which students' access vocational education from schools like: website (3), school assemblies (1), Television (1), newspapers (1), debates (1), and posters (1) confirm the low priority that schools attach to the provision of information on vocation education. The students expressed their dissatisfaction and wrote "Our school does not give chance to access information on vocational education"; "our school does not care"; "no method, the school does not even talk about vocational education"; "no methods are used to access information on vocational education in our school and that's the fact"; "we find out using our own ways, for example, visiting the vocational schools themselves". From all this comments it is very clear that the state of career guidance in schools is still wanting and little wonder that the rate of youth unemployment in the country may continue to increase if people entrusted to manage students learning do not provide them with timely and appropriate career guidance.

V. DISCUSSIONS

Perceptions of secondary school students towards vocational education

The first objective of the study was to establish the perceptions of secondary school students towards vocational education in selected secondary schools in Kampala District. The government of Uganda through its skilling Uganda program, establishment a regulatory framework to support BT/VET has tried all efforts to promote BT/VET but still the youths and children in secondary schools are not showing keen interest in vocational education programs as the study findings revealed.

Much as the teachers teaching vocational subjects are competent, friendly and do provide students with helpful advice, students still have apathy towards VE. The students perceive VE programs to be as useful for students' as spring to join university education as is with general education programs. Surprisingly, they prefer to pursue a general academic program (HSC) to a more vocational oriented program pursued in polytechnics. This finding is in agreement with Chambliss & Chiariello (1988) who pointed out the difficulty in attracting students with an interest in VE to vocational programs. Chambliss & Chiariello (1988) attributed this to lack of diversity of VE programs. It may also be possible that the students are not sure of the quality of education offered in vocational institutes for as Nurbolat et al. (2016) observed, successful effort to promote VE need to go hand in hand with the improvement in the quality of VE

which is not the best in Uganda given the poor state of infrastructure in most vocational schools.

According to the study findings, VE programs offer sufficient opportunities for work experience. The programs are suitable for both children from well to do families and those from deserving families. The programs are non discriminative of the gifted and weak students and deserve to be taught in both general (academic) and vocational institutes which is supported by (Oketch, 2014). This finding contradicts (CsabaFejos, 2000; Aynsley&crossouard, 2010; Swift & Fisher, 2012) finding that students are shunning VE because it is basically designed for the academically weak and disadvantaged students. The question is then why students are still biased towards offering VE. As the findings indicate, this may be attributed to the value the community attaches to VE which from the findings is still low. The finding can further be substantiated by Triventi(2013), Clarke and Winch (2007) that attribute the high preference of TVET programs in Germany because of its being associated with high status, ability to provide a link with higher education and the labor market.

The students also disagreed with the view that students who attend higher education get higher pay as compared to those who attend VE implying that in the mind of students, the earning of the person may not be determined by whether he/she has attended higher education or VE but on whether the education he/she has obtained has equipped him/her with the relevant skills required in the job market. Surprisingly, the students would prefer to attend higher education (HSC) institutions to vocational institutes after their 'O' level which seems to be rooted in the societies in which they are raised where VE is associated with manual labour suitable for the poor while general education is associated with white collar jobs suited for the children of the wealth and chiefs. The high preference for HSC to vocational education by the students studied is supported by Swift & Fisher (2012) finding that the general perception of VE among students is that it inhibits future career and education choices.

Channels through which students access vocational education information

The second objective of the study was to establish the channels through which secondary school students' access vocational education information in selected secondary schools in Kampala District. Information availability informs proper decision making and where information is lacking, wrong choices are likely to be made. The findings indicated a general deficiency on the way information on VE is transmitted to students. The findings were very clear that schools have done very little to popularize VE among students and the career masters rarely organize career talks. The school notice boards have also not been well utilized to provide relevant information on VE and even opportunities provided by the regular school assemblies have not been captured to provide students with information on vocational education. Comments of dissatisfaction with the way schools provide

career information to students need not go without attention. 'Our school does not care'; 'no method, the school does not even talk about vocational education'; 'we find out using our own ways, for example, visiting the vocational schools themselves'. This dissatisfaction with career provision among students by education managers is not different to what existed in Malaysia where the inadequate career counseling limited TVET graduates interest in higher education (Mavlean and Pavlova). The lack of career information is also echoed by Leanne et al., (2008), who observed that students are not well informed about VET making decisions, subject selection and pathways available to them at secondary schools.

The schools have not been able to use the opportunities provided by the school parents' days to provide students with relevant career information and the teachers have not done much to improve the information gap either. Prebble et al., (2004) have indicated that the lack of adequate information is responsible for the wrong choices students make in terms of: choice of institution, field of study, programme or course etc with the negative effect of worsening the drop out rates! The schools have not utilized opportunities availed by modern technology to avail students with information on career choices like the social media which is a favorite channel to many students as many testified that they had obtained career information from the social media.

The churches have also not been very useful in providing information to learners on career choices, and parents and guardians have played a minimal role in career information provision. The students are left on their own and have searched for information from their friends who may also not be well informed. The function of the careers masters in most schools is limited to annual career guidance sessions when students are choosing subjects to offer in senior three or at the end of 'O' when students are guided to select schools for further education. This situation in Uganda is not different from Kazakhstan where Nurbolat et al, (2016) examined the problems in the technical and vocational education management system and found that 50% of the university students, 48% of the college students, 46% of the vocational school students denied the role of the career guidance work in which they were educated, in the choice of the profession. CsabaFejos(2000) call for functional career masters able to provide career counseling to students, inform them of employment prospects and associated employment opportunities in alternative occupations is a viable way to go.

VI. CONCLUSION

Much as the students do not perceive significance differences to exist between VE and general education in terms of further training opportunities, employment opportunities and status, there is general apathy towards VE among secondary schools students. This is made clear when they were asked their preference after senior 4, as to whether to join HSC or polytechnics and 83% chose the Advanced level (HSC) option. This implies the need for more career information to

be provided to the learners as attitude change takes quite some time.

The channels through which secondary school students' access VE information in selected secondary schools in Kampala District is generally insufficient. The school based channels are mainly career sessions offered by careers masters as a one off activity which made students to sum it up as a lack of interest in the provision of career guidance by schools studied. From the students own efforts in search for career information, the social media came out prominently followed by teachers, meaning that students expect more in form of career guidance from their teachers.

VII. STUDY RECOMMENDATIONS

There is need for government and the relevant stakeholders to come up with a policy framework that clearly shows how a student can transit from the path of VE to further education as is done in countries like Germany and Switzerland for this seems to be a key limiting factor in the thestudents' interest to pursue a VE path right from the early stages. Such a policy should be publicized to all stakeholders like students, parents and schools.

There is need to support and strengthen the career masters function in schools. The career masters should undergo refresher courses in modern technologies like how to use social media to pass on career information as the social media seems to be a darling to many of the youths.

The education managers in schools need to lobby the relevant line Ministry for a forum that brings on board practitioners, industrialists and employers in an effort to come up with a VE curriculum that is relevant to the needs of the country, industry and the individual to avoid the rampant skills mismatch evident among VE graduates. Once all stakeholders are involved, the problems of limited funding and inadequate infrastrure may be jointly handled and managed.

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