

Article

Promoting Academic Competence in Vocational Education and Training of Lecturers Through Professional Development Programmes

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Abstract: This study explores the enhancement of academic competence among lecturers in Vocational Education and Training (VET) through targeted professional development programmes. This poses a challenge to effective teaching and learning, particularly in South Africa, where TVET colleges are expected to play transformative role. Using a qualitative case study design, the research engaged eight participants, comprising management and lecturers, from two randomly selected colleges to understand their perceptions and experiences regarding competence development. Random sampling was adopted to select colleges from a district because any college had probability to be selected. The purpose of random sampling was to determine if the participants needed professional development and the level of their needs. Data was collected through interviews and reflective diaries and analysed using a data matrix. The findings reveal that while lecturers recognise the value of professional development, significant gaps remain in subject knowledge, didactic skills, and the application of adult education principles. Participants also highlighted constraints such as limited institutional support and inconsistent access to training opportunities. The study concludes that structured and sustained professional development initiatives are essential for cultivating critical thinking, improving teaching efficacy, and ultimately revitalising VET institutions. It recommends a systemic approach to lecturer training that integrates academic, pedagogical, and practical competencies to meet contemporary educational demands.

Keywords: Academic competence; vocational education and training; lecturers; professional development; promoting academic

Introduction

Vocational Education and Training (VET) plays a crucial role in equipping individuals with the skills and knowledge necessary for employability and sustainable livelihoods in a knowledge-driven economy. In the context of South Africa's post-apartheid transformation, the VET sector is expected to address socio-economic inequalities by promoting inclusive and high-quality education. However, the effectiveness of VET institutions is closely tied to the academic competence of lecturers, whose qualifications and pedagogical capabilities remain a concern (Smith et al., 2015). Hence, some of the lecturers seem to still have National Diploma qualifications, for this, professional development programmes can contribute significantly towards improving the competence of lecturers.

Despite the technical and task-oriented nature of VET, academic competence defined by integrated subject knowledge, didactic proficiency, and critical thinking remains fundamental to lecturer performance

and student outcomes. For this study, academic competence refers to the ability of the TVET lecturers to perform excellently in their job prescription and expectations. Hence, they are expected to have adequate subject knowledge and appropriate teaching approaches in adult education context. Mezirow (2014) ascertained that academic competence in adult education enhances self-directed learning, critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Therefore, teaching that does not promote self-directed learning and andragogy can hardly be adult education. Academic competence can contribute to the improvement of the TVET college lecturers' performance. In the philosophy of the justification of adult education, self-directed learning and andragogy are described as academic competence of adult educator.

Previous studies in both developed and developing contexts have emphasised the need for professional development to enhance lecturers' vocational and pedagogical capacities. For example, in Germany and England, different models of competence have been established, prioritising either knowledge-based or skill-based frameworks (Raj et al., 2021). International frameworks such as the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) also advocate transnational standards and lifelong learning as key pillars of competence development. In Malaysia and China, strategic reforms have institutionalised professional development pathways for VET lecturers to maintain relevance in rapidly evolving work environments (Munusamy, 2021; Zhang, 2025). The purpose of this study is to investigate how professional development programmes can promote academic competence among VET lecturers in South Africa. The study contributes to the improvement of TVET lecturers' existing body of knowledge by foregrounding the perspectives of lecturers and management staff within Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges.

There is a vast amount of literature about the competence of a person, but a few about the competence of TVET lecturers. Through a qualitative case study design, this paper aims to promote academic competence specifically of TVET lecturers to bridge the gaps in current practices of more emphasis on practical than theory and offer practical recommendations for institutional and policy-level reforms that can strengthen the competence and professional identity of VET lecturers. The study wants to unfold the purpose of professional development programmes to TVET lecturers, why should professional development programmes of TVET lecturers include teaching principles, why should TVET lecturers attend professional development programmes, and why is academic competence significant to TVET lecturers. In addition, the study objectives include, to equip TVET lecturers with both subject knowledge and skills, to improve the andragogical knowledge of TVET lecturers, and to improve the performance of TVET lecturers.

Literature Review

1. Reconceptualising Lecturer Competence in the South African and Global Context

In the evolving context of post-apartheid South Africa, lecturer competence within Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institutions has become a national imperative. Competence is no longer confined to task-based knowledge but encompasses a broader set of academic, pedagogical, and reflective attributes. Van der Bijl and Oosthuizen (2019) assert that lecturers are expected to be sufficiently qualified in both academic and occupational dimensions of teaching. However, approximately one-third of college lecturers reportedly lack the requisite qualifications to facilitate teaching and assessment effectively (Atukunda & Maja, 2022). This highlights ongoing concerns about the readiness of TVET lecturers to address learner-centred pedagogies and adult learning needs in under-resourced and often neglected institutions.

Globally, lecturer competence is defined differently across national systems, shaped by distinct educational philosophies and labour market demands. In Germany, vocational education is framed by a holistic competence model that balances theoretical mastery with hands-on vocational training, reflecting the dual system's integration of cognitive and practical development (Chen, Goncharova & Frommberger, 2024). In contrast, the United Kingdom adopts a task-oriented approach where lecturer competence is measured against occupational standards and learner outcomes, which, although measurable, risks reducing professional development to narrow performance metrics (Mulder & Winterton, 2016). These two paradigms knowledge-based versus output-driven demonstrate the tension between abstract mastery and measurable skills. Despite their differences, both systems emphasise the need for structured and ongoing professional development.

Across Africa, there is growing recognition that lecturer competence directly influences institutional quality. In Nigeria, limited CPD engagement has prompted calls for reforms that integrate ethics, entrepreneurship, and pedagogical accountability (Isa, 2020), while Tanzania's formalisation of vocational teacher training through dedicated institutions reflects a policy-level commitment to competence-based instruction (Kombo, 2023). Within South Africa, the concept of academic competence must be contextualised to include transformative pedagogies, cultural responsiveness, and an appreciation for the country's complex socio-economic landscape (Dlamini, 2022).

2. Professional Development and Lifelong Learning for TVET Lecturers

Lecturer professional development remains a central mechanism for cultivating competence. Yet, implementation is uneven and often under-theorised, particularly in developing contexts. International frameworks, such as the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), promote lifelong learning as a cornerstone of competence, emphasising transparency, portability of skills, and the continuous refinement of subject and pedagogical knowledge (Singh & Ehlers, 2020). The EQF model has influenced many national systems, including those in Asia and the Global South.

In China, state-directed policies require vocational lecturers to undergo formal training annually and participate in intensive refresher courses every five years (Qi, 2016). Similarly, Malaysia has introduced reforms that link research capacity and pedagogical improvement, equipping lecturers to meet industry-aligned performance expectations (Munusamy, 2021). These models reinforce the notion that lecturer competence must evolve with labour demands, digitalisation, and educational shifts. Zhang (2025) confirms that in Chinese vocational colleges, structured professional development is tied to leadership responsibilities, curriculum innovation, and institutional advancement.

Outside Asia, Canada's Northern Alberta Institute of Technology (NAIT) offers a capacity-building model that integrates industry feedback into teaching and lecturer training (Miller, 2022). In Australia, while CPD is recognised as essential, it suffers from implementation gaps due to fragmented institutional support and insufficient policy coherence (Pizzuti et al., 2024). These international experiences underscore that successful CPD requires not only training content but a stable institutional culture of continuous improvement.

In the South African context, universities and training authorities offer Continuing Professional Education (CPE) programmes, but uptake remains inconsistent. Williams et al. (2024) found that lecturers cite time constraints, lack of support, and a misalignment between course content and teaching realities. Sullivan et al. (2021) further point out that institutional cultures often fail to reward qualification improvement or create enabling structures for professional growth. Without systemic support, CPD risks becoming performative rather than transformative.

3. Linking Lecturer Competence to Student Outcomes and Developmental Goals

There is broad consensus that lecturer competence significantly influences student success in vocational settings. Manwa et al. (2020) argue that students rarely outperform the competence levels of their educators, suggesting a direct correlation between lecturer capacity and student academic achievement. Similarly, Bin Superi and Naqshbandi (2022) affirm that lecturer motivation and mastery both content and didactic serve as key predictors of student retention, participation, and performance. In the TVET context, this relationship is intensified by the need for applied, industry-relevant instruction, which places additional pressure on lecturers to translate theoretical knowledge into practical skill development.

Didactic competence, the ability to communicate, explain, and adapt pedagogical content is particularly vital in adult learning environments. Many TVET lecturers are technically proficient but lack training in adult education principles or inclusive, participatory methods. Reflective pedagogy, peer learning, and classroom adaptation are skills that require ongoing cultivation through mentoring and experiential learning. Additionally, TVET institutions are increasingly expected to align their teaching practices with global sustainability agendas. In China, lecturer training is now linked to Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), incorporating critical thinking, ecological literacy, and global citizenship into vocational education (Lin, 2024). These developments signal an expanded role for lecturers not just as content deliverers but as

ethical, cultural, and social leaders. In South Africa, where equity, access, and decolonial pedagogies are at the centre of educational transformation, the expectation that lecturers contribute to developmental and societal goals adds another layer of complexity to competence development (Doiron, 2023; Darling-Hammond, 2017).

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative case study approach framed within the Interpretive Paradigm. The interpretive paradigm was selected due to its focus on describing and understanding of the specific situation to enable to construct knowledge. The findings are interpreted to influence the participants to change, hence this would be empowerment. It allows the researcher to examine underlying systemic issues while encouraging respondents to articulate possibilities for change within their professional contexts.

The case study design enabled an in-depth exploration of how academic competence is perceived and promoted among TVET lecturers and management. Two Vocational Education and Training (VET) colleges from the OR Tambo district to ascertain the status of TVET lecturers in the district. From these institutions, eight participants were purposively chosen based on their professional relevance and willingness to provide rich, experience-based insights. The sample included six lecturers, three from each college, drawn from the Engineering and Information Technology departments, as well as one management representative from each institution.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in the participants' respective work environments at times convenient to them. Distinct interview questions were developed for lecturers and management to accommodate their different institutional roles and perspectives (Schroeder, 2023). This approach enhanced the validity of the data collection process by aligning questions with participants' job responsibilities and daily practices (Alordiah & Ossai, 2023).

All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and supplemented by reflective diary entries maintained by the researcher. The interview data were transcribed and analysed using a manual thematic analysis, allowing for comparison across responses and the identification of recurring themes. The findings were then presented as an inductive research narrative, capturing both individual perspectives and collective insights. This methodological approach, grounded in participant empowerment and contextual sensitivity, allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities associated with promoting academic competence in South African VET institutions.

Table 1. Participant breakdown by role and institution

Participant	Role	Institution	Discipline
P1	Lecturer	King Sabata Dalindyebo FET College, Queenstown Road, Mthata	Engineering
P2	Lecturer	King Sabata Dalindyebo FET College, Zimbane, Mthata	Information Technology
P3	Lecturer	King Sabata Dalindyebo FET College, Zimbane, Mthatha	Engineering
P4	Management	King Sabata Dalindyebo FET College, Queenstown Road, Mthatha.	N/A
P5	Lecturer	King Sabata Dalindyebo FET College Queenstown Road, Mthatha	Information Technology
P6	Lecturer	King Sabata Dalindyebo FET College, Zimbane, Mthatha	Engineering
P7	Lecturer	King Sabata Dalindyebo FET College, Zimbane, Mthatha	Information Technology
P8	Management	King Sabata Dalindyebo FET College, Queenstown Road, Mthatha	N/A

Source: Author's fieldwork (2024)

The Findings

The data collected from interviews with six lecturers and two management personnel at two South African TVET colleges provides detailed insight into the challenges and opportunities related to promoting academic competence. Several recurring themes emerged from the analysis, shedding light on how professional development programmes, lecturer motivation, and educational context influence teaching quality and student engagement. Each theme is illustrated with direct participant reflections that reinforce the significance of the findings.

1. Balancing Practical and Theoretical Teaching

Participants had differing views about whether practical or theoretical components were easier to teach. Several lecturers explained that practical work tended to be more enjoyable and engaging for students, making it easier to deliver. Others felt that theoretical instruction, though more demanding in terms of preparation, offered greater structure and clarity.

"Teaching the practical part is easier because students are more attentive. But you still need theory to explain what you are doing."

(Participant 2, Female, 34 old)

The responses to the interview question showed that participants were more likely to concentrate on practical than theoretical teaching. Those who favoured theoretical teaching emphasised the importance of having strong subject knowledge to support student understanding and bridge the gap between classroom and industry demands.

2. Planning for Difficult Topics

Lecturers stressed that meticulous planning was essential for lessons perceived as difficult, especially those involving complex theory or unfamiliar practical applications. Strategies included consulting peers, using visual aids, dividing content into smaller parts, and encouraging group work.

"For complicated topics, I prepare well and give students questions to research in advance. That way, they contribute and stay interested."

(Participant 3, Male, 48 years old)

This theme revealed that confidence in delivering challenging topics was linked directly to lecturers' own preparedness and willingness to seek support.

3. Engagement with Learning Resources

While some participants reported using libraries or online tools to enhance their content knowledge, others admitted to limited engagement with such resources. A number of lecturers preferred digital platforms such as Google, citing convenience and accessibility.

"We use digital libraries when possible, especially for new topics, but some lecturers just rely on their old notes."

(Participant 5, Femal, 36 years old)

These findings suggest that while awareness of the importance of knowledge enrichment exists, institutional or personal barriers may limit lecturers' access to continuous learning.

4. Need for Professional Development and Institutional Support

There was broad agreement among lecturers that professional development programmes were essential for enhancing both subject and pedagogical competence. Participants highlighted the need for refresher courses, workshops, and opportunities to visit real work environments.

"Lecturers must go out to see the workplaces we are preparing students for. That helps us teach better."

(Participant 1, Male, 43 years old)

The responses also indicated a desire for management to provide more structured support through resources, mentorship, and study bursaries.

5. Changing Expectations in a Democratic Teaching Environment

Participants reflected on the shift from traditional, teacher-centred methods to a more democratic, learner-centred approach. Some found this change empowering, while others expressed concern about diminished discipline and rising student disengagement.

"Now students know their rights, and that affects how we teach. You need better skills to manage the classroom and still be effective."

(Participant 4, Male, 40 years old)

Despite the challenges, most acknowledged that these changes demanded better training and adaptability from lecturers.

6. Importance of Subject Knowledge and Didactic Competence

Nearly all lecturers agreed that strong subject knowledge is foundational to teaching in VET contexts. Equally important, however, was the need for didactic competence, the ability to communicate and explain effectively using appropriate methods.

"You can't just know the content; you must know how to teach it in a way students understand and apply."

(Participant 6, Female, 34 years old)

Participants voiced concern that many lecturers lacked formal training in teaching methodologies, especially those from technical backgrounds. The responses to the interview question indicated that both subject knowledge and didactic knowledge are the attributes of a competent lecturer.

7. Management's Perspective on Competence Enhancement

Management personnel interviewed supported the need for structured professional development and agreed that lecturer competence directly influences student performance. They advocated for skills development programmes, bursaries, and study leave to promote ongoing lecturer improvement.

"Our lecturers must grow professionally if we want quality outcomes. We should give them time and support to study."

(Participant 7, Male, 39 years old)

There were, however, differing views on whether lecturers should always hold more knowledge than students. One respondent suggested that outcomes-based education supports student-led learning, though the general consensus remained that a knowledgeable lecturer is key to success.

Discussion

1. Previous Studies and Comparative Analysis

This study reaffirms the centrality of professional development in enhancing the academic competence of TVET lecturers, aligning with the broader body of international literature that advocates for systematic training and continuing education in vocational teaching (Anthonie, 2024; David, 2023; Maseko, 2022). The findings strongly resonate with the German model's emphasis on integrated knowledge-based competence (Mulder & Winterton; Frenay & Soroyan, 2023) and with international efforts to balance occupational

standards and pedagogical capacity, as observed in Malaysia, Australia, and Canada (Darling-Hammond, 2017). Furthermore, the participants' acknowledgement of the dual importance of subject and didactic knowledge mirrors conclusions drawn in studies from Sweden and Nigeria, where gaps in pedagogical training have hindered educational reform (Rangasam, 2023; Zatt & Mizukami, 2022).

Participants' reflections on the changing dynamics of teaching in a democratic context reveal challenges that echo broader concerns about the need for responsive, critical educators who can manage classrooms with empathy, professionalism, and academic strength. These findings reinforce calls for deeper investment in lecturer development—not only for knowledge acquisition but also for nurturing reflective, ethical, and adaptive practitioners (Yan, 2024; Zhao et al., 2024).

2. Working Assumptions: Confirmations and Emerging Insights

The study assumed that professional development programmes would be regarded by lecturers and management as necessary for improving competence. This was clearly confirmed through participant responses that highlighted a shared recognition of CPD as a catalyst for personal and institutional transformation. However, the research also revealed nuanced insights: many lecturers demonstrated limited initiative in pursuing enrichment opportunities, citing time, resource constraints, and lack of institutional support (Fatima, 2024). Moreover, a key emergent insight relates to the divide between theoretical and practical teaching. While some lecturers preferred the hands-on approach of practical teaching, others valued theoretical structure, underscoring the need for balanced methodologies supported by didactic competence. This suggests that competence cannot be defined solely through content mastery but must include pedagogical agility and an understanding of adult learning principles, components critical in vocational education settings (Bajis et al., 2020).

3. Broader Implications

The findings hold broad implications for educational policy, institutional practice, and curriculum design within TVET. Institutions must embed professional development into the culture of lecturer performance by providing access to workshops, bursaries, mentoring, and work-based exposure. Doing so may not only enhance lecturer effectiveness but also directly influence student motivation, attendance, and academic achievement (Kim et al., 2020). In line with the national vision for a skilled, responsive post-school education system, this study affirms that lecturer competence, especially in adult learning settings, must be framed as an ongoing, reflective journey. Curricula must account for both the technical and human elements of teaching: subject knowledge, didactic skill, and socio-emotional intelligence (Tuomi, 2022). The systemic nature of these findings suggests the need for cross-sector collaborations involving universities, industry, and government to support the professionalisation of vocational educators.

4. Directions for Future Research

Several avenues emerge for further scholarly exploration. A longitudinal investigation could assess the long-term impact of targeted professional development on lecturer competence and student performance (Akiba & Liang, 2016). Comparative studies across multiple districts or provinces would also help assess regional disparities in access to CPD opportunities. Additionally, exploring the role of mentorship and peer observation as informal but powerful professional learning tools may yield practical strategies for staff development (Shanks, 2023). The emotional labour of teaching in a democratic environment, especially among underqualified or unsupported lecturers, also merits deeper psychological investigation. Finally, assessing how CPD influences the integration of sustainable development concepts and digital skills into VET delivery would align research with current global educational priorities.

5. Final Thoughts and Recommendations

This study illuminated the lived experiences and perspectives of TVET lecturers and management in relation to academic competence and professional development. The findings underscore that effective teaching in vocational settings demands more than technical expertise; it requires a coherent blend of pedagogical

strategies, reflective engagement, and institutional support. Professional development emerges not as a luxury but as a necessity for revitalising TVET colleges and fostering responsive educators capable of meeting the complex demands of adult learners. Institutions must create environments where continuous learning is not only encouraged but structurally supported. By investing in their educators, TVET colleges stand to improve student outcomes, enhance institutional credibility, and contribute meaningfully to national development

Conclusion

This study has underscored the critical role of professional development programmes in promoting academic competence among lecturers in South Africa's Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) sector. Drawing on the perspectives of both lecturers and management from two TVET colleges, the findings reveal that competence is multidimensional, encompassing subject knowledge, didactic skill, critical thinking, and adaptability to adult learning environments. While many lecturers express awareness of their developmental needs, institutional challenges, such as limited access to structured training and insufficient support, continue to hinder their growth. The study confirms that without consistent, context-sensitive professional development opportunities, lecturers may struggle to respond to the dynamic demands of vocational education, particularly in democratic and post-industrial societies. The success of any educational reform in the TVET space hinges on equipping educators not only with practical knowledge but also with the pedagogical and reflective tools necessary to guide adult learners effectively.

International models in countries such as Germany, Malaysia, China, and Canada provide valuable reference points for South Africa. However, the implementation of such strategies must be localised and responsive to the unique socio-economic and institutional realities within the South African context. It is therefore recommended that CPD programmes be institutionalised as part of lecturer evaluation systems and integrated with industry exposure, academic advancement, and mentorship structures. In conclusion, fostering academic competence in vocational educators is not only a matter of professional growth it is a strategic necessity for improving the overall quality and impact of TVET institutions. Empowered lecturers will, in turn, shape empowered students, contributing meaningfully to national development, social inclusion, and the advancement of a knowledge-driven economy.

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