



Understanding youth experiences of skills development and employment in rural Malawi: Perceived barriers to school to work transition

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ABSTRACT

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This study examines youth perceptions of skills development and school-to-work transition in rural Malawi, drawing on evidence from Nkhonkhotakota, Dowa, Mulanje, and Phalombe districts. Using a mixed-methods design, the study combined survey data from 300 young people aged 18–35 with qualitative insights from key informant interviews involving vocational trainers, district officials, employers, and community leaders. Rather than directly measuring labour market mismatch, the study explores how young people perceive the relevance of vocational skills training to their employment experiences and transition into work. Findings indicate that many young people perceive Technical, Entrepreneurial and Vocational Education and Training programmes as only partially aligned with available rural livelihood and employment opportunities. Respondents reported difficulties securing employment related to their training, with many transitioning into informal self-employment, subsistence agriculture, or other income-generating activities outside their areas of specialization. Participants attributed these experiences to shortcomings in training relevance, limited practical exposure, inadequate access to start-up capital, weak connections between training institutions and employers, and persistent gender norms influencing occupational choices. Key informants reinforced these perceptions, highlighting institutional constraints including limited industry engagement, resource shortages, and weak coordination between training providers and local economic actors. The study contributes empirical evidence on how rural youth experience transitions from training to work and how institutional and socioeconomic conditions shape these experiences. It underscores the importance of strengthening collaboration among TEVET providers, employers, and local government, expanding work-based learning, promoting gender-inclusive vocational pathways, and enhancing entrepreneurship and business development support for sustainable and inclusive rural youth employment.

Contribution/Originality: This study is one of very few studies that investigate youth perceptions of TEVET relevance within Malawi's rural context, moving beyond employment outcomes to examine how young people experience the transition from training to work. It uniquely triangulates youth data with perspectives from different players to reveal multi-level gaps.

1. INTRODUCTION

Youth unemployment and underemployment remain among the most pressing development challenges in Malawi, with young people in rural areas facing particularly constrained pathways into productive employment. While national policy discussions often focus on employment creation and skills development, comparatively little attention has been given to how rural youth experience the transition from education and vocational training into work. This gap is important because rural labour markets differ substantially from urban settings, being characterised by limited formal employment opportunities, high levels of informality, seasonal economic activities, and a heavy

dependence on smallholder agriculture. In districts such as Dowa, Mulanje, Phalombe, and Nkhonkhotakota, these conditions shape the employment opportunities available to young people and influence how they perceive the value and relevance of vocational skills training.

Malawi's demographic profile further underscores the urgency of addressing youth employment challenges. According to ILO ACCEL Africa (2022), an estimated 270,000 young people enter the labour market each year, while the formal economy generates only about 30,000 new jobs annually. As a result, most young people seek livelihoods through self-employment, family enterprises, agriculture, or informal work. In many rural communities, *ganyu* (casual labour) has become an increasingly important source of income. Although historically regarded as a temporary coping strategy, *ganyu* has evolved into a regular livelihood option for many rural households, particularly among young people with limited land, low educational attainment, and few alternative employment opportunities. These realities shape young people's expectations of vocational training and their experiences of transitioning into employment.

The Government of Malawi has identified Technical, Entrepreneurial and Vocational Education and Training (TEVET) as a key strategy for improving youth employability, promoting entrepreneurship, and supporting economic transformation. Under the Technical, Entrepreneurial and Vocational Education and Training Authority (TEVETA), vocational training programmes aim to equip young people with practical skills relevant to local economic opportunities. The establishment of Community Technical Colleges has further expanded access to vocational education, particularly for out-of-school youth who previously faced barriers to formal training. Community Technical Colleges are now operational in several districts, including Dowa, Nkhonkhotakota, and Phalombe, reflecting continued national investment in skills development.

Despite these efforts, evidence suggests that many young people continue to encounter difficulties translating vocational training into sustainable employment or viable livelihoods. Previous studies have identified challenges including limited practical training opportunities, inadequate career guidance, constrained access to finance for enterprise development, and weak linkages between training institutions and local employers. However, relatively little research has examined how rural youth themselves perceive the relevance of vocational training to their employment experiences and the factors that influence their transition from training to work. Understanding these perceptions is important because they shape career aspirations, training choices, and decisions regarding wage employment, self-employment, and migration.

Existing research on youth employment and vocational education in Malawi has largely adopted national or urban-focused perspectives, often overlooking the diversity of rural labour markets and the lived experiences of young people in different local contexts. Furthermore, many studies emphasise policy implementation or institutional performance while giving less attention to how young people interpret and navigate the opportunities and constraints they encounter after completing vocational training. Exploring these experiences can provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of existing skills development initiatives and identify areas where training programmes can better support successful school-to-work transitions.

Against this background, this study explores youth perceptions of skills development and school-to-work transition in rural Malawi, drawing evidence from Dowa, Mulanje, Phalombe, and Nkhonkhotakota districts. Specifically, the study seeks to answer three research questions: (1) How do rural youth perceive the relevance of vocational skills training to their employment and livelihood opportunities? (2) What institutional, socio-economic, and contextual factors do young people perceive as influencing their transition from training into work? and (3) How do young women and young men experience school-to-work transitions differently in rural communities? By addressing these questions through a mixed-methods approach, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of rural youth employment experiences and provides evidence to inform policies aimed at strengthening vocational education, improving school-to-work transitions, and supporting inclusive rural development in Malawi.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. *School-to-Work Transition and Skills Development in Sub-Saharan Africa*

The transition from education and training into productive employment has become a central concern in vocational education and labour market research, particularly in developing countries where youth unemployment and underemployment remain persistently high. School-to-work transition refers to the process through which young people move from education or training into employment, self-employment, or other livelihood opportunities. The quality of this transition is influenced by individual competencies, labour market conditions, institutional arrangements, and broader socio-economic factors (ILO ACCEL Africa, 2022).

Within this literature, the concept of skills mismatch has received considerable attention. Cedefop (2010) defines skills mismatch as the misalignment between the competencies developed through education and training systems and those required in labour markets. This mismatch may occur as vertical mismatch, where workers possess higher or lower qualifications than required for available jobs, or horizontal mismatch, where individuals work outside their fields of training (McGuinness, Pouliakas, & Redmond, 2018). While these concepts provide useful analytical frameworks, measuring skills mismatch objectively generally requires evidence from employers, labour market demand analyses, or graduate tracer studies. Consequently, many studies rely on the perceptions and experiences of graduates to understand how they interpret the relevance of their training to employment opportunities.

In Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), school-to-work transitions are shaped by structural characteristics that differ markedly from those in industrialised economies. Scholars identify outdated curricula, limited responsiveness of training institutions to changing economic conditions, and weak collaboration between vocational training providers and employers as persistent constraints affecting youth employment outcomes (Allais, 2012). The African Union (2020) observes that many Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) systems remain predominantly supply-driven, while the World Bank (2019) highlights inadequate investment in technical skills development and weak institutional coordination as important barriers to improving employment prospects for young people.

These challenges are particularly pronounced in rural areas, where labour markets are characterised by high levels of informality, limited industrialisation, and weak value chain development (Palmer, 2020). Rural youth often combine farming, casual labour, and small-scale enterprise activities to sustain their livelihoods, requiring a broader range of competencies than those traditionally provided through vocational training programmes. However, vocational education frequently provides limited exposure to modern agricultural practices, agribusiness development, or rural entrepreneurship (May-Tobin, 2017). At the same time, restricted access to information and communication technologies constrains participation in emerging digital economic opportunities (World Bank, 2020). Gender disparities further influence school-to-work transitions, with young women continuing to face social, cultural, and institutional barriers that limit participation in technical trades and formal employment (UNESCO, 2019).

Recent scholarship therefore advocates for more adaptive and context-sensitive vocational education systems that respond to local economic realities. Competency-based training, stronger public-private partnerships, entrepreneurship education, and digital skills development have been identified as important strategies for improving the relevance of vocational training (Wedekind, 2021). In rural settings, increasing attention has also been given to aligning vocational education with local economic ecosystems, including agriculture, natural resource management, and small enterprise development. These perspectives provide a useful framework for understanding how young people perceive the relationship between vocational training and their transition into employment in rural Malawi.

2.2. *Vocational Skills Development and School-to-Work Transition in Malawi*

Technical, Entrepreneurial and Vocational Education and Training (TEVET) occupies a prominent position within Malawi's human capital development agenda, as reflected in the National Youth Policy and Malawi Vision 2063. Administered by the Technical, Entrepreneurial and Vocational Education and Training Authority (TEVETA), the system seeks to equip young people with practical competencies that support entry into wage employment, self-

employment, and entrepreneurship (TEVETA, 2019). Expanding access to vocational education has therefore become a key national strategy for improving youth livelihoods and promoting inclusive economic development.

Despite this policy commitment, research continues to identify important constraints affecting the effectiveness of vocational training. Studies report challenges including outdated curricula, inadequate training infrastructure, shortages of qualified instructors, and insufficient practical learning opportunities (Mambo, 2020). These challenges are often more pronounced in rural districts where access to quality training facilities and exposure to modern production technologies remain limited (Mkweta, 2019). Malawi currently operates only eight public national technical colleges offering formal TEVET, a capacity that falls short of growing demand for vocational education. Furthermore, entry into formal technical colleges generally requires a Malawi School Certificate of Education (MSCE), limiting opportunities for many rural youths who do not meet these academic requirements.

To broaden access, TEVETA has implemented the Informal Sector Skills Development Programme (ISSDP), which targets young people excluded from formal vocational education. The programme combines vocational and entrepreneurial training with informal apprenticeship models in which experienced master crafts persons transfer practical skills to apprentices. According to the TEVET Authority Annual Report (2021–2022), more than 10,000 young people participated in various skills development initiatives during the reporting period, including 2,326 apprentices trained through master crafts person, of whom over 1,000 were female.

Development partners have also invested in vocational skills development initiatives that seek to strengthen the transition from training into employment. For example, the ACCEL Africa project supported vulnerable youth within Malawi's tea supply chain by providing training in welding and fabrication, tailoring and fashion design, carpentry and joinery, motorcycle mechanics, and bricklaying. The programme was informed by a labour market assessment that identified locally marketable skills and aligned training with youth aspirations. Implemented in Mulanje and Thyolo districts, the project reported improvements in participants' technical competencies, communication skills, confidence, and employability.

Nevertheless, previous studies suggest that many young people continue to experience difficulties translating vocational training into sustainable employment or viable businesses. Weak collaboration between training institutions and employers limits opportunities for apprenticeships, internships, and workplace learning (TEVETA, 2019). Consequently, many graduates enter informal employment or return to smallholder agriculture after completing training (Chakera & Mkweta, 2019). Broader labour market analyses similarly associate limited employment opportunities, skills deficits, and qualification mismatches with low productivity and slower economic transformation (ILO, 2021).

Emerging evidence also highlights the growing importance of integrating entrepreneurship, digital competencies, climate-smart agriculture, and business management into vocational training programmes (Mawonde & Togo, 2019). Innovative programmes such as the UN Joint Programme in Nkhata Bay demonstrate the potential of vocational skills development linked to aquaculture, value addition, market access, and eco-tourism to create employment opportunities for rural youth. However, such initiatives remain relatively small in scale, and significant institutional and structural challenges continue to affect school-to-work transitions in rural Malawi.

Against this background, there remains limited empirical evidence on how rural youth themselves perceive the relevance of vocational training and the factors influencing their transition from education into employment. This study addresses that gap by examining youth perceptions of skills development and school-to-work transition in four rural districts of Malawi, while drawing on the perspectives of key stakeholders to provide a broader understanding of the opportunities and constraints shaping youth employment experiences.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design and Study Area

This study adopted a convergent mixed-methods research design to examine youth perceptions of vocational skills development and school-to-work transition in rural Malawi. The design enabled the collection of complementary quantitative and qualitative evidence, allowing the study to explore not only patterns in young people's training and employment experiences but also the contextual factors shaping their transition from education into work (UNESCO, 2021). Rather than objectively measuring labour market demand or skills mismatch, the study sought to understand how young people and key stakeholders perceive the relevance of vocational training to rural employment opportunities.

The research was conducted in four rural districts Dowa, Nkhosakota, Mulanje, and Phalombe, which were purposively selected to capture variation in livelihood systems, economic activities, and vocational training opportunities. Dowa is predominantly characterised by mixed farming and small-scale trade, Nkhosakota by fisheries and agriculture, Mulanje by tea production and agro-processing, and Phalombe by rain-fed agriculture and small enterprises. The districts also host Community Technical Colleges established under Malawi's TEVET expansion programme, providing an appropriate context for examining experiences of vocational education and school-to-work transition.

3.2. Sampling and Data Collection

3.2.1. Quantitative Survey

The quantitative component consisted of a structured questionnaire administered to 300 young people aged 18–35 years, with 75 respondents selected from each district. Participants were drawn from youth clubs supported by local development programmes because these clubs provided an accessible sampling frame of young people who had participated in, completed, or expressed interest in vocational skills development initiatives.

A multi-stage sampling procedure was employed. Traditional Authorities were first purposively selected within each district to capture variation in socio-economic conditions and livelihood opportunities. Youth clubs were then randomly selected, followed by random selection of eligible respondents from club membership registers. Most perception-related items were measured using five-point Likert scales, complemented by closed and open-ended questions to capture respondents' experiences.

3.2.2. Focus Group Discussions

Twelve Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted, comprising three discussions in each district. Each FGD involved 8–12 participants and was organised separately for young women, young men, and mixed groups to encourage open discussion and explore gender-specific experiences. Discussions focused on participants' experiences of vocational training, perceptions of training quality and relevance, school-to-work transition pathways, barriers to employment, entrepreneurship experiences, and recommendations for strengthening youth skills development.

3.2.3. Key Informant Interviews

To complement youth perspectives, 24 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted with stakeholders involved in vocational training and youth employment. The interviews comprised.

- 6 vocational training instructors from Community Technical Colleges and vocational training centres.
- 4 Community Technical College administrators.
- 6 employers, including representatives from tea estates, agro-processing enterprises, fisheries, construction businesses, and local artisans who regularly engage young workers.
- 4 district labour and youth development officers.
- 4 community leaders involved in youth development and local economic initiatives.

These interviews explored stakeholder perspectives on vocational training delivery, employment opportunities, employer expectations, barriers affecting youth transitions into work, and opportunities for strengthening collaboration between training institutions and local labour markets.

All interviews and discussions were conducted using semi-structured interview guides, audio-recorded with participants' consent, and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

3.3. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistical techniques in SPSS. Frequencies, percentages, means, and cross-tabulations were used to summarize respondents' demographic characteristics, vocational training experiences, employment status, and perceptions of training relevance. Where appropriate, Chi-square tests were used to examine associations between selected demographic variables and respondents' perceptions of school-to-work transition experiences.

The study did not seek to develop an objective measure of employability or labour market mismatch. Instead, quantitative findings describe patterns in respondents' perceptions and self-reported experiences, recognizing that these reflect individual perspectives rather than direct measures of labour market demand.

Qualitative data from FGDs and KIIs were analysed using thematic analysis following (Braun & Clarke, 2006) six-step framework. Transcripts were coded inductively to identify recurring patterns related to vocational training experiences, perceived relevance of acquired skills, employment pathways, gender differences, institutional support, and barriers to successful school-to-work transition. Coding and organisation of themes were supported using NVivo 12 software.

Findings from the quantitative and qualitative components were integrated during interpretation through triangulation. Areas of convergence and divergence between youth perspectives and stakeholder views were examined to develop a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing school-to-work transition among rural youth. This approach strengthened the credibility of the findings while acknowledging that the study primarily reflects participants' perceptions and experiences rather than objective measures of labour market demand.

3.4. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from relevant government line ministries and the DMI St Eugene University research ethics committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with particular attention to ensuring comprehension given varying literacy levels. Participants were assured of confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any point.

4. FINDINGS

4.1. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

The study surveyed 300 young people aged between 18 and 35 years drawn equally from Dowa, Nkhonkhotakota, Mulanje, and Phalombe districts, with 75 respondents from each district. Female respondents constituted 60% ($n = 180$) of the sample, while 40% ($n = 120$) were male. The average age of respondents was 24.3 years, indicating that the study captured young people who were either entering or actively participating in the labour market. Educational attainment varied across respondents, with the majority (62%) having completed senior secondary education, 20% having lower secondary education, 15% possessing vocational qualifications, and only 3% having primary education. These demographic characteristics provided an appropriate basis for examining young people's perceptions of vocational skills development and their experiences of transitioning from school to work. Figure 1 gives a summary of the respondents' educational attainment by sex and district.

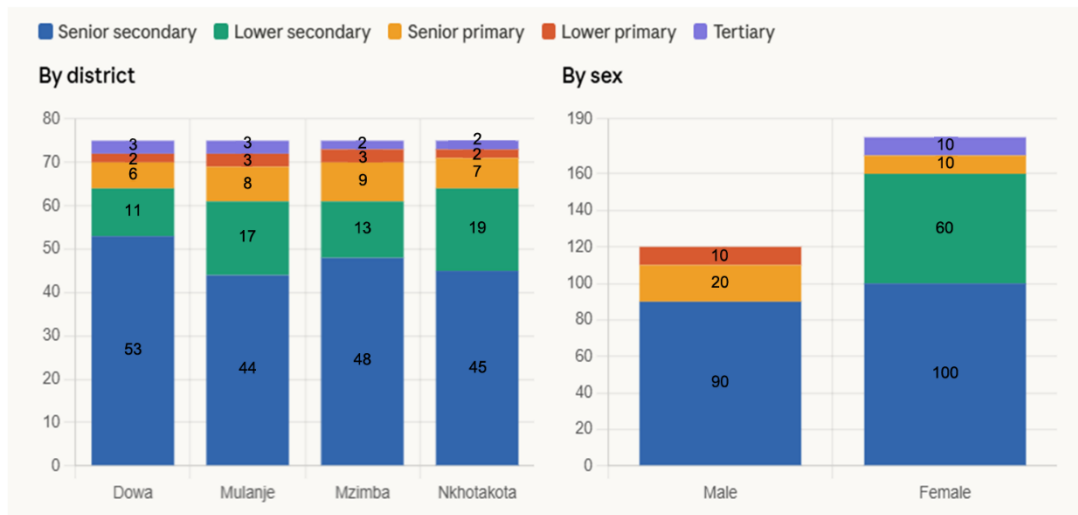


Figure 1. Education status by sex and district.

4.2. Youth Perceptions of the Relevance of Vocational Skills Training

Survey findings indicate that vocational training is widely perceived as beneficial, with 82% of respondents agreeing that vocational skills improve employment and income-generating opportunities. However, only 38% believed that the skills offered through existing training programmes adequately reflected employment opportunities available within their communities, while 49% felt that training programmes were only partially relevant and 13% considered them largely irrelevant.

Across the four districts, respondents reported that training opportunities remained concentrated in traditional trades. Tailoring was the most frequently reported trade, accounting for approximately 34% of all vocational training undertaken by respondents, followed by carpentry (18%), welding (15%), motorcycle mechanics (12%), bricklaying (9%), plumbing (6%), and other trades (6%), as shown in Figure 2.

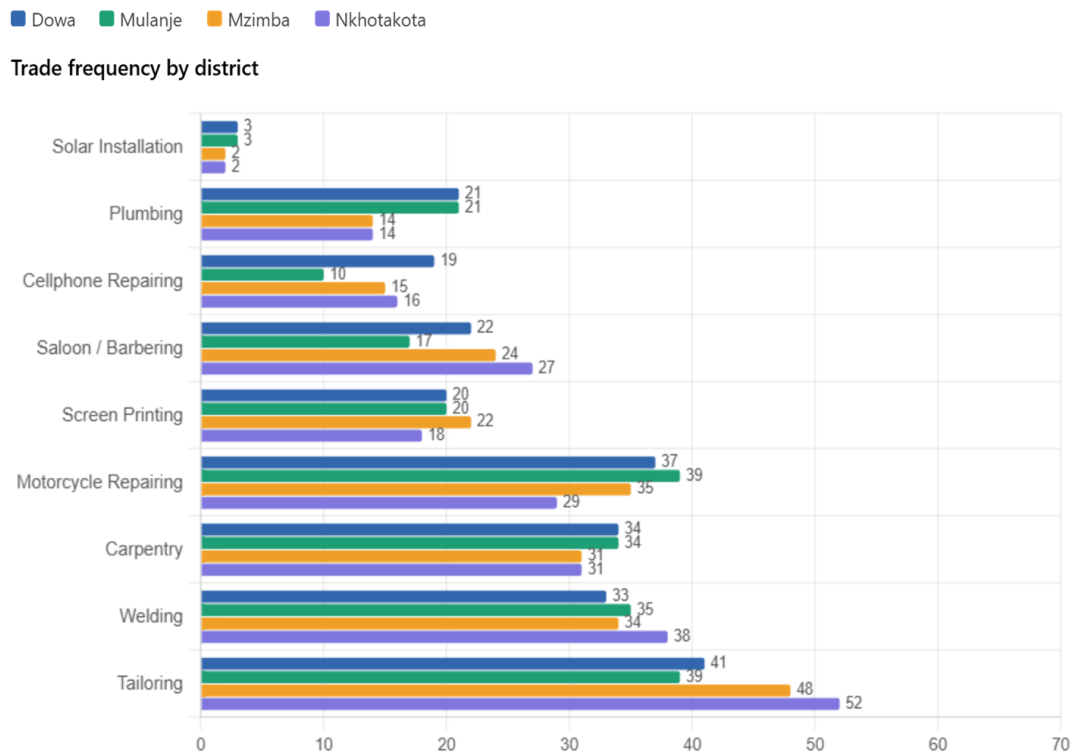


Figure 2. Trade preference by the respondents.

During focus group discussions, many participants indicated that these programmes had changed little over time despite shifts in local economic opportunities.

Conversely, respondents consistently identified skills they believed were increasingly needed but inadequately covered by existing vocational programmes. Approximately 71% expressed interest in digital skills, 64% in solar installation and renewable energy technologies, 58% in agribusiness and value addition, and 52% in agro-processing. Participants perceived that expanding these areas would improve their employment prospects within rural economies.

These views were reinforced by vocational trainers. One trainer from Mulanje explained:

"We train what we have always trained because that is what our instructors know and our equipment supports. But the tea estates now need people who understand quality control and basic mechanisation, not just hand tools."

Similarly, 68% of respondents believed that vocational curricula should be reviewed more frequently to reflect changing technologies and local economic opportunities.

4.3. Youth Experiences of School to Work Transition

The survey findings demonstrate that transitioning from vocational training into employment remains challenging for many rural youths. At the time of the survey, only 29% of respondents reported being engaged in employment directly related to their vocational training. A larger proportion (41%) were self-employed in small businesses or informal enterprises, while 22% depended primarily on casual labour (*ganyu*) and 8% had returned to subsistence agriculture or remained unemployed.

Among respondents who completed vocational training, 63% reported difficulties securing employment related to their field of training within six months of graduation. Furthermore, 57% indicated that they had accepted employment outside their area of training because of limited opportunities, while 61% stated that they combined more than one livelihood activity to sustain their incomes.

Participants frequently explained that although vocational training provided useful foundational skills, it did not always prepare them for the technologies encountered in workplaces. One participant from Dowa stated:

"I learned carpentry for six months using only hand tools. When I went to look for work, the workshop had electric saws and planers. I did not know how to use them. The man said I am not trained."

Approximately 72% of respondents believed that greater practical exposure through internships, apprenticeships, and workplace attachments would improve their transition into employment. Similarly, 69% felt that mentorship after graduation would increase their chances of establishing successful businesses.

4.4. Perceived Barriers to School to Work Transition

Respondents identified several barriers that they believed limited their ability to utilise vocational skills effectively. The most frequently reported challenge was limited access to start-up capital, identified by 81% of respondents. Many explained that although they had acquired practical skills, they lacked the financial resources needed to purchase equipment, rent workshops, or establish businesses.

Weak institutional linkages between training providers and employers were identified by 73% of respondents, who reported limited opportunities for internships, industrial attachments, or direct recruitment through training institutions. In addition, 67% perceived that those vocational institutions lacked modern equipment, while 64% considered practical training inadequate for current workplace requirements.

Respondents also highlighted structural constraints within rural labour markets. Approximately 76% believed that formal employment opportunities were too limited within their districts, 59% cited poor market access for youth enterprises, and 54% reported inadequate access to business advisory services after completing training.

Focus group discussions further revealed that many young people relied on personal networks rather than formal recruitment systems when seeking employment, reflecting the limited availability of structured labour market support in rural communities.

4.5. Stakeholder Perspectives

Key informant interviews broadly reinforced the perceptions expressed by young people. Vocational trainers acknowledged that limited financial resources constrained curriculum review, acquisition of modern equipment, and expansion into emerging technical fields. Several trainers explained that existing programmes continued largely because institutions lacked the infrastructure and specialised instructors needed to introduce new courses.

Employers similarly recognised the value of vocational training but reported that many graduates required additional practical orientation before becoming fully productive. Of the six employers interviewed, five emphasised that workplace experience was often more important than theoretical knowledge when recruiting young workers. Employers also highlighted the need for stronger partnerships between training institutions and local businesses to facilitate apprenticeships and internships.

District labour officers observed that formal employment opportunities remain limited in all four districts, making entrepreneurship and self-employment increasingly important pathways for young people. Community leaders similarly noted that while vocational training had increased young people's confidence and technical skills, many graduates continued to struggle because of inadequate access to finance, markets, and productive assets.

4.6. Gendered Experiences of School to Work Transition

The findings reveal notable gender differences in perceptions of vocational training and employment opportunities. While 93% of respondents agreed that girls now participate in vocational education within their communities, participation remained heavily concentrated in traditionally female trades. Among female respondents, 76% reported that tailoring or fashion design was the most accessible vocational option, whereas fewer than 15% reported opportunities to participate in welding, carpentry, plumbing, or motorcycle mechanics.

Young women also perceived greater barriers to accessing digital skills. Only 6% of female respondents reported receiving digital skills training compared with 42% of male respondents. Female participants attributed this disparity to limited training opportunities, financial constraints, and persistent social expectations regarding appropriate occupations for women. Figure 3 gives a summary of the gender experiences.

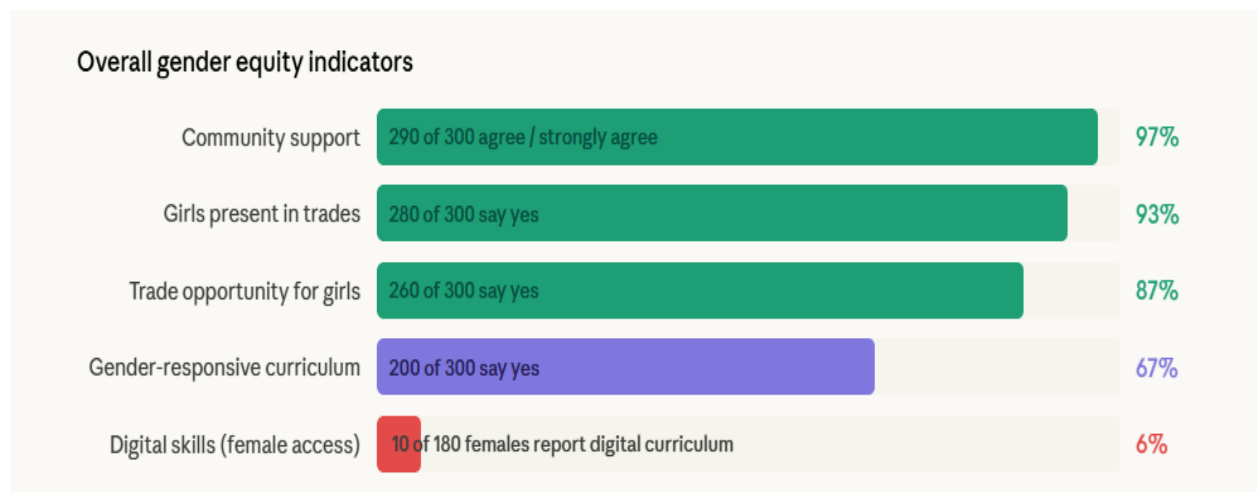


Figure 3. Gender perspectives.

One participant from Phalombe explained:

"We are told we can do anything. But the only course available here for women is tailoring. If you want to do welding, you must go to the city, and your family cannot afford that."

Despite these constraints, female respondents expressed strong interest in non-traditional trades, with 74% indicating willingness to enroll in courses such as electrical installation, welding, or solar technology if such opportunities became locally available.

Key informants similarly acknowledged that although community acceptance of girls' participation in vocational education has improved, occupational stereotypes continue to influence enrolment patterns. Community leaders and vocational trainers agreed that increasing female participation in technical and digital trades would require targeted scholarships, community sensitisation, and the expansion of gender-responsive training facilities.

Overall, the quantitative and qualitative findings consistently demonstrate that while rural youth perceive vocational education as valuable, many believe that improvements in curriculum relevance, practical workplace exposure, entrepreneurship support, employer engagement, and gender inclusion are necessary to strengthen school-to-work transitions in rural Malawi.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study suggest several practical actions for strengthening vocational skills development and improving school-to-work transitions among rural youth in Malawi.

Strengthen curriculum responsiveness through regular stakeholder consultation: TEVETA and vocational training institutions should establish regular curriculum review mechanisms involving employers, graduates, local government, and community representatives. Such reviews should ensure that training programmes reflect evolving local economic opportunities, particularly in agribusiness, renewable energy, digital technologies, agro-processing, and small enterprise development.

Expand workplace-based learning opportunities: Stronger collaboration between Community Technical Colleges, vocational training centres, and local businesses should be promoted to increase apprenticeships, internships, industrial attachments, and mentorship programmes. Practical workplace exposure would help young people acquire industry-relevant competencies and improve confidence during the transition into employment.

Strengthen entrepreneurship and business development support: Vocational training should be complemented by entrepreneurship development services that extend beyond classroom instruction. This should include business incubation, mentorship, financial literacy, market linkage support, and improved access to affordable start-up finance, particularly for graduates intending to establish rural enterprises.

Improve institutional collaboration: Greater coordination is needed among TEVETA, district councils, employers, youth development programmes, financial institutions, and development partners to strengthen school-to-work transition pathways. Local labour market information and employer feedback should be systematically incorporated into programme planning and implementation.

Promote gender-responsive vocational education: Training institutions should actively encourage girls and young women to participate in non-traditional technical trades such as welding, electrical installation, plumbing, renewable energy, and digital technologies. This should be supported through scholarships, female mentorship programmes, community awareness initiatives, and gender-sensitive learning environments.

Invest in modern training infrastructure: Government and development partners should prioritise upgrading training equipment, workshops, and digital infrastructure to ensure that young people gain practical experience using technologies comparable to those encountered in workplaces.

Strengthen career guidance and transition support: Career guidance services should be integrated throughout vocational training programmes to help young people understand employment pathways, prepare for job search processes, and make informed career and entrepreneurship decisions. Follow-up support after graduation should also be strengthened to facilitate a successful transition into employment or self-employment.

Future research: Future studies should complement perception-based research with graduate tracer studies, employer surveys, and labour market assessments to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between vocational training and employment outcomes in Malawi. Longitudinal research following graduates over time would also provide stronger evidence on school-to-work transitions and the long-term effectiveness of vocational education programmes.

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Transparency: The author states that the manuscript is honest, truthful, and transparent, that no key aspects of the investigation have been omitted, and that any differences from the study as planned have been clarified. This study followed all writing ethics.

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