



ABSTRACT

This article examines recent efforts to increase the participation of underserved communities in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET). In line with the National TVET Policy 2030, these initiatives aim to enhance access to education and training, thereby fostering greater economic participation and promoting socioeconomic mobility.

The discussion centres on initiatives targeting two specific groups: the Orang Asli communities and students from private Tahfiz schools. It highlights how TVET can expand educational and training opportunities for these groups, supporting their economic inclusion.

The article also explores the key challenges that hinder TVET from achieving improved employment outcomes for its graduates. It concludes with potential approaches to strengthen TVET's role in advancing socioeconomic transformation.

Please cite the work as follow: **Anis Farhana Amran. TVET for Social Mobility Among the Underserved: Navigating its Promises and Perils. 2025. PNB Research Institute.**

TVET FOR SOCIAL MOBILITY AMONG THE UNDERSERVED: NAVIGATING ITS PROMISES AND PERILS

by **Anis Farhana Amran**

The recently tabled Budget 2025 reinforces Malaysia's commitment to broaden access to Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), focusing on the underserved communities (MOF 2024). Aligned with the National TVET Policy 2030, these efforts aim to foster greater earning potentials and socioeconomic mobility. They focus on empowering the underserved youth with TVET's marketable skills by enhancing access to the TVET track, mainly to (1) the vulnerable communities such as Orang Asli, and (2) target groups including private Tahfiz students (MTVET 2024).

While these initiatives are well-intentioned, significant challenges persist in promoting economic inclusion and

better employment outcomes among TVET graduates. For example, recent TVET graduates demonstrate higher employability rates, yet many remain trapped in low-paying jobs that do not utilise their highest qualifications (MOHE, 2024; Khazanah Research Institute 2024).

This article examines Malaysia's evolving TVET framework, particularly its expansion of access towards underserved communities. It evaluates the effectiveness of TVET training in improving their economic livelihoods and suggests further initiatives to strengthen the ecosystem's ability to fulfil its promises.

Understanding Malaysia's TVET Framework

Governments across the world have varying approaches to TVET. In Malaysia, qualifications span from post-secondary to tertiary levels. Based on the current TVET standards (MQA 2020) students may begin their TVET journey as early as age 15 by obtaining the Malaysian Skills Certificate (SKM¹). From there, they can choose to start working, or progress to the

Malaysian Skills Diploma (DKM²), the Malaysian Advanced Skills Diploma (DLKM³), and eventually, degree programs offered by the Malaysian Technical University Network (MTUN). Alternatively, students may pursue the certificates or diplomas directly after completing their SPM.

¹ *Sijil Kemahiran Malaysia*, structured into three levels: SKM 1, SKM 2, and SKM 3, corresponding to levels 1, 2, and 3 on the Malaysian Qualifications Framework (MQF) (MQA 2020)

² *Diploma Kemahiran Malaysia*, corresponding to level 4 on the MQF (MQA 2020)

³ *Diploma Lanjutan Kemahiran Malaysia*, corresponding to level 5 on the MQF (MQA 2020)

TVET qualifications encompass a broad range of practical, industry-aligned fields that cater to diverse skills and career paths (TVET Madani 2024b). Foundational programs at skills certificate level cover areas like hairdressing and basic welding, providing essential skills for entry-level roles. At the tertiary level, TVET diplomas and bachelor's degrees unlock access to a wider array of fields, catering to both intermediate and specialised areas. Courses range from catering and building construction, to advanced fields like industrial chemistry, precision engineering, and specialised manufacturing techniques – all tailored to meet the demands of complex industries and technology-driven economies.

Picture 1: Electrical wiring installation is one of the semi-skilled courses offered in TVET programmes



Source: Harian Metro, 2018 (Fazurawati Che Lah)

Thus, TVET offers something for everyone, whether those seeking quick entry into the workforce with foundational skills or those pursuing advanced, specialised careers. As an alternative to the traditional academic route, TVET's practical, industry-focused approach makes it a valuable pathway for all kinds of career aspirants. Moving past outdated stigmas that have labelled TVET as a secondary option is essential to realising its full potential.

Expanding TVET Access for the Underserved Youth

Initiatives to widen TVET access for underserved groups have been a common strategy in many developing nations to support socioeconomic mobility and bridge educational and economic gaps (UNESCO-UNEVOC 2021). The wide range of skills and qualifications that TVET offers and close ties to the industry make it a powerful tool for helping individuals move up the socioeconomic ladder – especially those from underserved communities (Tripney and Hombrados 2013). A report by the Institute of Strategic & International Studies Malaysia highlights the significant potential of TVET to address the high proportion of youth in Malaysia who are not in education, employment, or training (NEET) (Azahar 2022).

Budget 2025 outlines major initiatives to expand TVET access to the underserved youth, mainly of the (1) vulnerable communities, and (2) target groups (MOF 2024). The

Budget 2025 saw the largest allocation in the country's history towards TVET-related initiatives, summing to RM7.5 billion – with a focus on developing the rightly skilled talent to meet the needs of investors under the broader national strategy to attract high quality FDI (BERNAMA 2024). Priorities are given to empowering talents in high-value sectors like semiconductor and the New Industrial Manufacturing Plan (NIMP) focused areas like Maintenance, Repair, and Overhaul (MRO) and Artificial Intelligence (AI) (MOF 2024).

Picture 2: Digitalisation has been rapidly adopted to develop more advanced, industry-driven courses, including in community colleges



Source: POLYCC News, 2023 (Ts. Mohamad Syazwan Ahmad Shukri)

In fact, youth worldwide are increasingly rethinking the pursuit of purely academic tracks. In the United States, The Wall Street Journal (2024) recently coined America's Gen Z as “the Toolbelt Generation”, reflecting a renewed appreciation for skilled trades and vocational education. Many young people are choosing the TVET track as they believe it offers direct access to industry-specific skills, competitive salaries, and clear career progression.

vulnerable communities prioritised under these initiatives are youth from rural and Orang Asli community, urban poor, and marginalised groups including persons with disabilities (OKU). The initiatives also expand to specified target groups, in particular private Tahfiz students and gig workers.

In light of the above developments, this article shall focus on the issues, existing government initiatives, and potential high-level solutions relating to TVET opportunities among the Orang Asli of Malaysia and students from private Tahfiz institutions. Compared to youth from the other TVET target groups – namely underprivileged households and youth from Sabah and Sarawak – these two specific groups (Orang Asli and Tahfiz) were chosen so we may dive deeper into the specific issues and initiatives, as the needs and strategies are very distinct for each community.

Picture 3: Children from the Orang Asli community doing their homework together



Source: *The Sun*, 2022 (Adib Rahwi Yahya)

Picture 4: Tahfiz students at a girls-only school in Hulu Langat, Selangor



Source: *The ASEAN Post*, 2019 (Sheith Khidhir)

TVET in Enhancing Economic Inclusion among Orang Asli Communities

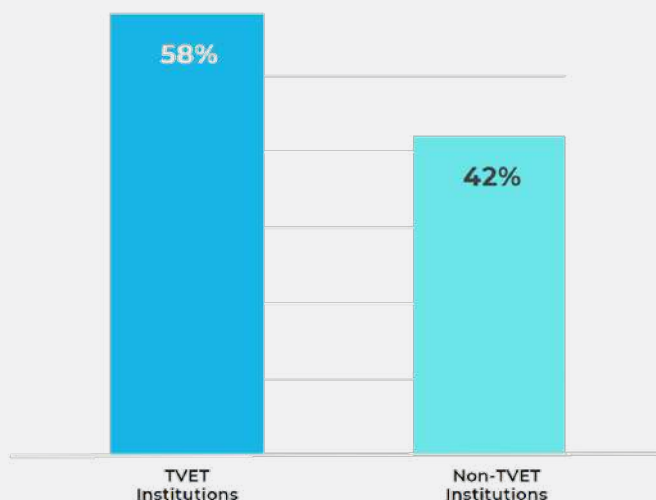
Orang Asli refers to the oldest inhabitants of Peninsular Malaysia, comprising diverse ethnic tribes. Their socioeconomic conditions have placed them among the disadvantaged minorities, with the majority living below the poverty line (Sawalludin, Lim, and Mohd Ishar 2020). This situation may highly be correlated with the alarming levels of school dropouts among the Orang Asli. A study by Fatan Hamamah (2008) reveals that around 50% of primary school leavers from the Orang Asli community do not progress to secondary school, and only 30% Orang Asli students complete their secondary education (Marzuki, Mapjabil, and Mohd Zainol 2014).

Studies have found that the high dropout rates among Orang Asli primarily result from difficulties in adapting to other

communities, the unsuitability of school curricula with their cultural backgrounds, and a lack of awareness about the importance of education among parents (Marzuki, Mapjabil, and Mohd Zainol 2014). This highlights the unique and distinct needs of Orang Asli.

Against the backdrop of said challenges in Orang Asli education, encouragingly, there is a growing recognition of TVET's potential to enhance educational outcomes for the Orang Asli. Graduate statistics in Figure 1 show that more than half of Orang Asli graduates now come from TVET institutions (MOHE 2023). This may indicate a relatively stronger interest in TVET programmes among the Orang Asli community, compared to academic programmes.

Figure 1: Orang Asli graduates by type of institutions, 2022



Source: *Graduates Tracer Study Report 2022* (MOHE 2023)

Note: The statistics represent Orang Asli graduates from MQA-accredited programs, including SKM certificates, diplomas, advanced diplomas, bachelor's degrees, and master's degrees from public TVET institutions. Short courses or one-time courses are not included in this data.

From this, we gather that TVET may indeed be the key to enhancing educational outcomes, and consequently, employment opportunities for the Orang Asli. Currently, there is a strengthened commitment to expanding TVET opportunities for Orang Asli communities. The Ministry of Rural and Regional Development (KKDW), through agencies under its purview like Department of Orang Asli Development (JAKOA) and Majlis Amanah Rakyat (MARA), has introduced various initiatives and programs to equip Orang Asli with essential trainings for economic empowerment (Wang 2024). Expanding TVET access can benefit the Orang Asli communities in several ways.

Firstly, TVET addresses alarming dropout rates by providing a broader range of opportunities for Orang Asli in schooling. Many Orang Asli students face challenges to adapt in the conventional academic track, which often leads to early dropouts (Marzuki, Mapjabil, and Mohd Zainol 2014). By promoting TVET pathways from a younger age, students can see a clear and practical route forward that aligns with their interests, particularly given the high interest in TVET programs at post-secondary levels (Figure 1). Introducing these options at the secondary level not only may help retain students but also motivate them to stay in school longer, improving overall educational outcomes.

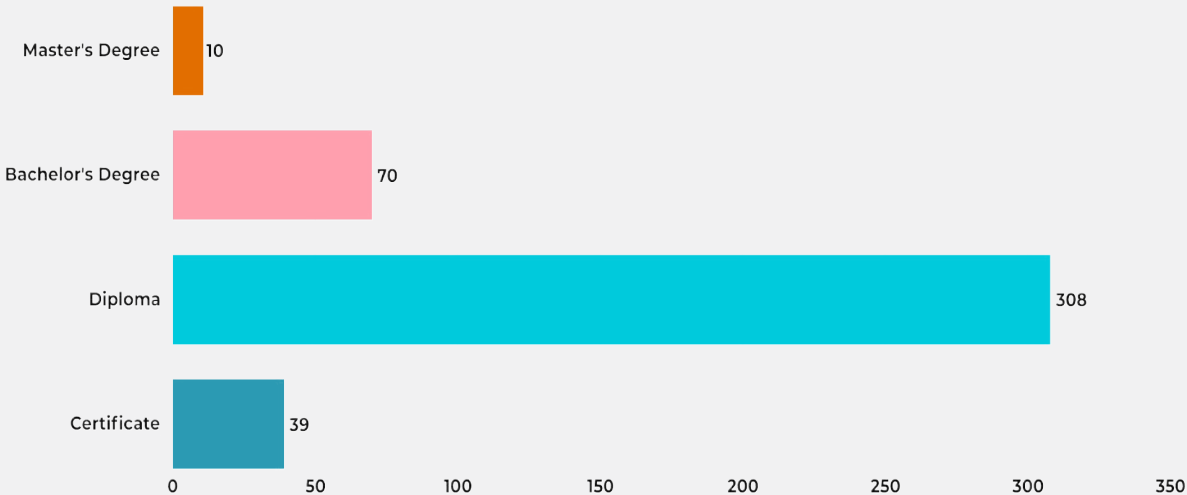
Dedicated Orang Asli TVET institutions, including the JAKOA Training Centre in Paya Bungor and GiatMARA Prima in Gua Musang, are set to open their doors soon for intake (New Straits Times 2024; Berita Harian 2024). These institutions, which allow students to enrol from as young as 15, offer tailored learning environments for these communities. Such initiatives could significantly enhance educational inclusivity and provide young Orang Asli individuals with the tools to participate better in economic activities, either through entrepreneurship or employment.

Secondly, TVET serves as a pathway for Orang Asli to pursue higher education. While retaining students in school is important, it is equally crucial to ensure that more students continue their education to higher levels. Initiatives like the Karnival Belia Orang Asli Rentas Desa Sejahtera (K-BOARDS) youth carnival, organized by KKDW, are promising steps in raising awareness about advanced TVET training options among Orang Asli (JAKOA 2022). By bringing together higher education TVET providers, this event helps Orang Asli students learn about the possibilities for further education and career development.

In addition to these existing efforts, stronger targeted initiatives are needed to encourage greater Orang Asli participation in higher education. Recent graduate statistics reveal that in 2022, there were only about 427 Orang Asli graduates (Figure 2), representing a mere 0.1% of the graduate cohort, despite Orang Asli comprising at least 0.6% of Malaysia's population (DOSM 2024; JAKOA 2024). Building on the current initiatives, more concerted efforts are required to support their progression into higher education.

As highlighted earlier in Figure 1, there is notable interest in TVET among Orang Asli, presenting an opportunity that the government should leverage further. Dedicated TVET initiatives for the Orang Asli should go beyond providing SKM certifications and focus on creating more accessible pathways to advanced and higher-level TVET qualifications. Graduate statistics from 2022 show that 72% of Orang Asli graduates hold diplomas (MOHE 2023). With targeted support, more Orang Asli students could be encouraged to pursue higher qualifications, such as bachelor's and master's degrees, particularly within TVET disciplines, enabling greater socioeconomic mobility and representation in higher education.

Figure 2: Number of Orang Asli graduates by education level, 2022



Source: Graduates Tracer Study Report 2022 (MOHE 2023)

Note: The data represents the number of graduates across all educational streams, including both TVET and non-TVET pathways.

Thirdly, TVET programmes also provide second-chance⁴ initiatives for Orang Asli dropouts. Globally, second-chance education programmes have been widely recognised as effective pathways to uplift the socioeconomic conditions of dropouts, particularly among marginalised and disadvantaged communities (CEDEFOP 2016; Savelsberg, Pignata, and Weckert 2017). These programmes offer opportunities for individuals to re-engage with education, enabling them to join educational pathways or occupations for which they are not yet qualified (UNESCO-UNEVOC 2014).

Second-chance initiatives are often delivered through TVET due to the inherent flexibility and hands-on nature of its pedagogies, making them particularly effective for skills transfer targeted at employment and income generation. The Youth Employment Inventory (YEI) reports that globally, 82% of post-formal education interventions designed to help disadvantaged youth transition into the labour market incorporate skills training (Eichhorst and Rinne 2015).

These initiatives can come in various forms, both formal and non-formal, often featuring flexible formats and hours to accommodate diverse needs (CEDEFOP 2016). In Malaysia, second-chance TVET initiatives for the Orang Asli include mobile “TVET in-situ” programmes, which bring short, village-based courses directly to local communities (Wang 2024). These courses are tailored to local demands

and needs, ensuring their relevance in supporting income generation and stimulating local economic activities. Since 2022, approximately 55 TVET short courses have been conducted, benefiting over 1,200 Orang Asli across Malaysia (Wang 2024).

The importance of continuing and expanding such initiatives is underscored by encouraging global evidence. Evaluations of second-chance programmes worldwide reveal that they have the greatest impact on the most disadvantaged youth, particularly in developing countries (OECD 2018). An analysis of the YEI database shows that 76% of interventions lead to positive impacts on employment rates and/or wage levels, with these effects being more pronounced in developing countries compared to developed ones (Eichhorst and Rinne 2015; OECD 2018). Expanding second-chance TVET initiatives for the Orang Asli, therefore, holds significant potential to improve their socioeconomic outcomes and foster greater economic inclusion.

In conclusion, the expansion of TVET opportunities holds significant potential to transform the lives of the Orang Asli, serving as a powerful catalyst for their educational and economic empowerment. By equipping them with relevant skills and opening pathways to sustainable livelihoods, these initiatives can bridge longstanding gaps, fostering greater inclusion and socioeconomic mobility within their communities.

TVET in Widening Horizons for Tahfiz Graduates

Generally, students from Tahfiz schools do not necessarily come from disadvantaged backgrounds. The Tahfiz stream has gained prominence among those seeking a curriculum that integrates Islamic knowledge and Quranic memorisation. Operating under various names, such as “Maahad,” “Tahfiz Centre,” and “Ulul Albab School,” these institutions are primarily differentiated by their governance and syllabi (Bani et al. 2017; Misbahrudin and Mohd Noor 2022).

Tahfiz schools overseen by the Ministry of Education (MOE) follow a standardised curriculum⁵, while licenced private Tahfiz schools which do not follow the standard curriculum are governed by the State Religious Authority (Bani et al. 2017). These private Tahfiz schools have far outnumbered those governed by MOE. Currently, around 1,200 private Tahfiz institutions are officially licensed, with estimates indicating at least 2,500 more operating without registration (Buletin TV3 2024; TVET Madani 2024a).

While the rapid proliferation of unlicensed private Tahfiz schools is a significant concern, an even more pressing issue lies in the fact they exist alongside existing government recognised Tahfiz schools, resulting in a serious problem of unstandardised curricula. Many of these schools strongly adhere to their own syllabi, often due to a preference for maintaining traditional teaching methods and the lack of teachers with qualifications recognised by the MOE (Misbahrudin and Mohd Noor 2022). As a result, certificates awarded by these schools are generally not recognised by public colleges or universities and subsequently employers in the jobs market, requiring students to take the SPM examination independently if they wish to advance academically.

Unfortunately, many Tahfiz students lack the resources and formal guidance needed to prepare adequately for the SPM examination, which curtails their academic advancement and career prospects. While some students may be redirected

⁴ In the Malaysian context, ‘second-chance’ typically refers to TVET initiatives for prison inmates. However, this discussion focuses on ‘second-chance’ education opportunities for school dropouts.

⁵ Tahfiz Integrated Curriculum or Kurikulum Bersepadu Tahfiz (MOE 2023)

to pursue the recognised JAKIM's Sijil Tahfiz Malaysia (STM) certification (Bani et al., 2017), career prospects remain primarily confined to Islamic studies. Consequently, these private Tahfiz school leavers face limited opportunities to pursue higher education.

In response, the government has rolled out several TVET-Tahfiz initiatives to create wider career pathways for private Tahfiz school graduates.

At the post-secondary level, MARA offers a bridging course designed to help private Tahfiz school graduates transition to TVET tertiary education. This three-month programme is tailored specifically for private Tahfiz graduates without SPM qualifications, qualifying them to enrol in TVET diploma programmes (TVETMARA 2024). This prevents the Tahfiz graduates from being excluded from higher education due to their lack of recognised prerequisite qualifications. It also broadens their educational and career opportunities.

For Tahfiz students still in private Tahfiz schools, increased partnerships with community colleges are being established to help them obtain TVET certifications. Budget 2025 allocates funds to GiatMARA and community colleges to continuously support Tahfiz students in

obtaining recognised TVET certifications (MOF 2024). In less than two years since this initiative was launched, over 600 students across 17 private Tahfiz institutions have enrolled in TVET courses, with further plans to increase the number of participating Tahfiz schools and enhance the qualifications offered to facilitate university admission (Abdullah 2024; Buletin TV3 2024). This represents a significant step forward, opening up pathways for Tahfiz students to pursue a broad spectrum of careers and achieve a well-rounded, professional future. These collaborations provide a pathway for more private Tahfiz students to gain recognised qualifications, enhancing their skills and employability while bridging the gap between an unconventional education stream and the mainstream education.

While these are commendable initiatives, to achieve a more meaningful impact, they must go beyond simply providing recognised qualifications. In addition to promoting opportunities for Tahfiz graduates to obtain recognised SKM qualifications and TVET diplomas, more graduates should be encouraged to enrol in advanced TVET programmes and pursue higher qualifications. This approach will not only prevent them from being excluded from recognised education but also create greater opportunities for professional growth and socioeconomic mobility.

The Critical Question: How Does TVET Enhance Social Mobility?

As TVET emerges as a potential pathway to enhance social mobility for underserved groups, it becomes increasingly important to assess its effectiveness in achieving meaningful outcomes. Such an evaluation is necessary to ensure that resources and efforts are appropriately channelled.

The underlying theory of change⁶ for TVET as an intervention to improve social mobility posits that a training or formal education will improve their employment outcomes and subsequently, economic livelihood. Based on this theory, initiatives to expand access to TVET training and higher-level TVET qualifications for underserved communities, such as Orang Asli and Tahfiz students, are laudable. Yet, the critical question remains: **to what extent do these efforts enhance socioeconomic mobility and improve the economic standing of these communities?**

Addressing this question requires rigorous policy research in the future. Not only does TVET education represent significant fiscal investments on the part of the government, but it also demands time away from pursuing immediate economic needs within these communities. For

many youths from these groups, pursuing higher education imposes a substantial financial burden, requiring funds for tuition and time away from potential earnings. This is why certification – TVET or otherwise – must at the end of it all have a meaningful impact on economic outcomes.

While a deeper evaluation is needed to determine their broader implications, several indicators point to TVET having positive outcomes at large, based on recent studies.

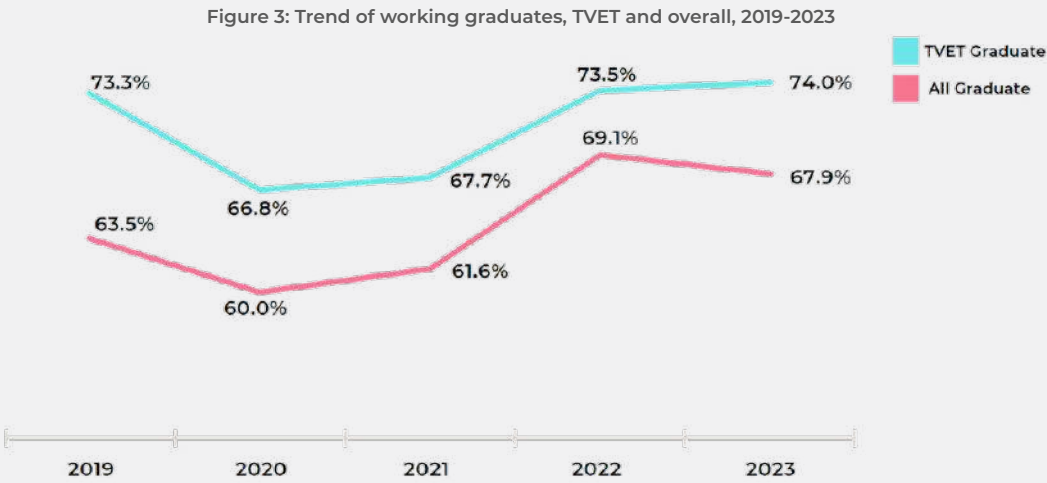
Firstly, data from MOHE's Graduates Tracer Study (GTS) show that TVET graduates experience strong job prospects, as reflected in their high employability rates. The Graduate Employability (GE) rate for TVET graduates stands at an impressive 94%, surpassing the overall rate of 89.8% for all graduates in 2023 (MOHE 2024), an often-cited advantage by many in promoting the TVET pathway.

Secondly, in recent years, the employment rate of TVET graduates upon graduation has consistently exceeded that of non-TVET graduates. While the GE rate includes graduates pursuing further studies, upskilling, or awaiting placement (MOHE 2024), the employment rate offers a

⁶ A theory of change is a method that explains how a given intervention, or set of interventions, are expected to lead to a specific development change, drawing on a causal analysis based on available evidence (UNDG 2017)

clearer measure of true employability by focusing exclusively on those actively employed. In 2023, an impressive 74% of TVET graduates secured employment immediately after completing their studies, consistently surpassing the national average, as illustrated in Figure 3. This suggests that TVET

holds significant potential to catalyse social mobility among underprivileged communities by reducing the waiting period between graduation and employment, thereby mitigating economic vulnerability.



Source: Graduates Tracer Study Report 2023 (MOHE 2024)

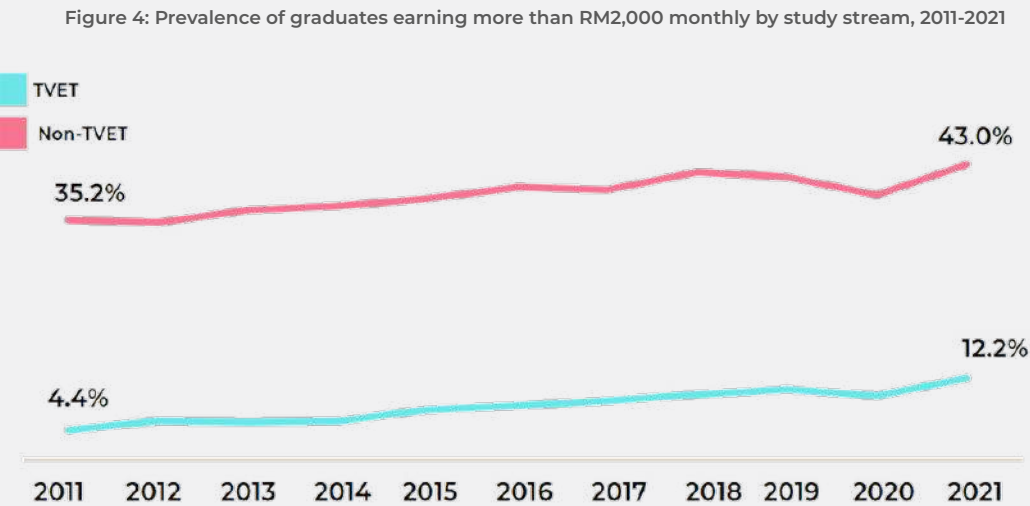
Note: This figure differs from the published Graduate Employability rate (GE), which includes graduates who are employed, pursuing further studies, upskilling, or awaiting job placement. Here, only the percentage of employed graduates is reflected.

While the higher employment and employability rates among TVET graduates present a clear advantage compared to non-TVET graduates, this outcome is not entirely unexpected. Evidence from other countries have consistently demonstrated the effectiveness of TVET in enhancing employment prospects. A notable example can be seen in OECD data (OECD 2023), which shows that employment rates for individuals with post-secondary non-tertiary vocational education surpass those of the overall cohort of post-secondary non-tertiary graduates. In 2023, these rates stood at 84.2% (compared to 83.4% overall) in OECD countries and 83.3% (compared to 82.3% overall) in EU countries.

However, beyond this encouraging progress in addressing unemployment, an equally critical question remains: the

quality of employment outcomes for TVET graduates. Significant challenges persist.

For example, most TVET graduates find themselves trapped in low-paying jobs. Alarming, only about one in ten TVET graduates earn more than RM2,000 monthly, as illustrated in Figure 4, reflecting the struggles of securing fair compensation in the labour market (Khazanah Research Institute 2024; Abdul Hamid and Tan 2023). In contrast, approximately 43% of non-TVET graduates earn above RM2,000, highlighting the stark wage disparity between the two streams. This reality not only underscores the limited financial returns of TVET qualifications but also risk reinforcing its perception as a less desirable pathway.

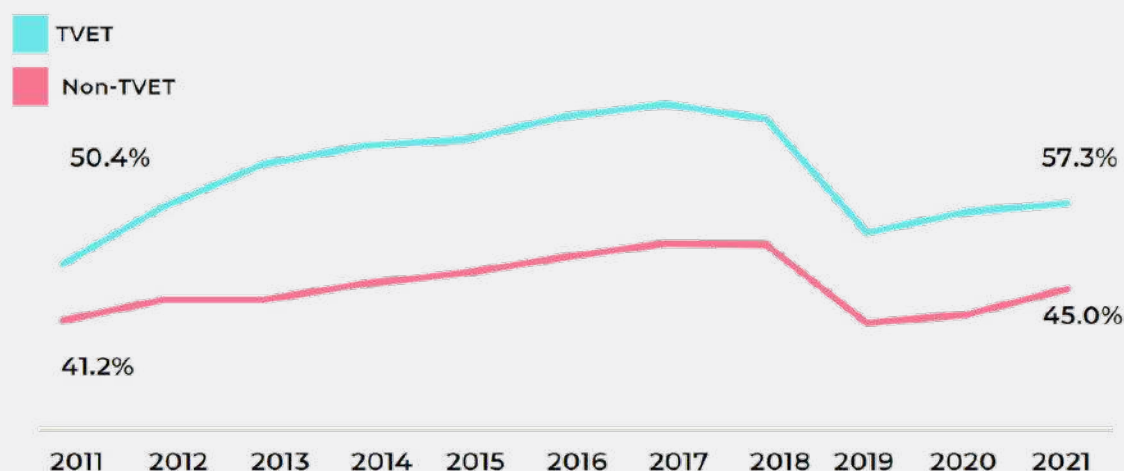


Source: Shifting Tides: Charting Career Progression of Malaysia's Skilled Talents (Khazanah Research Institute 2024)

Furthermore, overqualification remains a persistent issue for tertiary TVET graduates, who consistently face higher rates of employment in roles that require lower qualifications than those they possess, compared to their non-TVET counterparts (Khazanah Research Institute 2024). In 2022, for instance, 57% of TVET graduates were overqualified for

their roles, compared to 45% of non-TVET graduates (Figure 5). This mismatch not only undermines the value of their training but also confirming the flawed perception of TVET as a suboptimal career choice – a paradox that starkly contrasts with the goal of enhancing economic opportunities through the TVET pathway.

Figure 5: Prevalence of overqualified graduates by study stream, 2011-2021



Source: *Shifting Tides: Charting Career Progression of Malaysia's Skilled Talents* (Khazanah Research Institute 2024)

Nevertheless, there are encouraging signs suggesting that wage prospects for TVET graduates may improve.

Graduates of TVET bachelor's degree programmes tend to fare somewhat better at the lower end of the earnings spectrum compared to the general population of bachelor's degree holders. While Figure 4 underscores the notably lower prevalence of TVET graduates earning more than RM2,000, it is encouraging to note that TVET degree holders, in particular, fare better than their non-TVET counterparts.

At the low end of the earnings distribution, a smaller proportion of TVET bachelor's degree graduates earn less than RM2,000. As high as 68.3% of TVET bachelor's degree graduates earn above RM2,000 monthly, outperforming the 59% recorded for overall bachelor's degree holders (MOHE 2023). This may suggest that TVET tertiary programmes prove more effective at providing more stable entry into the workforce, ensuring a baseline level of financial security.

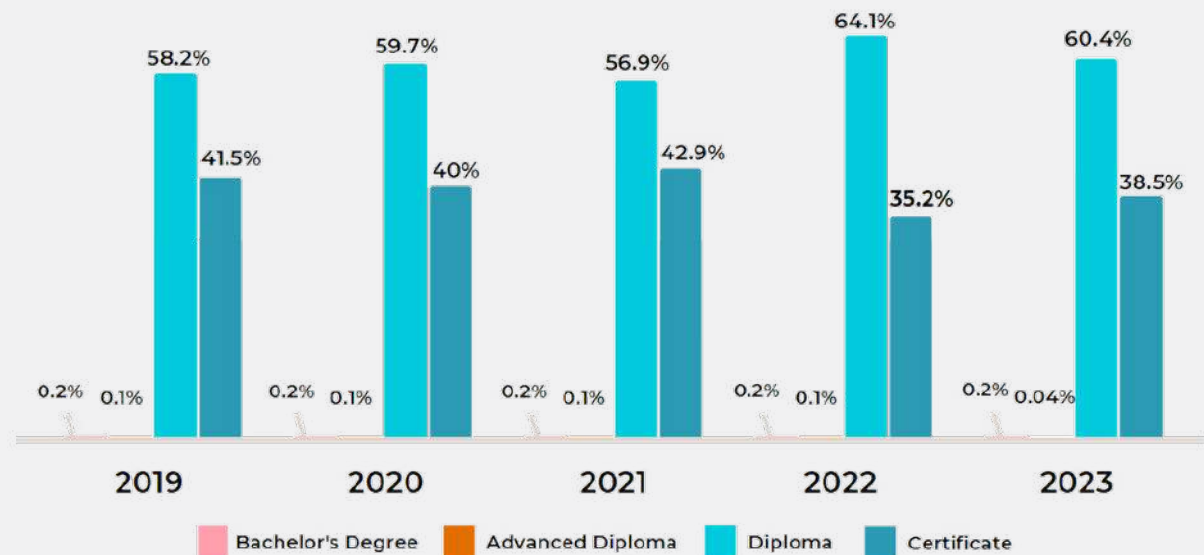
This points to a form of “premium” associated with TVET degree holders, highlighting the advantage of pursuing higher level TVET qualifications. In line with this, Abdul Hamid and Tan (2023) suggest that there is a need to increase the number of degree-qualified TVET graduates, as most current TVET graduates hold only diplomas. As observed in Figure 6,

diploma holders consistently represent the overwhelming majority of TVET graduates, making up more than half of the cohort each year.

At higher income levels however, this supposed “premium” for the higher TVET qualification diminishes. Only 15.9% of TVET bachelor's degree graduates earn above RM3,000 monthly, lagging behind the 23.6% of overall degree holders who surpass this benchmark (Abdul Hamid and Tan 2023). This lower wage prospect at the higher end is understandable, given that at present, TVET generally offers more low and semi-skilled courses, even at tertiary level.

While this indicates that TVET may not yet provide the same opportunities for wage growth as other non-TVET degree programmes, it is important to note that the government's push for more advanced, industry-demanded TVET courses may potentially change this dynamic. As the focus shifts towards developing higher-level, specialised skills, TVET could present greater opportunities for wage growth and long-term socioeconomic mobility in the future. Thus, while TVET currently excels at providing job security, its future prospects remain promising, especially as the sector evolves in response to industry needs.

Figure 6: Trends in TVET graduates by education level, 2019-2023



Source: Graduates Tracer Study Report 2023 (MOHE 2024)

Note: The significantly low number of TVET bachelor's degree graduates may be attributed to the current classification by MOHE's Graduates Tracer Study, where (1) only degree programmes from public TVET institutions are counted, and (2) for public universities, courses considered TVET are limited to those offered within the MTUN network, excluding technical courses from non-MTUN universities.

This discussion does not intend to suggest that TVET will inevitably outperform non-TVET pathways in terms of wage outcomes. It is important to recognise that (1) wage levels should reflect both qualifications and skill levels, regardless of the educational stream, and (2) the generally low starting pay and slow wage progression in Malaysia, which are systemic factors that extend beyond any particular educational pathway.

However, this author remains optimistic in acknowledging that (1) TVET qualifications can open up significant opportunities for underserved communities, given the

encouraging employment prospects, and (2) they can enable these individuals to compete on equal footing with their non-TVET counterparts. That said, the government's efforts should not be limited to promoting TVET participation alone. It is equally important to address the prevailing wage challenges to ensure that both TVET and non-TVET graduates are afforded fair and competitive compensation.

Breaking the Stigma - Balancing Between Inclusivity and Perception

Expanding TVET access for underserved communities is essential for social mobility in Malaysia, but an overemphasis on disadvantaged groups could inadvertently reinforce the notion that vocational education is a "second-tier" option reserved for those with limited choices (Shi and Bangpan 2022; Md Yusoff, Harun, and Zakaria 2020).

This misconception continues to associate TVET with lower prestige, perpetuating existing social biases and diminishing its appeal as a respected career pathway. Misconception about its prestige remain one of the three core challenges of advancing the TVET education sector in Malaysia (Abdul Hamid and Tan 2023). Worse still, it could be seen as the kind of education that is exclusively "suited for the marginalised and unemployable", further entrenching stereotypes and limiting the broader societal recognition of its value.

Consequently, such framing may contribute to a two-tiered educational hierarchy, where TVET is viewed as a fallback for individuals who cannot succeed in traditional academic tracks rather than as a viable and esteemed route with promising employment outcomes.

Therefore, recalibrating the narrative around TVET will be an essential component of reforms or enhancements to the current TVET education framework, necessitating robust efforts to promote participation across all demographics. The strategies outlined in the National TVET Policy 2030 – including curriculum enhancements, stronger employer partnerships, and expanded access to advanced technical fields – are crucial for enhancing the entire TVET ecosystem in Malaysia. Prioritising industry-aligned curricula and strengthening partnerships with local industries and international institutions could improve outcomes and

elevate the reputation of TVET. By fostering a reputable image for TVET, Malaysia can elevate it as a credible alternative to traditional academic pathways, attracting a wider range of students and reinforcing the value of vocational education in driving socioeconomic progress.

Traditionally industrial economies, such as Germany and Switzerland, should serve as exemplary models where TVET

is widely respected and seamlessly integrated as a viable pathway for students from all social strata (OECD 2010; SERI 2024). This inclusive approach has attracted a diverse talent pool, accommodating varied aspirations and career goals. By positioning vocational education as an esteemed career option, these nations demonstrate the potential for TVET to foster a skilled workforce that meets the dynamic needs of the economy while enhancing social mobility.

Way Forward

Achieving sustainable socioeconomic mobility through TVET requires strategic reforms that broaden access and elevate the quality, market relevance, and societal perception of the TVET pathway. As Malaysia strengthens its commitment to advancing the TVET ecosystem through initiatives outlined in Budget 2025 and the National TVET Policy 2030, the author proposes the following strategies:

(i) **Developing more accessible pathways to advanced and higher-level TVET training**, with the goals of increasing both employability and earnings potential. As discussed earlier, most of the current targeted initiatives for the underserved communities, while commendable, focus primarily on equipping these groups with skills certificates and, at most, diplomas. This approach is understandable, given that many within these communities face the pressing challenge of having no formal qualifications. However, it may be beneficial to actively explore ways to build on these foundational programme initiatives. **In other words, TVET targeted support for the underserved, like Orang Asli or Tahfiz school leavers, should not just stop at diploma and skills certificates.** As noted earlier, evidence suggests a noticeable education premium for TVET bachelor's degree holders, reinforcing the importance of creating better opportunities for higher level qualifications within these communities.

Moreover, the government should also consider placing greater emphasis on enabling these communities to access advanced-level TVET training in high-skilled fields, providing them with the tools to thrive on par with their counterparts from diverse backgrounds. This is vital to ensuring that underserved communities are equally included in education and employment opportunities, fostering socioeconomic mobility irrespective of their starting point.

(ii) **Ensuring earlier access to TVET opportunities**, particularly for underserved communities, should be a key priority. Building on the existing initiatives, that we have explored earlier, at the post-secondary, tertiary, and out-of-school levels (second-chance initiatives), many could benefit from earlier exposure to TVET opportunities. Early exposure to TVET programmes can play a transformative role in helping students make informed decisions about their educational and career paths. By ensuring they are aware of the opportunities available, such initiatives could prevent early dropouts and instil a stronger motivation to stay in school.

Programs specifically targeting underserved groups, including Orang Asli and Tahfiz school leavers, should be designed and promoted to spark interest and participation in education from a young age. This might include integrating school-based initiatives, organising outreach programmes, and establishing more dedicated institutions offering TVET programmes tailored to the unique needs of these communities. Early interventions like these will lay the groundwork for lifelong learning and socioeconomic advancement.

Through these continuous efforts, Malaysia can unlock the full potential of TVET as a catalyst for equitable economic growth and social mobility. Together, we can build a future where every individual, regardless of background, has the opportunity to thrive through education and meaningful economic participation.

Bibliography

- Abdul Hamid, Hawati, and Mei Yi Tan. 2023. "Unlocking the Earning Potential of TVET Graduates." Kuala Lumpur.
- Abdullah, Madiha. 2024. "TVET: SKM Tahap 6, 7 Dan 8 Bakal Setaraf Dengan Ijazah Pertama - Ahmad Zahid." *Astro Awani*, September 14, 2024.
- Azahar, Sofea. 2022. "Strengthening TVET Capabilities in Malaysia."
- Bani, Hamidah, Mohd Yassir Jaaffar, Maheran Katan, and Abd Halim Mohd Noor. 2017. "An Overview of Governance and Accountability of Tahfiz Institutions in Malaysian: Religious Councils Perspective." *SHS Web of Conferences* 36 (July).
- Berita Harian. 2024. "GiatMara Prima Untuk Orang Asli, Belia Gua Musang." *New Straits Times Press (Malaysia)* Bhd, September 3, 2024.
- BERNAMA. 2024. "Government Approves Additional Allocation of RM200 Million to Boost TVET." BERNAMA.Com. June 8, 2024.
- Buletin TV3. 2024. "Kerajaan Sasar 10,000 Huffaz Ikuti Program TVET Menjelang 2027." *Buletin TV3*, September 14, 2024. <https://www.buletintv3.my/nasional/kerajaan-sasar-10000-huffaz-ikuti-program-tvet-menjelang-2027/>.
- CEDEFOP. 2016. "Second Chance Measures."
- DOSM. 2024. "The Population of Malaysia." Department of Statistics Malaysia. 2024. <https://open.dosm.gov.my/dashboard/population>.
- Eichhorst, Werner, and Ulf Rinne. 2015. "An Assessment of the Youth Employment Inventory and Implications for Germany's Development Policy."
- Fatan Hamamah, Yahaya. 2008. "Pendidikan Masyarakat Orang Asli." In *Orang Asli - Isu, Transformasi Dan Cabaran*, edited by Ma'Ro'f Redzuan and Sarjit S Gill, 123–34. Serdang: Penerbit Universiti Putra Malaysia.
- Harian Metro. 2018. "Tingkat Imej TVET." *New Straits Times Press (Malaysia)* Bhd, September 17, 2018. <https://www.hmetro.com.my/bestari/2018/09/377955/tingkat-imej-tvet>.
- JAKOA. 2022. "KARNIVAL BELIA ORANG ASLI RENTAS DESA SEJAHTERA (K-BOARDS)." Official Portal of Department of Orang Asli Development (JAKOA), Ministry of Rural and Regional Development (KKDW). October 29, 2022.
- . 2024. "Ethnic Distribution of Orang Asli by Ethnicity by State." Jabatan Kemajuan Orang Asli (JAKOA). 2024. <https://www.jakoa.gov.my/orang-asli/jadual-taburan-etnik-orang-asli-mengikut-negeri/>.
- Khazanah Research Institute. 2024. "Shifting Tides: Charting Career Progression of Malaysia's Skilled Talents." Kuala Lumpur.
- Marzuki, Mazdi, Jabil Mapjabil, and Rosmiza Mohd Zainol. 2014. "Deciphering the Malaysian Aboriginal Low Educational Achievement: A Look at the School Accessibility Issue ." *Malaysian Journal of Society and Space* 10 (2).
- Md Yusoff, Ruzita, Anas Harun, and Ahmad Munzir Zakaria. 2020. "TVET in Malaysia: Capabilities and Challenges as Viable Pathway and Educational Attainment." *Journal on Technical and Vocational Education (JTVE)* 5 (1).
- Misbahrudin, Nor Tasik, and Abd Halim Mohd Noor. 2022. "A Framework to Analyze the Efficiency of Private Tahfiz in Malaysia." *Journal of Islamic Philanthropy & Social Finance (JIPSF)* 4 (1): 30–36.
- MOE. 2023. "Guidelines For Management And Implementation Of Tahfiz Integrated Curriculum." Putrajaya.
- MOF. 2024. "Belanjawan 2025."
- MOHE. 2023. "Graduates Tracer Study Report 2022." Putrajaya.
- . 2024. "Graduates Tracer Study Report 2023." Putrajaya.
- MQA. 2020. "Code of Practice for TVET Programme Accreditation." Cyberjaya.
- MTVET. 2024. "National TVET Policy 2030."

- New Straits Times. 2024. "Jako's Refurbished Training Complex Set for New Intake next Year." *New Straits Times Press (Malaysia)* Bhd, November 5, 2024.
- OECD. 2010. "OECD Reviews of Vocational Education and Training: A Learning for Jobs Review of Germany 2010." Paris. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264113800-en>.
- . 2018. "The Role of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) in Fostering Inclusive Growth at the Local Level in Southeast Asia." *OECD Local Economic and Employment Development (LEED) Papers* 2018/01.
- . 2023. "Employment Rates of Adults, by Educational Attainment, Age Group and Gender." OECD. 2023. [https://data-explorer.oecd.org/vis?lc=en&df\[ds\]=dsDisseminateFinalDMZ&df\[id\]=DSD_EAG_LSO_EA%40DF_LSO_NEAC_EMP&df\[ag\]=OECD.EDU:IMEP&dq=G20%2BEU25%2BOECD.T.Y25T64.ISCED11A_4%2BISCED11A_4_X%2BISCED11A_44%2BISCED11A_45.....OBS...A&lom=LASTOBSERVATIONS&lo=1&pd=2020%2C2023&to\[TIME_PERIOD\]=true&vw=tb](https://data-explorer.oecd.org/vis?lc=en&df[ds]=dsDisseminateFinalDMZ&df[id]=DSD_EAG_LSO_EA%40DF_LSO_NEAC_EMP&df[ag]=OECD.EDU:IMEP&dq=G20%2BEU25%2BOECD.T.Y25T64.ISCED11A_4%2BISCED11A_4_X%2BISCED11A_44%2BISCED11A_45.....OBS...A&lom=LASTOBSERVATIONS&lo=1&pd=2020%2C2023&to[TIME_PERIOD]=true&vw=tb).
- POLYCC News. 2023. "Digitalization of TVET in Community Colleges: Empowering Students towards Malaysia MADANI." Jabatan Pendidikan Politeknik Dan Kolej Komuniti. September 26, 2023. <https://news.mypolycc.edu.my/digitalization-of-tvet-in-community-colleges-empowering-students-towards-malaysia-madani/>.
- Savelsberg, Harry, Silvia Pignata, and Pauline Weckert. 2017. "Second Chance Education: Barriers, Supports and Engagement Strategies." *Australian Journal of Adult Learning* 57 (1): 36–57.
- Sawalludin, Aidil Fitri, Charmaine Jia Min Lim, and Mohamad Izzuan Mohd Ishar. 2020. "The Struggle of Orang Asli in Education: Quality of Education." *Malaysian Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities (MJSSH)* 5 (1): 46–51.
- SERI. 2024. "Swiss VPET System – A Brief Guide."
- Shi, Yi, and Mukdarut Bangpan. 2022. "Young People's Participation Experiences of Technical and Vocational Education and Training Interventions in Low- and Middle-Income Countries: A Systematic Review of Qualitative Evidence." *Empirical Research in Vocational Education and Training* 14 (8).
- The ASEAN Post. 2019. "Malaysia's Religious Schools under Fire." Digital Media Nusantara Sdn Bhd. September 6, 2019. <https://theaseanpost.com/article/malaysias-religious-schools-under-fire>.
- The Sun. 2022. "Orang Asli: High Dropout Rate Due to Lack of Monitoring, Evaluation of Aid Programmes." *Sun Media Corporation Sdn. Bhd.*, December 31, 2022. <https://thesun.my/malaysia-news/orang-asli-high-dropout-rate-due-to-lack-of-monitoring-evaluation-of-aid-programmes-JG10434379>.
- The Wall Street Journal. 2024. "How Gen Z Is Becoming the Toolbelt Generation." *The Wall Street Journal*, April 1, 2024.
- Tripney, Janice S, and Jorge G Hombrados. 2013. "Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) for Young People in Low- and Middle-Income Countries: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis." *Empirical Research in Vocational Education and Training* 5 (3).
- TVET Madani. 2024a. "Anwar Puji Zahid Libatkan Pelajar Maahad Tahfiz Dalam TVET." *Berita TVET*, June 8, 2024.
- . 2024b. "TVET Courses Search." TVET Madani. 2024.
- TVETMARA. 2024. "TVETMARA Institutions." Bahagian Kemahiran & Teknikal Mara. 2024.
- UNDG. 2017. "Theory of Change: UNDAF Companion Guidance." <https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/UNDG-UNDAF-Companion-Pieces-7-Theory-of-Change.pdf>.
- UNESCO-UNEVOC. 2014. "TVETipedia Glossary." 2014.
- . 2021. "Technical and Vocational Education and Training for Disadvantaged Youth." Bonn. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED615595.pdf>.
- Wang, YB Datuk Hajah Rubiah. 2024. "Response Speech by the Deputy Minister of Rural and Regional Development Regarding the Government's Efforts to Study and Implement Measures to Provide Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Opportunities for the Orang Asli Community." Kuala Lumpur.