

Strengthening Youth Quality of Life through TVET Education

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Abstract

Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) is increasingly recognised as a strategic pathway to enhance youth employability and quality of life. This study examines Malaysian youths' perceptions of TVET and its potential contribution to youth development. A cross-sectional online survey involving 1,011 youths aged 15–30 years measured perceptions of TVET, social influence, and career prospects. Findings indicate high awareness (83.5%) and interest (76.6%) in TVET, with overall positive perceptions ($M = 3.64$). However, perceptions of career and financial prospects remained comparatively lower ($M = 3.33$). Stronger industry ties and public trust will elevate TVET as a credible pathway.

Keywords: Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET); Malaysian Youth Index; Education; Quality of Life

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1.0 Introduction

Quality of life is a key metric of sustainable development, encompassing economic stability alongside access to education, employment, healthcare, and personal fulfilment. For youth, quality of life depends heavily on educational attainment and skill acquisition that drive productive participation in society. Education is a lifelong investment that can enhance employability, social mobility, and resilience. To align with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), governments globally are reforming education systems to equip young people with the technical and adaptive skills needed for a tech-driven economy.

Malaysian youth are often referred to as a strategic national asset whose knowledge, competencies, and adaptability will determine the country's future social and economic competitiveness. With this in mind, the government has continuously strengthened policies that promote youth empowerment through education and skills development. Policy documents such as the Malaysian Youth Policy 2015-2035, the National TVET Policy 2030, and the Twelfth Malaysia Plan (2021–2025) highlight the need to cultivate a skilled, innovative, and adaptable youth workforce equipped to navigate technological advancement and evolving labor market demands. In this regard, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) is now an essential structural element of the national education ecosystem.

The Malaysian Youth Index (MYI) 2024 highlights the critical role of education in youth development. The report shows that the Education Domain achieved a very satisfactory score of 86.74 (IYRES, 2026). The indicators contributing to this positive development are educational attainment, literacy, and secondary education participation among Malaysian youth. However, tertiary enrolment indicators scored lower, suggesting a need for targeted attention. This gap highlights the need for varied educational pathways that

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cater to different aspirations, learning preferences, and labour market needs. TVET serves as an effective route for youth to acquire industry-relevant competencies, improving employability and career readiness.

Globally, perceptions of TVET have shifted significantly over the past decade. TVET is now widely recognized as an important investment in human capital development through education. International institutions such as UNESCO and the International Labour Organization (ILO) have consistently highlighted TVET's role in reducing youth unemployment, supporting lifelong learning, facilitating school-to-work transitions, and promoting inclusive economic growth. TVET systems nowadays are expected to cultivate problem-solving abilities, adaptability, digital competencies, entrepreneurial skills, and lifelong learning attitudes. These skills will help nurture youth well-being and build resilient communities.

Public perception remains a key challenge for TVET despite its positive development. Vocational education has become a second pathway after academic education because of parental expectations, societal attitudes, limited career awareness, misconceptions about income, and uncertain career progression. As Malaysia strengthens its TVET ecosystem through institutional reforms, industry collaboration and skills development, understanding youth perceptions is increasingly important. Evidence on factors influencing these perceptions can help stakeholders design more effective interventions to increase TVET participation.

This study bridges a vital gap by integrating national youth survey data with the MYI 2024 report. Rather than viewing TVET strictly through the lens of job prospects, it examines its indirect impact on youth quality of life. The study aims to examine Malaysian youths' perceptions of TVET and its potential role in supporting youth development. Specifically, the study has three objectives: (1) to examine Malaysian youths' awareness and interest in TVET; (2) to examine youth perceptions of TVET in terms of general perceptions, social influence, and career and financial prospects; and (3) to discuss the potential role of TVET in supporting youth quality of life through educational and career development. The findings provide useful insights for policy and programme development and support efforts to position TVET as an inclusive and sustainable educational pathway.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Quality of Life and Youth Development

Quality of life has evolved into a multidimensional concept that extends beyond economic well-being to encompass physical, psychological, educational, social and environmental dimensions of human development. The World Health Organization (WHO) describes quality of life as individuals' perceptions of their position in life within the context of their culture, value systems, goals, expectations and concerns. Contemporary perspectives further emphasize that quality of life reflects people's opportunities to achieve personal aspirations through education, productive employment, social participation and lifelong learning.

For youth, quality of life is closely associated with successful transitions from education to employment. Educational opportunities influence not only academic achievement but also future income, career development, social inclusion and psychological well-being. Consequently, education has become a fundamental dimension of sustainable youth development and is recognised internationally through the SDGs, particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). UNESCO's Strategy for Technical and Vocational Education and Training (2022–2029) (UNESCO, 2022) similarly positions skills development as an essential mechanism for youth empowerment, lifelong learning and successful transition into decent work.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) mentioned that schools and universities must move beyond providing academic knowledge. Education systems must focus on developing adaptable competencies so people can easily pivot and thrive as job markets constantly shift (OECD, 2023). Future education therefore requires learners to possess technical expertise alongside adaptability, creativity, strong communication, problem-solving skills, and resilience.

2.2 Youth Perceptions Towards TVET

Previous studies suggest that youth attitudes towards TVET are shaped by a mix of factors, including parent expectations, peer pressure, career goals, perceived income opportunities, and social status. In line with this, recent Malaysian research using behavioural insights found that environmental, social, and personal influences significantly affect students' attitudes towards TVET and that targeted interventions can improve perceptions of vocational education (Shaari et al., 2024).

2.3 TVET and Youth QoL

Yasin et al. (2024) found that low-income populations with a positive mindset toward hands-on skills tend to report better quality of life and health. The research shows that vocational training offers far more than just financial gain. Individuals with practical skills and education gain job security and financial resilience, improving their overall quality of life and well-being.

Internationally, UNESCO (2022) similarly emphasizes that TVET contributes to youth empowerment by developing skills required for decent work, entrepreneurship, and lifelong learning while supporting inclusive and sustainable societies. Rather than focusing solely on occupational preparation, the latest TVET systems aim to provide adaptability to technological change, participation in society, and continuously upgrade youth competencies throughout their working lives.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Study population and research design

This study used a quantitative cross-sectional design to examine Malaysian youths' awareness, interest, and perceptions of TVET. The target population comprised Malaysian youths aged between 15 and 30 years. A total of 1,011 youths participated in the study. This aligns with the age definition adopted in the Malaysian Youth Policy during the data collection period.

The study used a non-probability voluntary sampling approach through an open online polling survey. The survey link and QR code were distributed through the IYRES database, social media platforms, and relevant stakeholders to reach eligible youth respondents. Data were collected through an online self-administered questionnaire using the Lime Survey platform.

3.2 Research Instruments

The instrument was developed internally by the Institute for Youth Research Malaysia (IYRES) based on the objectives of the study and was reviewed by experts to ensure that the items were relevant, clear, and appropriate for the study. The study examined three principal constructs, and each construct was measured using multiple statements rated on a five-point Likert scale from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree.

Table 1. Constructs of study

Construct	Description
Perception towards TVET	Respondents' overall attitudes and acceptance towards TVET
Social Influence	Influence of parents, family members, peers and society on respondents' educational decisions
Career and Financial Prospects	Respondents' perceptions regarding employment opportunities, career advancement and financial benefits associated with TVET

3.3 Data analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to summarize respondents' demographic characteristics, awareness, interest, and perceptions towards TVET. Frequencies and percentages were reported for demographic characteristics and items related to TVET awareness, knowledge of available courses, and interest in pursuing TVET. Mean scores were calculated for the three TVET perception constructs. Higher mean scores indicated more positive perceptions towards TVET, stronger social influence and more favourable perceptions of career and financial prospects. The analysis described respondents' overall views across the three constructs.

3.4 Ethical considerations

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. Respondents were informed of the survey's purpose before completing the questionnaire and could withdraw at any stage without penalty. No personally identifiable information was collected, and all responses were analysed in aggregate form to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. The data were used solely for research purposes in accordance with the ethical principles governing social science research.

4.0 Findings

4.1 Respondent profile

A total of 1,011 Malaysian youths aged between 15 and 30 years participated in the study. Encompassing varied educational and employment backgrounds, the respondents offered a broad, well-rounded perspective on how young Malaysians view TVET. Female respondents constituted 50.7% of the sample while 49.3% were male. In terms of education, the highest proportion of participants had achieved a Bachelor's Degree (29.9%), followed by SPM certificate (26.1%), Diploma (21.5%), STPM/ STAM/ Foundation (8.4%), Master's Degree (5.5%), and Certificate-level qualifications (5.2%). Relatively few respondents reported holding either a PhD or lower levels of education. Regarding employment status, almost half of respondents were students (47.0%), while the remainder were employed youths, self-employed individuals, unemployed youths, and those seeking employment.

4.2 Awareness and interest towards TVET

Awareness of TVET among Malaysian youth was generally high, with 83.5% of respondents indicating they were aware of TVET. This shows that government initiatives to promote TVET have achieved considerable success in increasing public awareness regarding vocational education. Besides that, 77.9% of respondents were familiar with the courses offered by TVET institutions. This suggests that most participants had at least a foundational understanding of the educational pathways available within the TVET ecosystem. Interest in pursuing TVET was also encouraging, with 76.6% expressing willingness to enroll in TVET programmes. Although this proportion shows generally positive acceptance, it also indicates that roughly a quarter of Malaysian youth remain reluctant to choose TVET as their main educational route. Overall, these findings show that Malaysian youth have high awareness of and interest in TVET. However, awareness alone does not necessarily translate into educational participation, emphasizing the importance of understanding the underlying factors that influence how youth perceive vocational education.

4.3 Youth perceptions towards TVET

Three constructs were examined to understand respondents' perceptions of TVET: perceptions towards TVET, social influence, and career and financial prospects. Respondents showed a moderately positive perception of TVET, with an overall mean score of 3.64. This finding suggests that Malaysian youths generally recognize TVET as a valuable educational pathway that provides relevant skills

and employment opportunities. However, the mean score also indicates room to further strengthen public confidence in the status and attractiveness of vocational education.

The overall mean score is 3.54 for social influence, reflecting positive influence from family, peers, and community regarding TVET. At the same time, the moderate baseline suggests this support is far from uniform across the youth population, as family expectations and societal attitudes continue to heavily shape their academic choices.

Among the three constructs, career and financial prospects recorded the lowest mean score (3.33). Although respondents generally acknowledged the employment opportunities associated with TVET, they appeared less confident regarding long-term career progression, salary growth, and financial security. This gap is significant, as career expectations heavily drive youth's choices. Even when young people value TVET's educational merit, skepticism about its long-term financial payoff may ultimately discourage some youths from selecting TVET.

5.0 Discussions

The high level of awareness of TVET among respondents suggests that TVET has achieved considerable visibility among Malaysian youth. However, the present findings also demonstrate that high awareness does not automatically translate into participation. For policymakers, this suggests that general familiarity with TVET is widespread, continuing to run basic information campaigns will yield shrinking results. Greater emphasis may instead be required on why young people should choose TVET specifically detailing career progression and realistic outcomes. This approach aligns with Malaysian evidence showing that TVET enrollment is driven by a range of complex factors beyond basic awareness. Hong (2021), for example, identified student and public perceptions, parents, instructors, employers, facilities, costs and policy as factors associated with students' tendency to choose TVET after secondary education. Similarly, Wong and Atan @ Yaakub (2021) noted that attitudes towards TVET remain influenced by its longstanding image as a second-class educational pathway. These findings demonstrate that increasing TVET enrollment requires improving the wide decision-making environment rather than relying solely on information campaigns. Additionally, these results mirror the core insights of MYI 2024. While the Education Domain recorded a very satisfactory score of 86.74, the tertiary education enrolment indicator remained substantially lower than other education indicators. In this context, the high awareness and interest observed in the present study suggest that TVET has potential to function as an additional post-secondary pathway for Malaysian youth. Strengthening progression routes between skills qualifications, higher-level TVET programmes and tertiary education could therefore contribute to a more inclusive education ecosystem in which academic and technical pathways are treated as complementary rather than competing routes.

Respondents held a moderately favorable view of TVET, though a mean score of 3.64 out of 5 signals quiet reservation rather than full endorsement. Favorable perceptions must still contend with deep-rooted stigma and misunderstandings regarding vocational training. For instance, Hashim's (2025) review of studies from 2020 to 2024 highlights that TVET is still largely seen as a second-tier educational route. The study concluded that widespread misconceptions and a lack of awareness about TVET's career value continue to undermine its image in Malaysia. These contemporary concerns are consistent with earlier Malaysian research. Alavi, Sail and Awang (2013) found both positive and negative images of technical and vocational education among parents and teachers, illustrating that attitudes towards technical occupations are socially constructed rather than determined solely by programme quality. The persistence of this issue suggests that increasing the number of TVET programmes alone will not necessarily elevate TVET's social standing. The present results may therefore indicate that Malaysia is experiencing a gradual transition in the public image of TVET rather than a complete transformation. This is significant because educational choice involves both instrumental considerations such as employment prospects and symbolic considerations, including status, identity and social recognition. Consequently, the repositioning of TVET should move beyond portraying it as an option primarily for students who do not pursue conventional academic education.

Beside that, this finding reinforces the view that decisions concerning TVET are not made by young people in isolation. Educational pathways are embedded within a broader social environment in which parents, teachers, peers and community expectations can influence perceptions of what constitutes a desirable education and career. Hong (2021) identified parents and public perceptions among the factors influencing students' tendency to enroll in TVET. Earlier work examining the image of technical and vocational education from the perspectives of Malaysian parents and teachers similarly identified both positive and negative attitudes towards technical education and technical occupations. These findings are important because parents and teachers frequently function as information gatekeepers during young people's transition from secondary education into further study. The moderate social influence score in the present study therefore warrants particular attention. It suggests that while many respondents experience encouragement towards TVET, such support is not necessarily universal or strong enough to overcome other concerns. Outreach strategies should not focus exclusively on potential students. Parents, teachers, school counsellors and community influencers should also be treated as important stakeholders within the TVET decision-making ecosystem. Information provided to these groups should extend beyond course availability and entry requirements to include qualification pathways, professional recognition, examples of career progression, opportunities for further education, and credible employment outcomes. In other words, changing youth perceptions requires changing the environment in which youth educational decisions are made.

Perhaps the most important finding of the study is that career and financial prospects recorded the lowest mean contrasts with the higher scores for general perceptions towards and social influence. The data points to a clear disconnect which demonstrates that respondents acknowledge TVET's skill-building benefits yet remain skeptical about its long-term financial payoff. This distinction explains the underlying gap between viewing TVET positively and actually choosing it as a study path. The International Labour Organization's Global Employment Trends for Youth 2024 emphasizes that young people's labour-market experiences must be considered not only in relation to unemployment but also transitions into work, NEET status, gender inequalities and youth anxieties about their future prospects

(ILO, 2024). UNESCO similarly positions TVET as a route towards productive employment and decent work, rather than employment alone, and explicitly identifies further learning and career progression as important dimensions of modern TVET systems. Malaysia appears to have made considerable progress in creating awareness of TVET but the next challenge is to establish stronger confidence in the economic value proposition of TVET. Addressing this issue requires stronger employer participation. Instead of viewing industry simply as the end of the educational pipeline, partnership with employers to build the ecosystem together is important. Direct industry involvement through curriculum development, hands-on apprenticeships, professional certifications and defined career progression to ensure TVET training remains directly aligned with market realities. At the same time, policymakers and TVET providers could communicate actual graduate outcomes more transparently, including employment rates, salary trajectories, occupational progression and examples of graduates who have progressed from technical positions into supervisory, professional, entrepreneurial or specialist roles.

The findings also provide a basis for considering TVET within the broader discourse on youth quality of life. Importantly, the present study did not directly measure quality-of-life outcomes, and therefore it cannot establish that TVET participation causes improvements in quality of life. Rather, the results identify several mechanisms through which TVET may potentially contribute to youth well-being, particularly educational opportunity, skills development, employability, career development and financial security. Quality of life encompasses far more than simple employment status. It reflects a person's broader capacity to build meaningful skills, achieve financial independence, participate in community life, and pursue long-term personal goals. Thus, these findings demonstrate that improving youth quality of life through TVET is not merely about expanding enrollment but it requires translating vocational education into tangible life outcomes. The relationship with the MYI 2024 Education Domain is therefore particularly relevant. A successful TVET system should simultaneously develop skills, facilitate employment, provide progression opportunities and empower young people to exercise greater agency over their educational and career trajectories.

6.0 Conclusion & Recommendations

This study highlights TVET's potential as an important educational pathway for Malaysian youth. While TVET is increasingly recognised among young people, its future attractiveness depends on how effectively it is positioned as a credible pathway for skills development, further education and sustainable careers. The study also suggests that strengthening TVET requires more than promoting awareness. Greater attention should focus on building confidence in the long-term value of TVET, particularly in relation to career development, economic opportunities, and professional recognition. From a youth perspective, a robust TVET ecosystem does not replace traditional education—it enriches it. TVET serves as a vital vehicle for practical skill-building in a changing economy. However, several constraints must be considered when interpreting these findings. Using an open online survey and voluntary sampling limits the generalizability of the results to the broader population of Malaysian youth. In addition, the cross-sectional design captures youth perceptions at a single point in time and does not allow changes in perceptions to be observed over time. Furthermore, the absence of direct quality-of-life metrics precludes causal inferences regarding TVET's impact. To overcome these limitations, future studies should adopt representative sampling methods, longitudinal tracking, and standardized well-being instruments.

Several recommendations are proposed based on the overall findings of the study. First, career pathways and progression opportunities should be made clearer. Young people need accessible information on employment opportunities, career advancement, professional certification and pathways to higher qualifications after completing TVET programmes. Second, industry collaboration should be strengthened to ensure that TVET programmes remain relevant to labour-market needs. Greater industry participation in curriculum development, apprenticeships, work-based learning and professional certification can improve the credibility and employment value of TVET qualifications. Third, enhancing the status of TVET involves strategic visibility for high-skilled roles and successful alumni. Equally vital is empowering frontline guides such as parents, teachers, and career counselors—with current data to destigmatize vocational pathways and support sound career decision-making among youth. Eventually, longitudinal studies with validated metrics are needed to trace TVET's impacts on career progression and youth quality of life. Sustaining these outcomes will ultimately depend on strategic collaboration among government agencies, educational institutions, and industry leaders.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This study contributes to the field of TVET and youth development by looking beyond the traditional focus on skills development and employability. By embedding TVET within the context of overall youth quality of life, this study investigates how social networks, income expectations, and advancement potential influence perceptions of technical education.

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