

## The Convergence of Vet and Adult Education: A Systematic Review of Principles, Challenges, and Strategies for Lifelong Learning

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### Abstract

*This systematic review investigates the intersection of vocational and adult education, focusing on how the integration of adult learning principles can redefine vocational training to enhance lifelong learning and employability. Following the PRISMA guidelines, the study synthesizes literature to identify key objectives, relevant principles, persistent challenges, and strategic pathways for reform. The findings suggest that shifting from a narrow, job-specific focus to a broader, learner-centered approach incorporating andragogy and heutagogy is essential for meeting modern labor market demands. The review concludes that redefining vocational education is a critical driver for sustainable economic and social development, particularly in emerging economies, and proposes a detailed set of policy, pedagogical, and financial recommendations for implementation.*

**Keywords:** Vocational Education, Adult Education, Lifelong Learning, Employability

### Introduction

The global labor market is undergoing a profound transformation driven by technological advancement, globalization, and shifting economic structures (Zuo, 2025). In this context, Technical vocational education and training (VET) systems, which have historically focused on initial skills acquisition for youth, are increasingly viewed as inadequate for the needs of a modern workforce. There is a growing recognition that vocational education must be redefined through the lens of adult education to support lifelong learning and continuous skill validation (Zhao, 2024).

Technical Vocational Education and Training (VET) systems, designed primarily for initial entry into the workforce, are struggling to meet the dynamic demands of the 21st-century

labor market, which requires continuous up-skilling and reskilling of the adult population (Zhao, 2024). This misalignment creates a significant skills gap, leading to underemployment and hindering economic productivity. The core problem lies in the systemic failure to integrate established adult education principles—such as andragogy, self-directed learning, and the recognition of prior learning (RPL)—into TVET program design and delivery. Consequently, VET remains largely pedagogical, rigid, and standardized, failing to accommodate the unique needs of adult learners who possess substantial prior experience, require flexible scheduling, and are motivated by immediate application of knowledge (Wolf & Lindemann, 2024). This is particularly acute in emerging economies where a large proportion of the skilled workforce operates in the informal sector without formal certification, limiting their access to better economic opportunities. Without a systematic redefinition of VET through the lens of adult education, these systems will continue to marginalize experienced workers, perpetuate the skills gap, and fail to serve as effective mechanisms for lifelong learning, thereby impeding national goals for sustainable economic and social development. This systematic review is therefore necessary to synthesize the fragmented evidence on how this critical integration can be effectively achieved. The primary purpose of this study is to examine how vocational education can be redefined through adult education to enhance lifelong learning, skills development, and employability.

Vocational Education and Training (VET) has historically been defined as education that prepares learners for jobs that are based on manual or practical activities, traditionally focusing on youth and initial skill acquisition (Wolf & Lindemann, 2024). However, the concept has evolved to encompass a broader role in lifelong learning, driven by the need for continuous professional development (Zuo, 2025). Adult education, conversely, is defined as the practice of teaching and educating adults, focusing on principles that acknowledge the learner's maturity, experience, and self-direction. The convergence of these two fields is essential for creating a responsive and resilient workforce. When viewed from an adult perspective, VET shifts its primary objective from initial job entry to career advancement and lifelong employability, prioritizing flexible, modular pathways over standardized curricula (Zhao, 2024).

The literature identifies several systemic barriers to integrating adult education into VET. These include Institutional Challenges, such as rigid accreditation standards that prevent the adoption of flexible, modular structures, and Pedagogical Challenges, where VET instructors

often lack training in adult learning methodologies, relying instead on traditional, teacher-centered styles (Zhao, 2024). Financial Challenges are also prominent, with inadequate funding for non-traditional programs and high costs for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) assessments making them inaccessible to many low-income workers (Federal Ministry of Education, 2023). Finally, Societal Challenges involve the persistent stigma that undervalues vocational education compared to academic paths (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023).

To overcome these barriers, the literature proposes critical strategies, including the adoption of Modularization and Stackable Credentials and the establishment of robust Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) mechanisms, a strategy strongly advocated by international bodies like UNESCO (UNESCO, 2023). Additionally, strengthening Industry-Education Partnerships and utilizing Blended and Online Learning modalities are crucial for providing the flexibility and relevance required by working adults. This review is guided by five specific research questions:

- 1 What are the key objectives of vocational education when viewed from an adult education perspective?
- 2 Which adult education principles are most relevant to vocational education delivery?
- 3 What challenges hinder the integration of adult education approaches into vocational education programmes?
- 4 In what ways can vocational education be redefined to accommodate adult learners and promote lifelong learning?
- 5 What are the perceived benefits of redefining vocational education through adult education for individuals and society?

### **Theoretical Framework: Andragogy and Heutagogy**

The theoretical foundation for redefining VET rests heavily on the principles of adult learning theory, particularly Andragogy and Heutagogy. Andragogy, as articulated by Malcolm Knowles, posits five core assumptions about the adult learner that are highly relevant to vocational training (Knowles, 1984): Self-Concept: Adults need to be seen as self-directing and capable of making their own decisions about their learning. Experience: An adult's accumulated experience is a rich resource for learning, and VET must utilize this experience rather than ignore it. Readiness to Learn: Adults are ready to learn things they

need to know to cope effectively with real-life problems, such as those encountered in the workplace. Orientation to Learning: Adults are problem-centered rather than subject-centered, meaning VET should focus on real-world tasks and challenges. Motivation: Adult motivation is primarily internal, driven by factors like self-esteem, job satisfaction, and career goals.

The integration of these principles is central to redefining vocational delivery (Ojeomogha, 2023). Furthermore, literature suggests a need to move beyond andragogy to Heutagogy, or self-determined learning, particularly in rapidly changing technical fields (Hase & Kenyon, 2001). Heutagogy encourages learners to be proactive in designing their own learning pathways, a critical skill for navigating future labor market disruptions (Zuo, 2025).

### **Methodology**

This study adopted a systematic review design, adhering to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) standards. The methodology was designed to ensure a rigorous, transparent, and reproducible synthesis of existing research. A comprehensive search was conducted across major academic databases, including ERIC, Google Scholar, JSTOR, and Science Direct. The search terms focused on the intersection of "vocational education," "adult education," "andragogy," and "lifelong learning." Inclusion criteria were limited to peer-reviewed articles, government reports, and international policy documents published between 2015 and 2025, ensuring the relevance of the findings to contemporary educational challenges. Data was extracted from the selected studies using a standardized thematic matrix. The synthesis process involved a qualitative thematic analysis, where findings were categorized according to the five research questions. This allowed for the identification of recurring patterns, conflicting evidence, and gaps in the current literature.

### **Results and Discussion**

#### **Objectives of Vocational Education from an Adult Perspective**

Literature indicates a significant shift in the objectives of vocational education when viewed through an adult education lens. The traditional VET model is primarily concerned with initial job entry, focusing on the acquisition of technical skills and utilizing a teacher-led, standardized curriculum (Wolf & Lindemann, 2024). In contrast, an adult-centered approach redefines the primary goal as career advancement and lifelong employability, rather than merely entry-level employment. This perspective advocates for learner-led, flexible, and

modular pathways, prioritizing self-directedness and career resilience over rigid, standardized training. Furthermore, the adult education perspective shifts the focus from the certification of formal schooling to the validation of prior learning and experience (RPL), recognizing the wealth of knowledge adults bring from their work and life experiences (UNESCO, 2023).

### **Relevant Adult Education Principles**

The integration of andragogy (the art and science of helping adults learn) and heutagogy (self-determined learning) is central to redefining vocational delivery. Key principles identified in the literature include the Need to Know, where adult learners must understand the immediate relevance and application of a skill to their professional goals. This is closely linked to the principle of Readiness to Learn, which emphasizes aligning training with the real-life tasks and problems faced by the learner. Furthermore, the principle of Prior Experience mandates that the curriculum must utilize the rich life and work experiences of adults as a primary resource for learning, while the concept of Self-Concept requires the learning environment to facilitate a move from dependency to self-directedness in the learning process (Ojeomogha, 2023).

### **Challenges to Integration**

Despite the clear benefits, several systemic barriers hinder the successful integration of adult education into vocational frameworks. These challenges can be grouped into four main categories:

**Institutional Challenges** are characterized by rigid accreditation standards and a pervasive lack of flexible, modular structures within VET institutions. These bureaucratic hurdles often prevent the rapid adaptation of curricula necessary to meet evolving labor market demands and the diverse needs of adult learners. **Financial Challenges** stem from inadequate funding allocated to non-traditional programs, which often results in high costs for critical services like Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) assessments, making them inaccessible to many low-income artisans and workers (Federal Ministry of Education, 2023). **Pedagogical Challenges** arise because many vocational instructors lack formal training in adult learning methodologies (andragogy). Consequently, they tend to rely on traditional, teacher-centered pedagogical styles that are ill-suited for engaging experienced adult learners. Finally, **Societal Challenges** involve the persistent stigma that views vocational education as a "second-best" option compared to academic paths, which can discourage participation and undermine the

perceived value of skills acquired through informal or non-formal means (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023).

### **Strategies for Redefinition**

To better address the needs of adult learners and labor market demands, the review identifies several critical strategies for reform. The first is the adoption of Modularization and Stackable Credentials, which involves breaking down long-term programs into smaller, manageable units. This allows working adults to learn at their own pace and accumulate qualifications incrementally. Second, the establishment of robust Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) mechanisms is essential to formally validate skills acquired through informal work experience, a strategy strongly advocated by international bodies like UNESCO (UNESCO, 2023). Third, Industry-Education Partnerships must be strengthened to co-create curricula with industry leaders, ensuring that vocational training remains relevant and responsive to evolving market needs. Finally, the strategic use of Blended and Online Learning modalities is crucial for providing flexible access to training, effectively overcoming the geographical and time constraints faced by working adults.

### **Implications for Sustainable Development**

Redefining vocational education has profound implications for both individual empowerment and national development. At the individual level, it significantly enhances social mobility and economic security by providing pathways for career progression and formal certification (Zuo, 2025). At the societal level, it fosters an inclusive workforce and directly supports the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education) and Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). By validating the skills of the informal sector, particularly in emerging economies like Nigeria, governments can unlock significant economic potential, promote social equity, and contribute to sustainable economic development (Zhao, 2024).

### **Conclusion**

This systematic review demonstrates that the redefinition of vocational education through adult education is not merely a pedagogical shift but a necessary economic and social imperative. By moving toward a more flexible, learner-centered, and experience-based model, vocational systems can better serve the diverse needs of adult learners and the dynamic requirements of the modern labor market. The findings underscore that a fragmented

approach is insufficient; a coordinated, multi-level strategy is required to realize the full potential of this integration.

### Recommendations

Based on the synthesis of the literature, the following detailed recommendations are proposed to guide the successful redefinition of vocational education:

1. Governments must move beyond pilot programs and fully embed RPL as a mandatory component of national qualification frameworks.
2. A dedicated body should be created to continuously monitor labor market demands and forecast future skill needs.
3. Regulatory bodies should require VET institutions to offer modular, stackable credentials that allow adults to enter and exit programs based on their immediate needs and career goals, thereby promoting true lifelong learning pathways.
4. Vocational instructors must receive mandatory, specialized professional development in adult education principles (andragogy and heutagogy).
5. Governments should offer tax incentives or grants to private sector companies that actively participate in curriculum co-creation in TVET, provide work-based learning opportunities, or contribute to the assessment and certification of adult learners in TVET.

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