



GENDER EQUALITY AND THE FUTURE OF WORK: TRANSFORMING VOCATIONAL BUSINESS EDUCATION FOR A SUSTAINABLE SOCIETAL BALANCE

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Abstract

The future of work is rapidly evolving, driven by technological advancement towards shifting workforce demographics and changing societal expectations. As the world strives for sustainable development and societal balance, promoting gender equality in vocational business education emerges as a critical factor. This paper explores the intersection of gender equality and future of work by highlighting the need to transform vocational business education to address the challenges and opportunities arising from these shifts in which the current state of gender equality in vocational business education and its implications for the future of work is examined. The paper also identifies key strategies for promoting inclusive and equitable education which includes, but not limited to: integrating gender-sensitive curricula; fostering inclusive learning environments and providing opportunities for women and under-represented groups in order to develop skills in high demand fields. The paper concluded that transforming vocational business education to prioritize gender equality is essential for creating a sustainable and balanced society, where individuals can thrive and contribute to the economy regardless of their gender, which would require a multifaceted approach involving policy makers, educators and industry stakeholders working together to promote gender equality and empower future generations of workers.

Keywords: Vocational Business education, Gender equality, future of work, sustainable development, societal balance

Introduction

The future of work is undergoing a unique transformation driven by global technological advancement, demographic shifts, and socio-economic transformations. Within this evolving landscape, the issue of gender equality has become increasingly significant in all disciplines and professions including business education. Vocational Business Education (VBE), which prepares learners for specific trades or professions, must adapt to foster inclusive learning environments and prepare all genders equitably for the challenges of tomorrow's workforce. Ensuring gender equality in VBE is essential not only for empowering individuals but also for achieving broader goals of sustainable societal balance and economic growth. Despite progress in recent decades, women continue to face continued significant barriers in accessing quality education and training, particularly in male-dominated fields. This perpetuates occupational segregation, limits career advancement opportunities and hinders economic growth. Vocational business education plays a vital role in preparing individuals for the workforce, equipping them with the skills and knowledge required to succeed in an increasingly complex and competitive job market. (Ewere 2014)

The economic advancement of a nation is heavily reliant on advancement in technology and the availability of skilled labour and technical personnel to drive the economy. Vocational Business Education plays a pivotal role in expediting a nation's industrial advancement. It offers a very effective method for cultivating a highly competent workforce that is needed by different sectors in a nation's economy. Technical and vocational education has been a crucial component of national development strategies and several civilizations due to its significant influence on productivity and economic advancement. (Ayeni & Olowe, 2015). VBE is effective when students, upon completing their studies are capable of becoming self-sufficient and financially independent. However, several capable and highly skilled individuals, who were unable to obtain profitable jobs, have continued to rely on their parents for financial support, perhaps as a result of various unrest and instability bedeviling the country. A turbulent condition refers to a duration characterized by several abrupt and unpredictable alterations. This may be due to their deficiency in the requisite vocational competencies required for Self-employment and for proficiently operating within the contemporary labour market. (Peter, 2014).

This paper therefore, tends to examine the role of VBE in sustainable societal balance; it argues that transforming VBE to prioritize gender equality is crucial for creating future of work that is equitable and sustainable for all. By highlighting the challenges, opportunities, and strategies for promoting gender equality in VBE. This paper aims to contribute to the ongoing conversation about the future of work and the role of VBE in shaping a more equitable society. This paper is also aimed at transforming VBE to prioritize equality for creating a sustainable and balanced society where individuals can thrive and contribute to the economy regardless of their gender.

Concept of Vocational Business Education

Vocational education is a specialized style of instruction aimed at equipping students with the skills and knowledge needed for various sectors such as manufacturing, agriculture, and commerce. (Ewere, 2014). Vocational training is designed to equip learners with the skills necessary for occupations that include hands-on or practical work. Vocational and Technical Education equips students with the necessary skills to function as productive members of a global society, enabling them to thrive in all aspects of life, education, and employment. Vocational and Technical education equips individuals with the necessary skills and knowledge to enter the workforce and actively contribute to the progress of society (Ayeni & Olowe, 2015). Okorie (2021) asserts that vocational education can be conceived as a comprehensive term referring to those aspects of educational process involving the acquisition of practical skills, attitudes, understanding and knowledge relating to occupations in various sectors of economic and social life.

The Nigerian National Policy on Education revised (NPE, 2022) stipulated aspects of vocational education as: an integral part of general education; a means of preparing for occupational fields and effective participation in the world of work; an aspect of lifelong learning and preparation for responsible citizenship and a method of facilitating poverty alleviation. Business education according to Ezenwafor and Onokpaunu (2017) is a branch of vocational education concerned with exposing its recipients to internal and external foundations and functioning of the workplace. Business education is a work-focused, skilled-based, result-oriented and technology-based educational programme. With the knowledge of business education, students are better informed and groomed with skills and understanding to cope with the unpredictable challenges of the business environment. Business education which is one of the courses taught in tertiary

institutions is focused on equipping its recipients with necessary skills meant for self-reliance. The aim/goal of business education is the production of manpower, which possesses the requisite knowledge, skill and attitude for harnessing other resources and bringing them together into a cooperative relationship yielding the goods and services demanded by the society for the satisfaction of their wants and needs. Godwin (2018), described business education as an aspect of total education programme that provides the knowledge, skills, attitudes and understanding needed to perform in the business world as a producer and/or consumer of goods and services.

It is imperative for business education programme which is charged with the responsibility of unveiling the dynamics of the world of work to ensure that its recipients possess relevant digital skills needed for effective entry and efficient participation in economic development. Okeji et al (2020) in support of the above stated that, the value of any education programme could be determined by its ability to adequately prepare and equip individuals in such a manner that they could fit into specific jobs, become technologically relevant, internationally competitive and economically prosperous, if properly packaged and adequately delivered. The courses offered in the business education curriculum include accounting education, secretarial education/office management education, and marketing and entrepreneurship education. Vocational business education is a form of training that prepares individuals for self-employment opportunities in various fields such as starting a business, managing finances, organizing events and workshops, and engaging in retail and wholesale trade. It also involves promoting and advertising products and services for different establishments, establishing secretarial institutes to train individuals in secretarial and computer skills, providing training in office management and information technology, setting up business centers and offering consultancy services to organisations in areas such as recruitment, information systems management, and marketing of computer accessories and stationery. Oguejiofor, C. S. (2020)

However, the reliable medium through which the mission and vision of business education programmes can be achieved stems from effective review and implementation of its curriculum. In order to achieve this, there is need for the inculcation of gender balance in the business education curriculum. In business education, the involvement of women and girls in planning and implementing the curriculum should not be over emphasized.

Gender Equality

According to the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE, 2016); it means equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities for women and men, and girls and boys. It implies that the interests, needs and priorities of both women and men are taken into consideration. It simply means equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities for women and men, boys and girls. It connotes ensuring women's and men's rights, responsibilities and opportunities do not depend on their gender. The basic key aspects of gender equality include equal rights, equal responsibilities and equal opportunities for both men and women. Gender equality isn't just about fairness; it's the foundation for a thriving society. When everyone is empowered, regardless of gender, we unlock stronger economies, healthier communities, and a safer world. Gender equality empowers individuals to break free from harmful stereotypes and pursue their dreams, regardless of societal expectations. It fosters an environment where everyone feels safe, respected, and valued, and where diverse perspectives and talents contribute to innovation and progress. By embracing gender equality, we pave the way for a brighter future for generations to come. Hence, for the future of work to thrive; there is the need for the inclusion of women and gender equality in the curriculum of vocational business education to guarantee the much desired societal balance.

The Role of VBE in Promoting Gender Equality

Transforming VBE to support gender equality involves structural, pedagogical, and policy reforms which include:

- Curriculum reform: curricula must be revised to eliminate gender biases and to promote gender-neutral language, diverse role models, and inclusive content. Embedding gender studies within business education can enhance learners' awareness of workplace dynamics and discrimination (Unterhalter et al., 2020).
- Teacher training: educators need continuous professional development to address unconscious bias and employ inclusive teaching practices. Gender-sensitive training equips teachers to recognize and challenge stereotypes, thereby fostering a more equitable classroom environment (OECD, 2021).

- Career guidance and counseling: effective career counseling that encourages students to explore non-traditional career paths can break gender norms. Counseling practices must address societal expectations and equip students with the confidence to pursue diverse fields (UN Women, 2020).
- Institutional policies and governance: institutions must enforce gender-equal policies in recruitment, retention, and assessment. Transparent reporting mechanisms, equal pay, and support systems like mentorship and childcare services can reduce structural barriers for female learners and staff (World Economic Forum, 2023).

Challenges to Gender Equality in Vocational Business Education

Several factors contribute to the under-representation of women in certain sectors and leadership positions, many of which are rooted in vocational business education as stated below:

- Gender stereotypes and curriculum bias: traditional business curricula often reinforce gender stereotypes, implicitly or explicitly channeling students into roles deemed “appropriate” for their gender (Gatti et al., 2019). This limits women's exposure to diverse career pathways and hinders their aspirations.
- Lack of female role models and mentorship: the under-representation of women in leadership positions within businesses translates to a scarcity of female role models in vocational settings. This lack of mentorship perpetuates a cycle of under-representation (Eagly & Carli, 2007).
- Gendered expectations and bias in assessments: implicit biases in assessments and evaluation processes can disadvantage women, even when objective measures are used (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004). This can lead to lower grades, fewer opportunities, and reduced confidence.
- Limited access to resources and networking: women often face barriers accessing resources, such as funding, networking opportunities, and professional development programs, compared to their male counterparts (OECD, 2015). Vocational institutions have a role in addressing this imbalance.

The Future of Work and Gender Dynamics towards Sustainable Societal Balance

The future of work, shaped by digitization, automation, and remote work, presents both challenges and opportunities for gender equality. On one hand, automation risks displacing women from routine administrative and service jobs; on the other, it opens avenues in tech and entrepreneurship (ILO, 2020). However, these benefits can only be realized if women have equal

access to digital skills training and leadership development. Moreover, the gig economy and platform-based work models offer flexibility, but often lack social protections, disproportionately affecting women due to unpaid care responsibilities (UNDP, 2022). Preparing learners for this new world requires integrating soft skills, digital literacy, and gender equity into vocational curricula. Hence, achieving sustainable societal balance through gender equality through VBE has implications far beyond the education sector as it contributes to economic growth by expanding the talent pool and improving productivity, social justice through fair access to opportunities and resources and to ensure environmental sustainability for women empowerment, thereby, leading to more women inclusive and sustainable communities (UN Women, 2019).

Transforming Vocational Business Education for Gender Equality

In addressing the challenges, several approaches are required which include the following;

- Holistic curriculum reform towards integrating gender-sensitive content across the curriculum is vital. This involves challenging gender stereotypes, showcasing successful women in business, and incorporating case studies reflecting diverse perspectives according to UNESCO (2017), incorporating learning modules on unconscious bias and inclusive leadership is very crucial towards transforming VBE with gender equality inclusion for sustainable societal balance.
- Pedagogical innovations towards adopting active learning strategies, collaborative projects, and inclusive teaching methods that can create a more equitable learning environment must be targeted and implemented. Boaler, (2016) posited that, there is need for the encouragement of participation from all students, regardless of gender which is imperative towards achieving the required learning goals and objectives.
- Mentorship and sponsorship programmes: establishing formal mentorship programs that pair female students with successful women in business can provide crucial guidance, support, and networking opportunities. Sponsorship programs, which involve active advocate for gender balance should be instituted across various strata of the Nigerian society for women inclusion to engender sustainable societal balance
- There should be greater involvement of women participatory in governance with increased women inclusion in decision-making agencies and bodies.

- There should be partnerships with industry to promote inclusive work environments and internships.
- Monitoring and evaluation systems that track gender-based outcomes and guide reforms (ADB, 2021) should be instituted.

Recommendations

1. Curriculum and Teaching: Gender equality can be achieved by integrating gender studies and future skill that is the inclusion of modules on gender equity, ethics, sustainability, digital fluency and entrepreneurial thinking
2. Establishing transparent policies addressing recruitment, progression and support service
3. Track gender-disaggregated outcomes to identify gaps and inform interventions
4. Financial aids and scholarships should target the underrepresented gender in business related vocational studies
5. Access to technology, maker spaces and online learning tools should be made available
6. Partnership with employers who are committed to gender inclusive hiring

Conclusion

Gender equality is not merely a policy goal but a prerequisite for building a resilient and inclusive future of work. Vocational business education must evolve to be gender-transformative, equipping all individuals with the skills and opportunities necessary for meaningful participation in the workforce. Through curriculum reform, institutional change, and policy innovation, VBE can serve as a powerful driver for a sustainable societal balance.

The future of work presents transformative opportunities and complex challenges for gender equality by reimagining VBE through a gender responsive lens, societies can foster more equitable labor markets and sustainable economic development. This requires concerted efforts across policy, curriculum design, institutional practices, and partnership with industry and communities. With intentional strategies and inclusive implementation, VBE can be a cornerstone of balanced equitable future of work.



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