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Improving labour market outcomes through learning-to-earning interventions in low- and middle-income countries

An evidence gap map

Evidence Gap Map Report 37

Education



International Initiative for Impact Evaluation

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3ie evidence gap maps

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About this evidence gap map

This report systematically identifies and organises the evidence base on technical and vocational education and training (TVET) and skills, using a framework covering the full scope of supply-side learning-to-earning interventions and labour market outcomes. The online EGM is available here. This work was developed by 3ie with funding from the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). The findings and conclusions presented in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of FCDO, 3ie's donors, or governing bodies. Please direct any comments or queries to the corresponding author, Pierre Marion, at pmarion@3ieimpact.org.

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Summary

One in three young people today lives in a country that is off track to achieve SDG Target 8.6, which calls for a substantial reduction in the proportion of youth not in employment, education or training (NEET, ILO 2024). Across low- and middle-income countries (L&MICs), around a quarter of young people are NEET (ILO 2024). The costs are not just economic. For millions of young people, the gap between learning and earning represents a gap between opportunity and exclusion.

These challenges are becoming more acute. The green energy transition and the rise of AI are rapidly reshaping labour markets, but only for workers with the right skills (ILO 2025a; ILO 2025b). Investment in technical and vocational education and training (TVET) falls critically short in many L&MICs. Given that governments bear most of the cost of TVET provision, robust evidence is needed to guide investment towards interventions that deliver the greatest benefits (World Bank, UNESCO and ILO 2023). Yet until now, there has been no systematic mapping of the TVET and skills evidence base across L&MICs.

This report addresses that gap. Commissioned by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) and produced by the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie), our evidence gap map (EGM) is the most comprehensive map of rigorous TVET and skills evidence ever produced for low- and middle-income settings. Drawing on a search for relevant studies in seven academic databases and 32 grey literature sources, this EGM includes **527 studies** (510 impact evaluations and 17 systematic reviews). Developed through extensive consultation with sector experts, practitioners and policymakers, it organises the evidence within a framework of 24 intervention and 27 outcome categories that captures the full range of learning-to-earning interventions and labour market outcomes.

The evidence base is substantial and expanding, spanning 87 countries across every continent. This is a substantial resource that programme designers, funders and researchers can draw on immediately to inform research, policy and practice. For governments and funders seeking to direct spending effectively, the evidence base offers a far richer starting point than is commonly recognised.

However, the evidence base is geographically uneven with L&MICs. Eighty-two per cent of studies come from just 31 countries, typically those with large populations or long-established national programmes. Almost 60 per cent of the evidence is concentrated in Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean. Meanwhile, countries with the highest NEET rates, including Botswana, Eswatini, Honduras, Mali and Zimbabwe, have little or no rigorous evidence at all. This is precisely where evidence is most needed, and most absent. Significant evidence gaps also remain in small island developing states and in many countries across the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia.

Research has predominantly focused on what is easiest to study, although a smaller but growing literature examines systemic interventions that shape TVET at scale. Nearly half of all studies focus on the delivery of training programmes lasting less than 12 months, with 36 per cent focused on programmes lasting less than one month. Far fewer examine how TVET systems are built, how access barriers are removed, how quality is improved, or what systemic interventions shape whether TVET works at scale. Nevertheless, there is an emerging evidence base on systemic capacity strengthening, for example, online training programmes and longer-term national TVET programmes.

Labour market and business outcomes are the most measured outcomes. This evidence provides key information on the impact of TVET interventions at the final stage of the causal chain. However, evidence on intermediate outcomes, such as the quality of TVET services, skills development, and educational outcomes, remains limited. This restricts the current literature's ability to guide modifications to TVET programme design and implementation to enhance completion rates and skill acquisition.

Less than half of the included IEs explicitly state that an intervention targets a vulnerable group. Among these IEs, youth, women, and individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds are the main focus of TVET interventions. The evidence on programmes targeting other disadvantaged or minority groups, including rural poor, people living with disabilities and refugees, is also very limited. It is not clear if this reflects a lack of programming targeting these groups, or a gap in research.

Critical emerging priorities are almost invisible in the research. Green skills and AI, central to the jobs of the coming decade, are not yet reflected in the evidence base. These key topics are explicitly mentioned in just one study each. While they may be incorporated in programmes focused on general core skills, this is likely a gap that requires further attention. Online delivery, which has grown sharply since COVID-19, also remains underexplored.

Despite a substantial and growing evidence, there is a lack of robust evidence synthesis. While we identified 17 systematic reviews, 13 had major limitations and were rated low confidence. The remainder are dated, with significant new research published since their completion. Yet the EGM itself represents the infrastructure needed to change this. We have identified substantial clusters of evidence where meaningful synthesis is possible, including the effects of technical and vocational education, on-the-job training, skills training, systemic capacity strengthening, career guidance and job search training.

Implications:

- **Draw on the evidence found in the EGM to inform activity and project design.** This EGM provides a wealth of rigorous evidence on multiple TVET topics across many contexts.
- **Prioritise evidence generation in countries with the highest NEET rates.** A targeted research agenda for underserved, high-NEET countries should be treated as an urgent priority, with development finance playing a central role in building that evidence base.
- **Expand rigorous evaluation in under-researched regions**, such as Central Asia and the Middle East and North Africa.
- **Consider the effects along the causal chain**, notably intermediary outcomes, such as the quality of TVET services, skills development, and educational outcomes.
- **Explore how TVET and skills programmes impact disadvantaged or minority groups.** This research can guide necessary adjustments to these programmes for specific groups within the targeted population.
- **Broaden the lens on what gets studied.** System-level reforms, access interventions, and emerging areas such as green skills and online delivery need rigorous evaluation.
- **Improve standardisation of outcome measurement.** Greater consistency in how skills acquisition, employment and income are measured would make the existing evidence far more comparable, and future synthesis far more powerful.

- **Prioritise systematic reviews in areas where clusters of research exist.** The evidence clusters identified in this EGM provide a strong foundation for synthesis. Commissioning rigorous reviews in these areas, rather than waiting for further primary research to accumulate, should be an immediate focus for funders and researchers alike.

This EGM is the second phase of a three-phase programme. The proposed third phase will draw directly on these findings to assess what works, for whom, and at what cost.

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List of Acronyms

SR	Systematic review
IE	Impact evaluation
TVET	Technical and vocational education and training
NEET	Not in education, employment or training
3ie	International Initiative for Impact Evaluation
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
ILO	International Labour Organization

1. Background

1.1 High youth unemployment and skills shortages persist across L&MICs

The World Bank estimates that 1.2 billion young people across emerging and developing countries will join the workforce in the next decade, but only 400 million jobs are projected to be available (World Bank 2025). Youth unemployment rates across low- and middle-income countries (L&MICs) have stalled in recent years. It is expected that youth unemployment will rise from 27 to 27.9 per cent in low-income countries, and from 20 to 22.8 per cent in lower-middle-income countries between 2023 and 2027. While in upper-middle-income countries, rates have remained above pre-pandemic levels (ILO 2026). However, unemployment rates alone do not capture the full extent of the challenge. The proportion of youth not in employment, education or training (NEET) provides a broader measure of vulnerability (O'Higgins 2025). Globally, one in three young people live in a country off track to meet SDG target 8.6, which aims to reduce youth NEET rates (ILO 2024). These countries are predominantly low-income, with youth NEET rates in lower-middle-income countries reaching 25.8 per cent, more than double those in high-income countries (10.6 per cent; ILO 2026; ILO 2024). The situation is most problematic in the Arab States, at about 33.2 per cent, in North Africa at 31.2 per cent, and in sub-Saharan Africa at 20.1 per cent (ILO 2026; ILO 2024). Gender disparities further compound the challenge: NEET rates for females are estimated to be 22.9 per cent higher than for males in lower-middle-income countries and 16.6 per cent higher in low-income countries (ILO 2026).

A primary driver of high NEET rates is workers' lack of skills and the mismatch between those skills and the economy's current skill demands (World Bank, UNESCO, and ILO 2023). Sectoral trends such as the growth of artificial intelligence and the green energy transition are shaping new skill requirements for the workforce (ILO 2025a). The ILO's Workforce 2030 report projects that the green and digital transitions will significantly reshape labour markets, with employment growth contingent on adequately skilled workforces (ILO 2025b). Similarly, Steer and colleagues (2025) estimate that climate action could generate 375 million new jobs over the next decade, but stress that realising this potential depends on large-scale investments in skills development, particularly in developing countries (Steer et al. 2025). Taken together, these findings underscore the urgency of lifelong learning to keep up with trends in employment sectors (UNESCO 2022).

1.2 Policy responses are insufficient to address the current and future challenges

Countries frequently respond to skills shortages through "learning-to-earning" interventions. These include technical and vocational education and training (TVET) and skills programmes (ILO 2025c). The term "learning-to-earning" describes the transition from education to employment or entrepreneurship and encompasses a range of learning experiences, including periods of unemployment and irregular work (Nicolai, Moizza, and Kosbar 2023). TVET programmes include formal and non-formal vocational education, on-the-job training, apprenticeships, core skills training and entrepreneurship/business training (Yavuz et al. 2025). TVET and skills programmes aim to equip individuals with the technical and core skills required to enter employment. Despite the importance of investing in education, skills development, and transition to earning, investment in TVET programmes continues to face significant resource constraints. Funding is not only limited but, in some contexts, declining.

For example, UK Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) expenditure on vocational training fell by 60 per cent between 2019 and 2022, with a total budget of USD22 million in 2022 (SEEK Development n.d.). At the same time, TVET investments are very low in L&MICs, where unemployment and NEET rates are the highest. Spending on TVET was less than 0.2 per cent of GDP on vocational education compared with 0.46 per cent in high-income countries (World Bank, UNESCO and ILO 2023). The financing gap is expected to widen rapidly as the demand for TVET increases. The number of secondary TVET students is expected to more than quadruple in several Sub-Saharan African countries and even to increase tenfold in Niger and Sudan (World Bank, UNESCO and ILO 2023).

However, investments in TVET programmes do not automatically translate into reductions in unemployment and NEET rates. The effectiveness of TVET programmes has varied widely across contexts and time (World Bank, UNESCO and ILO 2023). Learners also face financial and informational barriers. For example, without foundational skills in reading and writing, TVET programmes are unlikely to equip students with the skills to apply in the labour market (World Bank, UNESCO and ILO 2025). Similarly, teachers may lack pedagogical training to deliver these programmes effectively (ILO 2019).

1.3 Why this EGM is needed?

As funding for TVET consistently falls short of the level required to adequately address the NEET crisis, investments must be evidence-informed to maximise their impact. This is particularly important given that TVET programmes are resource-intensive, costing more than ten times as much per participant as lighter-touch alternatives such as job search support or skills certification (McKenzie 2017). Identifying cost-effective interventions is therefore essential. However, the existing evidence base presents important limitations. Recent research highlights that the evidence remains mixed, with no clear cross-context recommendations on what works (Avis 2024). To date, there has been no systematic mapping of TVET and skills evidence across L&MICs.

In light of these gaps, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) partnered with 3ie to identify and categorise rigorous evidence on learning-to-earning interventions and labour market outcomes. This EGM represents the second phase of a three-phase research programme that began with the publication of a framework and scoping report (Yavuz et al. 2025a). The proposed third phase will build on the findings of this EGM to assess what works, for whom and at what cost.

1.4 What are the objectives of the EGM

This EGM provides stakeholders with an overview of rigorous evidence on TVET and skills interventions, as well as labour market outcomes in L&MICs. The objectives are to:

1. Identify and map impact evaluations and systematic reviews on learning-to-earning interventions in L&MICs.
2. Characterise the populations, settings, study designs and implementation features of the available evidence.
3. Identify primary and synthesis evidence gaps in the sector.

By capturing both evidence clusters and gaps, this EGM can inform the prioritisation of future research and funding and lay the foundations for the proposed third phase, which focuses on synthesising the identified evidence.

2. Scope and conceptual framework

2.1 Framework development and scope

The conceptual framework underpinning this EGM was developed and published as part of a framework and scoping report (Yavuz et al. 2025a) in phase one of our project. Working with the FCDO, subject experts, and an academic advisory group, we developed a framework that captures the full scope of learning-to-earning interventions and labour market outcomes. To ensure relevance across contexts, we engaged with TVET and skills stakeholders through three global roundtables, followed by an online webinar to encourage further feedback. The framework was subsequently refined based on these consultations.

Our framework focuses on supply-side interventions delivered as part of the learning-to-earning transition, the period of moving from education to employment or entrepreneurship. This approach encompasses a wide array of learning experiences and accounts for periods of unemployment and irregular work (Nicolai, Moizza and Kosbar 2023), targeting all individuals, not only youth. The framework covers both TVET and skills programmes as well as supplementary interventions commonly provided to TVET participants. Demand-side interventions, such as active labour market policies, are excluded, though we capture whether supply-side interventions are demand-driven during data extraction (Yavuz et al. 2025a).

2.2 Conceptual framework

Our conceptual framework draws on the three commonly cited barriers preventing TVET interventions from translating into improved labour market outcomes (World Bank, ILO and UNESCO 2023):

1. Challenged TVET learners
2. Unsupported TVET teachers
3. Weak incentives for TVET providers

The framework maps how interventions are aimed at addressing these barriers and traces the causal pathway from programme delivery to employment and income (Figure 1). Below, we provide a high-level overview of interventions expected to address these challenges based on past theoretical and empirical evidence. The effectiveness of these interventions is likely to vary by context. Further details are presented in the protocol (Yavuz et al. 2025b).

2.2.1 Challenged TVET learners

TVET learners face significant barriers and are often vulnerable (ILO 2025c). They may face financial challenges, gender barriers, societal stigma about vocational pathways, a lack of information about opportunities, and a lack of the foundational education knowledge required for vocational training (Pilz 2025; World Bank, ILO and UNESCO 2023; Osman 2014; Obiakor and Newman 2022).

In response to the many barriers TVET learners may face in accessing opportunities effectively, several interventions have been provided. Cash and voucher assistance to tackle financial challenges (Hicks et al. 2011; Camargo et al. 2021), awareness programmes to counter social norms (Del Carpio and Guadalupe 2022), vocational information (Chakravorty et al. 2025), and mentorship and guidance services (Germann et al. 2024).

2.2.2 Unsupported TVET teachers

TVET is uniquely positioned because, in many contexts, providers of training services often lack a background in training or education delivery. As a result, many TVET teachers lack the pedagogical skills needed to deliver quality TVET education (World Bank, ILO and UNESCO 2023). In response to this, teacher training has become a popular form of programming (Blimbo and Pugatch 2021).

2.2.3 Weak incentives for TVET providers and the private sector

TVET is effective only when it equips individuals with the skills they need to enter employment. To do this, TVET programmes must interact closely with the private sector, which, across many contexts, supports and provides TVET services. Private enterprises must provide placements for individuals to gain on-the-job skills while also supporting the development of programmes to ensure the skills provided are suitable for local job markets. However, if they are not incentivised to take part in these activities, TVET learners are put at a disadvantage. Currently, across many contexts, the link between TVET programmes and the private sector is broken (World Bank, ILO and UNESCO 2023).

To improve linkages between the private sector and TVET, different demand-driven interventions have been proposed. Interventions may seek to incentivise private-sector enterprises to participate in TVET programmes through mechanisms such as public-private partnerships (Oviawe 2018; Remington 2018). TVET programmes may also engage the private sector during curriculum development. Interventions such as skills matching help ensure TVET participants are equipped with relevant skills (Dobbo 2018; Dubbey et al. 2019).

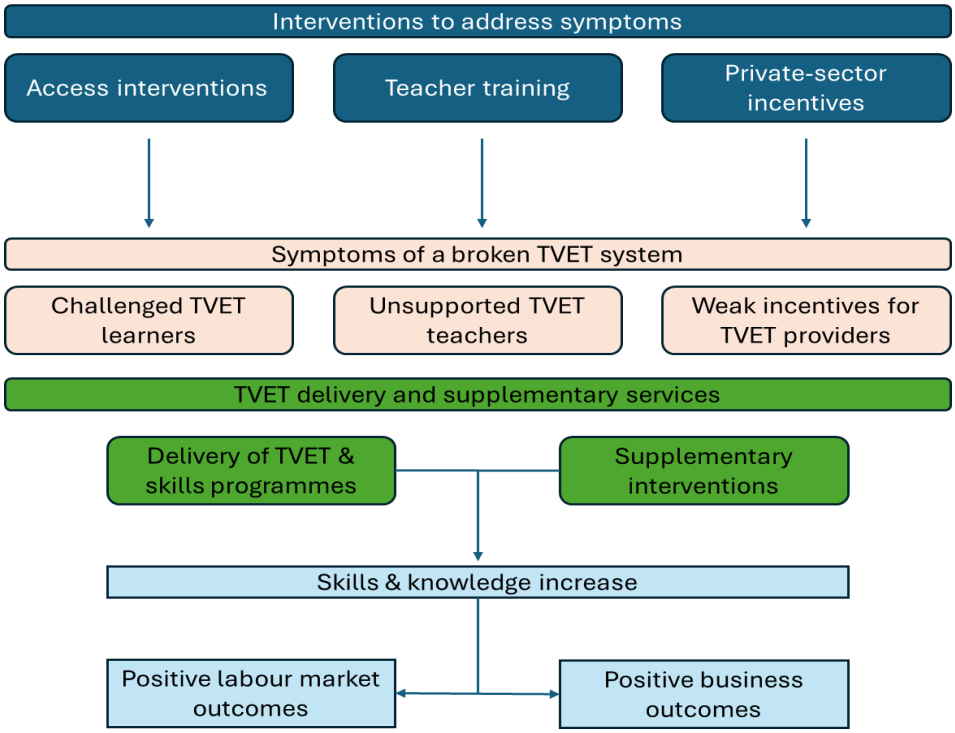
2.2.4 Delivering TVET

Once these barriers have been addressed, TVET itself can be delivered effectively. This includes the provision of vocational education in formal and non-formal settings (Castellano et al. 2012; Croke, Goldstein and Holla 2023), the provision of on-the-job training (Jung and Lee 2016), and the combination of both education and on-the-job training (Das 2021). Core skills may also be the focus of an intervention to provide individuals with the transferable skills needed across different sectors and roles (Shankar, Onyura and Laderman 2015).

2.2.5 Supplementary interventions

Once TVET has been delivered, individuals are then equipped with the skills they need to enter employment. While this rests on the assumption that employment opportunities are available, many individuals still face issues. In light of this, several supplementary interventions can provide job seekers with a final push to employment. Certification programmes can provide individuals with accreditation of both the technical and core skills they possess (Bassi, Nansamba and Rasul 2018), job matching programmes help employers and job seekers identify one another (Ahn, Dizon-Ross and Feigenberg 2025) and job search training can help teach job seekers how to navigate employment platforms (Fazio, Freund and Novella 2025).

Figure 1: Theory of change



Source: Our EGM protocol (Yavuz et al. 2025b).

2.3 Intervention and outcome domains

Drawing on the conceptual framework, the EGM organises evidence along five intervention domains and six outcome domains. Full details of each domain, including the specific intervention and outcome categories, are presented in Appendix A.

2.3.1 Intervention domains

1. **Availability** of TVET programmes: government-led and private sector initiatives focused on the provision of TVET, including formal education development and private sector development.
2. **Access** to TVET: interventions addressing barriers to participation, including financial and in-kind support, and awareness programmes to counter social norms and biases.
3. Building **quality** TVET services: interventions aimed at improving the effectiveness of TVET delivery, including systemic capacity strengthening, educator and trainer delivery strengthening, vocation information and guidance services.
4. TVET **delivery**: programmes equipping individuals with technical and core skills, including formal and non-formal vocational education, on-the-job training, combined education and on-the-job training, and core skills training.
5. **Supplementary** education and training services: interventions that further bridge the gap from learning to earning, including certification programmes, job matching services and job search training.

2.3.2 Outcome domains

The outcome framework captures results at multiple levels along the causal pathway:

1. **Availability** of TVET outcomes: measuring the number of programmes and placements available.

2. **Access** to TVET outcomes: capturing changes in attitudes towards vocational work and participation rates.
3. **Quality** of TVET outcomes: assessing institutional and teacher capacity, course completion and employment in related vocations.
4. **Skills and education** outcomes: measuring the acquisition and application of technical and core skills.
5. **Labour market** outcomes: including wage employment, income and asset ownership.
6. **Business outcomes**: including business profit, job creation and employee performance.

We restricted the scope of this EGM to studies that evaluated supply-side TVET & skills interventions. To keep the scope manageable, we excluded studies evaluating demand-side interventions. We included studies if they reported any outcome measures related to the outcome domains in the framework. However, we only included studies with **skills and education** outcomes if these skills were explicitly related to the labour market (for example, we excluded most studies within health and education fields that assessed in-service professional training aimed at improving their practice). We also excluded studies focusing on the agricultural sector if they did not have business skills outcomes.

3. Our Methods

We followed standardised EGM practices (Snilstveit et al. 2017; Snilstveit et al. 2016). This included developing a systematic literature search alongside an information specialist, conducting screening based on title and abstract, and full text, and extracting data for records deemed eligible for the map. When we captured systematic reviews, we further conducted a critical appraisal. The criteria to include studies for this map are in Table 1. Appendix A provides the full information on the inclusion criteria, and Appendix B lists the EGM advisory group members. A detailed description of the search, screening, data extraction, critical appraisal of SRs and quality assurance is available in the EGM protocol (Yavuz et al. 2025b).

Table 1: Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Population	Low- and middle-income countries (L&MICs) (World Bank classifications). Micro-enterprises and entrepreneurs included.	High-income countries. Large firms or corporations.
Interventions	Supply-side interventions (interventions aiming to increase availability, facilitate access, improve quality and delivery of TVET). Any of those outlined in section 2.3.	Demand-side interventions (e.g., wage subsidies). Multi-component programmes where TVET is not the primary focus. Core skills unrelated to employment.
Comparison	Any comparison condition (alternative intervention or business as usual).	No comparison condition.
Outcomes	Any of those outlined in section 2.3.	Any outcome outside of our framework.
Study designs	Impact evaluations (experimental or quasi-experimental) or systematic reviews.	Observational studies without counterfactuals. Qualitative or narrative reviews.

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Language	No restrictions.	NA.
Publication date	From 1 January 2000 onwards.	Before 2000.
Study status	Completed and ongoing studies.	NA.

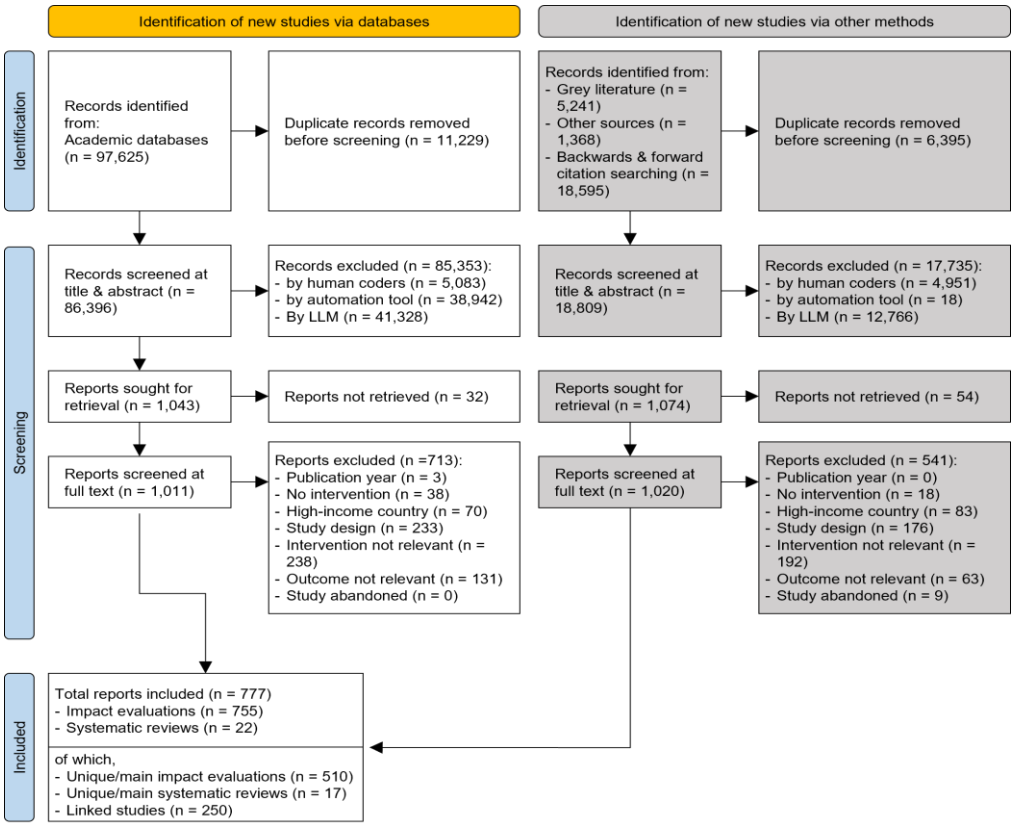
4. What we found

4.1 Search results

We identified an initial total of 104,234 records from seven academic databases and 32 grey literature sites (full details of our search and screening process, are presented in Appendices C and D). We first removed the duplicate records (11,229 records) before we started screening studies. Once we had screened our initial list of potentially eligible studies, we conducted citation tracking to identify an additional 18,595 records. In total, we screened 105,205 records based on their title and abstract (Figure 2). We removed 85,353 records. The team single-screened 10,034 records at title and abstract.

Two independent screeners then reviewed 2,031 records for eligibility at full-text level against our framework. Ultimately, we included a large body of evidence on TVET and skills programmes, comprising 510 impact evaluations, 17 systematic reviews, and 250 linked records (a total of 777 records). Appendix E provides examples of included and excluded papers. Appendix F lists the included studies. Below, we provide an overview of the key trends and takeaways from this evidence base. Our online EGM is available to view at the following link.

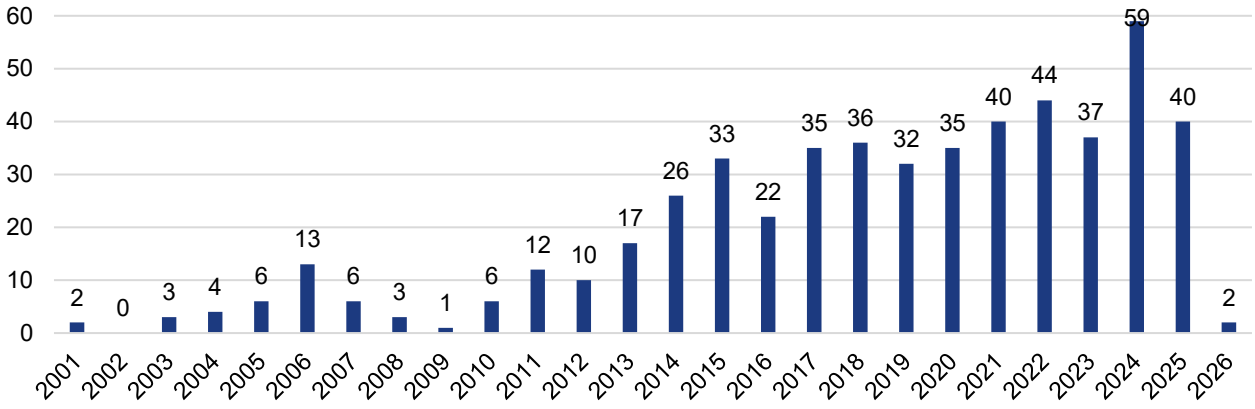
Figure 2: Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) diagram of systematic search and screening



4.2 The evidence has grown steadily over the past two decades

In the early 2000s, the number of IEs annually remained below 20 (Figure 3)[1]. Since 2010, it has continued to grow as it has been promoted as a solution to unemployment challenges.

Figure 3: Number of IEs identified by year, 2000-2026



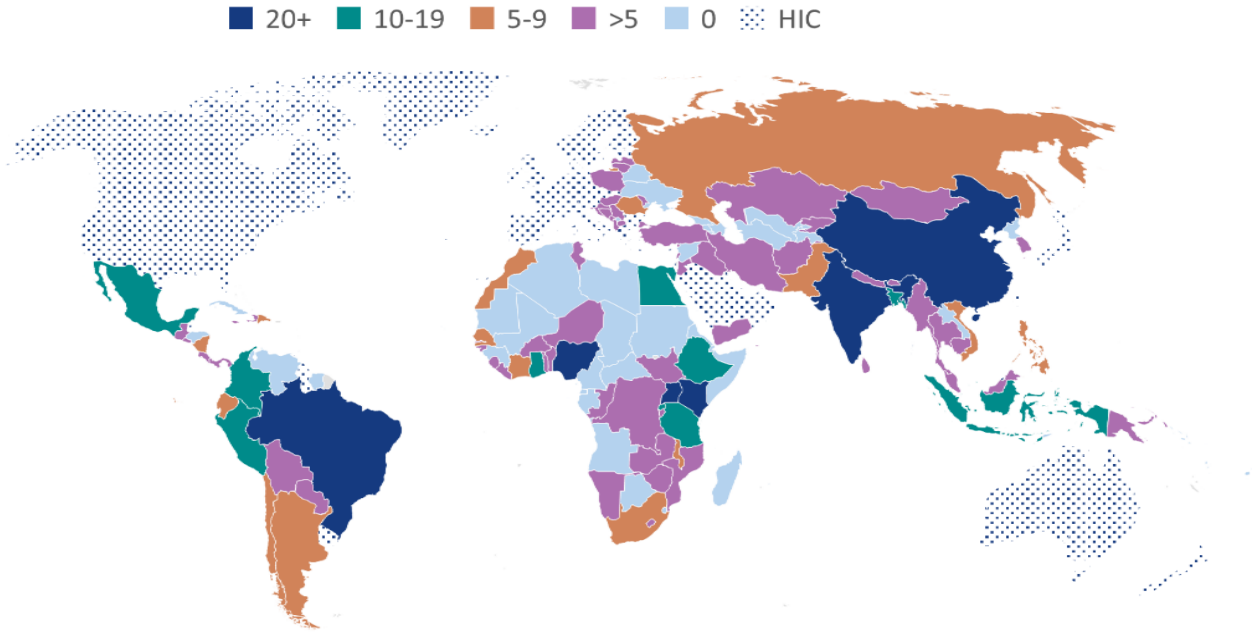
Note: The number of publications in 2025 and 2026 is based on early-year data as the search was conducted between October and November 2025.

4.3 The evidence is concentrated in Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean but remains limited in other regions in areas with high NEET rates

Rigorous evidence on TVET is geographically diverse, spanning the globe. Our map identified IEs in 87 countries across all regions (Figure 4 and Appendix G for a full breakdown of studies by country). Almost 60 per cent of the included IEs took place in Sub-Saharan Africa (n = 179) and Latin America and the Caribbean (n = 111). The remaining IEs focused on interventions in South Asia (n = 89), East Asia and the Pacific (EAP, n = 73), Europe and Central Asia (ECA, n = 36), and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA, n = 32).

[1] The publication year here refers to the earliest publication of a main/linked study group. For instance, if a main study presented in our online map is a journal article published in 2023, but we identified a linked working paper published in 2021, 2021 would be highlighted in this figure. This approach has been used in all instances where publication year data is used to highlight the earliest point at which concepts and trends emerged.

Figure 4: Geographic distribution of IEs



Regions	No.	Two top countries
Sub-Saharan Africa	179	Uganda (n = 28) Nigeria (n = 23)
Latin America and the Caribbean	111	Brazil (n = 23) Colombia (n = 18)
South Asia	89	Bangladesh (n = 17) Pakistan (n = 9)
East Asia and Pacific	73	China (n = 31) Indonesia (n = 15)
Europe and Central Asia	36	Russia (n = 6) Hungary (n = 4)
Middle East and North Africa	32	Egypt (n = 11) Morocco (n = 5)

Note: Because multiple studies were conducted across multiple countries, the total number of countries with evidence exceeds the total number of studies in the map.

While evidence is geographically diverse, it is spread thinly. Of the 87 countries where we identified evidence, we found fewer than five studies in 56 of them. Eighty-two per cent of included IEs took place in 31 countries with five IEs or more. These countries tend to be those with large populations where developmental funding and research have focused, or those that have implemented and run large-scale TVET programmes for long periods. For instance, across Latin America and the Caribbean, there are a large number of studies evaluating the same national programmes: the National Service for Industrial Training in Brazil (n = 23); Jóvenes en Acción in Colombia (n = 18); Projoven in Peru (n = 13); Juventud Y Empleo in the Dominican Republic (n = 8)[2]. In EAP, more than 50 per cent of the evidence was in two countries: China and Indonesia.

Significant evidence gaps remain across L&MICs. We found no evidence across 54 countries, including 21 small-island developing states (SIDS), a group often underrepresented in development research. Evidence was similarly limited across several countries in MENA and ECA. In MENA, seven of the 13 L&MICs contributed at most one IE, whereas in ECA, we identified 17 of the 24 L&MICs with this level of evidence.

[2] The number here represents the total number of IEs from a given country in our EGM. It does not necessarily reflect the number of studies focusing on the explicitly named programme within the country.

More evidence is needed in countries with the highest NEET rates. Evidence on the effectiveness of TVET interventions is most needed in contexts where the share of youths not in education, employment or training (NEET) is highest. Based on where evidence exists, we highlight the following countries as those where geographic gaps exist (Appendix G provides the full breakdown of countries by NEET rates):

- Countries with **NEET rates higher than 30%**, but with **zero studies**: Botswana; Eswatini; Honduras; Kiribati; Kosovo; Mali; Saint Lucia.
- Countries with **NEET rates higher than 30%**, and **fewer than five studies**: Burkina Faso, Jordan, Lesotho, Gambia, Zimbabwe.

For countries with high NEET rates and zero studies, there is no clear geographical gap or cluster. In contrast, for those with high NEET rates and fewer than five studies, we begin to see a trend towards a need for additional evidence in Sub-Saharan Africa (ILO 2026).

4.4 Most of the evidence focuses on TVET delivery interventions

Interventions exist across the entire breadth of our framework. We identified impact evaluations across every intervention category within our framework (Figure 5). While there were variations in the number of studies across categories, these variations highlight the sector's desire to explore all aspects of TVET. Interventions that are most commonly implemented and easiest to evaluate using impact evaluation methods made up the main body of evidence, though more difficult-to-evaluate interventions also appeared on our map.

Within the TVET delivery intervention group,[3] we identified:

- Entrepreneurship or business training (n = 104) was the most commonly evaluated IE. Notably, most IEs evaluated the provision of technical skills through either classroom-based learning (n = 92), on-the-job training (n = 30) or classroom learning combined with on-the-job training (n = 48).
- We also found a significant number of IEs evaluating the provision of core[4], as opposed to technical skills (n = 37). These interventions were often combined with other intervention categories within the framework. Core skills were a common component of technical training, combined with business training (n = 18), classroom education (n = 15) and classroom education and on-the-job training (n = 11).

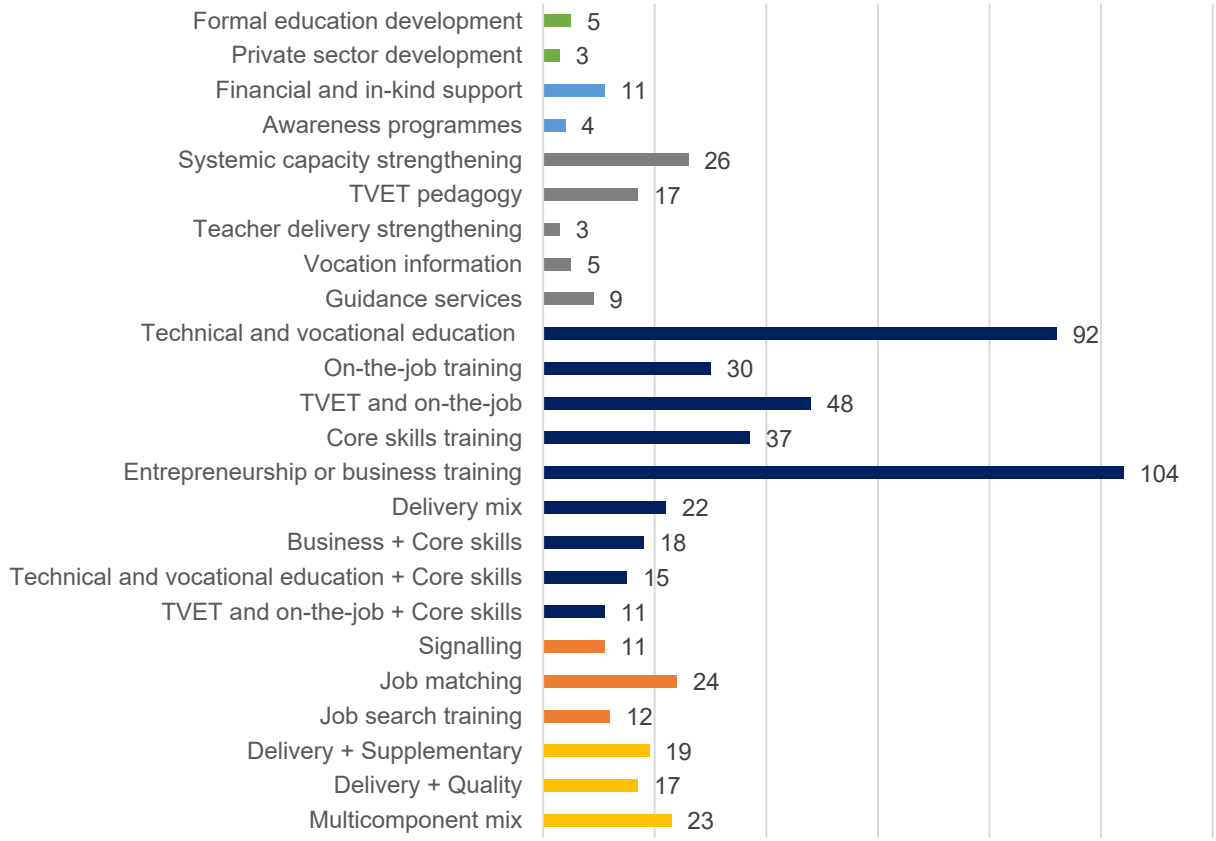
Multicomponent studies were common and primarily combined TVET delivery with additional components. We identified 57 studies evaluating interventions which included multiple components. Aside from those which combined core skills with technical training (described above), we found:

- 19 studies combining the delivery of TVET with supplementary interventions such as job matching. For instance, TVET delivery alongside core skills and certification (Croke, Goldstein and Alaka 2022).

[3] The full list of intervention groups and categories (and their definitions) is provided in Appendix A.
[4] We follow the definition by ILO (2021), which states that core skills for life and work in the 21st century refer to transferable non-technical skills, including social and emotional, cognitive, metacognitive, digital, and green skills, that complement technical skills and support employability, career adaptability, digital participation, and individual and community well-being.

- 17 studies combining an intervention within the TVET delivery group with an intervention within the building quality TVET services intervention group, such as TVET pedagogy, education and trainer delivery strengthening, vocation information, or guidance services interventions. For instance, a core skills programme provided guidance through mentorships (Krishnan & Krutikova 2013).
- Remaining multicomponent studies were a range of mixes of components with no discernible pattern.

Figure 5: Frequency of interventions within IEs



Note:

- Colours in the figure represent the intervention groups: availability of TVET (green), access to TVET (light blue), building quality TVET services (grey), TVET delivery (dark blue), supplementary education and training services (orange), multicomponent interventions across different groups (yellow).
- **Delivery + Supplementary**: IEs which evaluated an intervention combining an intervention within the TVET delivery group and an intervention within the supplementary education and training services group, such as job matching.
- **Delivery + Quality**: IEs which evaluated an intervention combining an intervention within the TVET delivery group and an intervention within the building quality TVET services group.

Fewer studies were identified in other intervention groups. We observed:

- Availability of TVET and access to TVET intervention groups were the least commonly evaluated intervention groups. This includes the creation of TVET in schools through government reforms (Olofinyehun, Adelowo and Egbetokun 2018), as well as financial interventions to support TVET participation through mechanisms such as scholarships (Camargo et al. 2021).

- 47 IEs looked at supplementary intervention group (signalling, job matching and job search training), those commonly implemented as a follow-on to TVET programmes. For instance, a programme which provided job matching between refugees and employers (Sterck 2024).

66 IEs aimed to increase the quality of TVET. These interventions aimed to improve the quality and effectiveness of TVET services (intervention group: building quality TVET services), such as strengthening service delivery capacity and ensuring participants have the resources needed to succeed**.** Due to the regional or national scale of system reforms, it is often difficult to implement an experimental or quasi-experimental study design in an IE. However, within the IEs on *systemic capacity strengthening* intervention group, we identified several examples. For instance, implementing a financial incentive for firms that host apprentices to improve their learning experience (Brown et al. 2024).

The lack of available evidence for specific intervention groups does not necessarily indicate that these interventions have not occurred, but rather that evidence gaps for these groups exist. Although there may be a positive association between the number of TVET and skills programmes and the IEs across intervention groups, this may not always hold. This EGM does not provide information on the prevalence of these intervention groups in the field.

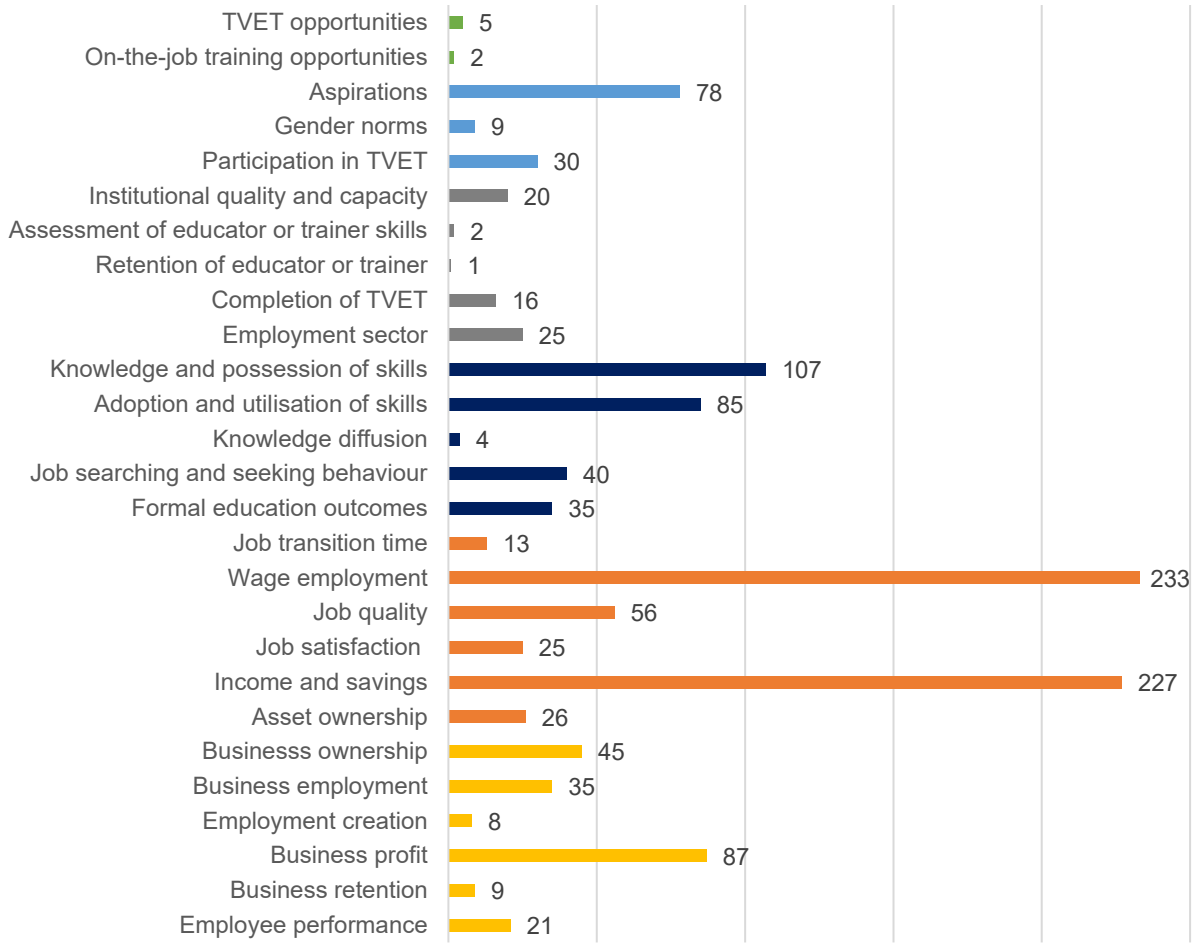
4.5 Evaluated outcomes mostly relate to final outcomes

Labour market and business outcomes are the most extensively evaluated, offering important evidence on the effects of TVET interventions at the end of the causal chain. Within labour market outcomes, *wage employment* (n = 233) and *income and savings* (n = 227) were the most commonly evaluated outcomes (Figure 6). Included IEs also often measured business outcomes, such as *business profit* (n = 87) and *business ownership* (n = 45). These outcomes are fundamental indicators of TVET's overall impact. These outcomes may serve as indirect measures of skills acquired through the TVET intervention, for which direct data collection can be more challenging.

Evidence on intermediary outcomes, such as quality TVET services outcomes and skills and education outcomes, was more limited. Only 16 IEs assessed outcomes linked to TVET completion and 25 studies examined whether the TVET intervention resulted in employment. Although we found 107 IEs with *knowledge and possession of skills* outcomes, the number of IEs reporting on other skills and education outcomes was significantly lower. Although we found clusters of evidence on indirect measures of labour and business outcomes, the scarcity of evidence on these outcomes represents an evidence gap, as it limits the extent to which the existing literature can inform adjustments to TVET intervention design and implementation aimed at maximising programme completion and skill acquisition.

The least assessed outcome groups are access to TVET (n = 113) and availability of TVET (n = 7). For instance, a mentoring programme that paired high school students with volunteer mentors through one-on-one meetings examined changes in aspirations and gender-related attitudes, including bias against female workers and blue-collar jobs (Hayashi et al. 2024). Also, availability outcomes related to the availability of TVET opportunities for potential participants, for instance, a firm-level apprenticeship quota reform intervention was assessed by the number of apprentices and apprenticeship opportunities (e.g., Caicedo, Espinosa and Seibold 2019).

Figure 6: Frequency of outcomes within IEs



Note: Colours in the figure represent the outcome groups: availability of TVET (green), access to TVET (light blue), quality TVET services (grey), skills and education outcomes (dark blue), labour market outcomes (orange), business outcomes (yellow).

4.6 Studies provided limited information on TVET programme implementation

When reported, TVET programmes were mainly implemented as part of wider programmes that extended beyond TVET. TVET was therefore often considered as a subset of a development intervention. This includes wider youth employment or social protection programmes (n = 20), such as country-wide cash transfers (e.g., Burchi & Strupat 2018), or financial access interventions (n = 16), mainly microfinance programmes (e.g., Garcia et al. 2022). Other interventions were implemented as part of wider government education policies (n = 8; e.g., Boahen et al. 2021) or infrastructure projects (n = 1; e.g., Allemand et al. 2023).

Studies did not distinguish between vocations and mainly evaluated large-scale, general training programmes. For the studies where technical training was provided, only a few provided details on the specific vocations which were being taught, while 48.5 per cent of studies evaluated interventions focused on multiple vocational trainings (Table 2). This extended to studies focusing on business training, where general business skills were provided; only 16 studies solely focused on financial skills for businesses (e.g., Buvinic et al. 2022).

Across the 424 studies that report this information, the most commonly evaluated vocations were industry, trade, and services (n = 50), including the banking industry (e.g., Gupta et al. 2023) and the garment industry (e.g., Adhvaryu et al., 2023). Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) was the focus in 29 studies, mainly examining women's involvement in this sector (e.g., Del Carpio & Guadeloupe 2022). Fewer studies focused on other sectors such as: agriculture, fishing and forestry (n = 21)[5]; education (n = 6); health (n = 4), hospitality (n = 4), energy and extractives (n = 2) and one study that focused on painting as an income-generating activity.,

Table 2: Content of vocational trainings reported by included impact evaluations

Content of vocational training	IEs	
	No.	Percent
Multiple, or non-descript	210	48.50
General business training	90	20.79
Industry, trade and services	50	11.55
STEM	29	6.70
Agriculture, Fishing and Forestry	21	4.85
Business training - Financial	16	3.70
Education for vocational education teachers/trainers	6	1.39
Health	4	0.92
Hospitality	4	0.92
Energy and extractives	2	0.46
Other	1	0.23

Note: A study may report multiple types of vocational training.

Social and emotional, and cognitive and metacognitive skills made up the majority of studies which evaluated core skill training.[6] Within 128 studies, cognitive and metacognitive skills identified in 70 studies included basic mathematics and literacy, as well as language training (e.g., Sun et al. 2023). Social and emotional skills were identified in 61 studies and focused on areas such as communication and teamwork (e.g., Karimi et al. 2024). For 38 IEs, core skills were not defined, but their provision was explicitly mentioned, while 9 IEs provided basic digital skills (e.g., Desai et al. 2025) and 1 provided green skills (Calero et al. 2014).

Emerging areas of focus for the sector are not yet reflected in the evidence base. Taking green skills as an example, an area of increasing priority to the sector (Steer et al. 2025), we found few studies which explicitly focused on this topic, the most recent of which was published in 2021. Only one study explicitly mentioned evaluating a programme which included green skills as a core skill (Calero et al. 2014), while two provided entrepreneurship training on the sale of solar panels (Bensch et al. 2021) and improved cookstoves (Shankar et al. 2015). Evidence may be hidden where it is not explicitly reported in a paper, such as green skills among many general core skills, or in technical training for vocations that will be key to the green transition. This also applies to AI, where we identified one study (Otis et al. 2025) that used generative AI to support entrepreneurship training.

[5] We included studies focusing on the agricultural sector only if they measured business skills outcomes.
[6] We follow the definitions of skills as provided in ILO (2021).

When reported, the private sector was primarily involved in delivering training and skills matching. Private sector organisations were explicitly mentioned as having delivered training in 67 studies (e.g., Alzúa et al. 2016), while in 43 studies, there was an explicit mention of skills matching, attempts to match skills and curricula to needs in local and regional job markets (e.g., Brudevold-Newman & Ubfal 2024). In one study, training courses were provided only after an employer had explicitly requested the course be developed to meet local labour needs (O'Connell et al. 2017). Just three studies explicitly mentioned the creation of public-private partnerships (e.g., Tsambou et al. 2024).

4.7 Short-term face-to-face learning is the dominant delivery approach, but online learning is increasingly favoured

The vast majority of studies delivered training face-to-face (n = 382). Despite this, online training delivery may be a more flexible and accessible option for many TVET participants who are unable to access traditional face-to-face programmes, as well as the use of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) to teach learners at their own pace (e.g., Paredes & Sevilla 2024). This method of delivery has become increasingly popular, with all 48 IEs focusing on online or hybrid delivery published since 2016. Of these, 41 have been published since 2020, indicating significant growth since the onset of the COVID pandemic.

Evaluations primarily focused on short-term programmes, rarely evaluating those longer than 12 months (n = 41). While many studies did not explicitly mention the length of the training programmes (n = 174), most focused on programmes less than six months in length (n = 179). These studies mainly focused on training in either core skills (e.g., Estrellado et al. 2023) or entrepreneurship or business training (e.g., Bruhn & Zia 2013). Twenty-three studies reported on courses lasting five days or less. For example, Bardasi et al. (2021) evaluated a 5-day business support programme in Tanzania. In contrast, training programmes lasting 12 months or longer primarily delivered technical training (e.g., Bahl et al. 2022).

Intervention intensity is rarely reported within studies. Intervention intensity refers to the number of hours a participant participated in training each week. This information was available in 12% of IEs. When this information was available, the majority of studies reported participation of 0–9 hours per week. This aligns with the lack of studies explicitly reporting evaluations of long-term training programmes, whereas shorter programmes lasted only a couple of days per week.

4.8 Fewer than half of the included IEs explicitly reported that an intervention targeted a vulnerable population

Among these studies, youth, women and individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds are the primary targets of TVET interventions. These populations are most often excluded from the labour markets. Few programmes target groups such as the rural poor (21 studies), persons with disabilities (7 studies), and refugee populations (6 studies).

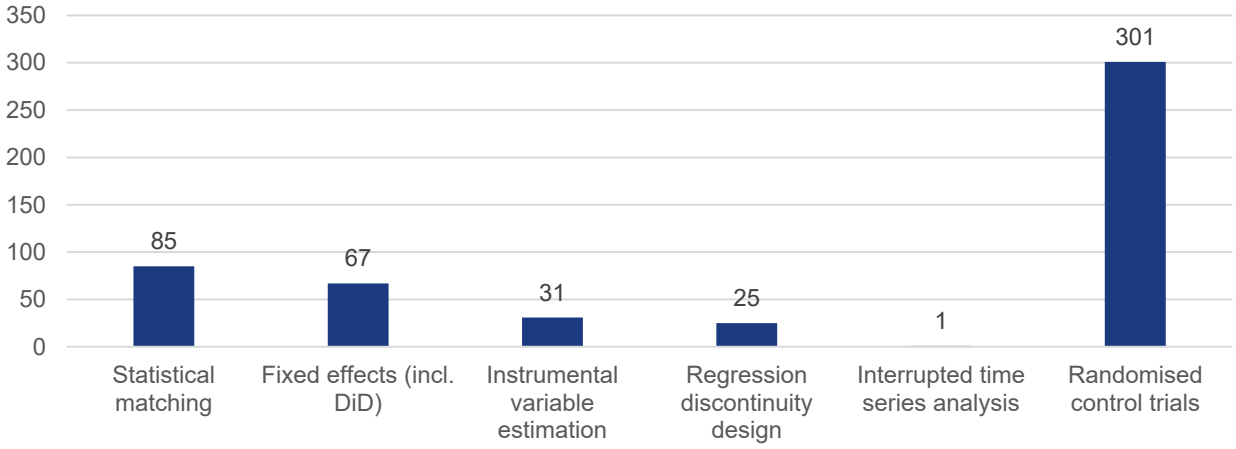
Only 30% of IEs explicitly reported the age of the participants targeted by interventions (n = 155). When this was reported, interventions tended to target populations across age ranges, for instance, those between 20 and 30. Interventions were most commonly assessed among those aged 18-29. Only one study solely targeted those 40 and above (Yanar et al. 2009).

4.9 Impact evaluations were primarily experimental, while statistical matching was the most common quasi-experimental approach

Of our 510 IEs, 60% were experimental (n = 301) and 40% were quasi-experimental (n = 209). When quasi-experimental approaches were used, statistical matching was the most common (Figure 7), followed by fixed effects (including difference-in-differences), instrumental variables, regression discontinuity design and interrupted time series analysis.

The EGM also includes several examples of IEs employing less conventional identification strategies to estimate the effects of TVET interventions. For instance, the use of a regression discontinuity design to explore the impact of a new government regulation requiring firms over a certain size to host apprentices (Arango et al. 2025) and the proximity to newly created TVET schools as an instrument to explore the impact of the expansion of TVET opportunities (Fukunishi & Machikita 2017).

Figure 7: Distribution of IEs across QED designs



Cost analysis is being embedded within TVET impact evaluations. Of the 510 IEs included in our map, 29 included a formal cost analysis. While not a large number on its own, this accounts only for studies that conducted a cost-benefit or cost-effectiveness analysis; we have not included studies that provide more informal cost information, such as the overall intervention budget or cost per participant. These 29 studies provide an encouraging foundation and highlight that cost analysis is already embedded in impact evaluations in this sector.

4.10 The absence of recent high-confidence SRs on TVET points to the need for rigorous syntheses focusing on the evidence clusters

The TVET evidence base has not yet been adequately synthesised. Our EGM identified 17 eligible systematic reviews published between 2013 and 2025, but most were assessed as low confidence against international standards (the critical appraisal tool is presented in Appendix H). Of the 17 SRs, one was high-confidence, three were medium-confidence, and 13 were low-confidence. Only one high and medium-confidence SR was published within the last six years (since 2020) (Lwamba et al. 2021). It has limited applicability to TVET, as its main focus was interventions to support women's empowerment in fragile and conflict-affected settings (FCAS). The other medium-confidence SRs most likely present outdated and less relevant findings for the sector in 2026.

Given the rapid growth of IEs in recent years, there is substantial opportunity for new evidence synthesis to support policy and programme decision-making in TVET. The evidence base has expanded substantially, with 281 IEs published since 2018. However, this growth has not been matched by corresponding high-quality evidence synthesis. The absence of recent high/medium confidence SRs on these topics represents a major synthesis gap.

The following evidence clusters appear well suited for future systematic reviews:

1. The impact of *technical and vocational education* on *wage employment* (n = 56) and *income and savings* (n = 47).
2. The impact of *entrepreneurship or business training* on the *adoption and utilisation of skills* (n = 48), *business profit* (n = 46), *income and savings* (n = 370, the *knowledge and possession of skills* (n = 26) and *business ownership* (n = 23).
3. The impact of *technical and vocational education and on-the-job training* on *wage employment* (n = 36) and *income and savings* (n = 33).

Beyond estimating overall intervention effects, future syntheses could help answer questions about programme design and implementation. Many studies on TVET delivery were combined with other aspects of our framework and grouped into multicomponent categories. These studies may allow exploring the differential impact of delivering TVET with or without other components aimed at supporting TVET systems and their effectiveness.

5. Conclusions

This EGM is the most comprehensive map of rigorous TVET and skills evidence in L&MICs to date. With 510 impact evaluations and 17 systematic reviews, this EGM provides a wealth of rigorous evidence on multiple TVET topics that can inform programme design and research across many contexts. The EGM was based on a framework that captured the full scope of supply-side learning-to-earning interventions and labour market outcomes.

This literature has expanded significantly over the last decade, suggesting increased research interest in TVET. Clusters of evidence have emerged in **Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and East Asia and the Pacific region**, while the evidence is thinner in **Central Asia and in the Middle East and North Africa**. The geographic distribution was not based on need, as countries with high NEET rates have often had few studies conducted.

Many studies have examined the delivery of TVET and skills, as well as their impact on labour market outcomes. However, evidence on intermediate outcomes such as TVET service quality, skills development, and educational outcomes is limited. This gap hampers the ability of existing research to inform changes in TVET programme design and implementation aimed at improving completion rates and skill acquisition.

Delivery of TVET & skills interventions was often combined with additional components, such as integrating TVET with job matching or a component dedicated to improving the quality of TVET. Across several intervention groups, we identified evidence gaps. Interventions linked to availability and access are under-researched. Additionally, we identified a small number of studies that assess the impact of system-strengthening interventions and initiatives in emerging TVET fields such as green skills and AI.

The evidence base also has notable reporting gaps across various settings and intervention features. Few studies offer clear, detailed descriptions of the programmes evaluated, making it difficult to determine their specific characteristics. While short-term face-to-face sessions remain the primary mode of delivery, online learning is becoming more popular. Less than half of the included IEs explicitly indicate that an intervention focused on a vulnerable group. Among these, youth, women, and people from lower socio-economic backgrounds are the main targets of TVET interventions. Only a few reported on private-sector engagement within the evaluated programmes.

There are synthesis gaps across our entire framework. In particular, there are large bodies of evidence on TVET delivery, focusing on skills and labour market outcomes, which may be suitable for synthesis. Existing systematic reviews are overwhelmingly of low-confidence and those that are not are either outdated or have a limited scope. The quality of evidence from systematic reviews is low. Thirteen of 17 SRs were appraised as low confidence, and those appraised as high or medium confidence were extremely limited in scope. The lack of recent high-confidence systematic reviews on TVET evidence highlights the need for thorough syntheses. These should focus on the main evidence clusters identified in the EGM, including the impacts of technical and vocational education, on-the-job training, skills development, systemic capacity building, career guidance, and job search training. In the proposed third phase, we will most likely also examine how private-sector involvement affected the magnitude and distribution of the effects of TVET and skills programmes.

While we have ensured our EGM meets the international standards and have conducted a rigorous search and screening process, we acknowledge the following limitations (Appendix I provides further details on deviations from our protocol). We had originally planned to include details of whether the training interventions took place as part of the formal education system or outside of it. After reviewing how this was reported in the studies, we have decided to omit this information from our EGM. Too few studies provided the level of detail needed to report this information accurately. Instead, the team plans to extract this during the proposed third phase of our work, when we will have further information on the setup of interventions from documents that are not impact evaluations.

5.1 Implications for policy

Contrary to general belief, there is substantial evidence on TVET & skills, and it should be used. While the lack of high- and medium-confidence reviews limits confidence in the use of synthesis evidence to inform policy, the large number of impact evaluations can help support policy in the following ways:

1. **Inform activity and project design**: Our EGM provides many examples of innovative ways in which impact evaluations can be used to measure challenging policies and programmes, in this case, those related to systemic changes.
2. **Identify relevant indicators to measure**: Exploring the specific outcomes used within studies can highlight which outcomes and indicators are used to measure various steps along different theories of change. Standardising the use of indicators for outcomes across policies and evaluations will help support future synthesis efforts by making studies more comparable.
3. **Support proposal development and scoping**: The EGM provides immediate access to topics on several TVET interventions. These can be used to support the

development and screening of proposals, ensuring that programmes are built on rigorous evidence and do not duplicate existing work.

5.2 Implications for future research

Based on our results, we recommend the following implications for future research:

1. **Further research is needed in contexts of high NEET rates and few studies**, specifically the following countries: Botswana; Burkina Faso; Eswatini; Gambia; Honduras; Jordan; Kiribati; Kosovo; Lesotho; Mali; Saint Lucia; Zimbabwe.
2. **Future IEs should prioritise research in regions with limited or no existing evaluations**, such as Central Asia and the Middle East and North Africa.
3. **Emerging areas such as green skills, life-long learning and the online delivery of TVET need additional research**. Where programmes evaluated include these aspects, they should be explicitly mentioned within studies.
4. **Quasi-experimental research designs should continue to be used to explore the effectiveness of difficult-to-evaluate interventions**, such as system reforms and the introduction of TVET programmes through government decrees. Our map highlights many examples of how these methods have been used and should be used as a tool for understanding how to evaluate these types of interventions.
5. **Further analysis of the effects of TVET & skills programmes on disadvantaged or minority groups is essential.** This research will inform necessary programme adjustments for specific groups within the targeted population. Only a few included studies provided such analyses.
6. **More direct evidence on skills assessment would provide a clearer idea of programme effectiveness**. Most of the evidence evaluated labour market outcomes, which could be considered as proxies for skills assessment or skills acquisition. To understand the sustainability and transferability of skills gains from TVET & skills programmes, greater attention to skills verification or skills assessment as outcome measures is needed.
7. **Future synthesis work should prioritise utilising international standards** to explore the impact of TVET & skills on labour market outcomes. Currently, despite clusters of evidence for specific interventions and outcome groups, there is a lack of high-confidence synthesis across the entire framework.
8. **Synthesis work should include subgroup analysis based on features of the intervention**. Current SRs have not attempted to explore the differential impacts of TVET based on features such as whether a government or a private agency implemented the intervention, whether skills matching occurred within a project setup, or the vocational topic of a programme. A high-level analysis of the impact of TVET on labour market outcomes, while interesting, will fail to address how programming is currently being implemented in the sector.

Online appendix

Online appendix A: Inclusion criteria
https://3ieimpact.org/sites/default/files/2026-06/EGM37-Labour-market-learning-to-earning-TVET-Online-appendix-A.pdf

Online appendix B: EGM advisory group
https://3ieimpact.org/sites/default/files/2026-06/EGM37-Labour-market-learning-to-earning-TVET-Online-appendix-B.pdf

Online appendix C: Search strategy
https://3ieimpact.org/sites/default/files/2026-06/EGM37-Labour-market-learning-to-earning-TVET-Online-appendix-C.pdf

Online appendix D: Screening and data extraction procedure
https://3ieimpact.org/sites/default/files/2026-06/EGM37-Labour-market-learning-to-earning-TVET-Online-appendix-D.pdf

Online appendix E: Examples of included and excluded papers
https://3ieimpact.org/sites/default/files/2026-06/EGM37-Labour-market-learning-to-earning-TVET-Online-appendix-E.pdf

Online appendix F: List of included studies
https://3ieimpact.org/sites/default/files/2026-06/EGM37-Labour-market-learning-to-earning-TVET-Online-appendix-F.pdf

Online appendix G: Country data
https://3ieimpact.org/sites/default/files/2026-06/EGM37-Labour-market-learning-to-earning-TVET-Online-appendix-G.pdf

Online appendix H: Data extraction and critical appraisal tools
https://3ieimpact.org/sites/default/files/2026-06/EGM37-Labour-market-learning-to-earning-TVET-Online-appendix-H.pdf

Online appendix I: Changes with our protocol
https://3ieimpact.org/sites/default/files/2026-06/EGM37-Labour-market-learning-to-earning-TVET-Online-appendix-I.pdf

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