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Cuthbert Tukundane[a]* and Jacques Zeelen[b]

[a]*Institute of Ethics and Development Studies, Uganda Martyrs University, PO Box 5498, Kampala, Uganda;* [b]*Faculty of Behavioural and Social Sciences, University of Groningen, Grote Rozenstraat 38, 9712 TJ Groningen, The Netherlands*

Although vocational education and training is considered to be a good option for improving livelihood opportunities for marginalised youth in developing countries, it often suffers from an image problem. This situation affects the quality of entrants, instruction and skills acquisition in training programmes. In this article, the researchers report on results and experiences from a participatory action research (PAR) project initiated to work towards the improvement of vocational education and skills training for early school-leavers. The research project was conducted in Mbarara district, south-western Uganda. The results show that the project created an awareness and change of attitude on the part of participants towards vocational education and training. It also established links between training institutions and employers; that is, between the skills supply and demand sides. Based on experiences and reflections from this project, the researchers argue that PAR can be a productive approach for facilitating skills development in vocational education and training.

Keywords: vocational education and training; participatory action research; marginalised youth; early school-leavers; skills development; Uganda

Introduction

Most developing countries are currently focusing on skills development as a strategy for expanding young people's livelihood opportunities, but also for national development (Africa Progress Report, 2012; UNESCO, 2012b). It is envisaged that skilled youth will have greater prospects in the labour market and chances for self-employment, as well as to tap into their creative and innovative potential. Vocational education and training (VET) is expected to play a big role in skilling youth (Jjuuko, 2012; The World Bank, 2006). However, in most of these countries, VET has a poor image and is often considered a 'poor cousin' of mainstream education (Tukundane, Minnaert, Zeelen, & Kanyandago, 2015; UNESCO – Dakar Office, 2012). As a result VET is seen by most young people as a preserve for 'academic misfits' and only to be chosen as a last resort. Consequently, VET is often populated by the disadvantaged and marginalised youth. This situation adversely affects the potential of VET and skills development, and has to change (McGrath, 2012).

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*Corresponding author. Email: tukundane2006@gmail.com

Uganda is one of the developing countries that are promoting skills development through VET. In the last 10 years, the country has been experiencing an expeditious growth in the demand for skills development and in particular vocational skills development. The demand for skills comes against the backdrop of high youth unemployment and enormous numbers of early school-leavers (Blaak, Zeelen, & Openjuru, 2013; Zeelen, Van der Linden, Nampota, & Ngabirano, 2010) who leave school without the required skills for the labour market and for taking advantage of other livelihood opportunities (Openjuru, 2010; Tukundane, Zeelen, Minnaert, & Kanyandago, 2014). Although the high youth unemployment can be partly attributed to slow job creation and growth in the economy, to a large extent it has been attributed to the inadequate skills possessed by the 'product' of the Ugandan education system. The graduates of the system in most cases lack practical or hands-on skills that would encourage self-employment and job creation in the country's largely informal sector (where economic activities are not officially regulated or monitored by government) (Ministry of Education & Sports [MoES], 2011; National Planning Authority [NPA], 2010). Due to the lack of necessary skills for their integration into the labour market, early school-leavers are especially disadvantaged and marginalised when it comes to finding and retaining work (Adams, 2007) or creating work for themselves. Not only does early school-leaving affect work prospects, it also dents confidence and sense of self-worth (Tukundane et al., 2014). Consequently, VET is regularly used as a strategy for equipping the youth with required skills, not only for combating unemployment (Oketch, 2007; The World Bank, 2008), but also for training others for self-employment (Atchoarena & Delluc, 2002).

Accordingly, Uganda is slowly responding to the demand for skills development and current efforts aimed at addressing the skills insufficiency problem are being guided by the Business, Technical, and Vocational Education and Training (BTVET) Act of 2008 (Ministry of Education & Sports [MoES], 2008) and the *Skilling Uganda* programme enshrined in the BTVET Strategic Plan 2011–2020 (MoES, 2011). During this timeframe, the main goal of BTVET is to develop the skills and competences necessary for young people to find gainful employment in the labour market. In general, VET is envisaged to equip young people with practical skills for employment and for taking advantage of livelihood opportunities. This should enable them not only to contribute to their personal advancement but also to the development of their country. However, as in many other developing countries, VET in Uganda suffers from an image problem, often being seen as an option for youth who have not succeeded in mainstream education. Consequently, in spite of good government policy, VET continues to be left mainly for those who either do not succeed in mainstream academic education or who cannot afford it (Openjuru, 2010). Early school-leavers form the largest part of this group (Jjuuko, 2012). The image problem which is deeply engrained in the mindset of many Ugandans has had a bearing on the resources allocated to VET programmes and their graduates. Though policies are in place and rhetoric points in the right direction, there have not been serious efforts towards changing the poor image of VET. Programmes are inadequately funded, physical infrastructure is wanting, and most teachers are inadequately trained. The curriculum is reminiscent of the practices in the theory-based, teacher-centred and examination-oriented mainstream academic education (Jjuuko, 2012; Openjuru, 2010; Rwendeire, 2012). The training has largely remained supply-driven and concentrated on 'traditional' courses such as carpentry and joinery, brick-laying and concrete practice, tailoring, and electrical installation and repairs.

As a result, the National Planning Authority expressed concern that there is a 'mismatch between training content and the actual skills required in the labour market' because

> large numbers of graduates of the formal skills development system continued to be unemployed despite the fact that there is a shortage of skilled workers in the economy [and] this is attributed to inadequate participation by employers in curriculum design and its delivery. (NPA, 2010, p. 242)

Other research has also shown that VET in Uganda has little relevance to the labour market and livelihood opportunities for youth (Openjuru, 2010; Zeelen et al., 2010). This literature indicates a mismatch between policy formulation and policy implementation. To rectify this problem, Adams (2007) and the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES, 2011) advise that VET outcomes can be greatly improved by involving employers in the design and delivery of training, thus making the 'training supply more flexible and demand-driven' (MoES, 2011, p. ix). This view was strongly echoed by UNESCO (2012a):

> The integration of youth into social and economic life depends upon analysing both the supply and demand for skills and involving relevant stakeholders, including youth, in decision-making processes. Attention to early skills needs assessment and forecasts are important for TVET to become more responsive to enterprises' and individuals' needs. This requires closer partnerships among public, private and civil society organisations to promote relevant programmes and initiatives for youth employment (p. 21).

The project and its research questions

In light of the foregoing discussion, a participatory action research (PAR) project was initiated in 2009 in Mbarara, south-western Uganda with the goal of improving VET skills for marginalised youth. In this project the researchers collaborated with VET practitioners, employers, current and former VET graduates and other key stakeholders from the community (early school-leavers, parents, educationists, policymakers, representatives from non-governmental organisations [NGOs] and local community leaders) to research and act together to improve vocational skills training for early school-leavers. The overarching research question in this project was: How can VET skills for marginalised youth be improved? Specifically, the project sought to answer two questions: (1) How can VET's image be improved? and (2) How can actionable knowledge be generated and used to improve skills training programmes for marginalised youth? 'Actionable knowledge' is defined as 'knowledge that can be applied to create effective actions that produce desired results' (Narducci, 2002, p. 1). In this project, actionable knowledge was to be generated through encouragement of partnerships and discussions between relevant stakeholders in VET. Practitioners would also be helped to reflect on their practice and work towards its improvement. In this article, the authors present experiences and reflections from the project. They argue that PAR can be a productive approach for changing the image of VET and for developing innovative practices in programmes for marginalised youth.

Methodology

The methodology adopted for this research project was participatory action research (PAR). This methodology combines theory, action and participation to initiate and promote transformation at the grassroots level where there are unresolved social,

economic or political problems (Fals-Borda, 1987). Whereas people may define PAR differently, McIntyre (2008) has outlined the tenets that underlie the majority of PAR projects as:

> (a) a collective commitment to investigate an issue or problem, (b) a desire to engage in self- and collective-reflection to gain clarity about the issue under investigation, (c) a joint decision to engage in individual and/or collective action that leads to a useful solution that benefits the people involved, and (d) the building of alliances between researchers and participants in the planning, implementation, and dissemination of the research process (p. 1).

Thus, PAR helps to empower local communities by enabling them to act to change their lived situations (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). It also gives the marginalised and socially excluded a voice by involving them in the production of knowledge and use of that knowledge. This is done by turning the people involved in the study into researchers themselves (Moorgawa, 2006) because people learn best, and are more willing to apply what they have learnt, when they do it themselves. Accordingly, PAR was chosen for this project in order to engage in research and actions that would empower individuals and the community to change the image of and practices in vocational skills training programmes for marginalised youth.

Mueller, Tilleczek, Rummens, and Boydell (2008, p. 69) stress that research in the field of early school-leaving 'should be guided by the principle and ultimate goal of improving the chances and opportunities of children and youth to be successful and to develop their full potential'. Tilleczek, Ferguson, Edney, Rummens, and Boydell (2008, p. 202) also emphasise that effective intervention programmes for early school-leavers 'cultivate meaningful bonds between students and teachers, [and other stakeholders, and] connect students to an attainable future through relevant curriculum and training'. In line with such recommendations, PAR enabled the researchers to collaborate with early school-leavers, VET practitioners, employers, parents, educationists and policymakers in a process where they could collectively clarify the issues at hand and 'formulate new ways of envisioning [the] situations' (Stringer, 2007, p. 204). Not only does PAR assist in the formulation of solutions, it also helps to 'avoid mistakes and to develop programmes that take into account the specific situation and conditions which will influence the outcome of programmes' (De Koning & Martin, 1996, p. 4). Accordingly, the use of PAR was appropriate in working towards formulating new ways of envisaging VET and fostering the skills training programmes to become more responsive to the needs of individual learners, the labour market and the development needs of the country.

Within this PAR project, the researchers preferred to adopt a practice-based evidence approach. Practice-based evidence refers to information collected from service providers and individual client histories to identify effective interventions to improve a programme or practice (Evans, Connell, Barkham, Marshall, & Mellor-Clark, 2003). Accordingly, in this project knowledge and experiences were collected from VET practitioners, students, former students and employers. This was to ascertain what works, why and how it works in the labour market. The information was to be used to improve practice in VET training programmes. Concurrently, the practitioners contributed to the process by sharing their experiences and reflections on their practice. Practice-based evidence is 'premised on the assumption that there is a bi-directional relationship between research and practice' (Kratochwill et al., 2011, p. 6) and provides valuable information on contextual and cultural issues that can greatly improve practice. As Mueller et al. (2008, p. 39) argue, a combination of research evidence, 'professional experience and

client-reported and observed evidence' is crucial in getting the best outcomes in intervention programmes for early school-leavers.

The project was undertaken in three cycles of action. This was to allow for progress towards a greater understanding of practices in vocational education and training and to work towards the desired improvements. The cycles are summarised in Table 1 and described in detail in the next section. It should be noted that the cycles were not as rigid and sequential as they appear in Table 1, as some actions overlapped between the different cycles.

The project processes

This section provides details of the project and how the research was conducted. Most PAR processes are initiated by communities or groups of people concerned about particular problems or situations that they want to change or improve, but in cases where the researchers are from the university (as in this study), it is usually the researchers who 'can approach a particular group inviting them to explore a particular issue' together (McIntyre, 2008, p. 8). The project was inspired by a passion for research that generates results that are useful to the community and a desire to see the lives of marginalised youth improved. The project was implemented within a period of four years; from July 2009 to July 2013. Throughout the project, the researchers endeavoured to uphold ethical principles of informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality, respect for participants' points of view, doing no harm and accountability. Concerning the above ethical principles, the participants willingly took part in the project after prior explanation of the purpose of the study. Their views were respected and kept in confidence, especially those that were expressed during in-depth interviews. With regard to accountability, members of the feedback committee had access to all the documents and minutes of the project whenever necessary. Through the newsletter, text messages and workshops, all participants were kept informed and involved in discussions about the activities and progress of the project. Care was taken to ensure that language used in the research project was understood by all participants.

Table 1.   Action cycles in the project.

Cycle 1			
Preparation and establishing communicative space	*Planning*	-	Informal meetings and interviews
		-	1st Workshop (December 2009): discussion of issues surrounding early school-leaving and vocational education and training
	Action	-	Inventory of issues
		-	Composition of a feedback committee
		-	Inclusion of other relevant key stakeholders
		-	Newsletter and continued communication through text messages
		-	Contacting vocational training institutes
	Reflection	-	Feedback meetings
		-	Report on activities and findings from cycle 1
		-	2nd Workshop (September 2010): discussion of report and reflection on activities and findings
		-	Planning of next steps

Table 1. *(Continued)*

Cycle 2 Research and development	*Planning*	- For visits to vocational training institutes - For in-depth interviews with key stakeholders - To carry out a tracer study - To observe available facilities
	Action	- Visited vocational training institutes - Carried out in-depth interviews with key stakeholders - Carried out a tracer study - Observed available facilities in vocational training institutes
	Reflection	- Feedback meetings - Report on actions undertaken and findings from Cycle 2 - 3rd Workshop (October 2011): discussion of report and reflection on actions and findings - Planning of next steps
Cycle 3 Implementation, evaluation and way forward	*Planning*	- Needed changes in vocational education and training: (i) image of vocational education and training (ii) choice of courses/trades by students (iii) making courses more practical (iv) input from potential employers and graduates (v) introduce and/or enhance guidance and counselling
	Action	- Talks to parents and youth about the relevance of vocational education and training - Allowing enrolled students to choose courses/trades freely - Teachers creating a conducive environment for students by providing counselling and guidance services - Invitation for employers to interact with practitioners - Introduction of internship and practicum programmes
	Reflection	- Feedback meetings - Report on actions undertaken and findings from Cycle 3 - 4th Workshop (March 2013): discussion of report and reflection on actions and findings - Way forward

Cycle 1: preparation and establishing communicative space

The research process started in July 2009 with informal meetings with various potential key stakeholders to talk about the conceived research idea. In total, nine meetings were held with education officers in the district, VET principals and teachers, parents, early

school-leavers within and outside VET, employers and community leaders. During these informal meetings, issues discussed were about early school-leaving (whether it is a problem in Mbarara or not), challenges facing out of school youths, VET as a pathway for early school-leavers and whether there was need for dialogue about these issues to generate ideas on how to tackle the prevailing problems.

These informal meetings were meant to open up a communicative space and to find out whether the community and the prospective stakeholders in the study were concerned about these issues and if they were interested in collaborating with the researcher in a PAR process aimed at generating 'local, timely knowledge of concrete situations' (Toulmin, 1996, p. 58) that would help improve current VET practices. Opening up a communicative space and establishing rapport with the potential key stakeholders was very important because, as Wicks and Reason (2009) observe:

> the success or failure of an action research venture often depends on what happens at the beginning of the inquiry process: in the way access is established, and on how participants and co-researchers are engaged early on. 'Opening communicative space' is important because, however we base our theory and practice of action research, the first steps are fateful. (p. 243)

By the end of these informal discussions most people were of the view that a workshop should be organised where stakeholders could come together to have a formal dialogue on the issues discussed as they were deemed very crucial for the community.

Consequently, a one-day workshop was organised in December 2009. The workshop was attended by 70 people representing various groups of key stakeholders. As this was the first workshop, the researcher and two research assistants facilitated the discussions. Participants started by exchanging views on issues previously discussed in informal meetings with different people so as to come to a common understanding of the issues and to agree on what they were going to do. There was a general agreement that early school-leavers are at an increased risk of poverty and social exclusion, and require support interventions to help them acquire life and work skills to improve their livelihood opportunities. The discussion of these issues aided in setting the background and scope for study and to assess the relevance of the issue to the community.

The proceedings of the workshop were conducted in an open and transparent manner and everyone was allowed to express opinions because it was important that everyone owned the process and outcome of the project. The facilitating researcher made it clear that from then onwards, the participants would become co-researchers in the project and that participation was voluntary. All 70 participants committed themselves to the research project and at the end of the workshop the following were agreed upon:

- To invite other important stakeholders that were missing at the workshop.
- To set up a *feedback committee* comprised of representatives of the different groups of stakeholders.
- To start a newsletter and telephone text message service to keep all participants informed about the project. The newsletter was named *YOMBEKA*, a local term for 'let's build', and was to be managed by a group of volunteer participants in collaboration with the facilitating researcher.
- To use local language (Runyankole-Rukiga) in all workshops and meetings to enable all participants to express themselves freely.

- To contact formal and non-formal VET schools in the community and find out those willing to participate in the research.
- To adopt a practice-based evidence approach to help VET practitioners reflect on their practice and work together with them to improve practice.
- To hold a workshop once a year in the subsequent four years where all the participants would come together to discuss the progress of the project, give and receive feedback, and decide on the next steps.

Cycle 2: research and development

Following the workshop, the feedback team, together with the facilitating researcher and research assistants, met and reviewed what had been discussed at the workshop and also mapped the way forward for the next steps. From a list of VET programmes recommended by participants, four VET programmes were chosen and they agreed to participate in the study. These were chosen because they majorly focus on early school-leavers and offer a variety of skills training courses. The principals and teachers in these programmes were also willing to fully collaborate in this long-term project.

Of the four VET programmes, one was a farm school training young people to gain life and hands-on practical skills in agriculture, carpentry and joinery, brick-laying and concrete practice. This was a full-time formal training programme with courses taken over a period of two years. Students had to attend classes on a daily basis and take examinations at the end of every term. At the end of the course students sit for a national examination and those who pass are issued with certificates. The second programme recruited early school-leavers and youth who had never attended school to train in various skills including practical skills training in ceramics, multimedia crafts, textile weaving, fabric decoration, baking and bakery technology, bee-keeping, agriculture, drum-making and mushroom growing. Training in this programme was short-term, lasting only three months. Emphasis was on gaining practical skills and teaching was mainly done by demonstration. The third programme offered courses in accountancy, secretarial studies, computer applications, catering and hotel management, and tailoring and embroidery. Its training approach was exactly the same as that of the first programme. The fourth programme had apprenticeship courses in car mechanics, motor vehicle repair and metal fabrication. This programme was non-formal in nature with considerable flexibility. Learners enrol at any time of the year and make a choice of the trade they want to learn. The learner completes the training when he/she or the trainer feels that the necessary skills have been acquired. All four VET programmes aimed at equipping the youth, especially early school-leavers, with practical skills necessary for labour market integration, self-employment, self-reliance and better livelihoods.

In the eight months following the workshop, visits were made to the selected institutions. The facilitating researcher and the two assistants, together with three volunteer participants, made at least three visits to each of the selected VET institutions. The purpose was to gain insight into current practice and identify areas that needed improvement. During the visitations, 13 in-depth interviews were held with VET teachers and 22 with VET students. In-depth interviews were also held with three principals and one deputy principal in the four institutions. Data collected in these interviews concerned the choice of VET, perceptions of VET, available courses and students' choices, current challenges and areas that they thought needed improvement. In the same period, the team also observed the physical infrastructure in the institutions such as classroom

space, training equipment and demonstration gardens. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed thematically. The findings from the interviews and observations were compiled into a report that was discussed by the feedback team and later by all the participants at the next workshop.

Cycle 3: implementation, evaluation and the way forward

Altogether, three follow-up workshops were conducted in September 2010, October 2011 and March 2013. The workshops were created as fora for all participants to discuss the project's progress and findings at the end of each cycle. By the fourth workshop, the number of participants had risen to 92 as participants continued to identify and invite other important stakeholders. During these workshops the different stakeholders shared their experiences with VET practitioners and gave feedback to the training institutions. Employers and VET graduates in work environments gave valuable information to the trainers and the trainers reflected on their work with other stakeholders including parents and officials from the district education department. In the workshops, participants would be divided into smaller groups to discuss challenges of VET and ways to improve VET practice. They would then make presentations to the whole group where there would be further discussion on these issues and recommendations made. The workshops also provided an avenue for participants to discuss the progress of the project and to give feedback on different issues.

In addition to the workshops, a tracer study was conducted on some of the graduates of the four participating VET institutions. This meant following up the graduates and interviewing them in their workplaces to gain insight into how their training reflected in the workplace. Accordingly, 18 graduates from the four institutions and their employers were interviewed. The information gained provided important feedback to the training institutions. Throughout the entire project the *YOMBEKA* newsletter and phone text messages kept participants informed about the project. The participants were able to share their thoughts and reflections on the project through the same means. The feedback committee met regularly to discuss the progress of the project and advise on next steps.

Data collected from interviews and workshop proceedings were tape-recorded and transcribed. The data were coded and analysed thematically with the help of ATLAS.ti software. Summaries of key findings from each cycle were compiled into reports. The reports were discussed with participants in feedback committee meetings and workshops as indicated in Table 1. These were meant to give participants opportunity to verify the findings and to give further input into the project. During the final workshop, a full report on the findings of the research project was presented and discussed by all participants for corroboration.

Results and experiences from the project

One of the main concerns of this project was how to improve the image of VET in Uganda – the first research question. The project created awareness about VET and its importance in building skills of marginalised youth and improving their life chances. This awareness was created in a way of open discussions about VET by the different stakeholders and sharing of experience by practitioners and graduates. The discussions and exchanges between the different stakeholders helped to improve the image of VET among the participants. When the project was beginning, most participants had negative sentiments about VET but, by the end of the project, there were indications of a

different attitude. The narratives of VET graduates and teachers played a crucial role in improving participants' attitudes towards VET. Some graduates had struggled to get jobs or to start their own trades. However, those who eventually managed to acquire jobs or start their own small businesses had compelling stories to tell. For instance, in one of the workshops a graduate of one of the participating training institutions had this to say:

> From the skills I got in training, I am now able to make these bags [she raised several handbags of different designs]. The bags are marketable and from them I am able to get income to look after myself and my siblings. I will not go on the street to beg. I beg the parents to send their children to vocational schools instead of leaving them at home or sending them to the streets. (VET graduate)

There were a number of stories like this from the young VET graduates but also from their teachers. For example, in another workshop, one VET teacher remarked:

> Many people despise VET but with my vocational skills I was able to set up a workshop in town. I now earn more money than most university graduates. We technical people are the ones holding the economy of this country. We make all the furniture that you use in your houses; we build the houses that you live in … (VET teacher)

Such stories and testimonies made participants reflect on VET and its importance in providing skills and livelihood opportunities for youth. By the end of the project, some participants testified that they could now comfortably send their children to VET or be comfortable with it. For example, one participant asserted:

> Five years ago my son did his primary school leaving examinations. His performance was fair. He wanted to go to Farm school and study agriculture. I refused because I wanted him to study until he gets a degree. I thought that a degree is more prestigious than studying in vocational school … he is now in higher [High School]; I don't know what he will be in future … but having gone in this project, my view is different … after higher, if he wants to go to technical school, I will allow him, … even my other children, they should choose … . (Parent participant)

Another participant who had self-pity feelings as a result of insults that were being thrown at him and his colleagues because of enrolling in a vocational school commented:

> I have been feeling very bad being in vocational. Passers-by kept telling us that we are in '*bushoberwa*' [literally meaning: 'last resort institution or institution for failures']. But now here you see people who finished vocational can earn money, can be somebody. This project has shown us things … now I am happy I am in vocational. If I finish I will start my workshop, I will also earn money … my parents will be happy. (VET student)

There were several other testimonies from different participants about their change of attitude towards VET because of their participation in the project. The project had exposed them to a different reality through interaction with practitioners, graduates and employers.

One of the many ways to increase VET's potential is through generating actionable knowledge that VET practitioners can use to improve their practice – the second research question. Therefore, this project was also concerned with the generation of

knowledge that would be useful to VET practitioners. Bringing together VET practition-
ers, employers and VET graduates to dialogue on the best way to equip young people
with VET skills produced practice-based evidence that will assist practitioners to
improve their practice. The employers shared with practitioners what is needed in the
labour market, namely, graduates with hands-on skills, as well as interpersonal skills.
Former VET students gave feedback to the practitioners on what works best in the real
world of work, that is, practical skills. Thus, the employers and the graduates asserted
that the training should be made more practical and tailored to the realities in the labour
market. They insisted that training institutions must balance theoretical and practical
training. Based on their experience in the labour market, the graduates also requested
the inclusion of entrepreneurial skills in the curriculum. They said that this would
enable students to learn how to start and run their own businesses upon completion of
training:

> When we get these students from you, after they complete their courses, they have theory
> in their heads but they cannot apply it to practical problems in the workplace. We get stu-
> dents trained in brick-laying and concrete practice but, when you put them on a building,
> they don't know what to do. In school they only build models … you need to give them
> more exposure to real building sites through internship placements. (Employer – building
> contractor)

The VET graduates also had information for their former schools in addition to thanking
them for the training they received:

> You tell us that we should be job creators and not job seekers … to employ ourselves and
> be self-reliant but you don't teach us how to start a business or where to get start-up capital
> from. So immediately we finish the training, we go on the streets to look for jobs. (VET
> graduate)

This feedback from the demand side of VET was very crucial in helping practitioners to
reflect on their practice. This was the first time that the four VET programmes were
seriously engaging other stakeholders to hear what they thought about their training and
graduates. At the end of the project, the practitioners made some commitments. These
included putting more effort into forging partnerships with industry and employers. In
this way the demand and supply sides of VET would continue learning from each other.
Eventually, this would make VET more responsive to the needs of the individual early
school-leavers and those of the labour market. Practitioners also resolved to establish
follow-up programmes for their graduates so as to continue receiving feedback about
their employment status and relevance of the skills they had acquired. They were also
to provide more chances for internships and practising lessons to make their training
programmes more practical. The teachers committed themselves to creating a conducive
learning environment for the students and enhancing the role of guidance and
counselling. In the last workshop, one teacher commented:

> Having listened to these young people, I now understand how using bad language further
> dents their self-worth … I will now endeavour to always be good to them, listen to their
> problems and try to contribute to the practical skills development. There are things we can-
> not change on our own but there are small things we can … for example, making my
> teaching methods more problem-based so that they develop problem-solving skills. (VET
> teacher)

Such commitments and experiences show that the image of VET and skills training for marginalised youth can be improved through the use of PAR. In PAR the stakeholders come together, share experiences, learn together and act together towards a desired situation. Since actionable knowledge in PAR is generated collectively, it is more likely to be owned and applied.

Reflections on the project and implications for PAR

This PAR project provided a forum for the different VET stakeholders to share 'their individual and collective realities' (McIntyre, 2008, p. 68) freely and to gain new 'experiences and understandings' (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005, p. 182) by contributing their unique experiences and knowledge (Brydon-Miller, 1997, p. 661). The process, experiences and outcomes presented above were not as smooth as they appear in writing because PAR can be a challenging undertaking. It requires substantial mobilisation, energy, teamwork and resources. When the research project started, the first challenge was to deal with the 'overstretched' (Van der Linden & Zeelen, 2008, p. 191) expectations of participants. Some thought that being invited into a research project meant a significant amount of money, especially that the project involved meetings and workshops and was long-term. In Uganda, due to the culture of NGOs and government departments giving lots of money (in the form of per diems) to meetings and workshops participants, usually if one organises such without money, people will not participate. Now here the researchers were inviting people into this long-term project but without money for per diems and allowances. Secondly, the VET institutions invited into the research project thought that the project would solve their physical infrastructure and facilities' problems and some parents thought that an NGO was coming to build vocational schools where their children would study for free.

   To compound the situation, the facilitating researcher and assistants were from the university; therefore, some participants thought that they knew everything and were coming to teach them. As Cunningham (2008, p. 380) notes 'collaborative initiatives between academically-based researchers and practice-based personnel involve the intersection of two different worlds' where much energy is needed to create a common working ground. All these challenges meant that more effort had to be invested in explanations, dialogue and the building of relationships in the initial phases of the project. Whereas participants appreciated the issue being researched and the participatory method used, they still expected individual and institutional benefits from the project. Therefore, considerable preparatory work and dialogue was needed to bring everybody on a par with the goals of the project. The informal meetings, initial visits to the VET programmes, and the fact that the facilitating researcher and assistants were from the area and were conversant with the local context and culture, helped considerably in building necessary relationships, getting everyone attuned to the goals of the project and to participate voluntarily. Building such relationships and developing a deep mutual trust and commitment of everyone is essential for the success of a PAR project (Boog, 2008; Brydon-Miller, 1997) and can be 'enormously complex' (Arieli, Friedman, & Agbaria, 2009, p. 288).

   Besides investing time and energy in extensive preparatory work in order to build relationships, mutual trust and commitment, researchers also had to create a secure conversational space or what other authors have called 'communicative space' (Bodorkos & Pataki, 2009; Wicks & Reason, 2009). This means providing an understanding attitude that is not judgemental and discriminatory, which is important for building trust and

confidence (Angucia, Zeelen, & De Jong, 2010) among the participants. This research project brought together various stakeholders who included young and old people and also people of different status in the community. This automatically brought into play issues of power, conflicting interests and cultural tensions.

For instance, during the initial workshop the power issue manifested itself very strongly when one of the district education officials felt that participants were 'unfairly' accusing government of negligence and lack of commitment in tackling the issue of early school-leaving and supporting VET, tried to dominate the discussion and vehemently defended the government actions. There was a danger of the dialogue turning into a blame game and the facilitating researcher and research assistants had to regularly intervene to remind the participants of the goal of the research and to appeal to the participants to listen to each other, trust one another and keep focused on the desired outcomes of the study. Eventually, after building mutual trust and participants recognising that they were all in the project to work towards a common goal and that all of them were important stakeholders bringing to the group different skills and knowledge to achieve the goal, the conversations became more honest and fruitful. The district education official who was previously disturbed by people's comments eventually calmed down, liked the research project and became one of its main pillars. Throughout the entire research process, the facilitating researcher had to be a good listener, respect and understand people's points of view, and behave in a socially and culturally appropriate way to help participants build trust and good working relationships. These difficult tasks and challenges illustrate the importance of the facilitator possessing good interpersonal and communication skills as well as being a person of integrity. As expressed in the words of one participant, it is only when people develop trust in the researcher(s) that they can fully participate and work towards the achievement of the research project's main goal:

> The first time you approached me to join this research, I thought that you were like the others who come, ask us to fill-in their questionnaires or answer their questions [interview] and go away … sometimes organisations pay them much money to do this research but as a respondent you get nothing out of it. In the beginning I was not sure, but after like two meetings, and seeing how you people [researcher and assistants] care and listen to us, even involve us in presenting and interviewing people, I was convinced that this is a different kind of research. People from university to sit and listen to us and accept what we are saying … this is not normal. I want to work in this research so that our children get a good future. (Male parent participant)

Other aspects helped to create a conversational space. One was the use of local language where everyone felt at ease and was able to express himself/herself freely. This was important especially for the participating early school-leavers and parents who were not fluent in English. Also, allowing participants to chair sessions, lead discussion groups, become involved in writing the newsletter, participate in interviewing people, and in the organisation of meetings and workshops, not only enhanced participation but also the communicative space. Particularly, the youth felt very comfortable being interviewed by fellow youth and appreciated being given opportunity to share their experiences. As McIntyre (2008, p. 12) acknowledges, 'many participants in PAR projects have not had the opportunity to speak their truth into public life and therefore must be provided with space to do so'. Accordingly, early school-leavers and the people in VET, who always feel marginalised because of negative social perceptions and stigma surrounding early school-leaving and VET, appreciated the opportunity given to them to

tell their stories and participate in a project intended to improve their plight. Constant communication through the *YOMBEKA* newsletter and telephone text messages was also crucial in maintaining the research process and working relationships. This study affirms Stringer's (2007) view that good communication is important for the accomplishment of action research projects.

Last but not least, the feedback team played a crucial role in the planning and implementation of the project. This group of participants did the extra work in the form of attending regular meetings, thinking and planning with the facilitating researcher and research assistants, crosschecking what had been recorded and written, and identifying gaps in the research process. This team ensures that the 'decisions in the process of knowledge-creation [are] not arbitrarily made by the researchers but [are] influenced by the ideas of the participants' (Angucia et al., 2010, p. 224) and it becomes easy for project innovations to be implemented (Van der Linden & Zeelen, 2008). The committee included volunteers and people chosen in the first workshop to represent various stakeholders. They had sound knowledge of the local context and realities and were in constant touch with other project participants, which meant that their comments and suggestions gave relevant information that guided the research process. For instance, they advised on which relevant VET programmes and employers should be included in the research, and the best time for meetings and workshops. The VET practitioners on the committee gave important information about their practice and what the possibilities and challenges were of introducing certain innovations to improve their practice. Having regular feedback meetings and several workshops at different stages of the research ensured the cyclical nature of action research. Without this committee, the researchers would have got some things wrong, especially with regard to getting practice-based evidence.

Conclusion

This PAR project was initiated to work towards the improvement of VET for marginalised youth in Mbarara district, south-western Uganda. Specifically, the project aimed at improving the image of VET and generating actionable knowledge for use in the enhancement of VET skills training. The project enabled various stakeholders to collaborate in a knowledge-generating process and actions that led to new understandings of VET and plans for its improvement. It created awareness and led to a positive attitude towards VET. Links between VET practitioners and employers (that is, between the supply and demand sides of VET) were established. The practitioners committed themselves to make the training programmes more practical and responsive to the needs of the labour market. This was to be done through continued interaction with employers and follow-up programmes of their graduates. Guidance and counselling was to be given a prominent role in the programmes. In addition to practical skills, entrepreneurial and interpersonal skills would also be added as components of the training curriculum. Though this research project did not and could not address all problems concerning VET in Uganda, such as inadequate teaching facilities, insufficient teachers, deficiencies in curriculum and teachers' poor remuneration, it is important research because it has dealt with issues concerning the *improvement* of VET. Earlier studies in Uganda have mainly addressed *problems* associated with VET. The research project has also demonstrated that PAR can be a productive approach for enhancing VET skills development for marginalised youth. Furthermore, it has shown that collective learning by honouring local knowledge and experiences, in combination with external engagement, pays off.

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