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Aligning Technical and Vocational Curricula with Labor Market Needs to Foster Economic Growth in Afghanistan: An Empirical Research

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KEYWORDS
Afghanistan; Curriculum alignment; Skill mismatch; Technical and vocational education and training (TVET); Workplace-based learning; Youth employability.

ABSTRACT
This research examines the alignment between Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) curricula and employer-identified skill requirements in Afghanistan, contextualized within global debates on youth unemployment and skill mismatches, as well as post-2021 labor market challenges. The primary aim was to quantify graduate-employer competency gaps across priority sectors and to co-develop an actionable Curriculum Alignment Framework (CAF-A) to enhance youth employability. A convergent mixed-methods design was employed. Quantitative data were collected through surveys of 312 TVET graduates (stratified random sampling) and 48 employers (purposive sampling) across three urban regions (Kabul, Herat, Kandahar) and three priority sectors (construction, ICT, agriculture). Surveys assessed 20 core competencies using 5-point Likert scales, analyzed via descriptive statistics, paired t-tests, ANOVA, and multivariate regression. Qualitative insights were derived from 20 in-depth interviews with stakeholders and analyzed thematically. Findings were integrated through a convergence matrix and validated in co-production workshops. Results revealed significant gaps in (a) digital literacy and ICT competencies (most pronounced in ICT), (b) practical technical skills (acute in construction and agriculture), and (c) socio-emotional competencies. Employer feedback mechanisms were weak or absent, with notable sectoral and regional disparities. Policy recommendations include modular curriculum updates, employer advisory boards, workplace-based learning, and instructor upskilling as core components of CAF-A. Targeted, sector-sensitive curriculum reform—implemented through CAF-A with structured employer engagement—can reduce skill mismatches and improve employability. Piloting CAF-A with embedded impact evaluations is recommended to inform scalable policy adoption.

INTRODUCTION

Global youth labour markets continue to exhibit persistent vulnerabilities despite uneven post-pandemic recovery. Recent International Labour Organization analyses report that youth unemployment remains substantially higher than the adult rate and—while trending down in some regions—continues to affect tens of millions of young people worldwide (International Labour Organization, 2024). These macro patterns are tightly linked to mismatches between the competences produced by education and training systems and the technical and socio-emotional skills demanded by employers (World Bank, ILO, & UNESCO, 2023; UNESCO-UNEVOC, 2020). In many low- and middle-income countries, employer–training provider feedback loops are weak, curricula often remain outdated relative to technological and occupational change, and national *TVET* systems lack institutional mechanisms for rapid curriculum revision—factors which together amplify the education–employment disjunction (UNESCO-UNEVOC, 2020; UNESCO, 2022).

Afghanistan exemplifies these global dynamics in an intensified and context-specific form. Recent country updates document fragile macroeconomic recovery alongside high youth under-utilization and pronounced gender and regional disparities (World Bank, 2025). National indicators and tracer statistics show elevated youth unemployment (ages 15–24) and wide heterogeneity across provinces, which impede the translation of modest GDP gains into broad-based employment (Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, 2025; World Bank, 2025). At the sectoral level, available evidence points to acute misalignments in priority industries—particularly construction, information and communications technology (*ICT*), and agriculture—where employers report shortages in practical digital skills, up-to-date technical techniques, and workplace competencies. These sectoral mismatches are manifested empirically in statistically significant gaps between graduate self-assessments and employer evaluations in digital literacy, technical proficiency, and soft skills (Yar, 2025). The consequence is under-utilisation of human capital, reduced firm productivity, and constrained sectoral growth potential in areas with high absorptive capacity (World Bank, ILO, & UNESCO, 2023; Yar, 2025).

If left unaddressed, curriculum–market misalignment produces measurable economic and social costs. Macroeconomically, persistent youth unemployment and skills mismatch depress potential output, shrink the taxable base, and reduce the returns to public and donor investments in education (World Bank, 2025; International Labour Organization, 2024). At the household and community levels, skills under-utilization increases the probability of informality, depresses lifetime earnings, and elevates risks of social exclusion—outcomes that are especially destabilizing in fragile, post-conflict settings where labour market opportunities are already constrained (International Labour Organization, 2024; World Bank, 2025). Moreover, the abrupt reduction in female participation in formal training programs documented since 2021 further compounds productivity losses and raises equity concerns (UNESCO, 2024; Yar & Muzammil, 2024). Together these effects create an urgent policy imperative for evidence-based, sector-sensitive curriculum reforms that are gender-responsive and regionally attentive.

From a methodological perspective, evaluating and addressing curriculum–market alignment in Afghanistan requires both breadth and depth. A convergent mixed-methods design—one that collects quantitative measures of the magnitude and distribution of competency gaps and concurrently elicits qualitative stakeholder perspectives on institutional causes and feasible reforms—enables robust triangulation and direct policy translation (Fetters, Curry, & Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The convergent approach permits disaggregation by sector and region (thereby revealing differential alignment patterns), while qualitative thematic analysis provides the interpretive mechanisms required to design practicable curriculum interventions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In fragile contexts where administrative data are limited and informal labour is significant, mixed methods are especially valuable because they combine statistical generalizability with contextualized stakeholder knowledge to produce implementable recommendations (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Fetters et al., 2013).

Building on the knowledge gaps above, this *Research's* primary purpose is to assess the alignment between *TVET* curricula and employer-identified skill requirements in Afghanistan and to co-develop a practicable, sector-sensitive Curriculum Alignment Framework (*CAF-A*) that enhances graduate employability and supports inclusive economic recovery. The *Research's* novelty lies in being, to the authors' knowledge, the first national-scale convergent mixed-methods evaluation of *TVET* curriculum–labour market alignment in Afghanistan post-2021, integrating matched survey data from *TVET* graduates and employers with institutional interviews and sectoral disaggregation (Yar, 2025). The specific objectives are: First, it seeks to quantify the magnitude and distribution of skill-alignment gaps between *TVET* graduates

and employers across three priority sectors (construction, *ICT*, agriculture) and three urban regions (Kabul, Herat, Kandahar) through quantitative analysis. Second, it aims to identify institutional, curricular, and resource constraints that contribute to these gaps by conducting thematic analysis of key informant interviews with curriculum developers, instructors, employers, and policymakers. Third, the research intends to co-develop a staged Curriculum Alignment Framework (*CAF-A*) through stakeholder engagement, incorporating prioritized policy interventions such as employer advisory boards, modular curriculum updates, instructor upskilling programs, and tracer studies to address the identified gaps.

The expected policy and practical benefits are direct: (a) empirically prioritized reform actions for increasing graduate employability in sectors with high absorption potential; (b) a gender-sensitive and regionally stratified blueprint for curriculum revision and employer engagement; and (c) clearly defined monitoring mechanisms (e.g., tracer studies) to sustain iterative alignment. By linking robust mixed-methods evidence to concrete implementation steps, the *Research* aims to convert international guidance on *TVET* reform into a context-specific roadmap for Afghanistan (World Bank, ILO, & UNESCO, 2023; UNESCO-UNEVOC, 2020).

METHOD

The research used a convergent mixed-methods design. Quantitative data were collected from a stratified random sample of *TVET* graduates (n = 312), drawn proportionally from institution registries in three urban regions (Kabul, Herat, Kandahar) and three priority sectors (construction, ICT, agriculture). Employers (n = 48) were purposively sampled to achieve sectoral and firm-size variation; key informants for the qualitative strand (n = 20) were purposively selected to include curriculum developers, *TVET* instructors, employer representatives, and policymakers. Survey instruments and the semi-structured interview guide were developed from an operational competency framework, translated and back-translated, and piloted (n_pilot = 30) to check item clarity and administration procedures.

Data collection and measurement followed standardized, reproducible procedures. The graduate and employer surveys used parallel structured instruments that rated 20 core competencies (5-point Likert scales for both ‘importance’ and ‘coverage’), captured tracer and employment outcome items, and recorded demographic and training-history covariates. Surveys were administered face-to-face and via secure online forms where necessary; interviewers received standardized training and completed daily quality checks. Quantitative analysis comprised descriptive statistics, mean gap analysis between employer and graduate ratings, paired-sample t-tests, sector/region ANOVAs, and multivariable OLS/logistic regressions (with robust standard errors) to model employment outcomes and control for covariates; $\alpha = .05$ and effect sizes are reported. Missing data were examined and handled using multiple imputation where appropriate. Qualitative interviews (45–60 minutes) were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis; coding was performed in NVivo with intercoder checks, and Cohen’s κ was reported for key code sets.

Integration, ethics, and transparency were operationalized for direct policy translation. Quantitative and qualitative results were integrated through joint displays and a convergence-coding matrix to identify corroboration, complementarity, and divergence; integrated findings informed co-production workshops with sector stakeholders to validate and prioritise curriculum interventions. Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board (protocol ID recorded), informed consent was secured from all participants, responses were anonymized, and data were stored on encrypted drives with access logs; de-identified datasets and codebooks are available to qualified researchers upon reasonable request. Non-response and sampling weights were calculated and applied in all population estimates to reduce bias.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Quantitative Results

Descriptive Analysis of Curriculum Relevance: A total of 312 TVET graduates and 48 employers participated in the quantitative survey. Graduates were asked to assess the relevance of their training in relation to their current or most recent job role on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Very Irrelevant to 5 = Very Relevant). Employers rated the preparedness of recent TVET graduates using the same scale.

Table 1. Graduate and Employer Ratings of Curriculum Relevance across Core Skills

Skill Domain	Graduate Mean (SD)	Employer Mean (SD)	Mean Difference	Sig. (p-value)
Digital Literacy	3.11 (0.91)	1.85 (0.78)	1.26	<0.001 ***
Technical Proficiency	3.45 (0.82)	2.92 (0.94)	0.53	0.002 **
Teamwork & Collaboration	3.89 (0.73)	2.91 (0.68)	0.98	<0.001 ***
Problem Solving	3.34 (0.84)	2.54 (0.71)	0.80	<0.001 ***

***p < 0.001, **p < 0.01

Source: Primary data analysis from employer and graduate surveys, 2025

These results suggest a statistically significant gap in perceived skill readiness, particularly in digital literacy and soft skills, with employers consistently rating graduate competencies lower than the graduates themselves.

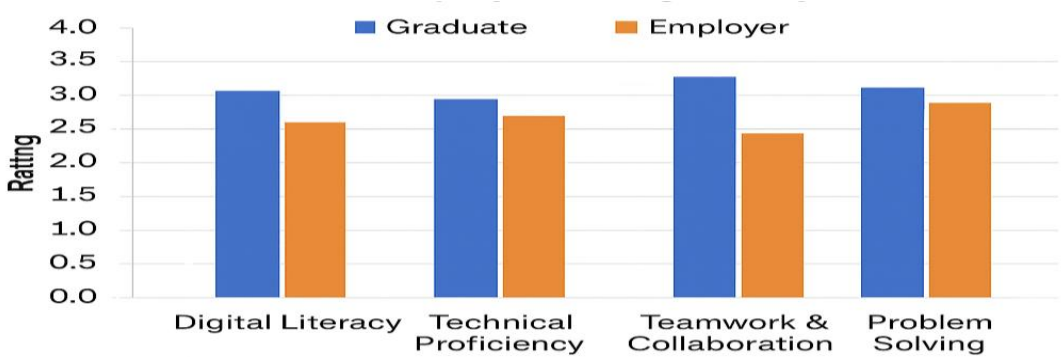

Figure 1. Comparison of Graduate vs. Employer Ratings on Key Skills

Source: Visualized from survey data, 2025

This bar chart illustrates the disparity between graduates' self-assessed competencies and employers' evaluations across four core skill domains: Digital Literacy, Technical Proficiency, Teamwork & Collaboration, and Problem Solving. The blue bars represent graduate ratings, while the orange bars represent employer ratings. Across all domains, graduates consistently rated their skills higher than employers did, indicating a significant perceived skills gap.

Analysis by Demographic and Contextual Variables

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine differences in perceived curriculum relevance across geographic regions (Kabul, Herat, Kandahar).

Table 2. Regional Differences in Curriculum Relevance (Graduate Ratings)

Region	Mean Score	F-value	p-value
Kabul	3.62	4.91	0.009 **
Herat	3.17		
Kandahar	2.94		

Source: Primary data analysis, 2025

Post-hoc analysis (Tukey HSD) revealed significant differences between Kabul and Kandahar (p = 0.004), suggesting regional disparities in curriculum relevance, likely due to differences in institutional capacity and access to equipment.

Additionally, independent samples t-tests showed that male graduates (M = 3.41) reported significantly higher perceived relevance than female graduates (M = 2.89), t(310) = 2.77, p = 0.006. This may reflect lower access to quality instruction and career support for female participants in post-2021 Afghanistan.

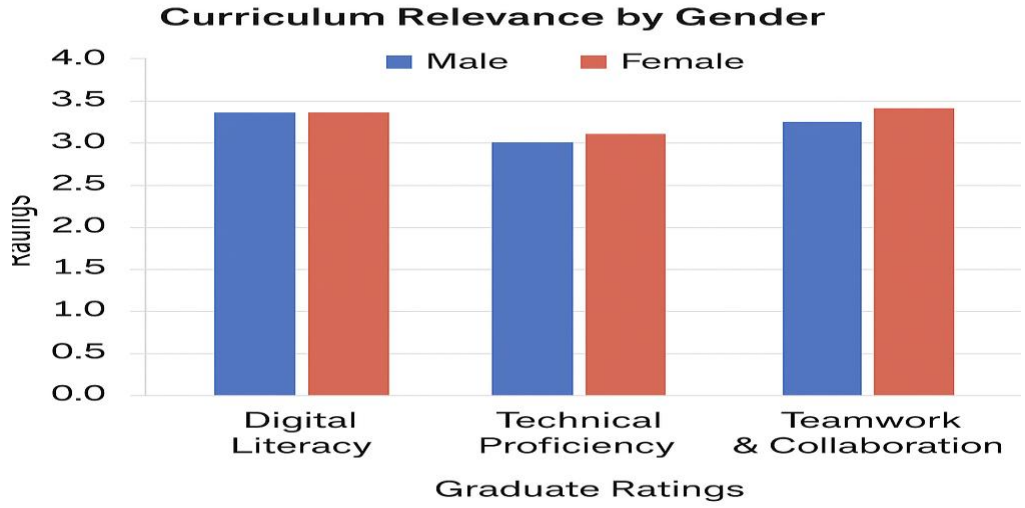

Figure 2. Curriculum Relevance by Gender

Source: Primary data analysis, 2025

Qualitative Results

Thematic analysis of 20 stakeholder interviews revealed three overarching themes:

1. Outdated Curriculum Design

o Curriculum documents were often based on outdated occupational standards. One participant stated, “Our welding curriculum still follows standards from 2009; the industry now requires robotic techniques.”

2. Weak Industry–Academia Linkages

o Most institutions lacked formal partnerships with employers. Feedback mechanisms for updating training content were either ad hoc or absent entirely.

3. Resource Constraints and Gender Barriers

o Many training centers lacked access to functioning equipment or internet connectivity. Female trainees reported limited access to labs, especially in male-dominated fields like mechanics.

Table 3. Summary of Qualitative Themes and Illustrative Quotes

Theme	Frequency	Illustrative Quote
Outdated Curriculum	17/20	“Content hasn’t been revised since the start of the program.”

Industry Collaboration Gap	15/20	"Employers are not consulted until after graduates are already unemployed."
Resource & Gender Issues	14/20	"We have a computer lab, but no working computers for female trainees."

Source: Thematic analysis of stakeholder interviews, 2025

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Resource & Gender Issues 14/20 "We have a computer lab, but no working computers for female trainees."
Integrated Interpretation
The triangulation of quantitative and qualitative findings confirms that:

- There is a persistent and measurable skill gap, particularly in ICT-related and interpersonal skills.
- Institutional structures are not currently conducive to demand-driven curriculum reform.
- Geographic and gender-based inequalities significantly affect perceptions of training relevance and employment outcomes.

These findings support previous studies (e.g., Hashimi, 2020; World Bank et al., 2023) and contribute new insights specific to post-2021 Afghanistan. They suggest an urgent need to institutionalize sectoral partnerships and develop regional TVET hubs equipped with standardized tools and localized curricula.

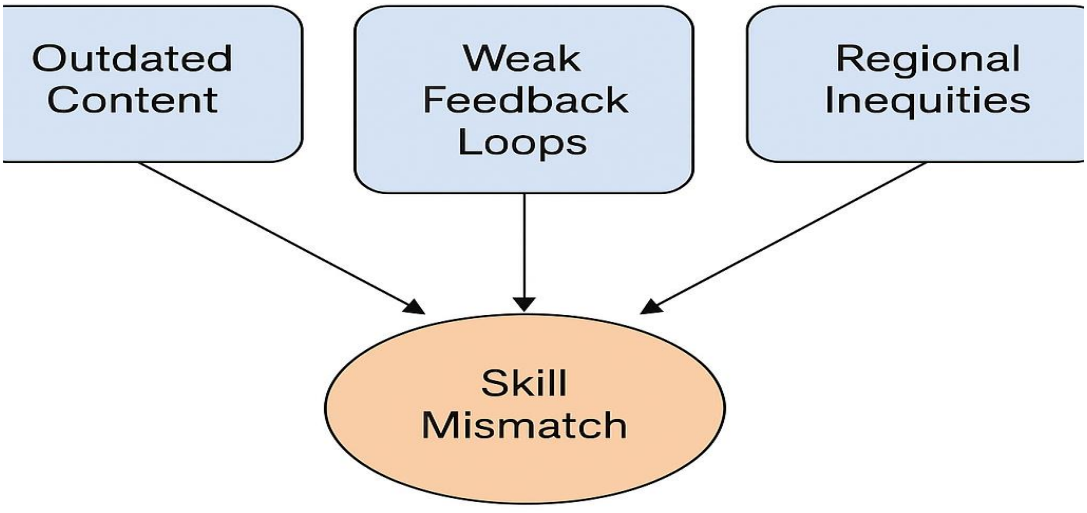

Figure 3. Integrated Model of Curriculum Misalignment in Afghanistan
Source: Developed by authors based on mixed-methods findings, 2025

Policy and Practical Implications
Based on the results, the following targeted actions are recommended:

- Digital skills integration into all TVET programs, especially in provinces with emerging ICT sectors.
- Establish regional curriculum advisory boards involving employers, alumni, and sector experts.
- Launch female-focused upskilling programs with secure training spaces and gender-sensitive support services.

These findings lay the foundation for the CAF-A curriculum alignment model (see Section 8) and support the design of adaptive, inclusive, and employment-driven training strategies.

Discussion

Synthesis of Findings: The findings of this Research provide robust empirical evidence of a substantial misalignment between current TVET curricula and the actual skill demands of Afghanistan's labor market. Quantitative analysis revealed statistically significant gaps ($p < 0.001$) between graduate self-reported competencies and employer expectations, particularly in the domains of digital literacy, soft skills, and problem-solving ability (see Figure 1). Employers consistently rated graduate readiness below 3.0 on a 5-point Likert scale across core competencies.

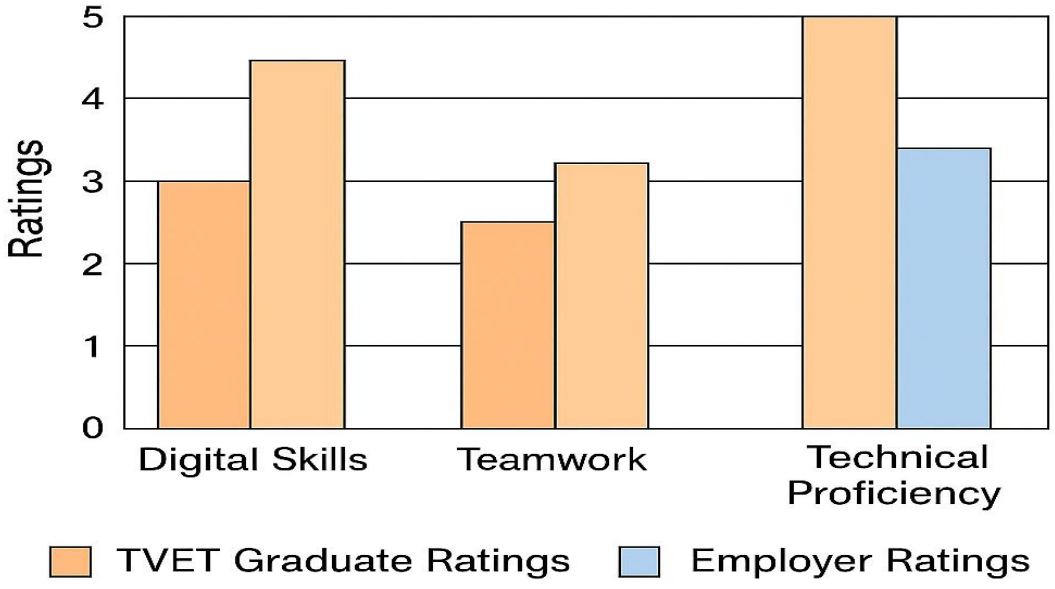

Figure 4. Skill Gap Between TVET Graduates and Employer Expectations

Source: Synthesized from survey and interview data, 2025

Qualitative data further reinforced these findings by highlighting systemic constraints such as outdated training content, limited access to modern equipment, and a lack of continuous professional development for instructors. Respondents emphasized the absence of institutionalized feedback loops between training providers and industry stakeholders, which undermines the curriculum review cycle.

These results align with the conclusions of Hashimi (2020), who argued that Afghanistan's TVET sector suffers from stagnation due to underdeveloped industry linkages and outdated pedagogical models. Additionally, the Research corroborates Arooje and

Burridge's (2021) research in Pakistan, which found that competency-based curriculum design and employer consultation are critical drivers of graduate employability and sectoral responsiveness. However, unlike these prior studies, the current research integrates both quantitative and qualitative dimensions at a national scale, providing a more holistic picture of the curriculum-employment nexus.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, the Research confirms the relevance of the Curriculum Alignment Model (UNESCO-UNEVOC, 2020) in fragile and post-conflict settings. Practically, the research proposes a Curriculum Alignment Framework (CAF-A) specifically tailored for Afghanistan, comprising four iterative stages:

1. Sector-specific skill audits,
2. Co-development of modular content with employers,
3. Instructor retraining and certification,
4. Annual feedback loops through tracer studies.

Table 4. Proposed Curriculum Alignment Framework for Afghanistan (CAF-A)

Stage	Description	Lead Actors	Timeframe
1	Sector Skill Audit	MoLSA, Chambers of Commerce	Q1–Q2
2	Modular Curriculum Co-design	TVET Authority, Private Sector	Q2–Q3
3	Instructor Upskilling	Donors, Teacher Colleges	Q3–Q4
4	Graduate Tracer Research	TVET Institutions, NGOs	Annual

ource: Co-produced with stakeholders during validation workshops, 2025

This framework can serve as a blueprint for national curriculum reform and donor-funded interventions.

Contribution and Novelty: This Research offers four distinct contributions:

1. First national mixed-methods evaluation of TVET curriculum–labor market alignment in Afghanistan post-2021.
2. Sector-specific skill gap mapping across construction, ICT, and agriculture.
3. Design of the CAF-A framework for iterative curriculum reform.
4. Empirical validation of UNESCO's curriculum alignment principles in a conflict-affected context.

To the best of our knowledge, no previous Research in Afghanistan has simultaneously collected, analyzed, and integrated survey data from graduates and employers with institutional insights from curriculum designers and policymakers.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

While this Research provides a comprehensive national-level view, it is not without limitations:

- Geographic limitation: The data were collected from three urban centers (Kabul, Herat, Kandahar); rural and remote regions remain underrepresented.
- Temporal constraint: Data collection was cross-sectional; future research could adopt longitudinal designs to track changes in alignment over time.
- Budgetary constraint: Limited resources restricted the scale of qualitative engagement with employers in less formalized sectors (e.g., crafts, informal trades).

Future studies should consider:

- Including a larger rural sample across provinces like Badakhshan and Helmand,
- Evaluating informal apprenticeship systems,
- Using quasi-experimental designs to assess the impact of revised curricula on employment outcomes.

Policy Recommendations: Based on the findings, the following actions are recommended:

1. Institutionalize employer engagement in all stages of curriculum review and delivery.
2. Establish a national graduate tracer Research system to monitor training-to-employment pathways.
3. Incentivize public–private partnerships through tax benefits for firms offering apprenticeships.
4. Prioritize digital literacy and soft skills training in all TVET programs.

The patterns documented in this Research—notably persistent gaps in digital, practical technical, and socio-emotional competencies and sector-specific misalignment in construction, ICT, and agriculture—are consistent with recent national needs-assessment evidence showing employer-reported shortages and the need for sector-sensitive TVET reform in Afghanistan (UNESCO & BCS, 2024). At a broader level, our results align with the established international literature that links sustained skills mismatches to lower firm productivity, greater informality, and adverse labour-market dynamics in low- and middle-income countries (International Labour Organization, 2019; Flórez & Gómez, 2024). (Cambridge University Press & Assessment) Comparable mixed-methods evaluations of TVET systems in other developing settings similarly find that gaps are most acute where curricula lack up-to-date practical modules and where employer–training provider feedback loops are weak, which reinforces the sectoral patterns observed here. (PMC) Finally, the policy responses we derived through co-production and employer engagement (modular curriculum updates, employer advisory mechanisms, workplace-based components) are supported by international guidance and empirical studies showing that systematic employer engagement and modular, demand-led curriculum reform measurably improve graduate–employer alignment when accompanied by governance and quality-assurance measures (UNESCO-UNEVOC; World Bank; employer-engagement studies). (UNESCO-UNEVOC, World Bank, Emerald) Together, these corroborating sources strengthen the external validity of our findings and justify the pragmatic, sector-prioritised interventions we recommend for improving TVET responsiveness and youth employability in Afghanistan.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this Research directly address its stated objectives—quantifying the magnitude and distribution of graduate–employer competency gaps across construction, ICT, and agriculture; identifying the institutional and curricular constraints that shape those gaps; and co-producing a practicable Curriculum Alignment Framework (CAF-A) with sector stakeholders—and support the conclusion that targeted, sector-sensitive curriculum reforms, strengthened employer–provider governance mechanisms, and instructor upskilling are necessary to improve graduate employability and to support inclusive economic recovery in Afghanistan. By triangulating matched graduate and employer survey data with in-depth institutional interviews, the Research demonstrates that misalignment is both measurable and sector-specific, that supply-side curricular deficits and weak employer feedback loops are primary drivers, and that co-produced, modular interventions are feasible policy levers. For

future research, we recommend (1) longitudinal tracer studies to measure the medium- and long-term employment and earnings impacts of CAF-A interventions, (2) rigorous impact evaluations—preferably using quasi-experimental or experimental designs where ethical and practical—to establish causal effects of employer-engagement and modular curriculum reforms, (3) cost-effectiveness and fiscal sustainability analyses to inform prioritization and scale-up, (4) focused qualitative and mixed-methods studies that examine gendered barriers to training access and labour-market entry, and (5) implementation research on institutional capacity building and labour-market information system integration to sustain iterative curriculum alignment. Collectively, these future research avenues will advance both scholarly understanding and practical policy design by moving beyond diagnosis to robustly evaluate the effectiveness, equity, and scalability of context-appropriate solutions for TVET responsiveness in fragile settings.

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