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Reimagining the Purpose of Vocational Education and Training

The Perspective of ITI Students in the National Capital Region of India

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“People are the real wealth of a nation. The basic objective of development is to create an enabling environment for people to live long, healthy and creative lives. This may appear to be a simple truth. But it is often forgotten in the immediate concern with the accumulation of commodities and financial wealth.”

– Mahbub ul Haq (1990: 9)

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Abstract

Vocational education and training (VET) is generally believed to be a tool for the promotion of youth employability (VET for work) and economic productivity (VET for growth). This rather narrow understanding has been challenged by a growing number of development scholars, who argue that it fails both theoretically (to capture the complex nature of human beings), and practically (to attract a larger number of beneficiaries to VET). Given recent policy efforts to make VET ‘aspirational’ for the India’s youth, this case study seeks to kick-start a process of reimagining the purpose of VET in India by engaging with the voices of 21 Industrial Training Institute (ITI) students in the National Capital Region. Drawing on Powell & McGrath’s Realist-Capability Model, the study retraces the reflexive processes that preceded these students’ decision to enrol in an ITI and locates their reasons for pursuing VET in the context of their individual aspirations, dreams and preferences. In doing so, the study finds that VET may serve both intrinsic and instrumental purposes, the latter of which include but go well beyond the ideas of ‘VET for work’ and ‘VET for growth’.

Key Words: vocational education and training, skill development, capabilities, functionings, agency, freedom, human development, industrial training institutes, India, youth

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List of Abbreviations

AISSCE	All India Senior School Certificate Examination
B.A.	Bachelor of Arts
B.Com.	Bachelor of Commerce
B.Ed.	Bachelor of Education
B.Sc.	Bachelor of Science
CEDEFOP	European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training
GoI	Government of India
ILO	International Labour Organisation
ITI	Industrial Training Institute
MNC	multi-national corporation
NCR	National Capital Region
NCT	National Capital Territory
PU	pre-university
RCM	Realist-Capability Model
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
TVET	technical and vocational education and training
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNEVOC	International Centre for Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
VET	vocational education and training

Glossary of Terms

<i>Agency</i>	In line with Sen (2000: 19), the term <i>agency</i> is used to refer to a person’s ability to act and to bring about change. Following Archer’s work on structure and agency (1995; 2003; 2007; 2012), this ability is understood both to shape and to be shaped by structure, albeit in a temporally distinct way.
<i>Antecedent valued functionings</i>	The term <i>antecedent valued functionings</i> refers to states of being or doing that a person would like to achieve. As such, antecedent valued functionings can be understood as a person’s goals, aspirations or preferences, which are “constitutive of human wellbeing” (Powell & McGrath, 2019: 23).
<i>Capabilities</i>	The term <i>capabilities</i> refers to states of being or doing that a person is able to achieve. As such, capabilities are “notions of freedom, in the positive sense: what real opportunities you have regarding the life you may lead” (Sen, 1987: 36).
<i>Functionings</i>	The term <i>functionings</i> refers to states of being or doing that a person has achieved. As such, functionings can be understood as “different aspects of living conditions” (Sen, 1987: 36).
<i>Structure</i>	In line with Archer (2003: 135), the term <i>structure</i> is used in the sense of emergent properties which objectively shape a person’s situational context. Following Archer’s work on structure and agency (1995; 2003; 2007; 2012), structure is understood both to shape and to be shaped by human agency, albeit in a temporally distinct way.
<i>Valued capabilities</i>	The term <i>valued capabilities</i> refers to states of being or doing that a person would like to achieve and at the same time, is able to achieve. As such, valued capabilities can be understood as “opportunities that are valued for reasons that matter to the individual” (Powell & McGrath, 2019: 26).

1. Introduction

Over the past few years, vocational education and training (VET) has experienced a significant revival of policy and programmatic interest. Most notably, the Third International Congress on Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) organised by UNESCO in 2012 introduced a new, transformative vision of VET, which understands the latter as a tool for fostering youth employment and entrepreneurship, for promoting equity and gender equality, and for facilitating the transition towards ecologically sustainable societies. As a result of these high-level discussions, VET became an integral part of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4¹ in 2015, and governments around the world have made extensive provisions to revamp their formal VET systems and to enhance both the seating capacity and quality of their VET institutes (DeJaeghere, 2019; McGrath & Powell, 2016; McGrath et al., 2018; Ngcwangu, 2019; Powell, 2016; Sharma & King, 2019; Tikly, 2013; UNESCO, 2016).

While academia welcomes this revival of interest in VET, a growing number of development scholars have pointed out that contemporary VET research and practice is underpinned by what is considered to be an outdated paradigm. Generally described as “the ethos of productivism” (Anderson, 2009: 39), this paradigm is built on the assumptions that the sole purposes of VET are (i) to expand the productivity (‘VET for growth’) and (ii) to enhance the employability (‘VET for work’) of a country’s workforce. In view of the transversal character of SDG 4, both of these assumptions have been criticised as too narrow in scope. What is more, they have been found to fail practically, as youth participation in formal VET remains low in many countries (McGrath, 2012; Psacharopoulos, 1985; UNEVOC, 2006; World Bank, 1991). The need of the hour is therefore to reimagine the purpose of VET and to reorient VET programmes and policies towards the needs of their intended beneficiaries.

An interesting case to explore in this context is India. Like in many other middle-income countries, the predominant narrative around India’s massive skill development efforts² has been found to concur with the ‘VET for growth’ assumption (King, 2012). The National Policy for Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, for instance, seeks to “equip [India’s] workforce with employable skills and knowledge so that they can contribute substantively to the economic growth of the country” (GoI, 2015a: 2). At the same time, however, the Government of India

¹ SDG 4: To ensure inclusive and equitable education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

² The Government of India has set the ambitious target of training more than 400 million people by the year 2022 (Mehrotra et al., 2015).

has made it a priority to “align demands of the employers with the aspirations of Indian citizens” (GoI, 2015b.: 5) and “to make skill development aspirational for boys and girls in [the] country” (GoI, 2015a: 16). These statements indicate a shift in focus from the needs of the economy to the needs of the people, and merit further consideration in VET research and practice.

1.1. Purpose and Research Questions

Since the inception of UNESCO’s transformative vision of VET, a small but growing body of literature has sought to rethink the purpose of VET, and to build a new account of ‘VET for human development’ (e.g. Bonvin, 2019; DeJaeghere, 2019; McGrath, 2012; Powell, 2012; McGrath & Powell, 2016; Szekely, 2019). Drawing on Amartya Sen’s conception of development as freedom (Sen, 2000), this new account is based on the normative assumption that the overarching purpose of VET should be the expansion of the freedoms and capabilities of individuals to live the kind of life they have reason to value. Up until now, however, the VET for human development account is largely theoretical in nature, and only few studies have sought to understand what it might mean in practice (Hilal, 2019; Powell & McGrath, 2014; Powell & McGrath, 2019; Suart, 2019). Furthermore, contributions on and from the Indian context are currently missing in this discourse.

With a view to addressing this research gap, this case study seeks to understand what a ‘VET for human development’ account might look like in the Indian context. The study departs from the viewpoint that such an account must actively engage with the perspective of the intended beneficiaries of VET and build on a good understanding of both the lives that they have reason to value, and of the structural factors that expand or limit their individual capabilities and freedoms to lead these lives. Based on this viewpoint, the study engages with the voices of 21 Industrial Training Institute³ (ITI) students in the National Capital Region (NCR) of India and uses Powell & McGrath’s Realist-Capability Model to understand why these students decided to pursue VET. By locating their motives for pursuing VET in the context of their individual constellation of concerns and aspirations, the study seeks to approach the task of rethinking the purpose of VET from their perspective. To this end, the study is guided by the following research question:

Why do young people in the NCR of India choose to pursue VET?

³ ITIs are the main providers of formal VET at the level of higher secondary education in India.

1.2. Demarcation

In the light of recent concerns about the ‘attractiveness’, ‘image’ and ‘social desirability’ of VET both in India and globally (e.g. Ahmed, 2016; Ajithkumar & Pilz, 2018; Billett, 2014; Jambo & Pilz, 2018; Ratnata, 2013; Russo et al., 2019; Winch, 2013), it is important to point out that this study does not aim at contrasting perceptions about different educational pathways or at modelling the external determinants of youth participation in VET. Rather, it seeks to understand how young people in the NCR of India perceive and evaluate the option of pursuing VET, in view of their individual aspirations, goals and dreams and in the face of their respective structural contexts. In doing so, the study hopes to introduce a different perspective on the purpose and value of VET in India and to inform ongoing discussions about how to make VET ‘aspirational’.

1.3. Thesis Outline

This study is presented in 8 chapters. Following this introduction, Chapter 2 provides a definition of VET along with an overview of the Indian education system to contextualise the discussions in the following chapters. The study then goes on to review the existing literature on the VET and human development nexus in Chapter 3 and introduces Powell & McGrath’s Realist-Capability Model in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 discusses the research design, the philosophical assumptions and the methods used for sampling, data collection and data analysis, whereas Chapter 6 presents the results of the latter. The study concludes with a discussion of the results in Chapter 7 and highlights implications for existing and future VET research and practice in Chapter 8.

2. Setting the Scene

2.1. Towards a Definition of VET

The term ‘vocational education and training’ (VET) is generally used synonymously with the terms ‘skill development’ and ‘career and technical education’ (CTE) and has thus far eluded any attempt at a uniform definition (Agrawal, 2014; Douse & Uys, 2019; Diwakar & Ahamad, 2015). Moodie (2002) compares and analyses existing classifications of VET and concludes that the term is best defined as “the development and application of knowledge and skills for middle level occupations needed by society from time to time” (260). This rather broad definition underlines the fact that VET is generally related to a specific job profile or trade. It

however also highlights that what is considered to be VET can vary greatly throughout time and from context to context (CEDEFOP, 2017; Maclean & Pavlova, 2013; Russo et al., 2019).

In the Indian context, a clear distinction needs to be made between *formal* and *informal* VET. Formal VET is generally understood to take place within the parameters of the mainstream, government-led education system and to lead to a recognised qualification or certificate. Informal VET, in contrast, takes place outside the parameters of the mainstream education system and may or may not be recognised and certified by the state (Pilz & Uma, 2015; Wessels & Pilz, 2018). For the purpose of this study, the term VET is used to refer to the vocational stream of the government-led education system in India and is therefore best understood in the former sense. The following section provides an overview of India's government-led education system and indicates, which of its elements are considered in this study.

2.2. The Indian Education System

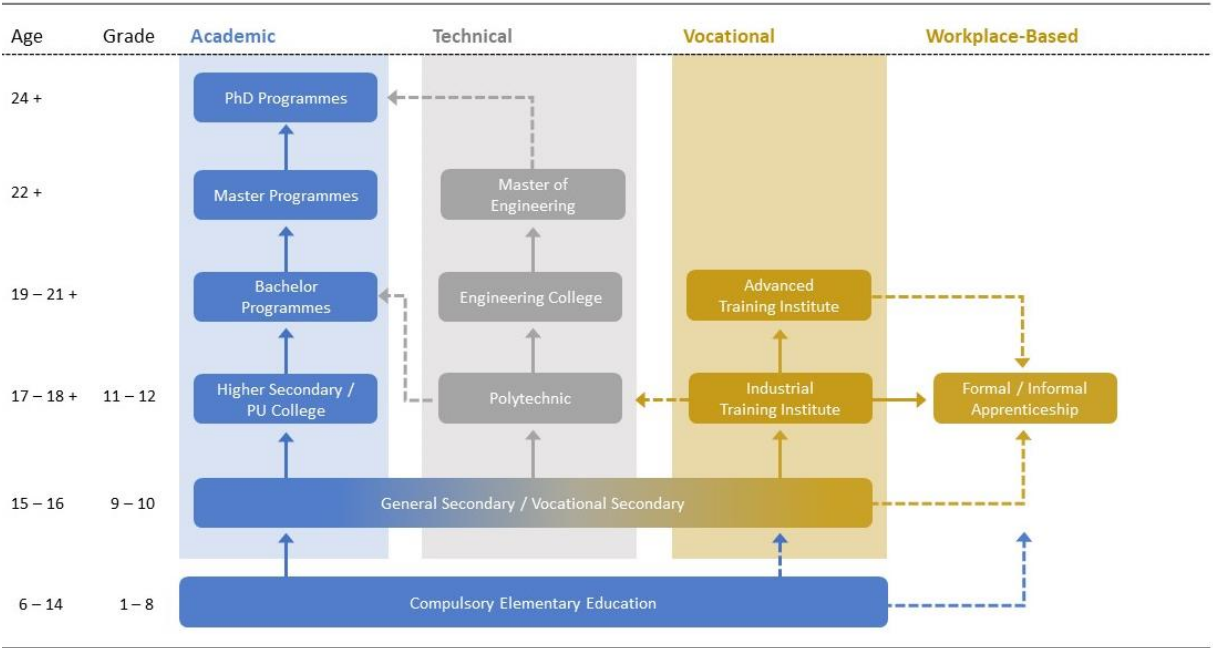
The Indian education system consists of three streams, which divide at the level of higher secondary school (grades 11 to 12) and provide only few opportunities for inter-stream transfers thereafter (see figure 1). Within the *academic* stream of education, the so-called pre-university (PU) colleges – also known as 10+2 – offer two-year intermediate courses to prepare students for university admission. Depending on their personal interest and previous academic achievements, students choose to specialise in either *Science* (e.g. Physics, Chemistry, Biology), *Commerce* (e.g. Maths, Statistics, Economics) or *Arts* (e.g. History, Political Science, Music) subjects as well as two languages. Upon completion of PU college, students undergo the All India Senior School Certificate Examination (AISSCE), which is highly competitive. Based on their AISSCE grades, students may then pursue an undergraduate degree at a public or private university or enrol in a specialist degree course at a university-affiliated college (Khare, 2016; Tara & Kumar, 2016; Wessels & Pilz).

Within the *technical* stream, the so-called Polytechnics offer 3-year courses at higher secondary school level which lead to the award of a diploma. Most Polytechnics offer diploma courses in mainstream disciplines such as civil, mechanical and electrical engineering. Over the past few years, however, many Polytechnics have started to diversify their course offer to include disciplines such as mechatronics, hospital engineering, architectural assistantship, interior decoration, fashion technology and handloom design. Diploma-holders are considered to be skilled workers who have both practical and theoretical know-how and typically take on

supervisory positions in their respective fields. They may however also pursue a bachelor’s degree at an engineering college or enter directly into the second year of an undergraduate programme at university level (Goel, 2011; Rao et al., 2014; Schneider & Pilz, 2019).

Within the *vocational* stream, formal education at higher secondary level is provided by the so-called Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs). ITI-courses range from one to two years in terms of duration and are designed to prepare students for employment in one out of 126 designated trades (Jambo & Pilz, 2018; NCAER & J. P. Morgan, 2018). Successful ITI-graduates are considered to be semi-skilled workers, who may undergo further training at an Advanced Training Institute, or else complete a one-year, workplace-based apprenticeship in a public or private sector organisation to achieve the status of a skilled worker. Alternatively, they may enter directly into the second year of a diploma course, thus switching from the vocational to the technical stream of education (Kumar, 2016; Schneider & Pilz, 2019; Venkatram, 2012). At the level of higher secondary education, ITIs constitute the main providers of formal VET in India⁴. This study will therefore engage with the perspective of ITI students.

Figure 1: The Indian Education System



Source: Own creation based on Mehrothra et al. (2014), NCAER & J. P. Morgan (2018) and Schneider & Pilz (2019)

⁴ The Indian education system also exhibits a ‘vocationalised’ form of academic education that covers all levels from lower secondary school (grades 9-10) to graduate degree programmes. This form of VET is however restricted to very few localities and institutions and continues to absorb but a miniscule number of students (NCAER & J. P. Morgan, 2018; Wessels & Pilz, 2018).

3. Literature Review

The academic discourse on VET and human development is based on the observation that contemporary VET research and practice are underpinned by what is considered to be an outdated paradigm. Anderson (2009) describes this paradigm as the “ethos of productivism” (39) and claims that it is based on two key assumptions: At the national level, VET is believed to enhance worker productivity, which in turn leads to economic growth (VET for growth). At the individual level, VET is believed to enhance a person’s employability and therefore lead to jobs (VET for work). This chapter outlines the Indian version of this orthodoxy⁵ and highlights some of its implications for existing research on ITIs and (prospective) ITI students. The chapter then goes on to present the main ideas behind the VET for human development approach and provides a brief overview of previous empirical studies in this field. The chapter concludes by bridging the findings of this literature review to the purpose of this study.

3.1. The Orthodoxy: VET for Economic Growth

The predominant narrative around VET in India departs from the understanding that the country is facing “a pronounced skill gap both in terms of quality and quantity” (Palanithurai, 2016: 156). In terms of quality, there is believed to be a “mismatch between the demand and the supply of labour” (Kumar et al., 2019: 2), meaning that the skills of current jobseekers in the labour market do not align with the needs of the employers. This mismatch is believed to result in high rates of informality⁶ (92%) and youth unemployment (10,5%), which in turn prevent India’s formal economy from harnessing what is often called a demographic dividend⁷ (e.g. Kumar et al., 2019; Mehrotra et al., 2014; Neroorkar & Gopinath, 2018; Okada, 2012; Rao et al., 2014; Sanghi et al., 2012; Saini, 2015). In this context, VET is primarily targeted at India’s existing workforce and expected to foster economic growth by “bridge[ing] the gap and make[ing] people employable” (Kumar et al., 2019: 2).

⁵ This is not to say that existing research on and from the Indian context does not recognise other purposes beyond ‘VET for work’ and ‘VET for growth’. Existing research however tends to view these purposes as subsidiary to, or indeed, dependent on the promotion of workforce productivity and economic growth and to evaluate the outcomes of VET programmes and policies in economic terms only.

⁶ The term ‘informality’ is here understood to encompass all types of work without any legal or social security benefits (NCAER & J.P. Morgan, 2018: 8-9).

⁷ a boost in economic productivity that occurs when there is a larger number of people in the workforce relative to the number of dependents (UNFPA, 2016).

In terms of quantity, the existing skill gap is expected to amount to a shortage of up to 350 million skilled workers by the year 2022 (e.g. Afroz, 2018; King, 2012; Kumar, 2016). This shortage of skilled workers is believed to undermine the productivity of India's key industries and to disincentivise both national and international organisations from setting up manufacturing units in the country (e.g. Agrawal & Agrawal, 2017; Gandhi, 2015; Majumdar, 2008; ILO, 2003; Kumar et al., 2019; Pilz, 2016; World Bank, 2008). In this context, VET is primarily targeted at India's future workforce and expected to provide well-trained workers to be employed in the manufacturing units of national and international organisations, as well as to create additional jobs by transforming India into "a global manufacturing hub" (Sharma & King, 2019: 4). India is thus believed to face the dual challenge of improving the 'quality' of existing workers, on the one hand, and increasing the number of VET students, on the other hand.

This overarching conceptualisation of the role and purpose of VET as instrumental for both employability (VET for work) and productivity (VET for growth) has several implications for the focus and motivation of existing research on ITIs and on (prospective) ITI students, in particular. For one, ITIs are first and foremost understood as "vehicles of vocational training in preparation for the world of work" (Kumar, 2016: 65). This means that their effectiveness is evaluated in terms of their ability to produce workers that meet the demands of employers. Neroorkar & Gopinath (2018), for example, conduct a qualitative study to identify the determinants of ITI graduate employability and find that "ITIs have not been able to meet their objective of providing skilled manpower to satisfy the growing needs of the Indian labour market". Similarly, a quantitative study by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) concludes that the efficiency of ITIs is "particularly low, as the skills training provided was unable to equip young people with high employability" (ILO, 2003).

A second implication is that the concept of 'training quality' is first and foremost defined in terms of labour market relevance (Tara et al., 2016). A key concern in this context is that many of the ITI graduates remain unemployed⁸. This fact is attributed to the poor 'quality' (i.e. low industry relevance) of input factors, such as "out of date equipment" (Schneider & Pilz, 2019: 287), "outdated curricula" (Neroorkar & Gopinath, 2018: 7) and "the lack of linkages between VET providers and industries" (Agrawal & Agrawal, 2017: 247). Furthermore, ITI instructors

⁸ A recent tracer study including 1,675 ITI students finds that one third of the students remained unemployed 18 months after graduation (Joshi et al., 2014).

are often found to have insufficient technical expertise. Tara and colleagues (2016), for instance, evaluate the quality of training at selected ITIs and find that there is a need for “[d]eveloping professionally trained teachers/instructors who are constantly trained to upgrade technically to match the industry demand” (11).

A third implication is a growing concern about the ‘attractiveness’ and ‘social desirability’ of VET. In the light of low youth participation⁹ and high student drop-out rates¹⁰, VET is commonly believed to have a low standing in Indian society (e.g. Khare, 2016; Manthur et al., 2014; Mehrotra et al., 2014; Okada, 2012; Venkatram, 2012). Majumdar (2008), for instance, notes: “VET in India is often seen as a second-class education and as the last recourse for those who are unable to succeed in academic learning” (96). He also claims that learners generally aspire for higher education and so-called ‘white-collar jobs’ and that VET is “attractive only for low academic achievers and for students from low-income families” (ibid.). A similar view is held by Jambo & Pilz (2018), who argue that “[p]articipants in vocational training courses are stigmatised and often considered as educational losers” (15) and that “the reason for this can be found in the caste system, which traditionally assigns physical and dirty work to the lower castes” (ibid.).

Despite these concerns, very few studies have thus far sought to engage with the perceptions of the intended beneficiaries of VET. One exception is a study by Aggarwal and colleagues (2012), who conducted a quantitative survey among 2,655 secondary school students to assess “their awareness and interest with respect to vocational education” (8). The survey results indicate an inverse relationship between the students’ interest in VET and the educational level of their parents¹¹, and confirm the assumption that “students consider vocational education as an inferior option” (18). Ajithkumar & Pilz (2018), in contrast, conducted qualitative interviews with 15 ITI students for a study on ITI attractiveness and come to a different conclusion: “The ITI groups did not illustrate the traditional perception that it [VET] is a second rate option. Surprisingly for them, ITIs have provided an opportunity to reassess their options” (164).

One final, but critical implication of the ‘VET for work’ and ‘VET for growth’ paradigm is that existing VET research on and from the Indian context tends to problematise the aspirations,

⁹ Only 4% of the 15- to 29-year-old population is currently estimated to have undergone any kind of formal VET (Kumar et al., 2019).

¹⁰ Joshi and colleagues (2014) analyse the drop-out rates at 150 ITIs and find that 15,5% of all students dropped out before completing their respective course.

¹¹ The higher the educational level of either parent, the less likely the students were to express interest in VET.

goals and preferences of learners (e.g. Aggarwal et al., 2012; ILO, 2003; Manthur et al., 2014; Neroorkar & Gopinath, 2018). In their study on the perceptions and interests of secondary school students, Aggarwal and colleagues (2012), for instance, find that “[c]omputer and English speaking skills are clearly the most valued skills for students” (17) and that on-the-job training and job-specific skills seem comparatively less important. Furthermore, their survey results indicate that students aspire for jobs in the healthcare, education and banking sector, all of which are expected to generate a relatively low number of employment opportunities over the next few years. Quite contrary to the idea of making VET ‘aspirational’ (GoI, 2015a; GoI, 2015b), the study concludes that the aspirations of students “are largely misaligned with the needs of the Indian economy” (2).

3.2. The Alternative: VET for Human Development

Anderson (2009) was among the first to highlight that the ‘VET for work’ and ‘VET for growth’ assumptions are “based on a restricted and instrumental view of lifeworlds” (44). He criticises that this view “reduces people and the environment to the status of human and natural resources for economic exploitation” (ibid.) and that it fails to reflect the complexity of human nature:

“TVET students are not only already, or aiming to become, workers. They are also human beings and citizens with a wide range of needs, relationships, duties, aspirations and interest beyond work; in the family, the local community, in civil society and the global environment. [...] Yet in TVET they learn only to labour and produce commodities” (45).

Furthermore, he warns that this view tends to conflate the needs and interest of the individual with the needs and interest of employers and that it effectively curtails the agency of VET students: “[L]earners in TVET are reproduced as agents of productivism, lacking a reflexive understanding of their roles as ecological actors” (45).

A similar view is taken by McGrath (2012). While he “does not wish to reject the orthodoxy completely” (625), he concurs with Anderson’s critique that “it is not a true reflection of what it means to be human” (ibid.). He further points out that the VET orthodoxy is

“[...] too short-term in its focus on immediate employability rather than lifelong processes [...] too focused on a particular model of work as paid employment, with very serious gender implications [...] too centred on formal learning in educational institutes, largely heedless of the wealth of literature on informal learning [and] too uninterested in wider questions of preparation for the good life, ignoring the capabilities turn in particular” (ibid.).

Based on this critique, McGrath (2012) calls for the need to reimagine the purpose of VET within the revised parameters of contemporary development paradigms and points towards human development – and the capability approach, in particular – as a potential way forward.

According to the widely accepted definition proposed by Amartya Sen, human development is a process of expanding people's capabilities and freedoms "to lead the lives they have reason to value" (Sen, 2000: 293). In line with this definition, a small but growing body of literature has sought to build a theoretical account of 'VET for human development' (e.g. Bonvin, 2019; DeJaeghere, 2019; Hilal, 2012; McGrath & Powell, 2016; McGrath et al., 2018; Ngcwangu, 2019; Powell & McGrath, 2019; Szekely, 2019; Yassim et al., 2019). This literature concurs with Sen's assertion that "human beings are not merely means of production (even though they excel in that capacity), but also the end of the exercise" (1997: 1960). The 'VET for human development' account therefore strives to move beyond the narrow ideas of 'VET for growth' and 'VET for work' and insists that VET must first and foremost serve the purpose of enhancing human wellbeing.

In doing so, this new account of VET differs from the orthodoxy in two central ways. For one, it emphasises the fact that the purposes of VET may include, but are not limited to, the promotion of employability, productivity and economic growth. Bonvin (2019) for example notes that at the level of the individual, the purposes of VET may include "enhancing one's ability to participate in public debate, opening one's mind to other ways of living, [or] opening opportunities to break with cultural or social norms" (4). VET might also have a purely intrinsic value, as "one may learn for the sake of knowledge, even though that may not bring further advantage to oneself" (ibid.). At the level of the state, VET may aim at effectuating "social change toward a more cohesive or fair society" (ibid.), at strengthening the agency of marginalised groups (DeJaeghere, 2019; Hilal, 2012; Hilal, 2019) or at facilitating the transition towards green jobs and green economies (McGrath et al., 2018).

Furthermore, the human development account is centrally concerned with human agency and the individual aspirations, dreams and preferences of VET students. Whereas the orthodoxy oftentimes ignores, problematises or even "implies the necessity to 'cool down' their aspirations when they are too high" (Bonvin, 2019: 13), the human development account postulates that VET should contribute towards expanding both their capability to aspire, and their ability to pursue their aspirations (Lopez-Fogues, 2016; McGrath et al., 2018; Powell, 2012; Suart, 2019).

In line with this understanding, any attempt at reimagining the purpose of VET must actively engage with the perspective of VET students and develop a good understanding of the lives that they have reason to value, and of the factors that limit their individual capabilities and freedoms to pursue these lives.

3.3. Relevance of this Study

Although a growing number of scholars has worked towards revising the theoretical underpinnings of VET research, only few studies have sought to apply the ‘VET for human development’ account empirically. This has been attributed to the fact that the concept of human development, and Sen’s capability approach in particular, confront researchers with fundamentally philosophical debates about the nature of structure and human agency, and with the overarching question of who should be the one to define what constitutes a ‘good’ life (Alkire, 2010; Hirai, 2017; Robeyns, 2000; Robeyns, 2017). Given these challenges, existing empirical research at the nexus of VET and human development currently focusses on understanding why VET students are in VET. Such an understanding can help to identify relevant categories of capabilities (defined as potential states of being or doing) that matter to VET students and that should thus be expanded through VET programmes and policies.

Powell (2012), Powell & McGrath (2014) and Powell & McGrath (2019), for example, conduct qualitative repeat interviews with 20 VET students at a Further Education and Training (FET) college in South Africa to understand why they decided to pursue VET. Based on these reasons, they identify eight dimensions of capabilities that seemed to matter to the students in their sample. They then use this list as a benchmark for evaluating to what extent these capabilities were expanded or contracted through the FET college. Similarly, Hilal & McGrath (2016) and Hilal (2019) draw on focus group discussions with VET graduates and extend and adapt Powell & McGrath’s capability list to the specific context of marginalised groups in the occupied Palestine territories. Stuart (2019), in contrast, focusses on the perspective of 21 adult female learners in England and explores their reasons for returning to study at Further Education colleges at a mature age.

While each of these studies makes a powerful case against the ‘VET for work’ and ‘VET for growth’ assumptions, they stress the fact that the identified reasons for pursuing VET are “always contextually specific and will differ in different contexts and across different programmes” (Powell & McGrath, 2019: 59). Furthermore, they stress that is important to

understand “capability lists as provisional and in a state of flux as the list is likely to change as circumstances and contexts alter” (ibid.). By implication, this means that these existing findings and capability lists cannot be readily transferred to the Indian context. Rather, it is crucial to start engaging in extensive dialogue with the intended beneficiaries of VET in India and to start building a better understanding for their specific needs and aspirations.

This study thus seeks to engage with the perspectives of a small sample of ITI students in the National Capital Region (NCR) of India and identify the reasons for which they valued the option of pursuing VET. In doing so, the study hopes to kick-start the process of developing a ‘VET for human development’ account for the Indian context, which draws on Sen’s understanding of human development as the expansion of the capabilities and freedoms of the individual. To adequately address the complexity inherent in the concept of human development and the questions around structure and human agency, the study draws on the Realist-Capability Model – a theoretical framework for understanding human agency, which was recently elaborated by Powell & McGrath (2019). The following chapter will introduce this theoretical framework and discuss how it is operationalised in the context of this study.

4. Theoretical Framework

The Realist-Capability Model (RCM) draws on two strands of theory, the first one being the capability approach as pioneered by Amartya Sen (1980; 1987; 1992; 2000) and Martha Nussbaum (2000), and the second being Margaret Archer’s view of structure and agency (1995; 1998; 2000; 2003; 2007; 2012). This chapter will briefly present the main ideas behind the two strands of theory and set out the combined theoretical framework of the RCM. The chapter concludes by discussing its operationalisation.

4.1. The Capability Approach

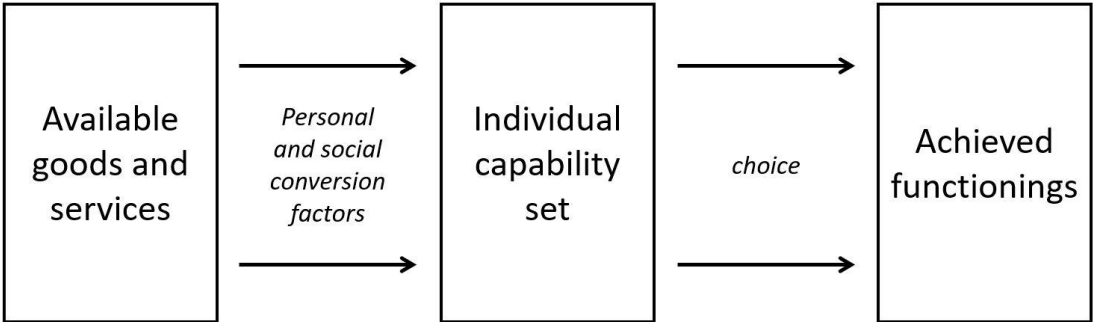
According to Sen himself, the capability approach is best understood as a framework of thought which can be used to conceptualise, measure and evaluate the agency, freedom and overall wellbeing of individuals (Robeyns, 2000; Sen, 2000). Unlike traditional approaches to welfare economics, the capability approach argues that it is not enough to know how many goods or services a person owns or uses to determine that person’s wellbeing. Instead, the value of a good or service is limited to the extent to which an individual is able to convert the characteristics of the good or service into valued states of being and doing (Sen, 1980; Sen

2000). Central to measuring and evaluating the wellbeing of an individual are therefore the concepts of *capabilities* and *functionings*. Whereas functionings refer to what a person actually is and does, capabilities are understood to refer to what a person *is able to* be or do. The distinction between the two concepts is decisive as it highlights interpersonal variations in the freedom that individuals have to lead the kind of life that they have reason to value:

“Functionings are, in a sense, more directly related to living conditions, since they are different aspects of living conditions. Capabilities in contrast, are notions of freedom, in the positive sense: what real opportunities you have regarding the life you may lead” (Sen, 1987: 36).

Although functionings can be understood as wellbeing achievements, they necessarily represent a subset of a person’s capabilities, i.e. the opportunities from which a person is able to choose freely. A person’s capability set, however, is contingent on numerous *conversion factors*, including personal, social and environmental characteristics, which restrict that person’s ability to convert the available goods or services into valued states of being and doing. Furthermore, a person’s *agency freedom*, defined as the ability to choose freely whether or not to make use of any of the available opportunities, is understood to form an integral part of that person’s capability set and is thus equally contingent on conversion factors. By implication, this means that a person’s functionings might be the result of a restricted set of capabilities, including restrictions in that person’s freedom to choose or not to choose from a (already restricted) set of capabilities (see Figure 2). The capability approach consequently does not consider functionings to be a good measure of the overall wellbeing of an individual, as they do not necessarily represent the life the individual has reason to value (Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 1992; Sen, 2000).

Figure 2: A Schematic Representation of the Capability Approach



Source: Own creation based on Sen (2000) and Robeyns (2000)

While the capability approach recognises the importance of both personal and social factors in shaping (i) a person's capability set, and (ii) the person's freedom to choose from this capability set, it has often been accused of downplaying the potentially constraining effects of social structure (DeJaeghere, 2016; Deneulin, 2014; Stewart, 2013). Furthermore, a number of researchers have pointed out that albeit emphasising the importance of choice, the capability approach as such does not include a theory of choice (Robeyns, 2000; Robeyns, 2017). To provide a full account of human action, those seeking to apply the approach empirically have therefore typically drawn on other strands of theory to develop specific capability theories that match the purpose of the study at hand (DeJaeghere & Lee, 2011; Hart, 2012; Lopéz-Fogués, 2016; Tikly & Barret, 2011). In the case of the RCM, the need to better theorise the respective role of structure and choice in the context of VET has led the authors to draw on Margret Archer's view of structure and agency (Powell & McGrath, 2019).

4.2. Archer's View of Structure and Agency

Grounded in critical realism, Archer's view of structure and agency is based on the assumptions that reality is stratified, that it exists independently from human understanding of it, and that it is not easily recognisable. In such a world, so Archer, social theories tend to suffer from what she terms 'conflation': Whereas some fail to recognise the power that society has over human beings ('upward conflation'), others deny the fact that human beings themselves are indispensable to the making of society ('downward conflation'). In addition, a third group of theories assume that structure and agency exist as a duality, whose properties constantly produce and reproduce one another ('central conflation'). To Archer, neither of these three conceptions form an adequate base for social analysis, as they obstruct any exploration of the interplay between the properties and causal powers of structure and agency. She therefore develops an alternative, 'non-conflationary' account which views structure and agency as two interdependent, but analytically "distinct strata of reality" (2003: 2).

To begin with, Archer maintains that the properties of structure objectively shape a person's situational context. The causal powers of this situational context are activated through the courses of action that the person might take and manifest themselves in the form of tendencies and countertendencies. These tendencies and countertendencies *condition* a person's agency to the extent that they bestow perceivable advantages and disadvantages upon different courses of action, and thus encourage or discourage her in following them through. At the same time,

however, Archer argues that human beings are “capable of resisting, repudiating, suspending or circumventing structural and cultural tendencies” (1995: 195). A person might therefore well decide to pursue a course of action despite being discouraged from it, or to forsake a course of action despite being encouraged to carry it out. This is due to the fact that human beings actively reflect on their situational context in relation to their concerns and strategically select courses of action to protect or promote what they care about most (Archer, 1995; Archer, 2003; Archer, 2007).

To better illustrate this point, Archer introduces the idea of the *internal conversation*. The internal conversation is best understood as a reflexive process, in the course of which human beings define what Archer calls a *life project*, i.e. “an end that is desired, however tentatively and nebulous, and some notion, however imprecise, of the course of action through which to accomplish it” (2003: 6). To define their individual life projects, human beings subjectively delineate and prioritise their *concerns* and – in consideration of their situational context – select courses of action that seem both feasible and desirable. By following their selected courses of action, they then deliberately (albeit always fallibly) activate the causal powers of their situational context. If successful, the activated causal powers will serve to either maintain or transform their situational context in a way that enables them to realise their individual life projects and to establish sustainable and satisfying *practices*¹². Structure itself must therefore be understood as the result of the result of human agency, wherein the properties of the most recent forms of structure may or may not comply with those of its precedents (Archer, 1995; Archer, 2003; Archer, 2007; Archer, 2012).

4.3. The Realist-Capability Model

Powell & McGrath (2019) observe several conceptual synergies between the capability approach and Archer’s view of structure and agency. For one, they point out that Archer’s understanding of a life project is similar to that of a valued functioning. Both life projects and valued functionings describe states of being or doing that are valued by the person at hand. In contrast to valued functionings, life projects however exist as aspirations, goals or preferences, which are shaped by the person’s individual concerns and motivate her actions. As such, the

¹² According to Archer, the ultimate goal of the internal conversation is to realise a *modus vivendi*, “a set of established practices that constitute a desirable way of life as defined by the subject in the light of his ultimate concerns” (Archer, 2012: 223).

formation of a life project can be understood to precede any attempt at actualising existing capabilities into valued functionings. Furthermore, it can serve as a proxy for a person's agency freedom¹³ and as a benchmark for identifying a person's valued capabilities, i.e. the capabilities that matter to her in the light of her concerns and her objective situational context (ibid.: 43). To insinuate this understanding of life projects, Powell & McGrath introduce the term *antecedent valued functioning* for referring to a person's preferred state of being or doing (ibid.: 26).

Powell & McGrath also note that a person's capabilities, defined as potential states of being or doing, exist in a similar space as what Archer calls the causal powers of structure. Both capabilities and the causal powers of structure are determined by the properties of a person's objective situational context. In addition, both represent but potentials, which may or may not be activated – or in the case of capabilities, actualised – by human choice (ibid.: 43). According to Archer, whether a person chooses to activate the causal powers of structure depends on whether that person feels that it will help to protect or promote her concerns (2003; 2012). Similarly, the capability approach implicitly suggests that if able to choose freely, a person will actualise those capabilities that she *values*, be that as an end in itself, or as a means to the end of achieving something else (Powell & McGrath, 2019: 25). From this, Powell & McGrath deduce that capabilities can be understood as “causal mechanisms that enable individuals to choose (or not to choose) to take action” (2019: 43).

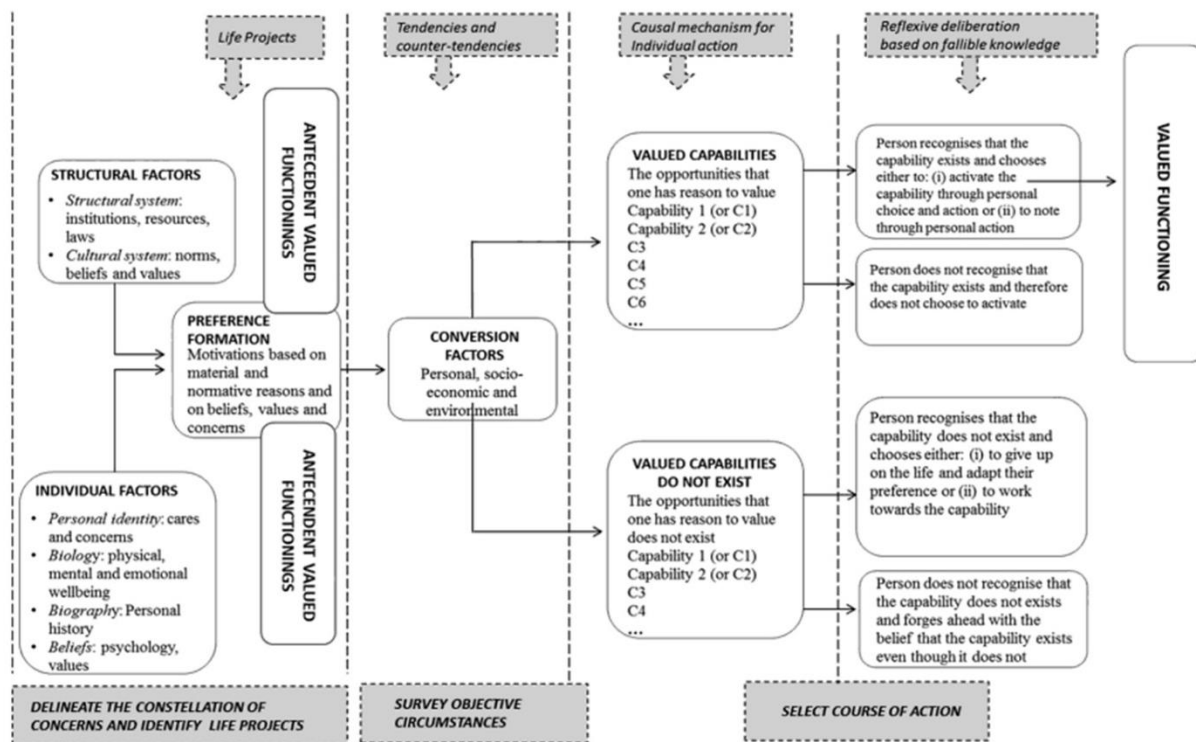
Based on these observations, Powell & McGrath integrate the capability approach with Archer's view of structure and agency to elaborate the RCM. The RCM departs from the notion of antecedent valued functionings, which are understood as goals, aspirations or preferred states of being or doing that motivate the actions of individuals. Analogous to Archer's life projects, the formation of antecedent valued functionings is the result of a reflexive process, in the course of which individuals weigh both structural factors (including institutions, resources and laws as well as cultural norms, beliefs and value systems) and personal factors (e.g. a person's individual cares and concerns, overall physical, mental and emotional wellbeing and previous experiences). Upon defining their antecedent valued functionings, individuals then use whatever manoeuvring space they have in their respective structural context to actualise the

¹³ A life project can be regarded as the wish to make use of certain opportunities, i.e. to actualise certain capabilities into functionings, while ignoring others. As such, life projects can serve to represent a person's freedom to choose or not to choose among a set of options.

same into valued functionings (i.e. actual states of being or doing). Their ability to do so however depends on their respective capability set, which, as suggested by the capability approach, is affected by personal, socioeconomic and environmental conversion factors (see figure 4).

Powell & McGrath highlight that these conversion factors should be understood in the critical realist sense of tendencies and countertendencies, which bestow advantages and disadvantages upon different courses of action and are activated through the individual's attempt to actualise their antecedent valued functionings (2019: 44). Since human beings are believed to reflect on their structural context and to activate its causal powers deliberately, the RCM regards them to have a “complex and real engagement [...] in shaping the set of current and future capabilities” (ibid.). At the same time, the two authors follow Archer in acknowledging that human beings are fallible in their knowledge about the causal powers of structure and the way in which they may or may not affect their individual capability sets. Whether a person succeeds at actualising her antecedent valued functionings into valued functionings thus not only depends on her ability to do so (i.e. the existence or non-existence of valued capabilities) but also on whether or not she recognises that she is (un)able to do so. To highlight this point, the RCM distinguishes between four possible cases (see figure 4).

In the first case, a person's valued capabilities (valued in light of her antecedent valued functionings) exist and the person at hand recognises that they do. As per the RCM, she will then choose to either actualise her valued capabilities into valued functionings or note the existence of her valued capabilities through her selected courses of action. In the second case, a person's valued capabilities exist but she fails to recognise it and therefore does not choose to activate them. In the third and fourth cases, respectively, a person's valued capabilities do not exist. If she recognises the same, she will either give up on the related antecedent valued functioning and adapt her preferences, or work towards the valued capabilities by making their existence as a new life project (antecedent valued functioning). Conversely, if she fails to recognise the non-existence of her valued capabilities, she might continue to forge ahead in the false belief that they do exist. Out of these four cases, only the first combination of events will lead to the immediate actualisation of a person's antecedent valued functionings (ibid.: 27).

Figure 4: The Realist-Capability Model

Source: Powell & McGrath, 2019: 27

4.4. Operationalising the Realist-Capability Model

The RCM describes a series of reflexive processes in the course of which individuals delineate their antecedent valued functionings (i.e. their aspirations, goals or preferences), review their existing capability set and actualise selected capabilities into valued states of being or doing. In contrast to conventional theories of behaviour or choice, the RCM does not aim to model the determinants or predict the outcome of choices. It rather explains the individual choice process as a complex interplay between structure and agency and emphasises that human beings enjoy temporal agential authority over their structural contexts. In so doing, the model places the focus of analysis on the individual's antecedent valued functionings – in other words, on the life the individual has reason to value – and thus provides a human development-oriented framework for understanding the educational choices of VET students.

To operationalise the RCM in the context of this study, the ability to pursue VET is understood as what Nussbaum calls a *combined* capability, “which may be defined as internal capabilities combined with suitable external conditions for the exercise of the function” (2000: 84-85). The ability to pursue VET thus necessitates the concurrence of favourable personal factors such as

the student's ability to learn, but also favourable socioeconomic and environmental factors, such as the means to pay for tuition and the existence of a VET institute. In the case of ITI students in the NCR of India, the ability to pursue VET was actualised into a functioning (i.e. the actual pursuit of VET). It is therefore safe to assume that the ability to pursue VET existed for all ITI students in India. What is more, the fact that these students decided to actualise the ability to pursue VET into a functioning indicates that they were rightly aware of their ability to do so, and that this capability was valued in light of their individual aspirations, goals or preferences at the time of decision making.

Based on this understanding, this study engages with the voices of a small sample of ITI students in the NCR of India and retraces the reflective processes that preceded their individual decision to pursue VET. The theoretical lens of the RCM allows the study to distinguish between the aspirations, goals and preferences that motivated their decision to enrol in their respective ITI and the personal, social and environmental factors that enabled or constrained them in doing so. Furthermore, the RCM helps this study to determine whether the students in the sample were motivated by adapted aspirations, goals or preferences and to understand which personal, social and environmental factors might have prompted their adaptation. By tracing their reflective processes, the study thus seeks to identify and develop an in-depth understanding of the reason(s) for which these students decided to pursue VET and hopes to inform the design and implementation of public policies that aim at making VET 'aspirational'.

5. Methods

This chapter will present the research design and underlying philosophical assumptions of this study as well as the applied methods for sampling, data collection and data analysis. Furthermore, the chapter will reflect on the matter of positionality and discuss ethical aspects and limitations of the applied methods.

5.1. Research Design

The research for this thesis departed from the central question of this study: Why do young people choose to pursue VET? This question first arose in the context of a VET project, for which the author of this thesis was working at that time, and which sought to develop policy recommendations on how best to attract India's youth to VET. Given the scarcity of research on the perspective of VET students and the lack of an overarching 'grand' theory of educational

choice, the author sought to engage with the perceptions, views and voices of VET students and develop an in-depth understanding of their lived experiences. The study thus adopted a qualitative, inductive approach (Creswell, 2013: 25), and the initial research design was built around the goal of emergence¹⁴.

While a pre-research literature review was conducted to inform the selection of data sources and methods, the study set out to explore the views and experiences of ITI students in the NCR of India relatively independently from existing concepts and frameworks. Semi-structured, individual interviews were used as the main source of data and the themes and categories that emerged from the first set of interviews served to refine the focus of the ones to follow. At the same time, the emerging themes and categories prompted the author to review additional bodies of adjacent literature and to search for a suitable framework that would help to conceptualise the relationship between the same. This search eventually led her to adopt the RCM as a theoretical lens, and to frame this thesis as an explanatory case study (Yin, 2017).

5.2. Philosophical Assumptions

The use of the RCM as a theoretical lens commits this study to certain philosophical assumptions. Most importantly, the study endorses Archer's view of structure and agency and therefore takes a critical realist stance to both ontology and epistemology. In terms of ontology, this means that VET institutes and VET students are recognised as *real* entities with *real* properties¹⁵. It is also assumed that each of these entities has its own causal powers, which exist independently of human understanding of them (Gorski, 2013a). Based on these assumptions, the study thus seeks to “activate, isolate, and observe the powers and tendencies of a particular entity” (ibid.: 665), namely those of VET institutes and VET students, with a view to contributing towards a better understanding of the same.

In terms of epistemology, critical realists deem it difficult, albeit not impossible, to rightly observe the causal powers of the entities under study (Gorski, 2013a; Longhofer et al., 2013; Prowse, 2010). This study therefore assumes that both the knowledge that pre-exists and the

¹⁴ More concretely, this means that the study began with an exploratory phase, followed by a phase that aimed at developing a better understanding of the preliminary results of the first phase and concluding with a phase of targeted data collection (Given, 2008: 247).

¹⁵ Critical realists, distinguish between three ontological domains: the domain of the *real*, which comprises all existing entities, their properties and causal powers, the domain of the *actual*, which comprises all causal powers that have been activated, and the domain of the *empirical*, which comprises all activated causal powers that are observed by human beings (Gorski, 2013a; Prowse, 2010).

knowledge that is generated through this study is “irreducible to what it is about and [that it] constitutes an object with its own level of social causality” (Longhofer et al., 2013). In addition, the study endorses the philosophical assumptions of ethical naturalism which underlie the capability approach. This includes the notion that ethical questions about the value of VET systems and institutions can be answered on the basis of facts about human beings and societies (Gorski, 2013a; Gorski, 2013b).

5.3. Site Description

The National Capital Region (NCR) is a central planning region located in the North of India. It is home to more than 46 million people and encompasses the National Capital Territory (NCT) of Delhi as well 23 adjacent districts from the neighbouring federal states of Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Haryana (GoI, 2017). As such, the NCR is one of the largest metropolitan areas in the world and displays a high density of higher general, technical and vocational educational institutes (GoI, 2016). For the purpose of this study, fieldwork was conducted in four districts of the NCR, including the NCT of Delhi, Alwar in the state of Rajasthan, Gurgaon in the state of Haryana and Ghaziabad in the state of Uttar Pradesh.

5.4. Sampling

A total of 21 students from six different ITIs in the NCR of India were interviewed for this study. At the level of ITIs, the sampling strategy is best described as *opportunistic*. This means that the author of this thesis made use of opportunities and followed new leads that presented themselves naturally (Creswell, 2013: 158). In her position as a junior advisor to a VET project, the author participated in a series of workshops and events in the NCR, during which she was able to establish contact to the principals of four ITIs. Similarly, contact to one of the ITIs was facilitated by a colleague, and another ITI was identified by a non-governmental organisation associated with the same VET project. The principal or contact person at the respective ITI then acted as gatekeepers, who in turn facilitated contact with the students.

At the level of individuals, the study began by using *convenience sampling*, meaning that the interviewees were chosen based on their availability and their willingness to participate in the study (Kapiszewski et al., 2015: 212). Upon establishing contact with an ITI, the author was invited to join one of the ongoing classes and to introduce herself and her research to the participating students. The respective gatekeeper then noted down the names of the students

who showed interest in participating in the study and arranged for separate time slots to conduct the interviews. Since the interviewees from the first four ITIs were men, the sampling strategy at the fifth and sixth ITI shifted to being somewhat more *purposeful*, as the author sought to include a larger number of women into the sample (ibid.; Creswell, 2013: 156).

The final sample includes both male and female ITI students aged 18 to 21 from a variety of trades as well as different educational, religious, geographical and socioeconomic backgrounds (see Appendix A for full overview of interviewees). Conversations with the staff and principals of the participating ITIs indicate that the trades that are featured in the sample are among the ten most popular trades in the NCR of India. Furthermore, the relative number of Hindus, Muslims and Christians in the sample roughly corresponds to their overall shares in the Indian population (GoI, 2001). It should however be highlighted that the sample and its characteristics are by no means representative of the target group. Table 1 gives an overview of some of the key characteristics of the sample.

Table 1: Sample Characteristics

	Specification	No. of interviewees
Age	18	10
	19	1
	20	3
	21	7
Sex	Women	5
	Men	16
Trade	Computer Operator & Programming Assistant (COPA)	5
	Electrician	6
	Fitter	4
	Carpenter	2
	Mechanic (Motor Vehicle)	3
	Mechanic (Refrigeration & Air Conditioner)	1
Religious affiliation (self-reported)	Hindu	16
	Muslim	3
	Christian	2
Caste affiliation ¹⁶	Scheduled Castes	4

¹⁶ The Government of India distinguishes between four categories of castes, namely *Scheduled Castes*, *Scheduled Tribes*, *Other Backwards Class* and *Forward Castes*. The caste lists are compiled irrespective of

	Other Backward Class	6
	Forward Castes	3
(self-reported)	No response	8
Previous educational level	Lower secondary	8
(self-reported)	Higher secondary	11
	Polytechnic	2
Highest educational level of either parent	Primary	4
	Lower secondary	6
	Higher secondary	5
(self-reported)	ITI certificate	2
	Undergraduate degree	4
Location of hometown	Rural area	2
	Semi-urban area	8
(self-reported)	Urban area	11
Average monthly household income	7.001 – 10.000 INR	6
	10.001 – 20.000 INR	13
(self-reported)	20.001 – 50.000 INR	2
Total		21 interviewees

5.5. Data Collection

The interviews took place in vacant classrooms or offices at the selected ITIs and had a duration of 20 to 40 minutes. Each interview began, once again, with an explanation about the purpose and the modalities of this study and the kind of questions that would be asked in the course of the interview. The author also provided additional information about herself and gave the interviewee the opportunity to voice any questions or doubts he or she might have. This proved important, as some of the interviewees initially mistook the purpose of the exercise for a job interview. Furthermore, all interviewees were informed about the facts that their participation was voluntary, that their identities would be protected from both direct and deductive disclosure and that they had the right to withdraw their participation at any point in time. Based on this information, all interviewees gave their consent to partaking in this study, which was formalised through a signed consent form (see Appendix C).

religion and socioeconomic status. Due to their historic disadvantage, fix quotas are reserved for SC, ST and OBC in education and government employment schemes as well as political bodies (GoI, 2019).

Since the author of this thesis speaks but a few words of Hindi, she was assisted by a Hindi-English interpreter in all interviews. The interviewees were given the option of conducting their interview in either language. While some of the interviewees seemed more comfortable with Hindi, others preferred English or switched back and forth between the two languages as the interview progressed¹⁷. To capture their precise choice of words in either language, all interviews were audio-recorded with the prior consent of the interviewees by using a smartphone application. Furthermore, each interviewee was asked to fill out a short quantitative questionnaire¹⁸, which covered general background information such as age, sex, religious affiliation, caste affiliation, educational background and socio-economic status (see Appendix D).

In line with Bryman (2012: 471), an interview guide featuring 13 open-ended questions and a list of possible prompts was developed prior to the first interviews (see Appendix B). This guide was however used flexibly, and the wording, sequence and number of questions and probes that were asked in each interview was adjusted to match the flow of the conversation. In the first round of interviews, all questions and probes revolved loosely around the interviewees' individual rationales for pursuing VET. Most importantly, the interviewees were asked why they had decided to enrol in their respective ITI, which advantages and disadvantages they associated with VET and what they hoped to achieve by pursuing an ITI certificate. As the fieldwork progressed, the questions and probes were increasingly informed by the results of the previous interviews and therefore became narrower in focus.

5.6. Data Analysis

The interview recordings were transcribed and – in case they contained parts in Hindi – translated into English, immediately upon return from the respective ITI. This enabled the author to gauge the quality of the data that had been collected on site and to improve the way in which questions and probes were phrased in the interviews to follow. To minimise the risk of meaning getting lost in the process of translation, the transcriptions and translations were done by the same native Hindi speaker, who had assisted the author as an interpreter during the

¹⁷ 8 of the interviews were conducted in Hindi, 5 were conducted in English and the remaining 8 interviews were conducted in a mixture of both languages, some leaning more towards English, some leaning more towards Hindi.

¹⁸ The questionnaire was reviewed for clarity and cultural appropriateness by the gatekeepers of the selected ITIs prior to the interviews. Based on the advice of the respective gatekeepers, the questionnaire was administered in English, as they argued that this was the general language of all written course material at the selected ITIs and that the interviewees would be most comfortable reading English.

interviews. In a second step, the translated interview transcripts were digitised and coded using the software NVivo 12. To begin with, each interview transcript was created as a case node and attributes (e.g. age, sex, educational background) were assigned to each case (i.e. interviewee) based on the background information that was collected through the quantitative questionnaires. This allowed the author to run cross-tabulate analyses between the cases and their attributes and to determine and compare the frequency with which certain responses, i.e. the emergent codes or themes, were mentioned across the different case attributes.

In a third step, each interview transcript was coded following an *emergent* coding scheme (Creswell, 2013: 185). Initial coding was done at the level of actions and processes and resulted in more than 200 codes. These initial codes were aggregated and sorted into broader categories of meaning (e.g. aspirations, structural enablers, structural constraints), which in turn were sorted into ten overarching categories (i.e. reasons for pursuing VET). As the coding progressed, it transpired that the overarching categories and the respective subcategories which had emerged from the data fit well with the categories of the Realist-Capability-Model (RCM) as presented by Powell & McGrath (2019). At the same time, it became apparent that some of the overarching reasons for pursuing VET were mutually exclusive, while others seemed to go hand in hand with one another. Given this complexity, the results of this study are presented on a case-by-case basis, following the logic of the theoretical framework of the RCM.

5.7. Ethical Considerations

In line with Tracy's four-dimensional understanding of research ethics (2010: 847), procedural, situational, relational and exiting ethics were reflected upon throughout the preparation and implementation of this study and played a paramount role in the selection of the applied methods. With regard to *procedural ethics*, the study followed the principles outlined in the LUMID Ethical Guidelines for Fieldwork¹⁹. Most importantly, this means that all interviewees gave their prior informed consent to partaking in this study. To protect the identity of the interviewees from both direct and deductive disclosure, pseudonyms are used to reference the interviewees in the write-up of this thesis, and the names of the ITIs that were included the sample remain anonymous. Furthermore, an agreement regarding the duty to safeguard the confidentiality of the information shared by interviewees was signed between the author and

¹⁹ internal document prepared for students of the LUMID programme at Lund University, dated 17.12.2013

the interpreter, and all data that was collected in the course of fieldwork was stored in a password-protected file on the author's personal computer.

With regard to *situational ethics*, the author of this thesis sought to abide by the principle of 'do no harm' at all times. This entailed, for instance, ensuring that potentially sensitive topics were not discussed in the presence of teachers or other students²⁰, and only to the extent that the interviewees felt comfortable. With regard to *relational ethics*, interviewees were encouraged to comment on the structure of the quantitative questionnaire and to exchange or eliminate any questions that they deemed inappropriate. Furthermore, interviewees were given time and space to co-define the tone and focus of their individual interviews by questioning the author about her motivation and by raising concerns and topics that mattered to them personally. With regard to *exitting ethics*, the author considered the potential impact that her research might have on the lives of the interviewees and was mindful of her use of language while developing the write-up of this thesis. Above, all, the stories and perspectives of the interviewees are therefore portrayed in a way that safeguards their agency and overall wellbeing.

5.8. Positionality and Limitations

The matter of positionality is believed to have played a central role in both the fieldwork and the writing process of this thesis (Hammett et al., 2015). As a white female with European background and appearance, the author stood out markedly at all sites of data collection. Her ascribed identity triggered utmost courtesy and compliance on the part of the gatekeepers and seemed to grant her relatively easy access to the field. At the same time, it is important to recognise that this same identity is likely to have influenced the choice of classes which the author was invited to join and that this might have co-determined the final student sample. In fact, one of the gatekeepers informed the author upon completion of the interviews that he had selected a class which he deemed to be 'of interest', and which was attended by a more 'outspoken' group of students.

Furthermore, the author's ascribed identity seemed to have influenced the way in which students were briefed about her visit. At two occasions, the responsible gatekeepers introduced the author as a representative of an international development organisation, which led to the

²⁰ While the classrooms or offices that were selected for the interviews did provide for some privacy, the bustle of everyday school life made it close to impossible to prevent other students or teachers from entering the respective interview locations inadvertently. In such cases, the author paused the interview until the newcomer had left, or else changed the topic of the conversation towards less personal matters.

misconception among the students that the interviews were part of a recruitment process. This misconception might have been amplified by the facts that the author was accompanied by a male interpreter and that some of the interviews took place in a teacher's office. To prevent this, all following interviews were conducted in vacant classrooms and the author was careful to explain her motivation, the role of the interpreter and the purpose of her study in detail, both in class and at the onset of every individual interview.

With regard to the interview process, it is important to highlight that the language barrier between the author and the Hindi-speaking interviewees, and the resultant need for an interpreter, complicated the creation of rapport. While the interpreter's mediation was extremely well conducted, it hampered a natural flow of conversation and limited the author's ability to react to certain cues or an unusual choice of words. The fact that a male interpreter sat in on the interviews might have also deterred some of the female interviewees from sharing their thoughts and experiences as openly as they would have done otherwise. Nevertheless, both male and female interviewees seemed increasingly at ease with the situation as the interviews progressed and made use of the opportunity to question the author about herself. In two cases, the roles of the author and the interviewee positively reversed towards the end of the interview, and the author found herself being questioned in detail about the German education system, her reasons for coming to India and her views on Delhi and its people.

Lastly, it is important to acknowledge that the author's positionality is likely to have influenced both the interviewees' responses and the author's interpretation of the same. In line with the epistemological assumptions outlined in section 5.2., this study accepts that the author was only able to observe whichever causal powers were activated in the course of fieldwork (the domain of the *actual*) – be it because of or in spite of her positionality – and that these activated causal powers are not to be equated with the totality of all existing powers (the domain of the *real*). The motives and reasons for pursuing VET as presented in Chapter 6 should therefore be considered a mere fraction of the entirety of all motives and reasons. What is more, the study recognises that the author's experience of these activated powers (the domain of the *empirical*) was filtered by her own biography and conceptual beliefs and therefore may or may not coincide with the domain of the *actual* (Gorski, 2013a; Prowse, 2010). Despite these limitations, the study believes to make a valuable contribution by challenging or refining existing hypotheses about the internal conversations of ITI students in the NCR India and by furthering the general understanding of why young people choose to pursue VET.

6. Results

This chapter presents the main reasons for which the ITI students who participated in this study decided to pursue VET. In line with the theoretical framework of the RCM, it will do so by highlighting their (adapted) antecedent valued functionings (i.e. aspirations, goals and preferences), their understanding of the objective situational context with which they were confronted at the time of decision-making, and the reflexive process that led them to see VET as a valued and viable option. Due to the word limit on this thesis, each of the identified reasons will be illustrated by the stories of only one or two interviewees. This should however not be mistaken to mean that the respective reason was their only motive for pursuing VET, or that the selected interviewees were the only ones to mention the respective reason. In fact, most of the interviewees were motivated by several reasons and most reasons were mentioned by several interviewees. Table 2 provides an overview of the identified reasons for pursuing VET and of the pseudonyms of the interviewees who mentioned the respective reason.

6.1. “I don’t want to be a burden” – VET as Way of Supporting the Family

For four of the interviewees, a key reason for pursuing VET was the wish to be able to support their families. Rashmi, for example, is the eldest of four sisters. She had scored good marks in 10th grade, which would have allowed her to continue to PU college. During her last year in lower secondary school, however, her family’s financial situation changed. While Rashmi’s parents still encouraged her to pursue further education, she remembers that some of her relatives had doubts:

“My parents told me to complete my studies, because you never know, I might land a very good job and that would be helpful for the family also. But my aunts told my father that after marriage, she will go to some other house and live with her in-laws. She won’t stay here. So why are you financing her studies?”

Rashmi was worried that her studies would put additional strain on her family’s income and that she would become “a burden on [her] family”. At the same time, however, she believed that further studies would help her in her ambition “to get a good job” and “to help [her] younger sisters”. Upon graduation from lower secondary school, she informed herself on the internet and discussed different educational options with her family. It was then that she learned about the Computer Operator and Programming Assistant (COPA) course at a nearby ITI. Since the

Table 2: Identified Reasons for Pursuing VET

		Pseudonym																		
Ajay	male	21	Electrician	Higher Secondary	X															
Ankit	male	21	Electrician	Polytechnic																
Deepika	female	20	COPA	Higher Secondary																
Devendra	male	18	Mechanic (Refr. & Air Con.)	Lower Secondary																
Harish	male	21	Electrician	Lower Secondary			X													
Jitendra	male	20	Mechanic (Motor Vehicle)	Higher Secondary																
Karthik	male	21	Fitter	Higher Secondary																
Lelia	female	18	COPA	Higher Secondary																
Mehul	male	21	Carpenter	Lower Secondary			X													
Naveen	male	18	Electrician	Higher Secondary																
Nitesh	male	18	Fitter	Higher Secondary			X													
Prakash	male	18	Fitter	Higher Secondary																
Rahul	male	21	Mechanic (Motor Vehicle)	Polytechnic																
Rajeev	male	18	Electrician	Lower Secondary																
Rashmi	female	20	COPA	Lower Secondary																
Rohit	male	18	Mechanic (Motor Vehicle)	Lower Secondary																
Sudha	female	21	COPA	Higher Secondary			X													
Sunil	male	18	Carpenter	Higher Secondary																
Surinder	male	18	Electrician	Lower Secondary																
Tanisha	female	18	COPA	Higher Secondary																
Umesh	male	19	Fitter	Lower Secondary																

COPA course “is only 700 rupees per year – it is almost free”, she was able to convince her aunts that this was a good investment, and with her family’s approval, she decided to enrol.

Similar to Rashmi, Naveen remembers that his family ran into financial difficulties when he was in 10th grade. Nevertheless, he continued to PU college as his aspiration was to get a job in the public sector:

“Graduation [from PU college] has a larger scope. Like you can become a teacher in a government school or a government official. I had plans to prepare for a government job because I wanted to make my family financially stable.”

Naveen recalls that he “was weak in maths and science” in grade 10 and that his teachers discouraged him from continuing with these subjects in grades 11 and 12. He also remembers discussing his family’s financial situation with his teachers. Upon graduation from PU college, his teachers advised him to pursue a Bachelor of Arts (B.A.), and then Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) to pursue the career of a schoolteacher. He however decided to enrol at the local ITI to become an electrician instead. He explains:

“I would have liked to do B.A. and then B.Ed. Those fields offer good salary and it would have helped me more in improving the conditions of my family. But my father is not a rich man. It would have been too much of a burden on him.”

Realising that he would need to complete two Bachelor degrees to become a teacher, Naveen looked into other ways of qualifying himself for a government job. He heard that the Delhi Metro and the Jaipur Metro offered many job opportunities for electricians. He understood that as an electrician, he would have “to work for long hours and do a lot of hard work” to support his family. However, he also felt that, as an electrician, he would be able to support his family sooner, both financially and through his newly acquired practical knowledge:

“I preferred ITI because it will help me to bring a salary soonly. But there were other reasons as well. I wanted to acquire the skill of repairing household things myself. If I do the electrician trade, I can take care of that myself instead of taking them to a mechanic.”

6.2. “Something that is cost-effective” – VET as a Compromise

Whereas Rashmi and Naveen chose VET to support their families, Sudha had to strike a balance between a restricted budget and her aspiration “to continue studying” and “to prepare for a

government job”. She remembers that her parents were generally supportive of her aspiration and that “they want that [she] work[s] after [her] education”. She was, however, also aware of the fact that her “family had financial problems and that they could not pay a lot for [her] education”. She remembers:

“After graduation [from PU college], I decided to join a coaching centre²¹. But the charges were very high, and moreover, my father didn’t agree. My sister advised me to join an ITI.”

Sudha learned from her sister that “the teachers at this ITI [the ITI that Sudha ended up enrolling in] are very good” and that “the government gives more job opportunities to candidates from this ITI”. Furthermore, she felt that the COPA trade in particular offered good opportunities for the future:

“My sister oriented me towards the COPA trade. According to her, computers are the future, and wherever you go, we need people who are skilled in handling the computers. So that’s why I think it is one of the best fields of study.”

Given these factors, she reasons:

“ITI is something that is cost-efficient. It has a lot of scope if you want to work with computers and if you want a government job. And the second thing is that women candidates get a lot of advantages. We get a bus pass and with the bus pass we can travel anywhere. Women candidates also get scholarships. So that’s why I think ITI is the best.”

6.3. “I could continue with my friends” – VET as a Way of Being with Friends/Family

Harish had attended a local government school and “was scoring good marks in maths and science”. After completing grade 10, he considered continuing to PU college and pursuing an engineering degree. But he soon found out that “in [his] village, there was no 10+2 in Science”. At the same time, nearly all of Harish’s friends decided to enrol in the electrician trade at a nearby ITI. Harish remembers that his father encouraged him to do the same:

²¹ There are numerous coaching centres in the NCR which offer preparatory trainings for the Civil Services Examination (CSE). The CSE is a nationwide competitive examination which is part of the recruitment process of various Civil Services of the Government of India, such as the Indian Police Service, the Indian Administrative Service and the Indian Foreign Service.

“My father told me to go and take admission at this ITI. He said that the teaching here will be good and that there is a future in ITI certificate. He also said that if I go and take admission here, I could continue studying with my friends and that I would enjoy myself.”

It was Harish’s long-term aspiration “to work for a big company with a big name. Something like Infosys or Vipro, that is well-known”. In the short-term, he however wanted to work somewhere close to his hometown so that he would be able “to keep living with his family”. In the light of these aspirations and his structural context, VET was the best option. He explains:

“My family is from [anonymous town]. In the surroundings of [anonymous town], there are many industries. ITI prepares you for a technical job in the industry. So, I wanted to do ITI and afterwards get a job nearby my family’s home.”

6.4. “I wasn’t old enough” – VET as a Stopgap

Prakash graduated from PU college at the age of 16. He had scored good marks in mathematics and physics in grade 10 and took science courses in grades 11 and 12. Upon graduation from PU college, his teachers advised him to go on to university and to pursue a Bachelor of Science (B.Sc.). But he was doubtful about whether a B.Sc. programme would help him to get a job:

“B.Sc. is not expensive so I could have done that. Some of my friends and people from my village have done B.Sc. But they don’t have a job. I haven’t seen anyone with a B.Sc. degree doing a good job. Companies don’t hire them. So I thought that if I do B.Sc., it would be of no use.”

Furthermore, it was Prakash’s aspiration to work for the Indian Railways:

“My uncle took me on a train ride to Jaipur once when I was a child. Ever since, I wanted to be a locomotive pilot or a ticket examiner. ITI is not required for the railways. They only require 10+2. But I wasn’t old enough.”

The minimum age requirement for the Indian Railways is 18 years. Prakash therefore wanted to “do something useful” that would enable him to bridge the time until he came of age. He therefore decided to join a two-year fitter course at a local ITI. Prakash recounts that his teachers and classmates were surprised when he told them that he was not planning to enrol in university, but that he was set in his decision to pursue a career at the railways:

“Since I had science subjects in my 12th, people told me to do B.Sc. They also told me, what is the use of studying science in PU if, at the end, I had to go to ITI. But my decision was to do ITI and then to try for the railway [...] I turned 18 recently. From now on I will apply.”

6.5. “It is good to do both” – VET as an Added Value

Two of the female interviewees pursued both VET and an academic degree at the same time. For them, VET represented an added value to their respective degrees. Deepika, for example, graduated from PU college at the age of 18. Her aspiration was “to continue [her] education and to work also”. With her parents’ permission, she enrolled in an English Honours programme at a well reknown Indian university, which allowed her to study from home:

“It’s an open learning programme, so they [the university] send you the study materials and you have to study on your own. We have classes only on Sundays and they grade you based on your assignments.”

At the same time, Deepika tried to get admission for a two-year COPA course at a local ITI. She was admitted to the ITI at her first attempt, but “didn’t get [her] desired trade”. She therefore focused on her Honours degree for one year and then tried again, this time successfully. Deepika remembers that she was the only one in her social circle to pursue both a degree and an ITI certificate:

“My friends weren’t interested in the COPA course because it’s an 8 hours work. It starts at 8:30 and finishes at 5:30. But I think it is a great opportunity. We have access to computers all the time and they are offering us courses in English and also in personality development. So it is really good.”

Deepika also explains that she had to distance herself from the opinion of her relatives:

“People are of this mentality that women should not step out of the home. They should get married and take care of the home. [...] In my home also, my relatives are not very supportive, though my parents are very supportive. But the other relatives, they look down upon me. So I had to be away from all those people and be in my own space.”

When asked why it was important to her to pursue both the Honours degree and the COPA certificate, she explains:

“The degree is useful, but I am not able to go to [anonymous university] regularly. ITI is something that is regular. I can come every day, Monday to Friday. Plus, we can stay here for 8 hours. The university teaches us a lot of things and we get our degrees. On the other hand in ITI, we learn certain aptitude and practical things and we become skilled to work. So it is good to do both.”

6.6. “My memory power was a problem.” – VET as a Second Chance

For three of the interviewees, VET represented a second chance at pursuing higher education. One of them is Rajeev. Rajeev completed lower secondary school at the age of 16. It was his dream “to become an engineer”, so he wanted to enrol in the Science stream of PU college. His teachers however advised his parents to send him into the Arts stream, as his grade 10 marks in mathematics and physics were not good enough. Rajeev’s parents were supportive of his goal of becoming an engineer. They considered the option of sending him to a Polytechnic, but they were worried that he would not be able to cope with the course work. Rajeev explains:

“My memory power was a problem. I want to do engineering, so this means I will have to do a three years [Polytechnic] diploma course. After, I can join an engineering college. But my parents thought that in diploma, a risk is there that it is too difficult for me to learn. That’s why they said I should come to the ITI first.”

Together with his parents, Rajeev decided to enrol in the electrician trade at a local ITI, which will enable him to “get the basic knowledge about the electrical machines and skills in installation” and to “understand what is happening in the diploma course”. After completing the ITI course, he is planning to apply for a diploma course in Electrical Engineering.

6.7. “I can change my whole life” – VET as a Steppingstone

Five of the male interviewees valued the option of pursuing VET as a steppingstone to a different life. Jitendra is one of them. He had opted for the Commerce stream in PU college. He achieved good marks in grade 12 and made plans to pursue a Bachelor of Commerce (B.Com.). But then his father fell ill and passed away only a few months after his graduation from PU college. He remembers that his father’s death left the family in a difficult situation:

“When my father died, I spend some money for the hospital, 15 Lakhs. So I had to cover that 15 Lakhs. My sister was also there, I had to take care of her. And some family problems were there also. So I had to drop out and get a job quickly.”

It was Jitendra’s long-term aspiration “to get married and to build up one house in [his] village”. Furthermore, he wanted “to work for a large MNC [multi-national corporation]” and “to work outside the country for some time”. But he found it difficult to build a career without any further certificate or degree. He explains:

“Jobs based on 12th standard are not that good. After 12th, I was working for a finance company. But I didn’t get permanent, so I was suffering. After that, I got a job at this automobile company, working with spare parts. I spent two years there, but it was hard work and there was no scope for higher positions. Everyone was telling me that without diploma, it’s like that.”

Jitendra discussed his frustration about his employment situation with some of his friends and family members. He recalls that “someone told [him] that at ITI, [he] can learn a technician job and that would be better”. In the end, he decided to enrol in the Mechanic (Motor Vehicle) trade at a local ITI. He reasons:

“In the surroundings of [anonymous town], there are many industries: Honda, Exide, Scania is there. And there are many opportunities in the technical field, even outside the country. My brother [cousin on his father’s side of the family] also went to this same ITI. He went to a gathering and asked for a job. That time they gave him a visiting card, and in the end, he went to Dubai to work. I can also have this opportunity and change my life, my whole lifestyle.”

6.8. “I just want to get a job fast” – VET as a Shortcut

Surinder completed lower secondary school at the age of 16. His teachers advised him to opt for the Arts stream in grades 11 and 12 and to then pursue a teaching career. Surinder remembers that his classmates all decided to continue their education and that they urged him “to do PU college”. But Surinder’s main aspiration at the time was to “get a job fast”. He explains:

“My family’s financial situation is not good. 10.000 Rupees are not enough to survive. Therefore, I thought of studying at an ITI and then find a good job in some company quickly.”

Surinder considered the option of continuing to PU college, because his friends insisted that graduation would improve his career prospects. But he was wary of the fact that it would be a long time until he could actually start working:

“My friends all told me I won’t get a good job if I don’t do PU. But under PU, all you want to do is study, study, study. And if you do the teaching line, then it takes a lot of time to get a job after graduation. First one has to do a Bachelor of Arts, then B.Ed. and then apply for a teacher’s job. It is a long procedure.”

Furthermore, Surinder was convinced that it would be relatively easy for him to get a job if he pursued an ITI certificate in the electrician trade. He argues:

“After passing out from this course, one has chances of getting good jobs. Many companies in my area are looking for electricians. Even the government is giving opportunities to the candidates from ITI. So I think it is easy to get a job after ITI.”

Surinder therefore decided to “take admission at this ITI” and is now pursuing a two-year course in the electrician trade.

6.9. “It guarantees some kind of stability” – VET as a Safety Net

Six of the interviewees highlighted that one of the reasons for which they decided to pursue VET is that it provides a kind of safety net. Umesh, for example, graduated from lower secondary school with good marks, which would have allowed him to continue to PU college or a Polytechnic. He however decided to pursue an ITI certificate first. He explains:

“In my district, my home, my street, my town, people say that you must have an ITI degree because it will guarantee you a job. There is no point studying further. You must do ITI.”

Umesh remembers that “[his] friends told [him] to do PU”. He however felt that “in PU, there is no scope” and that “companies prefer ITI pass-outs”. He recounts:

“I said, there [PU college] I will not go. If I do anything, I will do ITI and then diploma, because all the companies will take us if we do ITI. If you do both, they will take us right away and give a nice salary. There is future in ITI, that’s why I came to do ITI first.”

A similar reasoning is given by Leila. Leila graduated from PU college at the age of 18. Her main aspiration was “to get a government job” and “to become independent”. Like Deepika,

Leila decided to pursue both an ITI certificate and a university degree at the same time. Her priorities however lay with the ITI course. She explains:

“One must do ITI because it does guarantee some kind of stability. If you go through ITI education, for sure, you will get a job for 10.000 to 15.000. But this guarantee is not there if you go through university education. You might remain unemployed.”

6.10. “I want to excel in my field” – VET as a Path to Technical Expertise

Lastly, two of the interviewees pursued VET because they felt that it was the best (or the only) way to gain technical expertise in their preferred field. One of the two is Tanisha. Tanisha graduated from PU college with good marks, and her teachers told her to continue to university. But her aspirations lay elsewhere:

“So according to me, computers are the future. Since 9th grade I am very much interested in computers. In 10th, I studied graphics and in 11th and 12th, I studied more about computers. I want to make a career out of programming and get a higher-level position in the IT sector. So I decided to enrol in the COPA course.”

Tanisha remembers that she had done “a lot of research” to understand which educational pathways she could take to achieve her aspiration. She found that most people in her social circle “didn’t know what was an ITI and how many courses they offer”. She explains:

“I found that there are many courses. Some are engineering courses, some are non-engineering courses like fashion designing. And there are courses in computer sciences. I thought the COPA course is very good because it is 8 hours a day. All the time, computers are available. Teachers are available, too, so I can practice and ask for help.”

Even though Tanisha was the first one in her family to go to an ITI, her father and her other relatives were very supportive of her aspiration: “They told me to follow my dream and to concentrate on my studies”. She also spoke to one of her cousins who is a computer teacher about the COPA course, and he confirmed her impression that “ITI is quite a professional thing”. She therefore decided to enrol.

Like Tanisha, Sunil was very clear about the field he would like to work in in the future. He explains:

“Once I was done with my 10th standard, I was given the option of getting into PU college. I chose science, because I had an interest in science. But in 11th and 12th, I got more interested in the practical side of science. So, what I chose is carpentry, because I love carpentry. [...] I want to become a Master carpenter.”

Upon graduation from PU college, Sunil was looking for “a course that let [him] directly, practically apply [his] skills” and that would allow him “to learn more about carpentry”. But he could not find anything apart from an ITI course. He remembers being doubtful about whether the ITI course would help him achieve his aspiration of becoming a Master carpenter:

“You see, in carpentry, it’s about perfection and attention to detail. I can have a real good finish on wood, or I can have just like an ok, not-so-good thing. [...] From what I could see, ITI can get me a secure job. But if I want to, you know, excel in my field, I need to get a grip on many more things. I felt it would be better if you could study carpentry like you do engineering.”

Furthermore, Sunil was confronted with doubts on the part of his parents and relatives:

“Most of the parents want their children to go study theoretical things. [...] Like if I am interested in something that is to do with directly applying my skills, it is not considered as good as other degrees. I mean, it doesn’t give you the same status as the rest do. So, it’s more of, you know, ‘please get into university, please pursue diploma’.”

Eventually, he however decided that the ITI course was the only viable option for him:

“At the back of my mind, I know that ITI is not as great as an engineering degree. But I wanted to pursue carpentry. And since I couldn’t find any college that offered carpentry at the same level as engineering degree, I had to take this route.”

7. Discussion

The results of this study as presented in Chapter 6 show that young people in the NCR of India value the option of pursuing VET for a variety of different reasons. As indicated by the RCM, these reasons need to be viewed in the light of their individual aspirations, goals and preferences (i.e. antecedent valued functionings) and understood as an effort to promote the same within their respective situational contexts. While it lies beyond the scope of this thesis to develop a full-fledged capability list for ITI students, their antecedent valued functionings indicate some

of the valued states of being or doing that a ‘VET for human development’ account for the Indian context would need to include.

Firstly, nearly all students stated that they hoped that VET would help them to “get a good job”. Definitions of what constitutes a good job differed from student to student. Some of the students had a very clear idea of the field, industry or type of company they would like to work in and expressed their love for the tasks that working in these fields would involve (e.g. Prakash, Sunil, Tanisha). Others described their dream job more vaguely in terms of the facilities that their future workplace should have or in terms of the lifestyle that their future job would entail (e.g. Jitendra, Umesh, Leila). Irrespective of how they imagined their future job and workplace, their descriptions of the same highlight the fact that they decided to pursue VET to gain access to a certain *quality* of employment, featuring antecedent valued functionings such as engaging in creative, fulfilling or rewarding tasks and a working in safe and enabling environment. To put it in Ajay’s words: “I mean, if I had just wanted a salary fast, I would have just started working directly for any company. But I hope to get something better than that”. In this context, the purpose of VET thus needs to be understood as furthering the ability of young people to secure *quality* employment – an idea that includes but goes beyond the narrow assumption of ‘VET for work’.

Secondly, the students’ decision to pursue VET was also motivated by numerous antecedent valued functionings that lie well outside the sphere of employment. In this context, the purpose of VET must be understood as enhancing their ability to make a palpable contribution within their families (e.g. Rashmi and Naveen), to continue to study for the sake of learning (e.g. Sudha), to stay in their hometown and be close to their friends and family (Harish), to engage in a meaningful and worthwhile activity (e.g. Prakash), to build a house and getting married (e.g. Jitendra), to expand their career mobility (e.g. Jitendra and Mehul), to become financially independent from their parents (e.g. Leila and Surinder), to do well academically (e.g. Rashmi and Rajeev), to have a sense of security (e.g. Umesh and Leila) and to become experts in their fields of choice (e.g. Sunil and Tanisha). In some of the cases, these antecedent valued functionings were in fact adapted antecedent valued functionings, as previous reflexive processes led them to believe that their original aspirations, goals and preferences were unattainable (e.g. Naveen and Jitendra). Irrespective of whether they were adapted or not, however, these antecedent valued functionings mattered to the students at the time of decision making in the light of their respective situational context and must therefore be taken seriously.

This focus on the students' antecedent valued functionings is not to be mistaken as a neglect of the impact of structure. The results of this study show that ITI students in the NCR of India come from a wide variety of religious, geographical, educational and socioeconomic backgrounds. Activated by their antecedent valued functionings, the causal powers of these backgrounds confronted each of the students in the sample with a vast variety of structural and cultural tendencies, which either encouraged or discouraged them from pursuing VET. In some cases, these structural and cultural tendencies aligned well with their antecedent valued functionings, which led them to regard the ability to pursue VET as a valued and viable option from the start (e.g. Prakash, Surinder, Umesh, Tanisha). In other cases, VET presented itself as an option only after the students had adapted their aspirations, goals and preferences in response to the tendencies of their structural contexts (e.g. Sudha, Deepika). In yet other cases, VET itself provided a way of "resisting, repudiating, suspending or circumventing structural and cultural tendencies (Archer, 1995: 195) to pursue their (adapted) aspirations, goals and preferences (e.g. Rashmi, Naveen, Sudha, Harish, Rajeev, Jitendra). Irrespective of the properties of their individual contexts, however, the fact remains that all students chose to activate the capability of pursuing VET because they (fallibly) believed that this would help them to actualise the aspirations, goals and preferences (i.e. antecedent valued functionings) that mattered to them at the time. The purpose of VET must therefore be located in this context.

8. Conclusion

This study has sought to begin a process of reimagining the purpose of VET in India within the parameters of the human development paradigm. The study approached this task by engaging with the voices of 21 ITI students in the NCR of India and by developing an in-depth understanding for why they chose to pursue VET. Through the theoretical lens of the realist-capability model, the study retraced their reflexive processes (i.e. the internal conversations) that preceded their decision to enrol in VET and identified ten key reasons for which the students in the sample viewed VET as a valued and viable option. By locating these reasons within the context of their individual aspirations, goals and preferences (i.e. antecedent valued functionings), the study shows that the students' motives for pursuing VET include but go well beyond the narrow idea of 'VET for work'. This should not be understood as an effort of arguing away the impact of structure, as to do so would mean to suffer from what Archer (2003) calls 'upward conflation'. In line with the RCM, the study results however show that all students

actively reflected on their respective situational contexts and that they ultimately chose to pursue VET because they valued this option in the light of their antecedent valued functionings.

With regard to the focus of existing and future VET research and practice, two key messages emerge from this study. Firstly, the study results show that the predominant account about the role and purpose of VET in India is highly limited. The students in the sample did not only pursue VET to effectuate their immediate employability. Rather, they were motivated by a great variety of aspirations, goals and preferences, which mattered to them in the light of the structural and cultural tendencies of their respective situational contexts. If VET is to become ‘aspirational’, these aspirations, goals and preferences need to be taken seriously by both researchers and policy makers. Secondly, the results of this study challenge the predominant idea in existing VET research that ITI students are pushed into VET by their structural circumstances. The students in the sample did not choose VET because they had no other option. Rather, they made use of their own causal powers as human beings and identified the option of pursuing VET as a way of maintaining or transforming their respective situational contexts. By recognising ITI students as human agents, who have the capacity for effectuating structural change, future VET research and practice on and from the Indian context can move beyond the idea of ‘VET for growth’ and explore the ways in which VET may contribute towards building more equitable and sustainable societies.

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Appendix A: Detailed Sample Overview

	Pseudonym	Sex	Age	Trade	Religious affiliation (self-reported)	Case affiliation (self-reported)	Previous educational level (self-reported)	Highest educational level of either parent (self-reported)	Location of hometown (self-reported)	Average monthly household income (self-reported)
	Ajay	male	21	Electrician	Hindu	Scheduled Castes	Higher Secondary	Lower Secondary	semi-urban	10,001 - 20,000 INR
	Ankit	male	21	Electrician	Hindu	Other Backwards Class	Polytechnic	Undergraduate degree	semi-urban	10,001 - 20,000 INR
	Deepika	female	20	COPA	Hindu	Forward Castes	Higher Secondary	Undergraduate degree	semi-urban	7,001 - 10,000 INR
	Devendra	male	18	Mechanic (Refr. & Air Con.)	Muslim	Other Backwards Class	Lower Secondary	ITI certificate	urban	7,001 - 10,000 INR
	Harish	male	21	Electrician	Hindu	No response	Lower Secondary	Lower Secondary	semi-urban	7,001 - 10,000 INR
	Jitendra	male	20	Mechanic (Motor Vehicle)	Hindu	No response	Higher Secondary	Primary	semi-urban	7,001 - 10,000 INR
	Karthik	male	21	Fitter	Hindu	Scheduled Castes	Higher Secondary	Lower Secondary	semi-urban	10,001 - 20,000 INR
	Lella	female	18	COPA	Hindu	Forward Castes	Higher Secondary	Higher Secondary	semi-urban	10,001 - 20,000 INR
	Mehul	male	21	Carpenter	Hindu	Scheduled Castes	Lower Secondary	ITI certificate	urban	10,001 - 20,000 INR
	Naveen	male	18	Electrician	Hindu	No response	Higher Secondary	Higher Secondary	semi-urban	10,001 - 20,000 INR
	Nitesh	male	18	Fitter	Hindu	No response	Higher Secondary	Higher Secondary	semi-urban	10,001 - 20,000 INR
	Prakash	male	18	Fitter	Hindu	No response	Higher Secondary	Higher Secondary	semi-urban	10,001 - 20,000 INR
	Rahul	male	21	Mechanic (Motor Vehicle)	Muslim	Other Backwards Class	Polytechnic	Lower Secondary	urban	10,001 - 20,000 INR
	Rajeev	male	18	Electrician	Muslim	Other Backwards Class	Lower Secondary	Higher Secondary	rural	10,001 - 20,000 INR
	Rashmi	female	20	COPA	Hindu	Forward Castes	Lower Secondary	Lower Secondary	urban	20,001 - 50,000 INR
	Rohit	male	18	Mechanic (Motor Vehicle)	Hindu	Scheduled Castes	Lower Secondary	Primary	urban	7,001 - 10,000 INR
	Sudha	female	21	COPA	Hindu	Other Backwards Class	Higher Secondary	Lower Secondary	urban	10,001 - 20,000 INR
	Sunil	male	18	Carpenter	Christian	No response	Higher Secondary	Undergraduate degree	urban	20,001 - 50,000 INR
	Surinder	male	18	Electrician	Christian	No response	Lower Secondary	Primary	urban	7,001 - 10,000 INR
	Tanisha	female	18	COPA	Hindu	No response	Higher Secondary	Undergraduate degree	semi-urban	10,001 - 20,000 INR
	Umesh	male	19	Fitter	Hindu	Other Backwards Class	Lower Secondary	Primary	rural	10,001 - 20,000 INR

Appendix B: Interview Guide

(1) Tell me a bit about yourself.

Probes:

- a. How old are you?*
- b. Where are you from?*
- c. Do you have any siblings?*
- d. What are your hobbies?*

(2) What is your biggest dream?

Probes:

- a. What is your dream job?*
- b. Where would you like to work?*
- c. Where would you like to live?*
- d. How would you like to spend your time?*

(3) Tell me how you came to [name of institution]. Why did you decide to enrol in [name of institution]?

Probes:

- a. When did you first hear about [name of institution]?*
- b. When did you join [name of institution]?*
- c. What other options, if any, did you look into?*
- d. What was important to you at the time?*
- e. What made [name of institution] stand out against other options?*

(4) As you look back on your decision-making process for [name of institution], are there any events that stand out in your mind? Could you describe them? How did this event affect your decision to enrol in [name of institution]?

Probes:

- a. What was going on in your life at the time?*
- b. How would you describe the person you were then?*
- c. Where there any obstacles/challenges you had to overcome?*
- d. Who has been the most helpful to you during that time? How has he/she been helpful?*
- e. Has any organisation been helpful in the decision-making process? What did [name of the organisation] help you with? How has it been helpful?*

(5) Where do you see yourself in 2 years? Describe the person you hope to be then.

Probes:

- a. *What kind of job would you like to have?*
- b. *Where would you like to work?*
- c. *Where would you like to live?*
- d. *How would you like to spend your time?*
- e. *What would a perfect day look like?*

(6) How, if at all, will [name of institution] support you in becoming that person?

Probes:

- a. *How will [name of institution] help you in getting the job you would like to have?*
- b. *How will [name of institution] help you in achieving your other goals?*

(7) After these experiences, what advice would you give to someone who is passing out of 10th grade and who is facing the same decision now?

Probes:

- a. *Should they choose the same option as you did?*
- b. *Why/why not?*
- c. *Which factors should they consider in their decision-making process?*

(8) Is there anything else you think I should know to understand your decision to take admission in [name of institution] better?

(9) Is there anything you would like to ask me?

Thank you for your participation.

Appendix C: Consent Form

Consent Form

- I, the undersigned, volunteer to participate in a research project conducted by Ms. Sarah Stadler from Lund University in Sweden. I understand that the project is part of Ms. Stadler's Master dissertation and that it is designed to understand the factors that contribute to young people's educational choices in India.
- I understand that participation involves being interviewed by Ms. Stadler. The interview will last approximately 30 minutes. The interview will be audio recorded and notes will be written during the interview session.
- I understand that the notes, a transcript of my interview and the original audio recording will be retained in digital form until the Lund University examination board confirms the result of Ms. Stadler's Master dissertation.
- I understand that extracts from my interview may be quoted in Ms. Stadler's Master dissertation without revealing my identity.
- I understand that my name and the names of people I speak of will be changed in all reports on the results of this research project. Any details in my interview that might reveal my own or other people's identities will be disguised.
- I further understand that all information I provide during my interview will be treated confidentially.
- I understand that I am entitled to request a copy of the audio-recording and the transcript of my interview at any time while it is in storage, and to make any edits that I feel are necessary.
- I understand that even if I decide to participate in this study now, I can withdraw from the interview at any time or refuse to answer any question without providing any explanation.
- All my questions about the research project have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I am free to seek further information and clarification from the researcher at any time during or after the interview.
- I have received a copy of this consent form as well as Ms. Stadler's contact details.
- I voluntarily participate in this research project and agree to the interview being audio-recorded.

Participant Signature

Date

Appendix D: Questionnaire

1. What is your age? Please state a number.

2. What is your gender? Please circle.

male

female

non-binary

3. Which trade are you currently enrolled in? Please state.

4. What is the highest level of education that you have completed? Please circle.

Primary school
(1-8)

Vocational secondary
school (9-10)

Vocational higher
secondary (11-12)

Under-graduate/
bachelor's degree

Ph.D./
doctoral degree

Secondary
school (9-10)

Higher secondary
school (11-12)

ITI certificate

Post-graduate/
master's degree

Apprenticeship/
on-the-job training

5. What is the highest level of education that either of your parents have completed? Please circle.

Primary school
(1-8)

Vocational secondary
school (9-10)

Vocational higher
secondary (11-12)

Under-graduate/
bachelor's degree

Ph.D./
doctoral degree

Secondary
school (9-10)

Higher secondary
school (11-12)

ITI certificate

Post-graduate/
master's degree

Apprenticeship/
on-the-job training

6. How high is your average monthly household income? Please circle one category.

Less than
5,000 INR

5,000 –
10,000 INR

10,000 –
20,000 INR

20,000 –
50,000 INR

50,000 –
100,000 INR

above
100,000 INR

7. What is your religion? Please state.

8. What caste, if any, do you consider yourself a member of? Please state.

9. Which category best describes your hometown? Please circle.

urban

semi-urban

rural