

## THEMATIC PAPER: APPRENTICESHIP

# Acceptability in vocational education and training policy transfer: A case study of quality development in Indian industrial training institutes

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**ABSTRACT**

This study examines acceptability in vocational education and training (VET) policy learning, with a focus on quality development in Indian industrial training institutes (ITIs). The study investigates the attitudes of teachers toward a self-directed quality improvement approach developed within a German-Indian cooperation project. Drawing from implementation research, the study applies a multidimensional acceptability framework to assess the feasibility, perceived relevance, and contextual fit of the approach. Findings indicate that factors such as perceived benefit for students, context-fit and possibilities for individual policy adjustment, next to coherence with governmental policies, language familiarity and previous knowledge influence acceptability. The results offer insights for VET policy adaptation and vocational education and training staff engagement strategies.

**Key words:** policy learning, India, vocational education and training, industrial training institutes

**INTRODUCTION**

The growing emphasis on vocational education as a driver of economic growth and social participation in the global south, coupled with increasing internationalization efforts, has renewed interest in vocational education transfer. Despite the long-standing practice of educational cross-border transfer as a solution to various challenges, its effectiveness remains debated.

Since the global financial crisis of 2008, India has witnessed increasing attention toward the role of formal vocational education and training (VET). This has resulted in various policy reforms and initiatives aimed at enhancing the VET system. Recent efforts include the adoption of structures inspired by the German dual apprenticeship system (Maitra *et al.*, 2024), intensified private-sector involvement in VET, and quality improvement initiatives, reflecting global trends

(OECD, 2023). International organizations and development cooperation initiatives have significantly influenced these reforms, with industrial training institutes (ITIs) playing a pivotal role in delivering both apprenticeship- and institute-based training. Given their significance in India's vocational training landscape, ITIs have become a focal point of reform efforts (MSDE, 2024).

Recognizing that direct, unexamined transfer of systems and practices rarely succeeds, the discourse on transfer research and international development cooperation has increasingly emphasized contextual alignment. As a counter-concept to uncritical one-to-one transfer, "policy learning" has gained prominence (McGrath & Lugg, 2012). Policy learning encompasses reflective policy analysis, evidence-based decision-making, and the careful adaptation of reform measures. It involves deriving positive or negative lessons from foreign

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structures and ideas, stressing the importance of stakeholder involvement, collaborative decision-making, and contextual considerations (Chakroun, 2010). A lack of policy compatibility can lead to resistance at multiple levels, with stakeholder acceptance being a crucial factor in the successful and sustained implementation of reforms. Educators and administrators play a key role in contextualizing and reshaping educational programs (Mukhopadhyay & Sriprakash, 2011).

Despite the acknowledged importance of policy context and acceptance, discussions in the literature remain largely abstract, policymakers receive limited guidance on adapting policies to local realities, contributing to a frequent disconnect between policy and practice (McGrath & Lugg, 2012). Furthermore, most vocational education transfer studies focus on the system level, while research at the institutional level remains scarce (Allais, 2010). More empirical research is needed to explore how policies are practically implemented within vocational education institutions, considering the perspectives and concerns of key stakeholders.

Given India's large and continuously growing youth population requiring vocational training, the government has prioritized expanding VET institutions and training opportunities. However, alongside quantity expansion, quality development has gained importance, aligning with early quality assurance proposals by international actors in India (ILO, 2003).

ITIs play a critical role in India's vocational training landscape, with 15,034 institutes offering 2.7 million training seats across 155 occupational profiles (MSDE, 2024). These institutions provide both full-time vocational training and apprenticeship training under the Dual System of Training (Maitra *et al.*, 2024). They are responsible for theoretical and practical training, coordinating on-the-job training in companies, and facilitating employer cooperation.

Quality improvement initiatives have included the establishment of high-quality ITIs as role models under a World Bank initiative, the introduction of a national grading framework for benchmarking, and employer involvement in institutional governance through Institute Management Committees (Pilz & Regel, 2021). Despite these efforts, many reforms have failed to achieve long-term success (Maitra *et al.*, 2024). A key challenge remains the misalignment between policy intentions and local realities (UNESCO, 2020).

This study contributes to the discourse on policy learning by exploring acceptability in VET policy learning, specifically focusing on quality improvement in ITIs. It examines the attitudes of teachers toward the potential implementation of an institutional quality

development approach in ITIs. It centers on the research question: Which factors influence the acceptability of this approach among teachers.

## METHODS AND RESEARCH DESIGN

Designed within a German-Indian research project, the framework enables self-driven quality assurance and development in Indian ITIs. It integrates 34 input-, process-, and output/outcome-based quality criteria serving as benchmarks to guide development efforts (Ramasamy *et al.* 2021). While adapted to the Indian skill ecosystem, it incorporates quality improvement philosophies from Western contexts, which diverge from prevailing Indian practices. Thus, the framework functions as exemplary transfer policy, representing "voluntary transfer" (Phillips & Ochs, 2003). Implementation remains optional for institutes, without governmental mandates or recommendations.

The study employed a multidimensional acceptability framework from implementation research (Nastasi & Hitchcock, 2024) as a theoretical foundation for the analysis. Acceptability is distinguished from acceptance, with the former referring to the perceived suitability of a policy in a given context and the latter denoting actual adoption post-implementation. Both acceptability and acceptance are conceptualized as "satisfaction with various specific aspects of an innovation" (Proctor *et al.*, 2011). The study investigated acceptability by teacher responses, across dimensions such as feasibility, perceived relevance, anticipated success, alignment with stakeholder values, and social validity—the latter referring to consistency with values, beliefs, behavioral norms, and language familiar to teachers and administrators. Form and complexity, the content of quality criteria, measurement approaches and suggested practices for continuous development were discussed.

Data were collected through 8 individual interviews and 20 focus group discussions with teachers (103 participants) as well as 8 interviews with principals (8 participants) across 10 ITIs in Delhi. The study employed qualitative content analysis of transcribed data, using deductive and inductive coding (Kuckartz & Rädicker, 2018). While focusing primarily on teacher attitudes for investigating policy acceptability, principal interviews provided additional data on the general institutional context, and conditions for quality development measures (McKenney & Reeves, 2019).

## RESULTS

In the following section, selected results will be illustrated and discussed with a focus on the perceived relevance of the policy, which addresses benefit and

importance (Nastasi & Hitchcock, 2024) for target groups of policies.

In institutes, there was agreement among staff that improvement of the quality of training is one of the most important tasks in Indian VET. The largest share of teachers reacted positively towards the introduced approach. Specifically, its function of self-evaluation and a realistic assessment of institutional strengths and weaknesses was positively appreciated. Teachers predominantly evaluated the framework in terms of its possible usefulness to benefit their students: "I would implement it if it brings betterment for our students" (Cosmetics teacher in ITI).

Generally, expectations were formulated with regard to easily *measurable* results that should evolve in reasonable time: "More trainees should get a placement soon ..." (Stenography teacher in ITI).

The philosophy underpinning the quality approach views training institutes as organizations, institutional quality is conceptualized as a complex interplay of interdependent factors. The conceptualization involves a long-term perspective on improvement processes, and a specific focus on teaching and learning processes in the classroom. However, educators in ITIs face certain pressing challenges, that impact their work to such an extent, that other factors may be expected to receive lower priority. Examples of such challenges are trainees that are not provided with sufficient food by parents, basic infrastructural deficits or pressing demands for further teacher training: "We need an update in practical training. We can teach the theory-but not the practical ..." (Mechanics teacher in ITI).

Institute-based quality development that misses to articulate, address and prioritize such challenges in one way or the other, will lack acceptance among staff (Schweisfurth, 2011). In this context, the need for a certain flexibility imparted in policy design was expressed, due to the problem of diversity of standards across ITIs in states and regions. Teachers as well as principals formulated the need to be able to suit the approach to existing standards and preconditions (Ramasamy *et al.*, 2021).

Regarding the perceived relevance of institutional quality development, approaches incorporating measures that have the potential to improve output and outcome for students in a manageable period of time, that provide acknowledgement and context-fit toward challenges teachers may face in developing contexts and allow for some flexibility in implementation and configuration are expected to gain higher values of acceptance.

Further factors that have been identified to influence

acceptability among teachers include the coherence with existing governmental requirements, the explicit use of familiar language and concepts, transparency and trust in application, the contextual fit within administrative structures, and prior exposure to institutional quality development concepts.

## CONCLUSION

Study findings may contribute to decision-making and policy design processes in VET policy learning. The perspectives of administrators and educators on acceptability can inform considerations of policy suitability, translation and adaptation, stakeholder communication strategies, and contextual considerations in policy implementation.

A limitation of this study is its exclusive focus on pre-implementation acceptability, as the framework was not practically implemented in institutes. Investigating acceptance post-implementation would offer additional insights into the relationship between acceptability and actual behavior and would contribute to further validating identified dimensions of acceptance. Considering India's regional diversity, future research should explore variations in acceptability across different socioeconomic and institutional settings.

## DECLARATIONS

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None.

### Author contributions

Regel J: Writing—Original draft, Writing—Review and Editing. The author has read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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### Ethical approval

Not applicable.

### Informed consent

Written informed consent was obtained from the participants for publication. The participants were informed that the interview data were only used for research purposes, and their information would be anonymized when presenting the research result. Moreover, they are also allowed to stop the recording at any moment during the interview, and they can refuse to respond to any question asked during the review.

### Conflict of interest

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

**Data availability statement**

No additional data.

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