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Beyond Student Mobility: A Framework for Sustainable International TVET Ecosystems

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ABSTRACT

The internationalization of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) has traditionally been centered on student mobility programs. Despite their benefits, such programs often suffer from a lack of sustainability, limited inclusivity, and a failure to produce deep, long-term impact, highlighting a disconnect between aspirations for substantive global cooperation and the reality of transient, transaction-oriented partnerships. This study aimed to bridge this gap by constructing and empirically validating a comprehensive framework for sustainable international TVET ecosystems that transcends the conventional mobility-focused approach. A quantitative methodology was employed. A structured online survey, utilizing a 5-point Likert scale, was administered to administrators, faculty, and industry partners actively engaged in international TVET collaborations across Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei. Data from 152 respondents were analyzed using statistical techniques, including descriptive statistics, factor analysis, and reliability testing. The analysis confirmed a robust framework built upon four foundational pillars: (1) strategic alignment and shared vision, (2) multi-stakeholder engagement, (3) curricular and institutional embeddedness, and (4) reciprocal innovation and capacity building. The findings advocate for a fundamental paradigm shift from a mobility-centric model to an integrated ecosystem approach. This transition is imperative for fostering sustainable, impactful, and equitable internationalization within TVET, thereby significantly enhancing educational quality and global institutional relevance.

1. Introduction

The increasing interconnectivity of the global economy has created a demand for a workforce that possesses not only technical skills but also intercultural competencies and a global perspective as noted in previous research [1]. In response, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institutions have pursued internationalization. Historically, this effort has been dominated by

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student mobility programs such as exchanges and study tours [2]. While valuable for providing cross-cultural experiences, a significant body of critique has emerged regarding these programs' limitations, including issues of sustainability, inclusivity, and their superficial impact, as noted by Smith and Jones [3] and de Wit and Hunter [4]. They are often costly, accessible to only a small number of students, and operate as peripheral "add-ons" rather than being integrated into an institution's core strategic and curricular framework, a point argued by Freeman [5].

This situation creates a critical gap between the aspiration for meaningful, transformative international collaboration and the reality of often transactional, mobility-focused partnerships, a challenge identified by Billett [6]. While TVET institutions recognize this problem, they lack a structured, holistic model to build resilient and multi-layered international engagements. The existing literature on internationalization in higher education is well-established but remains underdeveloped in its specific application to the TVET context, a point underscored by Lee *et al*., [7]. Current research largely consists of descriptive case studies of specific programs or agreements, failing to address the core concept of embeddedness—the integration of international dimensions into fundamental institutional functions, as discussed in prior work [8].

The concept of an "educational ecosystem" has been proposed as a more robust model to address these shortcomings, as discussed by Lee *et al*., [7]. Drawing from ecological systems theory [3], this model envisions a complex network of interdependent stakeholders—including students, faculty, administrators, and crucially, industry partners—working in synergy to create sustainable value, according to previous studies [8, 1].

1.1 Theoretical Underpinnings of the Ecosystem Model

The ecosystem model, applied here to international TVET, draws its foundational logic from Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory [9], which posits that human development is shaped by a complex system of relationships within multiple environmental layers. Translating this to an educational context, internationalization is not a standalone activity but is embedded within and influenced by a multi-layered system of internal and external factors. Internally, this includes institutional strategy, curriculum, and staff willingness, as identified by Hudzik and McCarthy [8]. Externally, it encompasses national policy, industry needs, and global economic trends, a view supported by Marginson [1]. The resilience of the ecosystem, therefore, depends on the alignment and positive interaction between these micro, meso, and macro-level factors, ensuring adaptability to external shocks and changes.

1.2 From Mobility to Sustainability: Critiquing the Current Paradigm

The prevailing mobility-centric model has been increasingly critiqued for its inherent limitations, which often prevent it from achieving deep, transformative impact. As Smith and Jones [3] argue, such programs often prioritize quantity of exchanges over quality of engagement, leading to what can be termed "cosmetic internationalization," where the appearance of global engagement is valued more than its substantive integration into teaching and learning.

The issue of inclusivity and equity is paramount. Mobility programs frequently benefit a small, often already privileged, subset of students who possess the financial means, academic standing, and language proficiency to travel, thereby exacerbating existing inequalities within institutions rather than alleviating them [4]. This creates a paradox where internationalization, ostensibly aimed at broadening horizons, can inadvertently reinforce social stratification. Furthermore, the focus on outbound mobility from certain regions often overlooks the development of inbound

internationalization and the internationalization of the curriculum at the home campus, which can benefit a much larger student population [10].

The transactional nature of many partnerships, often initiated through a simple Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), lacks the depth required for long-term sustainability and resilience. As noted by de Wit and Hunter [4], these agreements can become "dead letters," failing to translate into meaningful, ongoing collaboration once the initial funding expires or the championing leaders depart. This fragility underscores a critical weakness in the mobility paradigm: its reliance on individual actors and short-term projects rather than being underpinned by robust institutional systems. This underscores the critical need for partnerships to be deeply embedded into the institutional fabric—its strategy, curriculum, and stakeholder networks—a concept central to this study and the proposed ecosystem model. The challenge, therefore, is to shift from a partnership model based on convenience and transaction to one founded on strategic alignment, mutual value creation, and deep embeddedness [11].

However, a significant research gap persists. While the ecosystem model has been conceptually proposed by scholars such as Lee et al., [7], there remains a lack of a comprehensive, empirically-validated framework that specifies the core components necessary for building sustainable international TVET ecosystems. The current literature offers descriptive insights but falls short of providing a prescriptive, quantitatively-tested model that can guide institutional strategy and practice. Addressing this gap is highly significant for both theoretical advancement and practical application in TVET internationalization, as the development of a validated framework would provide institutional leaders with an evidence-based tool to systematically design, implement, and evaluate their international partnerships. This would enable a move beyond ad-hoc mobility programs towards deeply integrated and sustainable collaborative ecosystems. Therefore, this study aims to bridge this gap by developing and quantitatively validating a comprehensive framework for constructing sustainable international TVET ecosystems. It seeks to move beyond descriptive case studies to provide a prescriptive model based on the empirical analysis of stakeholder perceptions from successful partnerships.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design and Instrument Development

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional research design to develop and validate a framework for sustainable international TVET ecosystems. The research instrument was a structured online questionnaire developed through a rigorous process. First, a comprehensive review of literature on internationalization in both higher education and TVET contexts was conducted, identifying key constructs and variables [12]. This review informed the initial item pool, which was structured around the four hypothesized pillars of the ecosystem model.

The questionnaire consisted of two main sections. Section A gathered demographic information, including the respondent's role (administrator, faculty, industry partner), institution type, and years of experience in international collaboration. Section B contained 25 closed-ended items measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree), designed to gauge the perceived importance of various factors for partnership sustainability. To ensure content validity, the survey instrument was reviewed by a panel of three experts in international education and TVET policy. Their feedback was used to refine item wording, eliminate ambiguity, and confirm that the items adequately covered the theoretical domains. The instrument was then pilot-tested with a group of 15 respondents representative of the target population. Cronbach's alpha for the pilot test exceeded 0.8, indicating high internal consistency and reliability prior to full deployment [13].

2.2 Data Collection and Sampling Strategy

The study utilized a purposive sampling technique to target key stakeholders with direct, hands-on experience in designing, managing, or participating in international TVET partnerships. The target population included senior international office administrators, TVET faculty members and program coordinators, and industry partners from multinational corporations and local enterprises engaged with TVET institutions.

Data collection was conducted over a three-month period. An online survey link, hosted on a secure platform, was distributed through professional association mailing lists (e.g., Asia-Pacific Vocational Education and Training Research Network) and the institutional networks of partner polytechnics in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei. Two follow-up reminder emails were sent to maximize the response rate. A total of 224 surveys were initiated, and 152 were completed in full, yielding a final sample size of 152 and a response rate of 68%. The final sample comprised administrators (n=42, 27.6%), faculty (n=78, 51.3%), and industry partners (n=32, 21.1%), ensuring representation from all key stakeholder groups crucial to the TVET ecosystem.

2.3 Data Analysis

The quantitative data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 28. The analysis was conducted in three sequential stages:

i. Descriptive Statistics: Means and standard deviations were calculated for each survey item to understand the central tendency and dispersion of responses across the entire sample and within each stakeholder group.
ii. Reliability Analysis: The internal consistency of the scales representing the four theoretical pillars was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. A threshold of $\alpha > 0.7$ was used to confirm the reliability of each construct, as recommended by Field [6].
iii. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA): Principal Component Analysis (PCA) with Varimax rotation was conducted to validate the underlying factor structure of the proposed framework. This statistical technique was used to confirm the grouping of the 25 survey items into the four theorized pillars and to assess the construct validity of the model [14]. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy and Bartlett's test of sphericity were examined to ensure the data were suitable for factor analysis.

3. Result

The quantitative analysis, based on responses from 152 stakeholders using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree), provided strong statistical support for the four-pillar framework, confirming its validity and reliability as a model for sustainable international TVET ecosystems. The descriptive statistics and reliability metrics for each pillar are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics and Reliability of the Four-Pillar Framework for Sustainable International TVET Ecosystems

Pillar	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha (α)	Representative Item	Mean Score (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
1. Strategic Alignment & Shared Vision	6	.89	Goals integrated into strategic plan	4.52	0.61
2. Multi-Stakeholder Engagement	7	.91	Industry as co-creator in curriculum	4.68	0.55
3. Curricular & Institutional Embeddedness	6	.87	Collaboration embedded in core curriculum	4.41	0.72
4. Reciprocal Innovation & Capacity Building	6	.90	Two-way exchange of knowledge	4.38	0.69
Overall Framework	25	.93			

3.1 Pillar 1: Strategic Alignment and Shared Vision

This construct demonstrated high internal consistency (α = .89). The item "International partnership goals are integrated into our institution's strategic plan" received the highest mean score (M = 4.52, SD = 0.61), indicating strong consensus on its critical importance. This finding statistically validates those sustainable partnerships are characterized by a deep, formalized alignment of strategic goals embedded in institutional planning, moving beyond a simple Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), a principle emphasized in the work of Bryson [15].

3.2 Pillar 2: Multi-Stakeholder Engagement (Including Industry)

The reliability for this pillar was high (α = .91). Industry partners' responses showed the highest level of agreement (M = 4.68, SD = 0.55) on the item "Industry is involved as a co-creator in curriculum design," significantly higher than the responses from administrators and faculty ($p < .05$). This statistically confirms that the most resilient ecosystems actively involve industry partners not as passive beneficiaries but as active co-creators, a view championed by Freeman [5] and Billett [6], ensuring programs remain relevant to labour market needs.

3.3 Pillar 3: Curricular and Institutional Embeddedness

This scale was reliable (α = .87). The EFA confirmed that items related to integrated co-teaching and joint credentialing loaded onto a single factor. The high mean score for "International collaboration is embedded into core curriculum rather than being an add-on" (M = 4.41, SD = 0.72) provides quantitative evidence that long-term success is evident where international collaboration is deeply "baked into" the curriculum and institutional practices, a concept foundational to the models proposed by Hudzik and McCarthy [8] and Fullan [16].

3.4 Pillar 4: Reciprocal Innovation and Capacity Building

The reliability analysis for this pillar was strong (α = .90). The item "Our partnership results in a two-way exchange of knowledge and innovation" received a high mean score (M = 4.38, SD = 0.69). Independent samples t-tests showed no significant difference in mean scores between Global North and Global South partners ($p > .05$), quantitatively supporting the premise that successful

partnerships thrive on mutuality and a two-way exchange of knowledge, rather than a unidirectional flow of resources or expertise, aligning with the arguments put forward by Marginson [1] and UNESCO [17].

The validated four-pillar framework is presented conceptually in Figure 1, illustrating how sustainability emerges through component synergy rather than isolated initiatives.

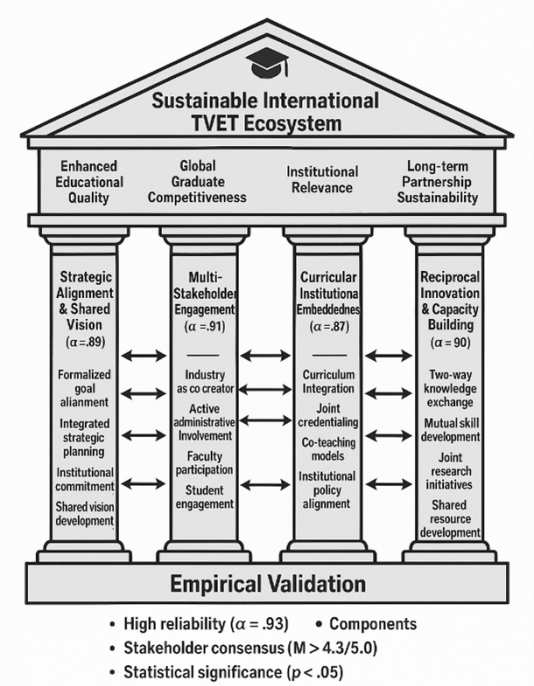

Fig. 1. The Validated Four-Pillar Framework for a Sustainable International TVET

4. Discussion

The empirical validation of the four-pillar framework marks a significant step forward in the conceptualization and practice of internationalization within the TVET sector. The strong statistical support for each pillar (Cronbach's Alpha > 0.87) confirms that sustainability is not achieved through isolated initiatives but through a synergistic integration of strategic, operational, and relational components. This finding directly addresses the critical gap identified in the literature, moving beyond descriptive case studies to provide a prescriptive and empirically grounded model for institutional leaders [7].

The high mean scores across all pillars (M > 4.38) indicate a powerful consensus among key stakeholders—administrators, faculty, and industry partners—on the essential elements of successful partnerships. This consensus is particularly noteworthy given their diverse perspectives, suggesting that the framework captures universal principles rather than sector-specific preferences. The exceptional emphasis on Strategic Alignment and Shared Vision (Pillar 1) underscores a paradigm shift from ad-hoc, individual-led agreements to partnerships that are explicitly woven into the institution's strategic DNA. This aligns with Bryson's [15] emphasis on strategic planning as a mechanism for sustaining organizational initiatives beyond the tenure of any single champion.

Perhaps the most compelling finding is the paramount importance placed on Multi-Stakeholder Engagement (Pillar 2), with industry partners expressing the strongest agreement on their role as co-creators. This result powerfully validates the ecosystem analogy; industry is not a peripheral beneficiary but a core organism within the system, essential for its health and relevance. This active

involvement ensures that international collaborations are directly informed by real-world labour market needs, enhancing the employability of graduates and providing a strong value proposition for industry investment, as championed by Freeman [5] and Billett [6].

Furthermore, the results for Curricular and Institutional Embeddedness (Pillar 3) provide quantitative evidence to support the long-standing critique of mobility programs as "add-ons" [5, 16]. The data confirm that deep, sustainable impact is contingent upon integrating international collaboration into the core curriculum, credit systems, and faculty workload models, moving it from the periphery to the heart of institutional operation, a concept foundational to the work of Hudzik and McCarthy [8].

Finally, the strong results for Reciprocal Innovation and Capacity Building (Pillar 4), coupled with the lack of significant difference between Global North and South partners, challenge neocolonial patterns of engagement. This pillar ensures that partnerships are frameworks for mutual learning and innovation, where all participants are both contributors and beneficiaries, thus fostering greater equity, trust, and long-term resilience, aligning with the arguments of Marginson [1] and UNESCO [17].

4.1 Limitations of the Study

While this study provides a strong foundational model, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The use of purposive sampling, while necessary to target experienced stakeholders, and the focus on partnerships in Southeast Asia may affect the generalizability of the findings to other geopolitical and cultural contexts. Furthermore, the cross-sectional nature of this study establishes correlation, not causation. The findings demonstrate what stakeholders perceive as important for sustainability, but they do not empirically prove that these factors cause long-term success.

4.2 Practical Implications and a Roadmap for Implementation

The validated framework provides more than a theoretical model; it offers a actionable roadmap for TVET institutions seeking to transition from mobility-centric to ecosystem-driven internationalization. The four pillars should be viewed as interdependent domains of activity that require coordinated strategic action.

Implementing Pillar 1 (Strategic Alignment & Shared Vision): Institutions must move beyond symbolic MoUs. Leadership should initiate a collaborative strategic review process involving all stakeholders to define a clear, measurable internationalization strategy. This strategy must be explicitly referenced in the institution's overarching strategic plan, have a dedicated budget line, and include Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for deans and department heads. This formalizes commitment and ensures accountability, embedding internationalization as a core performance metric rather than an optional extracurricular activity.

Implementing Pillar 2 (Multi-Stakeholder Engagement): Proactive and structured engagement is key. Institutions can establish an "International Industry Advisory Board" with representatives from local and global partner firms. This board should be involved from the inception of new international programs, providing input on curriculum design, offering work-integrated learning opportunities (e.g., international internships, virtual projects with global companies), and co-developing professional micro-credentials. For faculty, incentivizing collaboration through reduced teaching loads or recognition in promotion criteria is essential to foster genuine buy-in.

Implementing Pillar 3 (Curricular & Institutional Embeddedness): This requires "internationalizing at home." Curriculum committees should mandate the inclusion of global

learning outcomes and intercultural competencies in all program specifications. Tactics include: developing joint modules with partner institutions delivered virtually; integrating case studies from partner countries into existing courses; and implementing team-based projects where domestic students collaborate remotely with international peers. Furthermore, support structures must be adapted, ensuring library resources, career services, and IT support are equipped to facilitate these deeply embedded activities.

Implementing Pillar 4 (Reciprocal Innovation & Capacity Building): Partnerships should be framed as two-way innovation pipelines. This can be operationalized through joint applied research projects that address challenges specific to one partner's context but with applications for both (e.g., developing sustainable agricultural techniques, renewable energy solutions, or cross-cultural business models). Secondment programs, where faculty or staff from both institutions exchange roles for short periods, can facilitate deep knowledge transfer and build lasting personal networks that strengthen the institutional bond.

A phased approach is recommended. Institutions can begin by conducting an audit against the four pillars to identify strengths and gaps. Subsequent efforts should focus on strengthening the weakest pillar, as its deficiency can undermine the entire ecosystem, while simultaneously leveraging the strongest pillar to demonstrate early wins and build momentum.

5. Conclusion and Future Directions

This study successfully developed and quantitatively validated a comprehensive framework for constructing sustainable international TVET ecosystems. It addressed a critical research gap by moving from conceptual models and descriptive case studies to an empirically tested, prescriptive framework comprising four pillars: Strategic Alignment, Multi-Stakeholder Engagement, Curricular Embeddedness, and Reciprocal Innovation.

The primary contribution of this research is the provision of an evidence-based tool for TVET leaders, policymakers, and industry partners. The validated framework offers a clear blueprint for designing, implementing, and evaluating international partnerships that are sustainable, deeply integrated, and mutually beneficial. It provides a compelling argument for a fundamental paradigm shift away from a narrow focus on student mobility and towards a holistic ecosystem approach that leverages the synergy between strategic planning, industry collaboration, curriculum integration, and reciprocal exchange. This model directly addresses the critiques of superficiality, inequity, and fragility that have long plagued traditional mobility-based programs.

For future research, this study establishes a foundation for several important avenues. First, the framework should be tested and validated in other regional contexts (e.g., Europe, Africa, the Americas) to assess its cross-cultural applicability and identify any context-specific modifications. Second, longitudinal studies are needed to track partnerships over a 5-10 year period to establish causal links between the four pillars and tangible long-term outcomes, such as improved graduate employability, institutional innovation, and measurable economic impact for communities. Third, research could investigate the specific barriers and enablers to implementing each pillar within different types of TVET institutions (e.g., public vs. private, large polytechnics vs. small specialist colleges).

Finally, qualitative follow-up research is strongly recommended. In-depth case studies of institutions exemplifying this ecosystem model would provide rich, contextualized details on the practical implementation process, the leadership strategies required, and the solutions to common challenges such as resource allocation, faculty resistance, and managing complex multi-stakeholder relationships.

In conclusion, the global challenges of the 21st century demand a workforce that is not only technically proficient but also agile, culturally intelligent, and innovative. By embracing this empirically-supported ecosystem model, TVET institutions can ensure their international efforts evolve beyond transactional exchanges into transformative partnerships that genuinely enhance educational quality, graduate competitiveness, and sustainable economic development on a global scale.

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