

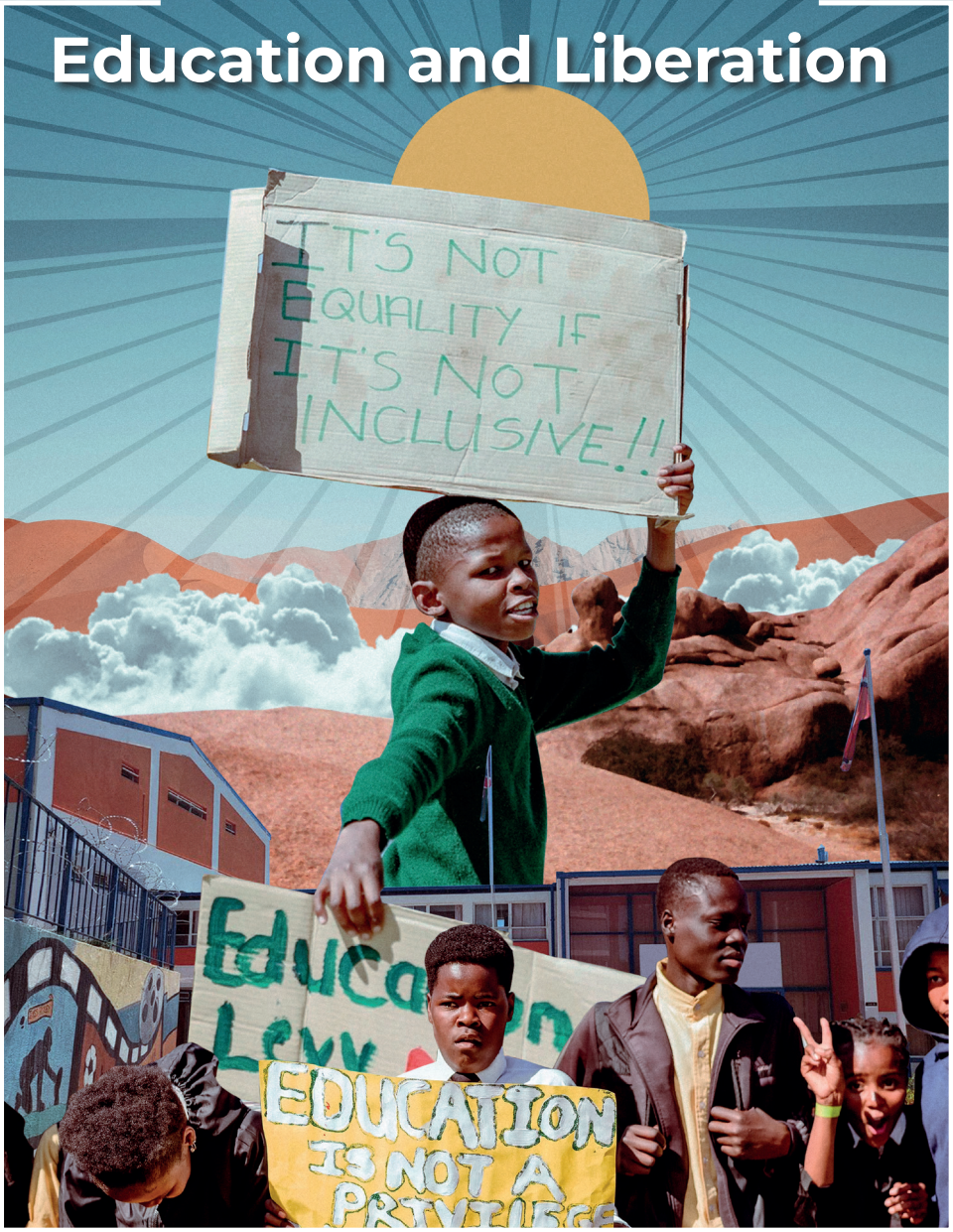
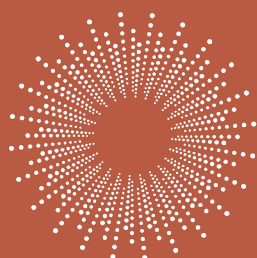


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Review of the Namibia State of Skills Demand and Supply Report

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Introduction

Skills development has become a central policy instrument in Namibia's pursuit of inclusive growth, economic diversification, and employment creation. In a context marked by persistently high youth unemployment, deep educational inequality, and a labour market characterised by informality and underemployment, skills policy is increasingly framed as a pathway to social inclusion and economic participation. The Namibia State of Skills Demand and Supply Report 2025 (NSSDSR) (Namibia Investment Promotion and Development Board [NIPDB], 2025) emerges within this context as a comprehensive attempt to diagnose skills shortages across key productive sectors, and to align education, training, and innovation systems with Namibia's long-term development ambitions.

Drawing on sectoral analysis and stakeholder consultations, the NSSDSR identifies critical skills gaps across advanced manufacturing, engineering, pharmaceuticals, food processing, and other technology-intensive sectors

associated with the “fourth industrial revolution”¹ (NSSDSR, 2025). Rather than treating these shortages as isolated occupational deficits, the report characterises these gaps as systemic, linking them to weaknesses in hands-on industrial training, outdated and insufficiently responsive curricula, and limited integration between educational institutions and employers (NSSDSR, 2025). The report further notes that skills development is constrained by broader structural factors, including limited access to appropriate technology, high capital costs, and underdeveloped innovation ecosystems (NSSDSR, 2025). In this sense, the report provides a detailed and credible diagnosis of Namibia's skills landscape. It makes a compelling case for reforming vocational education,

¹ The fourth industrial revolution has been described as “the blurring of boundaries between the physical, digital, and biological worlds ... a fusion of advances in artificial intelligence (AI), robotics, the Internet of Things (IoT), Web3, blockchain, 3D printing, genetic engineering, quantum computing, and other technologies” (McGinnis, 2023).

strengthening technical training, and improving coordination across state, industry, and research institutions.

This review assesses the NSSDSR within the broader framework of access to “education for liberation”. While empirically robust, the report remains predominantly supply-side oriented. Skills shortages are framed mainly as mismatches between educational outputs and labour-market demand, with emphasis on curriculum reform and institutional responsiveness. Although the NSSDSR recognises poverty, geographic exclusion, and gender

inequality, these are treated primarily as contextual constraints rather than as structural outcomes of Namibia’s postcolonial political economy, shaped by enduring inequalities in land, industry, and technology ownership. As a result, the deeper conditions shaping who can access skills, which forms of knowledge are socially valued, and whether the economy can absorb skilled labour remain insufficiently theorised.

The argument advanced here is not that skills reform is misplaced, but that it is insufficient as a standalone strategy for transformation. When education is



positioned primarily as a mechanism for labour market alignment within an economy still marked by structural dependence and limited productive diversification, there is the risk that the burden of adjustment will shift onto learners themselves. Read through a social justice lens, the NSSDSR raises a fundamental question: Can expanded access to skills training amount to liberation in the absence of structural changes that secure dignified work? The transformative potential of skills policy ultimately depends on its integration with broader industrial and demand-side strategies that expand productive capacity and redistribute economic risk.

Report Overview

The 2025 NSSDSR presents a comprehensive national assessment of skills availability, labour market demand, and education system performance. Framed as a strategic planning instrument, the report seeks to align skills development with Namibia's long-term development objectives, including Vision 2030, industrial diversification, and emerging sectors linked to the green and digital transitions.

Drawing on labour market data, education system indicators, and stakeholder consultations, the NSSDSR highlights a persistent paradox: high national unemployment, estimated at 36.9 percent, with youth unemployment

at 44.4 percent, coexists alongside reported shortages of technical and specialised skills. Employers across manufacturing, agriculture, engineering, and technology-intensive sectors cite difficulties in sourcing appropriately trained workers, particularly in mid- to high-level technical occupations.

The report attributes this mismatch to systemic weaknesses across the education and training pipeline. These include poor learning outcomes at the secondary level, low completion rates in technical fields, high attrition in TVET (technical and vocational education and training) institutions, outdated curricula, and limited opportunities for work-based learning. The NSSDSR further notes that institutional fragmentation and weak data systems impede effective skills forecasting and planning. Notably, the report acknowledges that skills development operates within broader structural constraints, including limited technological capacity, high capital costs, and under-developed innovation ecosystems.

In response, the report proposes a set of policy interventions to improve skills alignment, including reforming TVET and higher education curricula, incentivising STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) enrolment, expanding internships and work-based learning, strengthening labour market data systems, and

enhancing institutional coordination through sector-based committees. At its core, the report envisions a more integrated and demand-responsive skills system capable of supporting economic diversification and improving employment outcomes.

Structural Inequality and the Social Filtering of Skills Access

A central contribution of the NSSDSR is its recognition that skills shortages arise across the education and training pipeline, rather than solely at the point of labour market entry. Rather than locating failure exclusively within post-school institutions, the report traces constraints back to foundational stages of education, identifying poor learning outcomes, weak progression pathways, and uneven access to technical and vocational training as systemic sources of skills scarcity (NIPDB, 2025). This framing marks a significant departure from narrow labour market analyses that treat skills gaps as isolated occupational mismatches.

The most severe bottleneck identified by the report occurs at the secondary school level. The report documents that nearly 80 per cent of learners fail to achieve adequate results in national examinations, substantially limiting eligibility for tertiary education and technical fields (NIPDB, 2025). This underperformance functions as an early

structural filter that sharply narrows the pool of learners able to pursue qualifications in engineering, manufacturing, and other priority sectors. Although the NSSDSR notes that these outcomes are unevenly distributed across income levels and geographic location, the social mechanisms through which this filtering occurs remain largely implicit.

These early exclusions are reflected downstream in completion patterns. Despite manufacturing and agriculture accounting for a significant share of employment, completions in manufacturing- and engineering-related fields remain negligible, at approximately 0.03 percent of total graduates (NIPDB, 2025). The report attributes this imbalance to institutional factors, including outdated curricula, limited practical training opportunities, and weak coordination between education providers and industry (NIPDB, 2025). By locating responsibility at the level of system design rather than individual motivation, the report avoids moralising failure and reinforces the need for coordinated reform.

What remains underexamined, however, is how these institutional failures operate as mechanisms of social selection. Access to skills is not simply a matter of formal enrolment, but one of who can navigate, endure, and complete lengthy, resource-intensive training pathways. Education systems

reward particular forms of knowledge, language, and social familiarity, privileging learners who possess the cultural resources necessary to convert access into completion and certification (Bourdieu, 1984). Learners lacking these forms of cultural capital face heightened risks of attrition, even in contexts where access has formally expanded.

The NSSDSR itself identifies long training durations, limited geographic access to institutions, and the absence of income support during study as significant barriers to participation in technical fields (NIPDB, 2025). Yet these constraints are treated primarily as logistical challenges, rather than as distributive mechanisms that systematically shape differential capacity to remain within the skills pipeline.

From the perspective of access to education for liberation, this distinction matters. When structural inequalities in household income, location, and prior schooling influence the ability to acquire technical qualifications, expanded enrolment does not automatically translate into meaningful access. Skills shortages, in this sense, are not only technical deficits but outcomes of socially filtered educational pathways within a highly unequal society. Without addressing the material conditions that determine who can

convert educational opportunity into certification and employment, reforms aimed at alignment risk reproducing exclusion within the very system they seek to strengthen.

Cultural Capital, Aspiration, and the Social Valuation of Skills

The NSSDSR observes persistent enrolment pressure in traditionally prestigious fields such as business, education, and public sector-oriented qualifications, alongside weak uptake of technical and vocational pathways linked to manufacturing, agro-processing, and engineering (NIPDB, 2025). The report broadly interprets this pattern as a problem of information and incentives, suggesting that learners are insufficiently guided toward sectors with stronger labour demand.

This interpretation, while plausible, may underestimate the extent to which broader labour market conditions shape educational aspirations. In contexts of high unemployment and limited social protection, qualification choices often reflect strategies of risk management rather than simple misalignment. As argued by Bourdieu (1984), education systems confer cultural capital that signals social worth, making some qualifications attractive not because they guarantee employment, but because they offer symbolic security.

Taking this into consideration, preferences for “prestigious” degrees reflect rational responses to a labour market in which technical and industrial sectors are associated with instability, geographic concentration, or uncertain progression; learners may therefore prefer credentials perceived to offer greater security or social recognition.

The NSSDSR itself provides indirect evidence that supports this interpretation. It identifies long training durations, limited institutional access, and the absence of income support during study as barriers to technical enrolment (NIPDB, 2025). These factors raise the private costs of participation, particularly for students from low-income households. When combined with an economy whose absorptive capacity remains constrained, the perceived risks of pursuing specialised technical training increase further.

From this perspective, the issue is not merely one of signalling or behavioural correction, but of how different forms of work are materially structured and socially valued. Redirecting learners toward technical pathways without improving the stability, recognition, and progression associated with such work may have a limited effect. Aspirations cannot be transformed through information alone; they are embedded within lived experiences

of labour market insecurity. Without addressing the structural conditions that shape both opportunity and risk, efforts to recalibrate educational preferences may reproduce rather than resolve existing inequalities.

Skills Policy without Demand: The Political Economy Constraint

A defining feature of the NSSDSR is its emphasis on aligning skills supply with labour market demand. Skills shortages are mainly presented as coordination failures that can be corrected through curriculum reform, institutional alignment, and more responsive training systems (NIPDB, 2025). Within this logic, education and skills development are positioned as the primary levers of economic transformation, capable of unlocking productivity, competitiveness, and inclusive growth.

However, the report’s own findings point to a more constrained demand environment. The NSSDSR repeatedly acknowledges that Namibia’s economy remains limited in its capacity to absorb skilled labour, particularly in technologically intensive and value-adding sectors. Weak industrial ecosystems, high capital costs, limited domestic machinery production, and fragmented innovation systems are identified as structural constraints on firm expansion and diversification

(NIPDB, 2025). These conditions restrict not only job creation, but also firms' ability to invest in training and sustained skills upgrading.

Evidence from broader assessments of Namibia's productive structure reinforces this concern. Firms frequently cite skills shortages, yet these coexist with binding constraints related to technology access, equipment costs, infrastructure limitations, and weak productive capabilities (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2026). Under such conditions, demand for skilled labour is itself structurally constrained: firms cannot expand or upgrade production sufficiently to absorb specialised skills at scale. Skills shortages and limited productive capacity, therefore, interact as a dual bottleneck, suppressing both employment growth and skills utilisation.

The NSSDSR recognises elements of this tension but stops short of advancing a robust demand-side policy agenda. While institutional reform and improved alignment are necessary, they cannot, on their own, generate the industrial dynamism required to sustain large-scale technical employment. When skills development is tasked with compensating for structural weaknesses in productive capacity, the burden of adjustment shifts toward individuals and training

institutions rather than toward industrial transformation.

In this context, expanding technical training in an economy with constrained absorptive capacity risks raising expectations without securing livelihoods. Education can prepare individuals for opportunities; however, it cannot create those opportunities in the absence of coordinated industrial and technological policy. The transformative promise of skills development, therefore, depends not only on better alignment, but also on expanding the material conditions under which skilled work can be generated and sustained.

Education, Liberation, and the Limits of Skills-Led Policy

Throughout the NSSDSR, education is framed primarily as an instrument for improving employability, productivity, and adaptability. Learners are positioned as future contributors to economic competitiveness, and their success depends on the alignment of their skills with evolving labour market demand. This framing is operationally coherent and consistent with strategic economic planning. Yet it raises a deeper question: What kind of subject is produced by training that is aligned to the skills policy?

By emphasising responsiveness and adaptability, the NSSDSR locates

transformation primarily within the education system and the individual learner. While the report acknowledges structural economic constraints, its policy remedies focus predominantly on improving institutional efficiency and workforce readiness. In contexts where labour demand remains limited, such an approach risks shifting the burden of adjustment onto individuals who must continuously reskill to stay employable.

As Freire (1970/2005) cautioned, education oriented primarily toward adaptation may reproduce existing hierarchies rather than transform them. Liberation entails not only access to training but also the ability to convert learning into secure and dignified livelihoods where employment opportunities remain structurally constrained; expanding skills provision alone cannot guarantee such outcomes.

The NSSDSR makes an essential contribution by clarifying skills mismatches and institutional fragmentation. However, its transformative promise depends on situating skills development within a broader agenda that addresses job creation, industrial expansion, and social protection. Without this integration, education risks becoming a mechanism for managing economic risk at the individual level rather than redistributing it collectively.

Conclusion

The NSSDSR offers a rigorous and policy-relevant diagnosis of Namibia's skills landscape, identifying systemic weaknesses across the education and training pipeline and advancing a coherent reform agenda. Its contribution lies in clarifying institutional coordination failures and foregrounding the need for more responsive and integrated skills planning.

This review has argued that while these reforms are necessary, they are insufficient when framed primarily through a supply-side lens. Skills shortages in Namibia are embedded within broader structural conditions shaped by unequal access to education, socially differentiated risk, and an economy with limited capacity to absorb specialised labour. Without confronting these constraints, improvements in alignment may expand training opportunities without fundamentally altering employment outcomes.

For skills policy to contribute meaningfully to education for liberation, it must be situated within a wider developmental project that links education reform to industrial expansion, job creation, and social protection. Education can prepare individuals for opportunity, but liberation requires that such opportunities materially exist. The enduring challenge for Namibia is

therefore not only to align skills with demand, but to transform the economic conditions under which skilled work can be generated, recognised, and sustained.

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