

Political Participation of Business Organizations in the Construction of the Technical Vocational Education and Training System in Costa Rica between 1980 and 2021

Daniel Láscarez Smith

Abstract *This article focuses on the political participation of business groups in shaping the vocational education system in Costa Rica, covering the period from 1980 to 2021. Adopting a configurationist theoretical-methodological approach, the research was based on 14 semi-structured interviews, participatory observation and an analysis of historical documents. The research reveals how political-business groups linked to the attraction of foreign direct investment since 1980 have played a crucial role in defining the roles and functions of the Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) system in Costa Rica. The process of modernization and reform of the system since the 1980s was not only limited to ideological discourse, but was materialized through concrete political actions. This was translated into specific TVET policies that sought to transform curricula, financing, organization and relations between training institutions and transnational companies. In summary, the article highlights that during the last four decades, transnational business groups have played a decisive role in the configuration of the TVET system in Costa Rica, demonstrating their direct influence in the formulation and execution of policies that have shaped technical-vocational education and training in the country.*

Title *Political participation of business organizations in the construction of the technical vocational education and training system in Costa Rica between 1980 and 2021*

Keywords *vocational education; business associations; Costa Rica; TVET; dual apprenticeship; VET system; VET research*

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1 Introduction

During the beginning of my doctoral studies at the University of Osnabrück, Germany, in 2019, I observed that the scientific tradition around Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) studies in Costa Rica was practically nonexistent. However, the political and educational importance of TVET was experiencing a remarkable and accelerated growth. This phenomenon was mainly attributed to the implementation of dual training structures and the worrying increase in youth unemployment and poverty in the country (Láscarez Smith & Baumann, 2021).

In this scenario, various business chambers and governments influenced by business interests exerted significant pressure to reform the TVET system, with the aim of finding concrete solutions to challenges such as unemployment, low productivity and mismatches between the supply of educational services and the demands of the productive sectors.

Due to the active participation of entrepreneurs, a scientific interest arose in understanding the historical role they played in the construction of the current TVET system in Costa Rica. To address this inquiry, it was decided to segment the history of TVET into different stages: post-colonial (1821–1900), liberal (1900–1950), welfare state and import substitution industrialization (1959–1980), and finally, the era of economic liberalization (1980–2021). Although the historical division is not always the most suitable explanatory strategy, a series of specific political and economic arguments were used for this classification. In any case, understanding the period from 1980 to 2021 was considered to offer significant heuristic potential, given the profound structural transformation of the TVET system and the new productive and subjective configurations in Costa Rica.

Roughly since 1950, Costa Rica built its productive and social foundations through welfare policies and an import substitution industrialization model. Social successes in areas such as health, education and democratic stability have been widely recognized in the Latin American region. However, this development model faced a crisis due to various factors, including deficiencies in the administration of public resources, the international oil crisis and the social and fiscal tensions of the government since the early 1970s.

Starting in the 1980s, this situation led to the implementation of policies supported by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, as well as internal political dynamics related to deregulation, privatization and trade liberalization. This change led to the emergence of a new business elite, which also influenced the new functions and characteristics of the TVET system. Ultimately, these transformations distanced themselves from the vocational education and training functions that existed prior to 1980.

In this context, a new business group has emerged, referred to as “*the transnationalists*” (Alvarado 1981; Arguello, 1983). This conglomerate is closely linked to structural adjustment programs, initiatives aimed at attracting foreign investment, and economic liberalization. On one hand, they function as political actors representing the interests of transnational corporations, and on the other hand, they operate as entrepreneurs seeking new business opportunities and growth. This dynamic and multifaceted group embodies the strategic convergence between political and business actors, marking a significant milestone at the intersection of political decision-making and business development in this specific context.

From this empirical problematization, a theoretical challenge now arises: How can the concept of entrepreneur be understood and how can its social interactions be studied? Research on entrepreneurs, their actions, reasoning and ideologies has been a real challenge in the social sciences. In this study, entrepreneurs are conceived not only as rational actors in exclusive search of profit and profitability, but as social subjects who develop actions and worldviews within specific historical structures. The structures of vocational education and training reflect social, cultural, political and economic constructions in which various processes converge, such as conflict, consensus, acceptance, opposition, resistance and ideologies. In other words, TVET policies and systems are shaped by a wide range of social relations that express the political, economic and philosophical foundations of a society. This implies that studies of TVET systems must consider the history of the anthropological and sociological characteristics of society.

The research question posed to guide the research was: How has the organized political action of business groups been configured around the TVET system within the framework of the social, economic, and political transformations in Costa Rica from 1980 to 2021?

2 Theoretical-methodological approach: Latin American configurationism

Latin American configurationism stands as the theoretical-methodological basis of the present research, as Felix (2020) details, emerging in the 1980s and 1990s as a response to the growing critical reflections on methodologies in the Latin American social sciences. This approach questions the construction of meanings and the role of the subject, especially in contrast to hermeneutic and marxist perspectives.

The fundamental criticisms in those debates were directed towards the structuralist and culturalist determinisms present in Marxist and hermeneutic perspectives. According to Enrique de la Garza Toledo, considered the intellectual progenitor of Latin American configurationism, these currents proved insufficient to comprehensively address the complex relationships between subject and object.

In Europe and the United States, with the emergence of post-structuralist and institutionalist perspectives from the 1970s onwards, economic institutionalism, organizational theories and neo-institutionalist approaches were consolidated. Simultaneously, in Latin America, dependency theories, liberalization philosophies, the contributions of Wallerstein's world-system theories and other critical elements of capitalism were challenged and experienced a crisis.

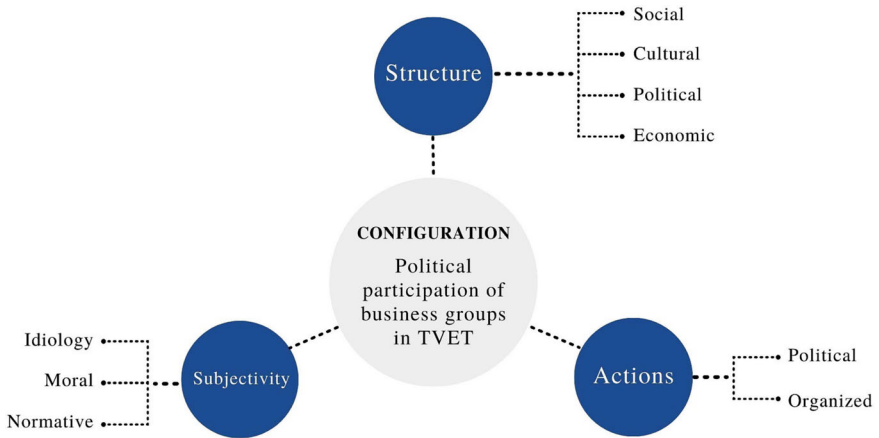
On the one hand, the dominant structuralist, functionalist and neo-institutionalist currents presented a capitalism without a subject, at least devoid of agency or reduced to economic rationality. On the other hand, the currents that sought to rescue the role of the subject neglected the importance of structure, perhaps for fear of falling into structuralism or poststructuralism.

In the 1980s, Mexican sociologist Enrique de la Garza acutely synthesized the above critique and embarked on the elaboration of a theoretical and methodological proposal to apprehend Latin American reality, giving rise to what is now widely known as configurationism. In essence, configurationism represents a theoretical critique of the predom-

inant currents in the social sciences, while constituting a scientific proposal to recover the centrality of the subject, its subjectivity and its structures, without falling into subjectivist or structuralist determinism.

As Felix (2020, p. 132) points out, configurationalism posits that reality must be understood as a process in which both structures and subjectivities intervene, and in which none of them determines reality, but rather conditions it. In this context, configurationalism conceives *configurations* as the relationships between structures, subjectivities and interactions, in an effort to comprehensively reconstruct the totality of reality.

Figure 1: Structure in the configurationist method.



Source: Láscarez Smith (2023).

Entrepreneurial subjectivities were studied, understood as the “process of creating meanings”, or “the process of giving meaning to social action” (De la Garza, 2018). Structures are understood as the rules that guide recurrent ordered practices; practices entail rules, and rules exist in practices, that is, they do not exist in themselves, apart from practice (Giddens, 1984). Structures can be understood as the result of human actions that objectify themselves, becoming relatively independent of their creators and turning upon them. Structures can exist at various levels of abstraction; they are abstractions that depend on conceptions, but also on realities that exceed the subjectivity of the subjects (de la Garza 2018).

Social actions are social practices that attempt to influence the course of social life. They have a meaning that can be conscious or unconscious. They have a dimension of power over other actors to persuade, influence, deceive, defeat, win, dominate or obtain a certain dimension of the material reality (De la Garza 2018).

3 Methods

To understand the structural transformations and changes in the actions and subjectivities of entrepreneurs and their organizations, this study employs a qualitative approach. This choice is rooted in the recognition that qualitative methodologies allow for a more in-depth exploration of complex social relations compared to positivist approaches. Furthermore, qualitative research aligns more closely with the research object, providing depth, richness, interpretative insights, contextualization of the environment, attention to details, and an exploration of unique experiences. As Hernández-Sampieri et al. (2004) articulate, qualitative research offers a fresh, natural, and holistic perspective on phenomena while affording the researcher flexibility in their investigative pursuits.

The selection of study subjects adhered to two primary criteria: 1) prior research experience in the Costa Rican business sector and 2) qualitative inclusion and exclusion parameters.

The first criterion, “previous experience”, pertains to research undertaken on the national landscape of vocational training programs in Costa Rica in 2014. This investigation facilitated a comprehensive understanding of key stakeholders—business, institutional, union, public, and private—involved in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET). Active participation in the tripartite dialogue table initiated by the International Labour Organization (ILO) in 2017, aimed at establishing a dual apprenticeship model, facilitated contact with business representatives pivotal in formulating TVET policy. During the study on the costs and benefits of TVET in 2017, interactions with ten managers and business owners keen on engaging in apprenticeship programs offered insights. Subsequently, research on business perceptions of the dual apprenticeship policy in Costa Rica pinpointed optimal business groups for inclusion in this study. These prior experiences informed the establishment of inclusion and exclusion criteria for subjects and business organizations participating in the current research.

The second criterion, “inclusion and exclusion criteria”, delineates the essential characteristics for subjects and organizations to be considered eligible for participation, as well as those characteristics precluding participation.

For inclusion criteria, business organizations were defined as chambers or business associations. Chambers align with specific economic sectors (e.g., tourism or agriculture), while business associations coalesce around shared economic or political objectives transcending individual sectors (e.g., the Business Alliance for Development). Recognized by both business entities and the state, formal business associations advocate for private interests (e.g., COMEX¹ or CINDE²). It was imperative for these associations to maintain a department or unit dedicated to TVET development, exhibiting consistent and recognized political engagement during the study period. Additionally, individuals and representatives affiliated with business associations were required to lead the TVET department or own/manage enterprises, possessing sufficient knowledge about TVET.

Exclusion criteria encompassed business organizations lacking demonstrated involvement in TVET matters, informal entities, and those unrecognized by the state or

1 Ministry of Foreign Trade

2 Costa Rican Coalition of Development Initiatives

other business organizations. Matters unrelated directly to TVET development were also excluded from consideration in this research.

To conduct this research, a series of 14 semi-structured interviews were undertaken, with eight of them directed towards representatives of prominent business organizations in Costa Rica:

1. The Union of Chambers and Companies of the Private Sector of Costa Rica
2. The Chamber of Industries of Costa Rica
3. The Chamber of Tourism of Costa Rica (CANATUR)
4. Costa Rican Coalition of Development Initiatives (CINDE)
5. Costa Rican-German Chamber of Commerce (AHK)
6. Chamber of Information and Communication Technologies (CAMTIC)
7. Chamber of Free Trade Zones
8. Business representative on INA's Board of Directors

The second set of interviews comprised three discussions with representatives of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institutions involved in coordination with the business sector. These included officials from INA, MEP, and UTN who collaborated with Group 1. However, it is noteworthy that these individuals possessed the subjectivity of public officials rather than entrepreneurs, despite their claim to be responsive to business interests.

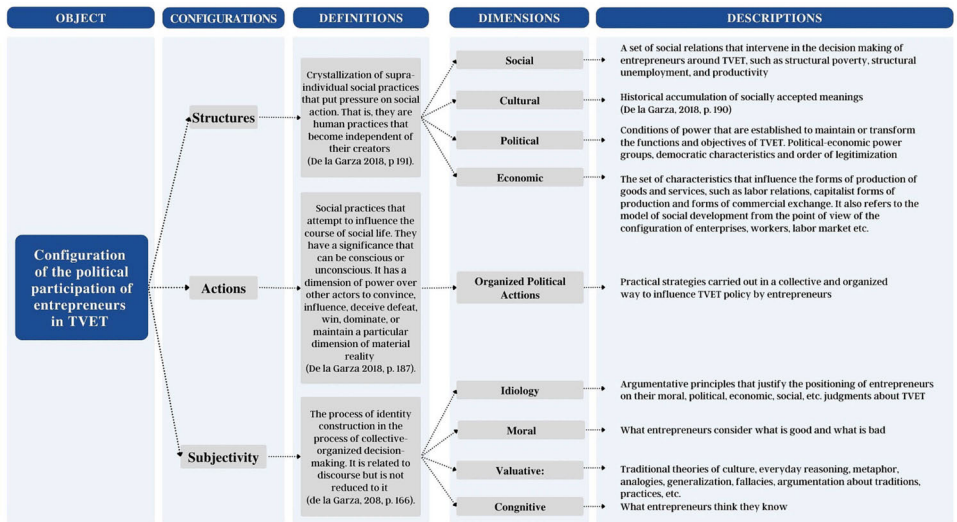
1. Directorate of Technical Education MEP and MEP's Business Linkage Department
2. National Apprenticeship Institute
3. National Technical University

The third group of interviewees consisted of experts in the field of TVET in Costa Rica. The first expert held senior positions in the Directorate of Technical Education of the MEP for three decades and played a pivotal role in implementing reforms and changes in the TVET system during the study's relevant period. He is now retired and works as a TVET policy advisor in Costa Rica. The second expert was responsible for overseeing the implementation of the first pilot plan in dual apprenticeships in Costa Rica in 1995 within the framework of cooperation between Germany and Costa Rica. This group also included a social scientist specializing in enterprise and organizational studies in Costa Rica.

1. Expert 1
2. Expert 2
3. Sociologist expert in business studies

The operationalization of the problem and the general categories can be seen below:

Figure 2: Configurations, definitions, dimensions, and descriptions of the object research.



Source: Láscarez Smith (2023).

4 Results

4.1 TVET and economic liberalization

During the crisis and the weakening of the welfare state, new conceptions of social and economic development emerged, dominated by liberal theses. New power groups called “transnationalists” presented a development alternative based on financial “modernization” as a strategy for insertion into the capitalist market (Alvarado, 1981).

For this new political class, privatization and economic liberalization were the most effective ways of slowing state growth and accelerating the stagnant growth rates of certain economic groups. Of course, the neoliberal discourse was also presented as an answer to the problem of poverty in society through the idea that the fewer barriers companies had, the more employment opportunities they could create. The economic model promoted was that of financial modernization. Financial modernization was no longer understood as nationalization, but as financial openness. It should be remembered that bank nationalization was the basis on which the welfare state was built. Since the Costa Rican Development Corporation (CODESA) (Raventós, 1995, pp. 10–13) was the maximum representation of a State with nationalized banking, these modernization measures were translated into the sale of CODESA shares. In addition, some measures included the attraction of financial centers, since they were considered an instrument of expansion that supported banking denationalization (Gorostiaga, 1978).

With respect to TVET, the biggest problem that arose for this new economic project and the new entrepreneurs was that the structures of TVET were built from the perspec-

tive of the previous development model. For this reason, the discourse of modernization of TVET structures in Costa Rica emerged strongly.

4.2 Structural adjustment programs and state reforms

As a solution to the great financial crisis and the deterioration of Costa Rican social conditions in the late 1970s and 1980s, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, together with the “transnationalists” proposed modernizing economic structures through structural adjustment programs. According to Raventós (1995), the second government of the neoliberal era (1982 to 1986) introduced austerity measures demanded by the International Monetary Fund as a condition for continuing to finance the State. This government signed the contract with the IMF and witnessed the implementation of the first Structural Adjustment Program (SAP I in 1985) (Raventós, 1995, p. 80), which in turn led to cuts in the public budget. It was then that the banking system was truly denationalized and the first steps of private investment began to take place. The objective of this SAP was financial equilibrium and expenditure control, for example, by freezing public sector salaries.

Later, in the third government of this period (Arias Sánchez 1986 to 1990), the second SAP was implemented (Raventós, 1996, p. 105) which increased privatization and state control. This second SAP pursued the same objectives as the previous SAP and basically involved a reform of financial policy, the agricultural sector, foreign trade, and the public sector.

It was followed in 1995 by SAP III, which consisted of state reforms (Raventós, 1995, pp. 145–154). This Structural Adjustment Program sought a deeper reform of the state through the pension system, privatization policy, financial liberalization and fiscal policy. These reforms would have an almost immediate impact on the entire labor and educational structure of Costa Rica. The following configuration describes the relationship between these processes in the institutional reforms of TVET and how employers participated in these processes.

The dramatic changes in the economic, labor, productive, institutional, private, and public structures are closely related to the subjectivity of the groups that promoted these changes and, of course, respond to certain political actions that have been oriented towards the transformation of the TVET system.

4.3 Between old and new business subjectivity: the social status of TVET since 1980

Within the import substitution model, a cultural perception emerged that relegated technical education to an inferior status. This perception manifested notably with the establishment of the National Apprenticeship Institute (INA), aiming to qualify masses of potential workers lacking formal education. This socio-cultural association persisted, delineating a dichotomy between academic and non-academic education. The social and economic value attributed to Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) did not align, exemplified by non-competitive TVET salaries pre-1980, incentivizing students to pursue higher education for better earnings.

During this era, there prevailed a prevailing sentiment equating attendance at INA with a lack of intelligence. Domestic companies, less concerned with workforce training, relied on the state for a supply of skilled labor. The dynamics of underdeveloped capitalism, coupled with the active role of the state in industrial development, contributed to the limited interest of national companies in TVET.

Costa Rica's integration into world capitalism, coupled with unfavorable terms of trade, fostered a robust national industry under the import substitution model. However, criticism of the model emerged due to its inefficacy. Underdeveloped capitalism, coupled with state-led TVET and its diminished cultural and social value, resulted in a tepid interest among domestic firms in TVET.

The pattern of economic growth showcased an asymmetrical relationship between the central and peripheral regions, concentrating dynamic economic activities in the Greater Metropolitan Area. This led to structural issues in peripheral regions, characterized by low productivity, unstable labor markets, and challenges in accessing quality goods and services.

Ineffectiveness in economic and employment policies to integrate individuals into the labor market, particularly since 2008, contributed to rising unemployment and informality. The business sector gradually shifted its perception of TVET, viewing it as a vehicle to foster entrepreneurship among the youth. This ideological shift aligned with the concept of "tropicalization" (Láscares Smith & Schmees, 2021) of international economic recommendations, prompting the establishment of departments and programs focused on entrepreneurial skills within the educational system. This shift, however, contradicted the promises of the neoliberal project, as it aimed to address employment challenges.

During the administrations of former presidents Arias Sánchez (1982 to 1986) and Rodríguez Echeverría (1998 to 2002) onwards, economic and political power in Costa Rica acquired new dimensions. In this period, the ideological foundations of transnational corporations in economic orientations were established, influenced by the Alliance for Progress, the Washington School and the role of USAID in economic policy (Morris 2005, p. 106, 110).

The Union of Chambers of Commerce and Industry of Costa Rica (UCCAEP) exemplifies the consolidation of economic and political subjectivity. Historically, UCCAEP presidents came primarily from traditional sectors, but since 2008 there has been a shift and now UCCAEP presidents come from the modern service sector. This change reflects not only the transformation of Costa Rica's productive structure, but also the emergence of business leaders with a non-traditional vision of the economy.

UCCAEP continued to promote a change in the functions of TVET, an ethical vision of education at the service of the market. The organization emphasized the adaptation of technical education to meet the requirements of national production and synchronize labor supply with business demand, reflecting a strategic action for productive transformation. The Ten Principles established by UCCAEP emphasized the importance of TVET in preparing the education system for an open economy exposed to increased competition.

Although business discussions on TVET are often conducted from an economic approach, the UCCAEP recognized the importance of pedagogy in meeting the objectives of system change. For this reason, businesses began to become actively involved in

curriculum planning processes. The emphasis shifted to fostering collaboration between academia and the business sector to train educators who are entrepreneurial, technologically adept and capable of integrating students into the innovation process according to Industry 4.0.

The subjective criteria that give meaning to the elaboration of national TVET policies respond to ideological criteria and a disconnection from the issue of poverty in the sense that the economy grows, but does not create jobs, since jobs are created in the national economy. This is the “double engine of the economy”, described by the UCCAEP representative when he said that Costa Rica has two economies: the export economy and the domestic market.

In addition, part of the ideological elements present in transnational corporations is the anti-union discourse. Labor flexibilization, the elimination of the minimum wage and tax exemption for corporate social security have been part of the productive transformation agenda for a better investment climate. The role of TVET institutions in this context, according to business, is to respond to the needs of the market against the interventionist interests of the unions.

4.4 Political actions of business groups around TVET

The following are some of the political actions that business groups have taken to strengthen the total or partial aspects of the TVET system in Costa Rica.

New Institutional Framework: Human Capital and Foreign Investment Attraction (1980s-1990s)

- The creation of institutions like the Costa Rican Coalition of Development Initiatives (CINDE) in 1982 played a crucial role in shaping TVET.
- CINDE's focus on human talent development through initiatives like the Training Program (PROCAP) aimed at aligning education with the needs of emerging industries.
- The geopolitical context, driven by the Cold War, influenced the creation of institutions like CINDE, reflecting the strategic importance of economic shifts in the region.
- The Ministry of Foreign Trade (COMEX) and the Foreign Trade Promotion Agency (PROCOMER) emerged in 1996, reinforcing the country's commitment to economic liberalization.

INTEL's Arrival and Curricular Transformation (1990s)

- The arrival of INTEL in 1998 marked a turning point, leading to significant curricular and institutional changes in TVET.
- INTEL's demand for well-trained workers prompted an overhaul of TVET programs to meet the needs of emerging high-tech industries.
- The cooperation between the Costa Rican government and the Taiwanese government played a pivotal role in modernizing curricula.
- The impact of INTEL on enrollment figures in TVET institutions underscored the need for higher standards and new competencies.

Linking TVET and Business Organizations: “Less Width, More Depth” (1990s)

- The slogan “Less Width, More Depth” symbolized a shift toward specialized, industry-relevant curricula in response to business demands.
- Direct collaboration between TVET institutions and businesses gained momentum, with a focus on identifying specialized areas and updating existing programs.
- Business associations became pivotal in shaping curricular discussions, marking a new trend in influencing TVET directions.

Dual Apprenticeships: TVET Modernization Flagship (1990s-2019)

- The discussion on dual apprenticeships in Costa Rica dates back to the late 1980s, with significant institutionalization in the early 1990s.
- A seminar in 1991 laid the foundation for a public policy on dual apprenticeships, drawing inspiration from the German model.
- The emphasis on bipartite responsibility and consensus highlighted the importance of collaboration between businesses and educational institutions.
- The 2019 dual apprenticeships law formalized the apprentice’s status as a student, emphasizing a new phase in TVET modernization.

5 Conclusions

The research focused on examining the configuration of the political participation of entrepreneurs in the construction of the technical vocational education and training (TVET) system in Costa Rica. The analysis focused on the organized participation of chambers and business associations, considering structures, actions and subjectivities.

From a historical-structural perspective, it is deduced that, starting in the 1980s, Costa Rica experienced a political-economic project driven by a new transnational business group in response to neoliberal capitalism. However, the full implementation of neoliberal policies was met with social resistance, which generated a gradual process influenced by social tensions and resistance.

In the area of business political actions, two levels of participation were identified: state organizations that respond to business interests and business chambers and organizations directly involved in TVET institutions. Political participation has focused on reforms and law proposals, highlighting the dual apprenticeship law in 2019 and the reform of the National Apprenticeship Institute (INA) in 2020 as achievements for entrepreneurs.

It highlights the lack of clarity in the pedagogical objectives of business political participation, evidenced in contradictions such as the adoption of the German dual apprenticeship model without the corresponding cooperation and labor rights needed for apprentices.

The main conclusion is that the political participation of business has been subordinated to the economic project, providing labor to transnational corporations. TVET has evolved into a strategy that allows employers to participate in areas historically dominated by the state and trade unions.

In the context of TVET institutions, a business linkage strategy aimed at improving educational offerings according to business needs can be observed. However, the introduction of “modernization” measures has not been entirely successful, and political participation has been transformed in response to financial crises and changes at the top.

Business political participation is influenced by economic structures, while recognizing the fragmentation of the Costa Rican business sector, where only large transnational corporations have effectively influenced TVET policies.

It highlights the creation of a transnational subjectivity in TVET after 1980, based on flexibilization and liberalization, designed to benefit specific sectors such as free trade zones, call centers and services. The business vision idealizes Costa Rica as a large free trade zone, subordinating TVET to the needs of foreign investment.

Ultimately, despite the theoretical capacity of TVET to integrate youth into quality markets, the lack of a solid structure based on the transnational subjectivities of entrepreneurs has limited its effectiveness. Further analysis of youth unemployment and the contribution of the general education system to youth labor integration is suggested.

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