



# The Challenges and Dilemmas of Vocational Education in China

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**Abstract.** With the rapid development of industrial society and the increasing importance attached to vocational education, the quality of vocational education is in conflict with the demand for vocational education, which also affects the status and attractiveness of vocational education. This article reviews the changes in vocational education in China, analyses and reflects on the dilemmas and challenges of the development of vocational education in China, and then corresponding opinions. Several suggestions are provided in this paper, including 1) Establishing a System Model for Different Stages of Economic Development; 2) Creating Employer-driven Management System; 3) Redesign the Curriculum and Courses of the Vocational Education and Training (VET) System; 4) Encourage Employer Participation and Raise Standards; 5) Built Bridge between the VET System and Academic and Higher Education 6) Address Low Public Awareness of the VET System. This paper will provide future implications for people to better understand the challenges and dilemmas of vocational education in China.

**Keywords:** Vocational Education · China · Dilemmas and Challenging

## 1 Introduction

China is striving to become a “modern, harmonious, innovative and high-income society”, and many changes are needed in the process, especially in the education system. In the pursuit of educational equity, the establishment of an employment-oriented vocational education system is the way forward for vocational education in China. Since 1978, China has vigorously promoted the vocationalisation of education. As a result, vocational education is seen as a strategy to help make investment in education more efficient. With the emphasis on the development of vocational education, it is worth thinking about how to better change and improve the system of vocational education levels, which has become a top priority for Chinese education. Changes in the development of vocational education have the potential to bring about changes in its own status and social recognition, thus pushing families to choose the vocational path more often and more actively. The development of higher vocational education in China reflects a global vocational trend that values skills and skilled workers. This paper will examine the challenges and dilemmas facing the development of vocational education in China by reviewing the development of vocational education in China [1].

## 2 Stages of Development

Employment is vital for every person and every family. Every person has to realize his or her self-worth in society through their respective occupations. It is therefore essential to increase the importance attached to vocational education. China has also gone through three stages in the process of exploring how to develop vocational education.

### 2.1 First Stage: Grope and Imitation

Before the establishment of New China and the reform and opening up of China in 1978, vocational education in China was at the stage of groping and imitation. At this stage, the vocational education system had just been established. It copied the educational model's Western countries.

On 10 August 1951, Zhou Enlai, the Chinese, pointed out at the 97th meeting of the Government Affairs Council that "The schooling system in old China was copied from Japan first and then from the United States. Although there were some modifications, generally, it still belongs to the capitalist education system." On 1 October 1951, the Government Council issued the Decision on reforming the length of the schooling System, which pointed out: "The original educational system in China has many shortcomings, among which the most important is the cadre school for workers and farmers and various cram schools and training classes, which has no due status in the school system [2]."

### 2.2 Second Stage: Expansion and Reform

The 1980s and 1990s saw a significant expansion of vocational education institutions, but quality issues were prominent. From 1996 to the present, the government has been committed to expanding the education system and improving the quality of vocational education [3]. The results of these measures have been mixed. In May of 1985, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China promulgated the Decision on the Reform of the Education System, judging the overall situation of vocational education. "Vocational technical education is exactly the weakest link in the whole education cause in China [4]." At the beginning of 1992, Deng Xiaoping's southern tour speech and the 14th National Congress of the Communist Party of China clearly proposed the establishment of a socialist market economic system, China's economic reform has greatly promoted the reform in the education field, focusing on the vocational education field. From 1999 to 2006, colleges and universities were expanded [4]. Vocational schools cannot receive enough students for development.

### 2.3 Third Stage: Investment and Boom

At the beginning of the 21st century, the cultivation of technically skilled personnel drew special attention from the state due to phenomena such as the shortage of skilled workers in some coastal area [5]. Since 2005, the state has started to increase its investment in vocational education and build the system of vocational education through the student

financial assistance system, the construction of model schools, the construction of basic capacity, and the mechanism of per capita funding. In recent years, along with the introduction of the National Implementation Plan for Vocational Education Reform and other policies, the construction of the vocational education system has entered a new stage, and the status of vocational education as a type of education distinct from general education has been established, with a multi-level vocational education system covering secondary, higher vocational and vocational undergraduate education, etc. Meanwhile, its internal pathway to further education has basically been opened up.

On October 12 2021, the General Offices of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council issued the Opinions on Promoting the High-quality Development of Modern Vocational Education. The role of vocational education is to cultivate diversified talents, and inherent technical skills, and to promote employment and entrepreneurship. After 2021 requires a balanced proportion of regular and vocational high schools in all regions, future vocational education will enroll a higher proportion of students. Therefore, more funds will be obtained for vocational education, and the future may be an era of booming vocational education.

### **3 Challenges and Dilemmas**

#### **3.1 Low Status in the Public Mind**

Admittedly, the difference in status between academic and vocational education exists in most countries. While in China, due to the Confucian tradition of valuing good governance in Chinese education, the idea that ‘mental work can dominate physical work’ is deeply rooted and has influenced the Chinese view of knowledge and education [6]. Vocational education faces challenges such as high tuition fees, limited upward mobility, and neglect of humanities in education. In addition to this, Chinese society, in general, pays white-collar people more than blue-collar workers, and even for the same salary, blue-collar workers have to work harder. From the perspective of students and parents, the benefits associated with vocational schools are very limited. At the same time, there is a general prejudice against this class of people, social disapproval, a low sense of self-identity, and a mismatch between giving and take is why people generally prefer the academic path.

#### **3.2 Weak Connections to Industry**

Although there is a link between vocational education schools and industry, this link is weak. Some vocational education institutions have modern buildings but no modern equipment, so graduates are not adequately prepared for the current job market. Organized internship experiences usually involve a few weeks of work at the end of the course [7]. Moreover, it is difficult for students to change their identity quickly and adapt to the pace of work in a relatively short period of time so that they can combine their studies and work and apply their learning [7]. The vocational education and training system also rarely interacts with international companies, which often use the most advanced industry and international standards.

With few young skilled workers and their frequent job changes, the high turnover of employees is an additional problem for companies of all sizes. This has also led to an acute shortage of qualified technicians and skilled workers. In general, there is a huge disconnect between the vocational education system and employers, who have little incentive to work with the vocational education system.

### **3.3 Inflexible Standards**

The importance of vocational education has come to the fore in order to better suit the development of the Chinese economy. Vocational courses should not be limited to vocational training alone, but workers should also learn the appropriate skills to meet market demands. Vocational college diplomas are no longer sufficient to meet the demands of society for careers. Vocational standards are diverse and constantly being updated, and vocational education should constantly adapt its teaching standards to better meet society's requirements for vocational institutions.

Such a system of standards and qualifications is still rare in China. Whereas in the past it was often thought that only schools and laboratories were the mecca of knowledge production and that knowledge could only be transformed in one direction from school to enterprise, the modern view is that enterprises and engineering are where knowledge is produced and that vocational education should be produced in real practice. Vocational education through school-enterprise cooperation is therefore no longer school-based education in the traditional sense.

### **3.4 Faculty with Limited Experience in Industry**

In China, there is a problem that the majority of teachers in vocational colleges do not come from industry but only have industrial experience or methods. There is an urgent need to improve the industry knowledge of vocational teachers and to find ways of employing teachers with a more industrial background. The most important thing for teachers in vocational education schools is not theoretical knowledge but practical experience. Teachers in China's current vocational education system tend to focus on imparting knowledge rather than on developing practical skills, or they lack experience. This is why the problem of finding experienced, competent and committed teachers is also a problem for vocational education.

## **4 Comparison with Other Country's Vocational Education**

Different countries have developed different vocational education objectives and training systems due to differences in their education systems and national contexts.

The vocational education system is a type in Europe that is mainly reflected in the influence exerted by the state on vocational training. This has led to three models: the 'school model', the 'market model', and the 'state-regulated market model'. In the 'school model', the state is responsible for primary vocational training, and in France, for example, most vocational schools follow a full-time teaching model. In the 'market model,' vocational training is largely organized independently of the state: at the heart of

this model is the transfer of skills. An example is the UK, where companies can carry out their own training. A third model is the state-regulated market model, in which the state regulates the involvement of companies in training [8]. A typical example of this type is Germany, whose VET model can be seen as a stark contrast to the Chinese model. It divides the training time into two distinct parts, with the college spend most of the time in internships and only a small part of the time in school, which also gives them more practical experience. China's manufacturing sector has been an important contributor to the country's continued economic growth. As times have changed, despite the expansion of the vocational education and training system, it has struggled to keep pace with the rapid growth of the economy. One of the most common problems is that companies complain that, despite completing VET, workers lack practical skills and that training within the VET system is too theoretical and not related to the actual work process [9].

The Chinese government has long recognized that the rapid growth of the Chinese economy has led to a continued increase in demand for skilled labor in the Chinese labor market [10]. China's manufacturing workforce is critical to the quality and productivity of the industry [4]. China has been looking to these countries with well-developed vocational education systems to improve its own education system.

## **5 Suggestions**

Vocational education can train more professional talents for the job market and better match the characteristics of the country's economic development. Therefore, China should also adjust its measures in the process of developing vocational education in time to better develop a vocational education development system.

### **5.1 Establish a System Model for Different Stages of Economic Development**

Any vocational education and training system needs to be matched to the level of economic development. There are many stages of economic development in China, so vocational education development should be adjusted accordingly at each stage. Because of the uneven development of China's regions, vocational education should also be developed in accordance with the conditions and needs of local development itself, with policies that are more in line with local development. However, it is important to note that all policy systems should be within a unified framework system so that all students can have a fair chance to compete.

### **5.2 Create Employer-Driven Management System**

In the workplace, employers have an absolute say in the choice of talent. They know better what kind of talents are needed in the job market and what kind of students are more in line with the needs of society. Therefore, employers should be more effectively involved in the design and implementation of the vocational education and training system, assessing and evaluating the vocational education system, and there should be frequent communication with employers to explore current and future skills needs. At the same time, the state should also establish a consortium of enterprises to encourage them to participate in the vocational education development process and to better provide direction for vocational education development.

### **5.3 Redesign the Curriculum and Courses of the Vocational Education and Training System**

Use industry councils to redesign the curriculum and create a new structure of experience for students, with key positions in vocational-technical training institutions filled by people jointly employed by industry or industry associations.

### **5.4 Encourage Employer Participation and Raise Standards**

Businesses should be encouraged to support and participate in the development of the vocational education and training system. Enterprises are encouraged to provide internship positions for students as well as corresponding workplace training. Enterprises can also be encouraged to participate in the development of the vocational education system by providing opportunities and platforms for students to work and by the state providing certain subsidies to enterprises.

### **5.5 Built Bridge Between the VET System and Academic and Higher Education**

There is no end to education. The development of vocational education should therefore also include higher education, especially in times of rapid economic development, when society's requirements for vocational education and training have increased accordingly. Individuals, companies and nations should constantly adapt to rapid changes. It is therefore essential to create bridges and pathways between vocational education and general/academic education and higher education. The state should create applied universities as the apex of the vocational education and training system, offering students technical and academic options, as well as flexible adult vocational and technical education that can help adults moving from the world of work to further education. In short, vocational education should also move towards higher education.

### **5.6 Address Low Public Awareness of the Vocational Education and Training System**

Due to the development of Chinese culture, vocational education is still generally not valued and it is therefore important to raise the profile of vocational education. By expanding the scale of vocational education, improving the vocational education system, and improving the platform for vocational education school students to be able to work more in order to change the traditional emphasis on academic studies and diplomas in China, the inherent perception of vocational education can be changed.

## **6 Conclusion**

To summarise, the above developments in vocational education and the dilemmas and challenges it faces are likely to bring about changes in its own status and social recognition, thus pushing families to choose more and more proactive paths to vocational education. The quality of vocational education is of paramount importance. This is particularly reflected in the quality of employment of vocational college graduates, which can

influence families' educational choices. When vocational education does lead to higher quality employment, parents are naturally more inclined to actively choose vocational education as an educational pathway for their children. China's vocational education system should improve the mechanism of combining vocational education with industry, enhance the adaptability of vocational education, and build a high-quality vocational education system with Chinese characteristics.

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