

Research on the Practical Dilemmas and Development Paths of the Integrated Development of Vocational Education and Lifelong Education in China

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Abstract: The integrated development of vocational education and lifelong education is of great significance for improving the quality of China's labor force, alleviating the structural contradiction between the supply and demand of technical and skilled talents, enhancing the quality of entrepreneurship and employment, and strengthening the development of a skilled workforce. The study finds that the current integration of vocational education and lifelong education in China still faces several challenges, including an incomplete institutional system, difficulties in realizing the integrated development of pre-service and post-service education, and insufficient emphasis on the cultivation of comprehensive qualities and competencies. Therefore, the government should intensify publicity efforts, strengthen cooperation among governments, schools, industries, and enterprises, and deepen institutional reforms concerning the integration of vocational education and lifelong education. Schools should establish institutional mechanisms for the integrated development of vocational and lifelong education through "credit mutual recognition" and "certificate interoperability," while further strengthening the construction of teaching staff. Communities should establish open community universities and community colleges to further build bridges for integrated development. In addition, industries should participate in formulating vocational education curricula that meet the developmental requirements of lifelong education, thereby forming a strong synergy to promote the integrated development of vocational education and lifelong education.

1. The Correlation between Vocational Education and Lifelong Learning

1.1 Vocational Education as a Foundation for Cultivating Students' Comprehensive Competencies in Lifelong Learning

Vocational education is education specifically oriented toward occupational positions, with its primary task being the cultivation of skilled personnel required in production, construction, and frontline service sectors. Skilled personnel must possess high levels of professional competence and occupational ethics. Therefore, vocational education aims to develop highly qualified technical talents by integrating education with occupational requirements. Through learning, students acquire

practical skills relevant to specific posts, understand career development pathways, and engage in career planning. These competencies and qualities are essential for lifelong learning, establishing a solid theoretical and practical foundation for participation in lifelong education. This, in turn, enhances the capacity of vocational education to serve the broader societal goal of promoting lifelong learning for all [1].

1.2 Vocational Education Provides Sustainable Learning Opportunities for Lifelong Education

Lifelong learning emphasizes learners' proactive engagement with diverse learning resources and opportunities across different life stages, continually improving their knowledge, skills, and competencies. To cultivate highly qualified technical talents who meet societal production needs, vocational education must encompass both pre-employment training and in-service occupational training. Both pre- and post-employment education explore opportunities for learners of various age groups to participate in vocational training. For instance, government reports have advocated reforms in higher vocational college admission policies, encouraging veterans, laid-off workers, and migrant laborers to enroll, thus providing these groups with access to vocational education. Once in the workforce, employees must continually engage in practical workplace training to adapt to evolving industry demands and enhance their professional skills. Vocational education, therefore, offers learners sustainable environments for lifelong education, enabling them to deepen and expand their occupational skills and adapt continuously to societal changes [2].

1.3 Lifelong Education Promotes the Sustainable Development of Vocational Education

The concept of lifelong education entails providing continuous learning opportunities and resources across different life and career stages, enabling individuals to adapt to societal and occupational developments. Implementing lifelong education stimulates learners' intrinsic interest and motivation for knowledge acquisition, fostering autonomous and enjoyable learning habits. It creates a positive learning atmosphere and lays the groundwork for continuous vocational education, equipping learners to meet the evolving demands of their future careers. This process enhances both professional competencies and occupational literacy, thereby promoting the sustainable and high-quality development of vocational education [3].

2. The Current Reality of Integrating Vocational Education and Lifelong Learning in China

2.1 Underdeveloped Institutional Mechanisms for Integration

Currently, the institutional framework for integrating vocational education and lifelong learning is underdeveloped and lacks top-level design. First, no comprehensive policy system has been established to support the integration, resulting in insufficient regulatory guidance. Second, there exist imbalances and inefficiencies in the allocation of educational resources. For example, some vocational and lifelong learning institutions face funding shortages, limiting the improvement of facilities and teaching quality, which prevents students from accessing high-quality vocational education and confines them to low-skilled, low-wage occupations. Consequently, the government must enact policies and regulations to establish a robust management system for vocational and lifelong education, enhance policy implementability, increase investment, and provide multidimensional support through policy, funding, talent development, and institutional mechanisms [4].

2.2 Lack of Integration between Pre-Employment and In-Service Education

Pre-employment and in-service education constitute critical components of vocational education. However, they currently operate in isolation, leading to a “disjointed” vocational education system. Pre-employment education focuses on professional skills, whereas in-service education emphasizes occupational competency, lacking continuity and coordination. To address this, vocational education should span an individual’s entire career trajectory, guided by career planning, learning processes, and lifelong learning principles. Measures include establishing career planning advisor systems to guide students in clarifying career goals before entering the workforce and fostering collaboration between enterprises and vocational institutions to develop integrated curricula and teaching plans. Additionally, cross-institutional and cross-sector learning platforms and online courses can facilitate continuous education across different stages of vocational and lifelong learning [5].

2.3 Insufficient Emphasis on Key Competencies and Comprehensive Skills

Current vocational education predominantly emphasizes professional skills and occupational literacy, whereas lifelong learning prioritizes comprehensive competencies, creating a misalignment that may impede the development of students’ overall capabilities. Strengthening students’ comprehensive competencies-encompassing professional skills, general skills, occupational literacy, innovation, and entrepreneurship-is essential [6]. Key competencies include learning ability, teamwork, cross-cultural communication, and creative thinking. Furthermore, vocational and lifelong education should innovate in educational philosophy, teaching objectives, and methods to better align with societal and economic development, supporting students’ career growth and lifelong learning. Strategies include diversified teaching methods, resource integration, and encouraging autonomous, experiential learning [7].

3. Pathways for the Integrated Development of Vocational Education and Lifelong Learning in China

3.1 The Government Perspective: Enhancing Advocacy, Strengthening Multi-sector Collaboration, and Deepening Institutional Reform

Currently, a cognitive dissonance persists within society: Vocational Education is erroneously relegated to a mere instrument for employment, while Lifelong Learning is viewed strictly as a pursuit of personal interest or self-cultivation. This conceptual decoupling leads learners to neglect post-employment continuing education and causes a deficit in practical skill accumulation within the lifelong learning sphere. To mitigate this "dual-track" (decoupled) phenomenon, the following measures are proposed:

Public Advocacy: The government must leverage diverse media channels to elevate the public profile of both sectors, fostering a holistic societal understanding of their intrinsic value.

Institutional Governance: A formal mechanism for integrated development must be established to drive policy reform. This involves incorporating both sectors into a unified national educational blueprint, thereby dissolving the rigid boundaries between academic credentials, vocational training, and lifelong learning.

Resource Optimization: Investment must be scaled to improve the quality, infrastructure, and systemic attractiveness of these educational pathways.

Triple Helix Collaboration: By deepening the integration of industry and education, the government can facilitate robust partnerships between academies and enterprises, ensuring curricula remain responsive to market shifts.

Societal Environment: A meritocratic social atmosphere should be cultivated to eliminate systemic discrimination against vocational tracks, providing a supportive external environment for integrated growth.

3.2 The Institutional Perspective: Establishing Credit Recognition and Certification Interchangeability while Strengthening Faculty Capacity

Educational institutions serve as the nexus for expanding student development, fostering market-aligned talent, and promoting social equity.

Credit Transfer Systems: Schools should develop standardized credit systems and evaluative criteria aligned with national policies to ensure the comparability and mobility of learning outcomes across different institutions and disciplines.

Modular Pedagogy: The implementation of diversified, modular curricula will allow for personalized learning trajectories tailored to individual student needs.

Certification Reform: The "1+X" certificate system (academic degrees + vocational skill certificates) should be advanced to enhance the professional mobility and employability of graduates.

Digital Infrastructure: Platforms for data interconnectivity are essential for the real-time verification and transfer of credits and certifications.

School-Enterprise Partnerships: Long-term strategic alliances with industry players should be formalized to involve the private sector in curriculum design and pedagogical practice.

3.3 The Community Perspective: Establishing Community Open Universities and Colleges as Bridges for Integration

Localized Access: By establishing community learning centers and open colleges, high-quality vocational training and skill-enhancement resources can be decentralized, meeting the multi-stage learning needs of residents.

Knowledge Dissemination: Regular symposia and workshops featuring scholars and entrepreneurs can provide residents with insights into career development and entrepreneurial guidance.

Synergetic Networks: Communities should act as coordinators between schools, enterprises, and training agencies to facilitate resource sharing, internships, and recruitment activities.

Social Practice: Encouraging participation in community governance and environmental initiatives enhances the comprehensive competencies and social responsibility of residents.

Self-Directed Learning: Supporting autonomous learning groups and interest-based collectives provides a grassroots platform for peer-to-peer advancement.

3.4 The Industry Perspective: Participating in the Formulation of Lifelong-Oriented Vocational Curricula

As the primary "end-users" of educational output, industry stakeholders are vital in ensuring pedagogical relevance. Curriculum development must be learner-centered, market-oriented, and systemically coherent.

Functional Competency: Curricula must prioritize core professional qualities and adaptive skills, emphasizing practical application through simulation and field internships.

Lifelong Learning Nuance: Tailored programs should be designed for diverse learner demographics to support continuous professional development (CPD) across the career lifespan.

Systemic Logic and International Benchmarking: Drawing on advanced international models,

industry-led curricula should be localized and systemically organized. This requires deep empirical research into industry trends and learner archetypes.

Dynamic Calibration: Curriculum frameworks must undergo periodic audits and updates to remain synchronized with the rapid evolution of the global market and technological landscape.

4. Conclusion

The integrated development of Vocational Education and Lifelong Learning represents the fundamental embedding of the "Lifelong Learning" philosophy within the vocational sphere. It is the definitive route toward constructing a modern vocational education system. By overcoming institutional bottlenecks and harmonizing pre-service and in-service training, a multi-stakeholder governance model-involving government, academia, community, and industry-will provide the necessary scaffolding for sustainable economic growth and individual self-actualization.

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