

An Analysis of the Dilemma, Reasons, and Path of Social Recognition of Vocational Education in China

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Abstract: Despite the introduction of a new law on vocational education and the improvement of the vocational education system, there are still problems, such as low social acceptance of vocational education and social stereotypes of vocational education, which not only affect the implementation of vocational education policies but also the enrolment of vocational education and the employment of vocational education graduates. This paper analyses the causes of the phenomenon from the school, social, parent, and student levels. It puts forward the following suggestions to improve the phenomenon and enhance the public's acceptance of vocational education: firstly, focus on the implementation of the policy in all aspects; secondly, improve the talent cultivation system; and thirdly, provide diversified employment opportunities to enhance the stereotypes. Through Dewey's theory of vocational education and Maslow's hierarchy of needs, we start with students' most basic psychological needs and then take measures to improve the social recognition of vocational education.

Keywords: vocational education, social recognition, stereotype, employment

1. Introduction

To promote social progress and economic development, on 1 May 2022, China enacted a new vocational education law and established the critical status of vocational education from the legal level. As described by Zhao, from a worldwide perspective, vocational education is well-developed in countries that are dominated by real economy and industry [1]. China has also invested much financial and material support in vocational education in recent years. The Ministry of Education (MOE) in February 2022 issued an Introduction on the Priorities of Vocational Education in 2022, which puts forward two significant tasks for vocational education at this stage: firstly, to improve the quality, and secondly, to improve the image [2]. The main task of vocational education in China is to improve the quality of vocational education and to enhance its image. The idea of vocational education is enhanced based on improving the quality of vocational education, which in turn enhances the social recognition of vocational education. However, in recent years, the public's social recognition of vocational education still needs to improve whenever vocational education is mentioned. They even think vocational education delays students' future development, and prejudice against vocational education still exists. This paper starts from the dilemma of social recognition, analyses the reasons for the low credit, and then seeks a solution path that can improve the social recognition of vocational education.

2. Reality Mapping of Low Social Recognition of Vocational Education

2.1. School Level: Diversified Enrolment Due to Difficulty in Vocational Education Enrolment

The low social recognition of vocational education has led to difficulties in enrolment in higher vocational colleges and universities, forcing them to extend the enrolment period continuously. In addition, it is also difficult to guarantee the level of students, and Sun found that some higher vocational colleges and universities have different levels of students in the same class [3]. For example, the students' origins and academic programs are extra. This makes it difficult for teachers to teach students according to their aptitude and more challenging to guarantee the quality of education. Even so, after graduation, students can obtain a full-time specialized diploma, which will inevitably affect the social reputation of vocational education in the long run. This kind of uninterrupted enrolment once again reduces the recognition of vocational education by all sectors of society. It makes vocational education fall into the vicious circle of complex enrolment and low credit.

2.2. Low Recognition of Vocational Education by Parents and Students Themselves

As shown in Figure 1, the number of schools, the number of students, and the source of students all show a downward trend, especially the number of enrolments is also in a year-on-year decline. To a large extent, these data show that parents and students of vocational colleges and universities are “far away” and “distrustful.” In May 2022, according to information from 168 valid questionnaires by Chen and others, about 73 percent of parents did not want their children to go to vocational institutions, and 87 percent were willing to spend a lot of money to send their children to private, non-higher vocational institutions [4]. Meanwhile, 118 of 180 students disliked vocational schools, accounting for 65.56 percent of the total [4]. In recent years, due to the country's development needs, many policies have been introduced in favor of improving vocational education. However, they still can't change the various “discriminations” against vocational education in society.

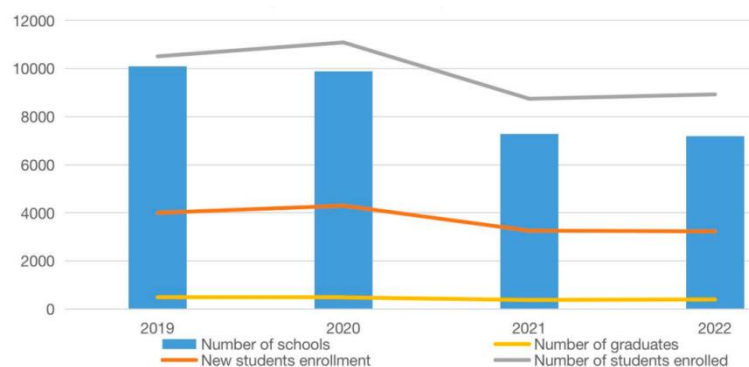


Figure 1: Secondary vocational school enrollment table 2019-2022 [5].

In addition, vocational education schools' curriculum and evaluation mechanism also prevents students from taking the initiative and showing their strengths. Most vocational education institutions “focus on knowledge-based tests and neglect skills assessment,” with a disproportionate teaching ratio and a serious lack of practical teaching [6]. This makes it difficult for those vocational school students who are not good at test-taking and are better at skills operation to generate motivation to learn and show their advantages, which leads to the lowering of self-efficacy of vocational school students and their lack of confidence in themselves, and the formation of the “Matthew effect” with higher education students, which leads to the formation of a one-sided social perception of the group of vocational education students. As a result, the public has a one-sided understanding of vocational

education students, which further develops into a stereotype.

2.3. Social Level: Social Evaluation System Based on Academic Qualifications Only

Scientific social evaluation mechanism is of great significance to the image enhancement and future development of vocational education. At the present stage, the employment environment of the whole society is filled with employment and evaluation standards. Academic qualifications are the most important, and scores are the most important. Michael Spencer, the Nobel Prize winner in economics, proposed in his theory of screening assumptions that education can be used as a screening device, which is used to help employers identify job seekers with different abilities so that job seekers can be assigned to various positions [2]. Because of such theoretical assumptions, most enterprises set the first degree of 985 or 211 as the threshold for job seeking when recruiting. In the social evaluation situation of the academic theory only, it naturally causes the public to have a stereotypical thought that vocational education is useless and cannot be employed after graduation, let alone enter the primary labor market. As a matter of fact, under the social evaluation mechanism of academic qualification theory, because of the excessive reliance on academic qualifications as the basis for selection and employment, without proper coordination between education and economic development, not only will it fail to promote economic growth, but it will also bring about severe consequences for the country and individuals. Everyone is pursuing higher education, and if there is no appropriate regulatory mechanism, it will inevitably lead to the strange phenomenon of overdevelopment of higher education and vocational education becoming a showcase.

From table 1, we can see that in 2017, vocational graduates earned 30 percent less than academic graduates. Regarding occupational status, more than 87 percent of graduates had secured white-collar jobs, with 64 percent in high-skilled jobs. While nearly seven in ten academic graduates were in white-collar and high-skilled jobs, there were 20 percent fewer vocational students in this area. Regarding job instability, two-fifths of academic graduates are in traditional areas (permanent employment). However, only one-fifth of vocational graduates have secured permanent positions. Therefore, the figure shows that academic graduates have a significant economic advantage and social recognition compared to vocational education students.

Table 1: The labor market outcomes of academic and vocational graduates [7].

	Academic	Vocational
N(%)	1306 (50.25)	1293 (49.75)
Annual income (RMB)	6137.65	41459.89
Occupation(%)		
White-collar and high-skilled	68.36	47.01
White-collar and low-skilled	23.44	36.13
Blue-collar and high-skilled	4.50	9.38
Blue-collar and low-skilled	3.70	7.49
Precariousness(%)		
Marginalised Zone (Unemployed and dispatched workers)	26.45	45.21
Liminal Zone (Employed with fixed-term contract)	30.41	32.76
Ttraditional Zone (Permanent/secure full-time work)	43.14	22.03
Total	100.00	100.00

3. Reasons for Low Social Recognition of Vocational Education

3.1. Top-Level Design Aspect

To help the development of vocational education, the state has introduced a series of policies related to vocational education. Still, fundamentally, there needs to be a robust mechanism to ensure the implementation of the policies. Eugene Bardack, an American public policy scholar, elaborated that the prerequisite for a public policy to be practical is that the interest groups related to the policy are highly agreeable to the policy introduced and obedient to its implementation [8]. However, there are still some problems with implementing the new vocational education law, and some scholars have even proposed to “abolish the separation of general education and vocational education.”

Secondly, national policies need to provide more economic support for vocational education. According to the research of the World Bank, the average amount of government subsidies for general education students is 2.53 times higher than that for vocational education students [4]. However, if vocational education wants to achieve higher quality development, the expenditures on experimental equipment and experimental facilities should be far more than that of general high schools. In 2021, the national per capita costs of general public budget expenditure on education per pupil in available high schools, secondary vocational schools, and general colleges and universities, etc., will be 17,236.78 yuan, 15,898.62 yuan, and 20,990.88 yuan, respectively, it can be seen from the data that the expenditure on vocational education is lower than that of general high schools, and the financial support for each student in vocational education is still far from enough compared with that of public education.

3.2. School Level

The educational goal of vocational schools is to cultivate talents who can meet the needs of society. However, the current inability of vocational school graduates to meet the development needs of the community reflects the problem of an imperfect talent training system in colleges and universities, which is mainly manifested in the irrationality of the curriculum system, the lack of experimental teaching links, and the disconnection between the education students receive in school and the needs of social development.

Table 2 reflects the proportion of lecture and practice hours in the courses of two vocational colleges in Singapore and China. For the same methods, Ngee Ann Polytechnic of Singapore adopts the mode of tutoring and practice in teaching, and the proportion of teacher’s lectures is 40% to 60%. The teaching of engineering courses pays more attention to practical operation and emphasizes students’ hands-on thinking abilities. On the contrary, from the table, we can see that China’s Wugong Vocational College puts the proportion of lectures in the courses that should focus on practice to 100%, with zero practical parts. It can be seen that in the essential part of teaching, knowledge and technical skills input, compared with Singapore Ngee Ann Polytechnic’s “less teaching and more learning,” China’s higher vocational colleges and universities are caught in the cycle of “more teaching and less learning” [9].

Table 2: Comparison of the Allocation of Secondary School Hours in the Teaching Modes of the Programmes [9].

No.	Course name	Ngee Ann Polytechnic Singapore				Wuhan Institute of Technology, Singapore				
		Total credit hours	Lecture	Tutorial	Practical	Percentage of lecture	Total credit hours	Lecture	Practical	Percentage of lecture
1	Mathematics	200	120	40	40	60%	64	64	--	100%
2	Electrical Circuits	80	40	20	20	50%	54	44	10	81.50%
3	Computer languages	80	40	--	40	50%	128	64	64	50%
4	Analogue Electronics	100	60	20	20	60%	64	52	12	81.30%
5	Digital electronics	40	--	--	40	0%	64	52	12	81.30%
6	Electrical Machines and Drag	120	60	20	40	50%	54	50	4	92.60%
7	CAD	40	--	--	40	0%	48	32	16	66.70%
8	Industrial Automation	60	--	--	60	0%	48	48	--	100%
9	Microcomputer Controls and Applications	60	--	--	60	0%	80	40	40	50%
10	Programmable Controllers	80	--	--	80	0%	64	32	32	50%
11	Power Distribution Protection	100	40	20	40	40%	48	48	--	100%

3.3. Parents' and Students' Stereotypes of Vocational Colleges

Parents and students tend to associate vocational education with negative terms such as “poor students” and “problems” and show a low level of recognition of vocational education. First of all, parents and students themselves think that students of vocational schools have a lower overall quality and are “poor students” who are eliminated from ordinary schools. In fact, according to the theory of multiple intelligences, everyone has their area of expertise, and every student shows their strengths in one or two areas of intelligence [10]. Although students in vocational schools cannot meet high requirements in knowledge-based tests, they perhaps excel in operational skills and hands-on abilities.

Secondly, the public has a stereotype of vocational schools themselves. According to relevant research, the social recognition of vocational schools is still to be improved, and about 50% of people’s impression of the overall state of vocational schools at this stage stays at average and below [11]. This is because there is a general perception that vocational schools are far inferior to ordinary schools regarding faculty and resource allocation. However, in some of China’s faster-developing provinces, such as Zhejiang and Guangdong, vocational schools are far superior to ordinary schools in terms of teacher strength and resource allocation. In addition, people’s concern about the future employment of vocational school students is also an essential factor contributing to the stereotype, as Wang and Wang illustrate that more and more people believe that after graduating from vocational schools, students can only engage in simple manual labor and have no prospect for development. In response to this, graduates of vocational schools also find themselves in a marginal labor market position in the job market, with a deplorable employment situation [12].

3.4. Social Level: Restricted Vocational Education Graduates' Career Development

At this stage, vocational education is not recognized by society, and the career development of vocational school students is limited. In fact, to a large extent, the demand for vocational education graduates is different from society’s needs. The community cannot recognize it, and most of the public believes that vocational education cannot eliminate poverty, inequality, and social exclusion. According to educationalist Dewey, occupations must be able to satisfy the basic needs of those who engage in them; that is to say, fields need to provide significant benefits corresponding to those who engage in such activities in society, and it is essential that such actions must continue to grow and also require creativity and innovation, which in turn will be able to withstand the challenges of an ever-changing society [13].

Research has shown that social status predicts the self-efficacy of decision-making among professionals, as their choice of occupation is based on more significant economic resources, social rights, and social prestige [14]. Meanwhile, Maslow's theory of needs suggests that human beings desire to engage in certain activities as long as they can satisfy their hierarchical needs. From the students' perspective, if a specific career can help them grow and survive, they will be motivated to make corresponding career choices. There is an inseparability between Dewey's vocational education and Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

For vocational students, vocational education is not only a choice of a reliable and sustainable source of livelihood but also a choice to contribute to society, which, to a large extent, reduces the hardship faced by the people in meeting their basic needs. Students' rejection of vocational education will be reduced only if it can be a reliable source of livelihood for them to seek employment, not only a livelihood but also a sustainable one, and to contribute to the development of society. At the same time, it will be possible to eliminate some of the notions of inferiority brought about by vocational education. The ultimate goal of vocational education must first consider the population's needs, which motivates their choices in life.

4. Suggestions for Improving the Recognition of Vocational Education

4.1. Focus on the Implementation of Policies, Increase Publicity, and Change the Public's Concepts

On one hand, the current promulgation of vocational education policy needs to be understood and recognized by the public, but vocational education policy implementation and implementation still need to be improved; constantly optimizing the policy supply of vocational education and changing the stereotype of the people is particularly important. Policies on vocational education should not only focus on promulgating policies but also on strengthening the process of monitoring policy implementation and evaluating the feedback of the policy cycle, which also plays a vital role. According to McLaughlin's interaction model, policies not only need to conclude but also should be implemented through a comprehensive policy assessment, especially the degree of behavioral debugging between policy implementers and policy influencers, focusing on the interests, values, and perspectives of policy recipients, and then forming a comprehensive and objective policy implementation report [9]. Putting the policy into practice will gradually change the public's disapproval of vocational education policy.

On the other hand, improving the implementation environment of vocational education policy is also essential in enhancing people's recognition of vocational education. Because the pursuit of self-interest and maximization of self-interest is the driving force for the policy implementation subjects, how to combine the policy implementation with the interests of the policy implementation subjects is the key to proving the excellent implementation of the policy [15]. Just as the state strongly advocates that vocational education is essential, however, in terms of financial investment in high school education and higher education still accounts for the majority of the proportion of the situation, should be improved to increase the investment in all aspects of vocational education, and the need to increase the relevant policy support, and in the allocation of resources to try to reduce the imbalance between general education and vocational education. While increasing financial input, policy support and concessions should also be given according to the actual needs of local vocational education and development planning to put every financial information into practice. Efforts should be made to build first-rate vocational education schools, foster a sense of professional honor among students, and enhance social awareness.

4.2. Improving the Talent Training System

Vocational education not only wants to improve the students' vocational ability in the employment position but also to strengthen the students' adaptability to the position and its changes and the flexible choice of the employable range, in addition to focusing on cultivating the students' sustainable learning ability. First of all, under the perspective of Gardner's theory of multiple intelligence, in terms of teaching ideology, it is believed that every student has their good parts, and teaching should be tailored to the student's ability and for the sake of every student's development. In terms of teaching philosophy, teachers in schools should maximize the development of their potential and change the view of the students that vocational education is a "secondary education" or "elimination education." In terms of teaching philosophy, school teachers should maximize their potential, transform the stereotype of vocational education as "inferior education" or "obsolete education," and motivate students to learn with conviction and motivation [10].

Secondly, the teaching design of vocational schools needs to carry out curriculum reform, and the teaching content should be changed from favoring fundamental theories to improving vocational ability and professionalism. That is to say, the whole teaching activities of vocational education should vigorously cultivate the practical application ability of students while transmitting the theoretical knowledge, strengthen the training of practical classes, and organically coordinate the academic teaching and the functional application operation throughout the whole teaching process, and the setting of the curriculum should be more flexible and maximize the students' ability to learn. The curriculum should be flexible to maximize students' learning ability.

In addition, given the mismatch between the professional settings of vocational education and the market demand, vocational education schools should deeply understand the importance of the talent cultivation mode. Vocational technology, as knowledge relatively independent of scientific knowledge, is a synergistic body that maintains a close relationship with science and technology. With the rapid development of science and technology, the boundaries between them are no longer so clear, and vocational schools, while cultivating the professional abilities of their students, also need to equip them with the knowledge of innovative thinking, teamwork, and cross-disciplinary communication [16]. The times are changing, and the students' curriculum system should also keep pace with the changes of the times to meet modern society's demand for diversified and compound talents, which in turn can change the stereotypical impression and cognition of vocational education and improve the mismatch between the professional settings of vocational education and the market demand.

4.3. Provide Diversified Employment Opportunities

As we all know, the labor market structure is also vital for the transition from vocational education to employment. On one hand, vocational education belongs to higher education as much as general education. There are no advantages or disadvantages between the two, especially regarding jobs, enterprises, and institutions, and graduates should make appropriate choices according to the actual situation. Vocational colleges should also start from their existing condition and be forward-looking, taking the demand of the employment market as the guide and offering specialties with strong practicality and employability. On the other hand, in the education of vocational school students, enterprises should be more involved because it is the enterprises that ultimately affect the employment of the students, and the enterprises have more say in what kind of students they need and what type of development they will have in the future.

In addition, we should endeavor to establish equality between vocational education and general education, avoid the phenomenon of undergraduate education "discriminating" against vocational education in the recruitment process, and guide society to change its prejudice against vocational education. A vocational solid sector can only be an attractive option for students if the conditions of

employment are generous and protective, as is best demonstrated by remuneration packages. As complex institutional complementarities can be best coordinated outside of the market sphere, the combination of an improved education system for vocational education, employment protection, and a generous pension system is a harmonization that is an alternative explanation for choosing vocational education for students [17]. As Dewey and Maslow describe vocational education, people's motivation is crucial to career goals. The ultimate goal of students and parents choosing vocational education is to find the right job after graduation, to fulfill their needs, and to have a sense of self-efficacy, so the employment of students in vocational schools is an essential manifestation of the state policy, the school education as well as the social recognition.

5. Summary

This paper analyses the status quo of the low social recognition of vocational education. It explains the causes of this status quo from the perspectives of schools, society, policies, parents, and students, respectively. Through the analysis of the problems of insufficient economic support for vocational education in national policy, the disconnection between the education students receive in school. The demand of enterprises for employees, the marginal position of students in the labor force of the employment market, and the limited career development after employment, three suggestions were put forward: firstly, to change the public's prejudice against vocational education and set the policy of vocational education into practice, and secondly, to improve the system of personnel training and improve the professional setting of vocational education and the demand of the market. Secondly, improve the personnel training system and improve the mismatch between the professional environments of vocational education and the market demand; finally, employment is the mirror reflecting vocational education, and there should be close contact between the school and the society to guarantee the employment of vocational school students and their career planning after employment. Vocational education has a vital role in society and students, and the positive impact of vocational education can only be reflected in improving good social recognition.

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