

Staying Updated in Terms of Educational Values: The Problems and Reform of Vocational Education in China

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Abstract: Education is a crucial component of a nation's superstructure. In today's global landscape, we observe varied social systems, such as the relatively traditional constitutional monarchy in Britain, which has successfully integrated a comprehensive system of international vocational education early on. In contrast, influenced by over 2500 years of traditional Confucianism, education in our country embodies a rich cultural essence. Aligning and reflecting the value of domestic education with global development trends is essential for its advancement and relevance in the contemporary era.

Keywords: Education; Value; Vocational education; Up to date

Online publication: May 23, 2024

1. History of development

1.1. British's development history

In the 19th century, the level of science and technology of a country determined its economic status. In order to meet the needs of society, universal education and vocational and technical education began to be highlighted ^[1].

Since the enactment of the Industrial Training Act in 1964, British vocational education has been influenced by the principles of democratizing education. This influence has led to the establishment of a dual system of higher education, which includes autonomous universities and non-university public higher education institutions, such as multi-technical colleges ^[2].

The national industry training underwent a transformation without intervention. This transformation aimed to develop the skills, knowledge, and understanding required for various professions, catering to the needs of individuals in the workforce and promoting lifelong learning. This was achieved through the implementation of the National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) system and the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF), which facilitated the connection between different qualification frameworks. Additionally, there was a strong emphasis on the development of key competencies such as communication skills, digital literacy, problem-solving abilities, self-directed learning, collaboration, and more.

By the 1990s, higher education underwent significant reform, resulting in the elimination of the “dual” higher education system. This restructuring aimed to establish a lifelong learning society with vocational education at its core, facilitating the integration of higher education and continuing education sectors. Collaboration with the European Union accelerated the internationalization of vocational education, leading to the completion of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), which became the first framework aligned with the European Qualifications Framework.

1.2. China’s development history

The origins of schools trace back to the era of slave societies, where education was intertwined with productive labor. This tradition persisted through the centuries, evolving over time. Following the Opium War in the 19th century, China underwent a period of Westernization that lasted for three decades. The Westernization Faction advocated for “learning from foreigners” and “combining Western and Chinese teachings.” This movement led to the adoption of Western science, technology, and craftsmanship, thereby promoting productivity. The abolition of the imperial examination system in 1906 marked the end of a 1300-year-old tradition and heralded the birth of the modern school system in China.

After the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, society entered a new era of peaceful and stable development, with science and technology as the primary productive force, vigorously promoting social development. In the 1980s, compulsory education was fully implemented nationwide, and a gradient-based national education system was established to improve the quality of the population. Efforts were directed towards cultivating diversified human resources through this national education system. This included the preservation of technical expertise, promotion of employment and entrepreneurship, provision of vocational education for high-caliber talents, and nurturing of applied skills. The goal was to cultivate socialist laborers and constructors equipped with both cultural literacy and professional proficiency. Enhancing the overall quality of the population and advancing technological capabilities serve as crucial indicators of a nation’s comprehensive strength and are key benchmarks of social development and progress.

1.3. Role of vocational education in societal development

Science and technology serve not only the superstructure of national management but also play a crucial role in expanding practical applications and driving economic development. Their aim is to continually meet, enhance, and elevate people’s material and cultural living standards, thereby fulfilling the comprehensive development of human needs ^[3].

Education spans across an individual’s entire lifespan, from family upbringing to formal schooling and societal integration. It reflects the evolution and advancement of individuals, progressing from basic consumer needs to early education, and eventually culminating in the pursuit of personal fulfillment and social value through a career path. This journey involves individuals mastering production skills and technology as “workers,” and further advancing their professional skills and qualities to become the driving force behind productivity development ^[4]. To realize and complete the education and training of “workers” depends on long-term and effective vocational education.

2. Value orientation of vocational education development

2.1. Lifelong: From prioritizing economic development to personal career development

Since the 1990s, the unemployment rate has become a crucial indicator reflecting market economy conditions and social stability. In response, vocational education has shifted from its traditional role as a “terminal” stage

to becoming a “lifelong” pursuit. This transformation entails the rational formulation and planning of individual careers, with integration into society to meet career needs as the starting point. It emphasizes the establishment of a “school-to-career” concept, promoting lifelong education as a means to continuously adapt to evolving professional demands and opportunities throughout one’s lifetime ^[5].

2.2. Integrated: From job skills to comprehensive vocational ability training

The role of vocational education extends beyond mere on-the-job training; its aim is to support students in ongoing learning, foster the cultivation of vocational core competencies, and enhance students’ ability for sustainable development ^[6].

In response to the uncertainty and instability in individual occupations caused by social and environmental factors, it is crucial to foster a professional mindset centered on “mastering one technical expertise while enhancing overall quality.” This shift involves moving beyond merely acquiring vocational skills for specific industry roles to developing and applying comprehensive professional qualities. This approach not only deepens expertise within specific occupations but also ensures a balanced range of skills across different job roles, ultimately contributing to the overall effectiveness of workers ^[7].

2.3. Sustainable: Creating favorable conditions for students’ career development

Human development varies widely, and vocational education, characterized by its humanistic approach, endeavors to foster respect for life and individuality. It prioritizes guiding individuals toward comprehensive and sustainable personal growth through effective training and guidance ^[8].

Implement the practical exercise of the industry module, improve the understanding of the industry with theoretical guidance and practice, experience the platform of operable skills, deeply understand the needs of the profession, and carry out further vocational skills training selectively in order to implement the professional standards.^[9]Strengthen the display and connection of the industrial chain, clarify the process of the industrial chain, improve the understanding of related industries, realize the vertical improvement of professional ability and the sustainable development of the horizontal guide.^[10]

2.4. Multi-mode: Broadening the channels of vocational education.

As education diversifies, vocational education plays a vital role in addressing industry needs by offering a variety of educational formats early on. This benefits individuals of different ages in accessing education and training. Through industry-oriented vocational education, there is a leading role in redistributing and reconstructing social human resources. This not only enhances the purposeful competition among human resources but also establishes industry-specific professional standards as fundamental criteria for enhancing the overall quality of the workforce. Thus, broadening vocational education channels contributes to realizing comprehensive human development.

Occupation arises from the reciprocal selection between human resource allocation and industry demand. “When education shapes individuals’ values, vocational education can usher in an era of training individuals with both specialized expertise and diverse abilities, fostering comprehensive human development.” This represents the purpose of effectively reforming, addressing, and refining the current vocational education system.

3. Problems in China’s vocational education and their corresponding countermeasures

3.1. Outdated educational system

Vocational education serves to assess individuals based on both their humanistic qualities and professional skills

in their engagement with society. However, it is often perceived solely as preparatory training for employment, placing excessive emphasis on job-specific skills and neglecting the broader value of education. This falls short of meeting the evolving demands of society and the holistic development needs of individuals. Overemphasis on achieving high enrollment rates can lead to negative psychological impacts on students ^[11].

Drawing inspiration from Germany's "education management multi-center, diversified unity" approach, the vocational education system implements two relatively independent modules that coexist, demonstrate mutual tolerance, and complement each other. One module comprises off-campus vocational education, situated within enterprise production sites and various training workshops. The other module consists of school-based vocational education, encompassing various vocational education institutions ^[12].

(1) Changing the concept of occupation.

The concept of career orientation should be redefined. Job positions are defined by various factors such as responsibility level, work intensity, human effort, and task difficulty. These factors collectively determine the value of the position, often measured by compensation. When there is a mismatch between personal aspirations and societal evaluations, discouragement may occur, leading to a decline in motivation and creativity.

(2) Changing the secular vision

Changing the secular perspective often begins with creation. This means moving away from outdated models focused solely on low costs and convenience, which often neglect environmental concerns. Instead, we need to prioritize creating a people-centric environment that values creativity and innovation. The government should take the lead in fostering this change, encouraging the development of new professional standards and conceptual frameworks across various industries, from production to marketing. By supporting creative initiatives and transitioning towards more sustainable practices, individuals and industries can better adapt to societal needs and thrive in the evolving industrial landscape ^[13].

(3) Vocational education and retraining.

Effective networking and cooperation between schools and enterprises are essential for implementing a vocational education system that meets industry standards. This collaboration facilitates the implementation of vocational continuing education, enabling the recycling of human resources by helping them acquire relevant skill qualifications. Such a system can also pave the way for entry into various higher professional schools. Additionally, this partnership can provide human resources links and pre-distribution short-term education and training within the industrial chain, ensuring that individuals are well-prepared for their specific roles in the workforce ^[14].

In an environment that emphasizes the simultaneous advancement of vocational and general education, various vocational education models are essential for breaking industry-specific limitations and aligning with the demands of the industrial chain. By offering diverse vocational education programs, we can provide multi-tiered and multi-faceted vocational training that caters to different skill levels and career aspirations. This approach fosters the holistic development of individuals, ensuring they are well-prepared to integrate into and contribute to the broader economy.

3.2. Incompatibility with other forms of education

Vocational education in China exists in various forms, including vocational colleges, training institutions, industry alliances, and more. However, the absence of unified standards for industry-specific core courses has led to a reliance on technical skills certificates as the primary measure of vocational qualifications obtained

through training. Consequently, certification units only recognize qualifications within their respective industry sectors, hindering the accommodation and integration of similar or related industries. Furthermore, without comprehensive career planning and overarching coordination, indiscriminate certification practices undermine the value of vocational qualification certificates. As a result, these certificates fail to effectively measure and reflect the true qualifications acquired through vocational education and training ^[15].

Australia's vocational education system offers valuable insights by incorporating the concept of industry participation, recognizing the industry as a crucial link between enterprises, training institutions, and vocational schools. This approach involves government agencies coordinating efforts to integrate training packages based on industry-specific standards and corresponding training criteria. Key responsibilities include conducting research and decision-making on matters such as school scale, infrastructure planning, educational product development, personnel arrangements, and financing. Additionally, authorities oversee curriculum design, textbook development, teaching plans, and syllabi management. Furthermore, public investment services, policy implementation, and unified identification and assessment processes are tailored to match the characteristics of each occupation.

4. Arrangement and setting of “competency-based” vocational courses

In the debate between “competency-based” and “labor-based” approaches, the latter prioritizes personalization and humanization in skill development. Drawing inspiration from vocational education practices in the United States, this approach combines vocational training with general education to enhance both knowledge acquisition and skill integration. By integrating curriculum elements and emphasizing entrepreneurship education, this model not only equips individuals with practical skills but also fosters a mindset of continuous learning. Ultimately, this comprehensive approach highlights vocational education as a system for nurturing individuals holistically.

By diversifying vocational education models and expanding their application across various industrial sectors, we can effectively meet the demands of competency-based education. This entails providing vocational training tailored to different trades and positions required by industries, ensuring alignment with market needs. Furthermore, implementing post-training programs that integrate human resource allocation within the industrial chain is essential for addressing the overall development needs of the workforce. This approach facilitates the organic linkage between industry and market dynamics, enabling individuals to acquire essential social vocational skills and enhance their overall quality. Ultimately, vocational education serves to cultivate well-rounded individuals with multifaceted abilities, thereby enhancing market competitiveness and contributing to the overall development and improvement of human resources quality.

Each country's education system is shaped by its unique historical development, resulting in diverse characteristics. In today's era of global interconnectedness, there is a call for global resource sharing to facilitate integration among nations. However, this also intensifies competition in terms of overall national strength. With a focus on people-centered development and the application of science and technology, vocational education plays a crucial role in comprehensive human training. The differences in vocational education across countries reflect their distinct contexts and contribute to their respective successes. As we navigate these differences and set goals for progress, it is essential to choose approaches that align with our development needs. By doing so, we can create and cultivate value in education, positioning ourselves as active participants in the global landscape.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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