Analysis of Learning Situation and Training Suggestions for Non-traditional Students in Vocational Colleges

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Abstract: With the popularization of higher education in China, the proportion of non-traditional students in higher education will continue to increase. Vocational colleges will be the main institutions in China that accept non-traditional students to attend universities. This student group is still very different from the traditional student group. The analysis of the learning situation of non-traditional student groups is a prerequisite and foundation for vocational colleges to explore the high-quality cultivation of this group. Through investigation and analysis of non-traditional students in vocational colleges, summarizing their learning characteristics strengths, and weaknesses, this article provides corresponding suggestions for high-quality cultivation of this student group in vocational colleges.

Keywords: Vocational colleges; Non-traditional students; Social personnel; Analysis of learning situation; Personnel training

1. Introduction

According to the Statistical Bulletin on the Development of National Education in 2022 released by the Ministry of Education of China, the gross enrollment rate of higher education reached 59.6% in 2022, which has reached the stage of popularization [1,2]. When higher education enters the stage of popularization, in addition to traditional students being the main source of higher education, the proportion of non-traditional students in higher education will continue to increase [3], and students will exhibit diverse characteristics [4,5]. People of various educational levels, social classes, and ages will have more opportunities to enter higher education institutions for learning [6]. With the popularization of higher education in our country moving towards the intermediate and advanced stages, more and more low-scoring students, retired soldiers, laid-off workers, migrant workers, and other groups will enter higher education institutions to receive higher education [7]. Vocational colleges will be the main institutions that receive this student group. Since the 2019 Government Work Report proposed to expand the enrollment of vocational colleges by 1 million, there has been a new group of students in vocational colleges, which is

still very different from the traditional source group of ordinary high school graduates or vocational school graduates [8]. How to cultivate this non-traditional student group well requires in-depth research and exploration by major vocational colleges, and this exploration is also of great significance [9]. It is a meaningful attempt and promotion for continuing education and lifelong education in China [10,11,12].

Although vocational colleges will no longer continue to expand their enrollment after three years, there is still a need to continue exploring and researching the cultivation of non-traditional students. To educate this student group well, it is necessary to conduct a systematic analysis of their learning situation. Understanding the characteristics of this student group, identifying their difficulties and shortcomings in learning, and exploring their strengths and specialties are essential to maximize strengths avoid weaknesses, and tailor teaching to their individual needs. The research group conducted a questionnaire survey on non-traditional students who have enrolled in higher vocational colleges [13]. 252 valid questionnaires were collected, and the three-year learning performance of some students was tracked and observed to gain a deeper understanding of the differences between this group of students and traditional students. Based on the survey results, the characteristics of non-traditional vocational college students and their learning advantages and disadvantages were analyzed and summarized. In addition, corresponding training suggestions were given based on their characteristics.

2. Analysis of demographic characteristics of non-traditional students in current vocational colleges

2.1. The age is mainly within the range of 18 and 25 years old

At present, the age of non-traditional students studying in vocational colleges is mainly between 18 and 25 years old. The proportion of personnel in this age group is 90.88%, which is the vast majority. Only 5.56% of people aged between 26 and 30 while the proportion of people aged 31 and above is even lower, only 3.57%. In terms of age, there is no significant age difference between non-traditional students and traditional students. 20–25 years old is the age stage with strong receptivity and plasticity.

2.2. The vast majority are still unmarried individuals

Among the surveyed individuals, the vast majority were unmarried, accounting for 89.29% while the proportion of married individuals with families is 9.92%, of which 7.14% are married individuals with children. Currently, the vast majority of social personnel recruited by vocational colleges are unmarried individuals who are relatively free and have fewer family ties.

2.3. Most people have some grassroots work experience

66.73% of the surveyed non-traditional students have work experience, with the highest proportion being those with 1–3 years of work experience, accounting for 30.17%. Students with 6–12 months of work experience rank second, accounting for 18.28%. 8.69% of personnel have 3–5 years of work experience, while only 2.8% have more than 5 years of work experience. On the other hand, 33.27% of people have never worked or are only involved in part-time jobs. Most experienced personnel are engaged in grassroots work.

3. The learning advantages of non-traditional vocational students at the current stage

3.1. Cherish learning opportunities

Since non-traditional students were originally a group of students who did not get into university, it is now

very rare for them to have the opportunity to enter vocational colleges for learning. They cherish the hard-won learning opportunity very much. They have experienced the difficulty of finding a job, and the hardships of grassroots work, and know the importance of education and skills in finding their ideal job. Therefore, they cherish the opportunity to improve their education levels and learn again.

3.2. Strong learning purpose and self-awareness

69.44% of the respondents believe that their learning advantage lies in having a strong learning purpose, and 55.16% of them believe that they have a strong sense of self-awareness in learning. They know what is more useful for them in their professional studies, so they are more purposeful in their studies than traditional students [14]. They not only want to obtain a college degree but also hope to further improve their professional skills through vocational education. Only a small number of people want to experience university life or spend their idle time.

3.3. Some people already have a certain level of professional skills

Because most personnel have some grassroots work experience, they have mastered a certain level of professional skills in their work. In terms of skill operation, compared to students from traditional sources, they learn faster, and some students can become teaching assistants for professional skills courses.

3.4. More able to endure hardship and have stronger resilience against setbacks

The research group observed the performance of non-traditional and traditional students in the internship process and found that non-traditional students are more able to endure hardship and hard work than traditional students. They are more willing to do some dirty and tiring work. When facing criticism from superiors, these students demonstrate stronger resilience to setbacks, are not as affected, and have better social adaptability.

4. The learning weaknesses of non-traditional vocational college students at the current stage

4.1. The foundation of cultural courses is relatively weak

Compared with traditional vocational college students, these students have a relatively weak learning foundation and there are obvious weak links. Some students have a serious bias towards certain subjects. Among the surveyed individuals, 70.24% of them believe that their English is a weakness in their learning. 46.03% of students feel that their computer proficiency cannot keep up with other classmates.

4.2. Weak mastery of professional theoretical knowledge

Non-traditional vocational college students prefer skill operation courses and have strong hands-on abilities, but their mastery of some theoretical knowledge that needs to be memorized is relatively poor. In terms of writing proficiency and self-learning ability, they are also slightly weaker. Their mastery of professional skills is better than their mastery of professional theoretical knowledge. Compared to students from traditional sources, their performance in the written test section of the final exam is much worse.

5. Suggestions for the cultivation of non-traditional students at the current stage

To better cultivate non-traditional vocational college students and achieve high-quality training of "Low-quality students entering, high-quality graduates leaving", vocational colleges should combine the characteristics of

these students and develop talent training programs that are suitable for them, to better help them grow and succeed.

5.1. Suggestions for courses

(1) Add elective courses to supplement weak foundations

Given that these students have a relatively weak cultural foundation, the school can offer some foundational courses in English, mathematics, computer science, and other areas, allowing them to choose courses based on their weaknesses. 72.2% of the respondents hope that schools can offer courses in this area to improve their weaknesses in learning. Schools can also appropriately reduce the difficulty or requirements of learning these public basic courses to build their confidence in learning these basic courses.

(2) Determine whether students need to study professional basic skills courses based on the results of skill tests

Vocational colleges can launch some professional skill tests to evaluate students' professional skill levels to evaluate whether students need to take some basic skills operation courses based on their skill level. 60.7% of the surveyed individuals hope to be exempted from basic operation courses related to their profession.

(3) Add professional advanced skills elective courses

Although these students have a certain level of professional skills, most of them are still at the intermediate and junior levels of professional skills. They hope to improve their professional skills to the next level and hope to further improve their professional skills through studying in higher vocational colleges. Schools can organize them to take high-level skill certification exams, such as senior technicians, etc. The admission of these advanced skill level certificates generally requires years of work experience. Traditional students do not have the necessary registration conditions due to a lack of work experience, while some non-traditional students generally meet the corresponding application conditions. Adding these advanced skill elective courses can enhance their learning enthusiasm. 65.9% of the surveyed individuals hope to receive additional advanced technical operation training.

(4) Deeply explain professional theoretical knowledge

Teachers need to be more detailed, in-depth, and patient when explaining some necessary professional theoretical knowledge, as non-traditional students tend to have weaker mastery of theoretical knowledge. In the arrangement of teaching content, the principle of "necessary and sufficient" can also be followed, allowing students to master the necessary knowledge in the course. Some less important knowledge can be omitted from the syllabus and be exempted from exams. With this, the practice of theoretical knowledge can strengthen and deepen their mastery of important knowledge.

(5) The graduation internship can be treated differently based on the student's work experience

Vocational colleges generally set up graduation internships to help students adapt to society, understand enterprises, and understand job responsibilities and basic work processes. However, most non-traditional students already have some grassroots work experience, so it is not suitable for them to intern in grassroots work positions. Vocational colleges can treat students differently based on their past work experience, by exempting them from professional graduation internships, reducing the duration of professional internships, or providing them with higher skill or management positions to enhance their enthusiasm for professional internships.

5.2. Suggestions on learning security

(1) Strengthen tuition subsidy

Generally speaking, students from non-traditional sources who have worked in society for some time will have a certain amount of savings compared to fresh high school/vocational school students. However, some individuals may not go to school due to concerns about tuition and living expenses (such as unemployed individuals). Schools can provide financial assistance such as grants, loans, and scholarships to these individuals, and it is best to explain the relevant policies during enrollment promotion to dispel their learning concerns [15].

(2) Conduct psychological construction for learning

A considerable number of non-traditional students have doubts about their learning abilities. They believe that they are not material for reading or studying. They may have encountered setbacks in their previous studies, felt frustrated, and lacked sufficient confidence in their university studies. Therefore, it is necessary to encourage them, build their confidence in learning, eliminate their concerns in learning, and provide them with appropriate psychological construction and counseling.

(3) Adopting a flexible learning system

Through a survey on the preferences of non-traditional students in terms of academic system, it was found that 74% of people choose a flexible part-time study system, which means that as long as they complete the credits within a specified time, they can graduate. This flexible learning system can allow them to arrange their study time more flexibly and dispel their concerns about study time.

(4) Provide group learning assistance

Schools can provide group assistance for students from traditional and non-traditional sources in their studies. Generally, students from traditional sources, especially those from general high schools, have good grades in cultural foundation courses but weak skill levels, while students from non-traditional sources have poor cultural foundations and good skill levels. Through group learning assistance, they can learn from each other's strengths and weaknesses in their studies, form complementary and mutually beneficial relationships, and progress together.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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