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Integrating MORS Standards into Tourism Vocational Education: A Case Study from a Chinese Vocational and Technical College

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Abstract: This study delves into the integration of MORS standards in vocational tourism education at Jiangmen Polytechnic. The research indicates that the incorporation of MORS standards significantly enhances both the quality of education and the professional skills of students. Additionally, through modern apprenticeship pilot programs and other school-enterprise cooperative pathways, the college has extended MORS standards to industry practice, improving service levels in the regional tourism industry. Faced with challenges in resource allocation and teacher training, the college adopted strategies such as increased investment, optimized resource allocation, and organized teacher participation in training. Moreover, considering the differences between MORS standards and the actual industry requirements in Guangdong Province, the college selectively introduced certified occupational standards. These practices not only demonstrate the college's capability in educational innovation and industry adaptation but also offer valuable insights to other vocational and technical colleges, especially in the innovation and improvement of tourism vocational education.

Keywords: Vocational Education; Regional Cooperation; MORS Standards.

1. Introduction

The Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area, located in southern China, is a city cluster characterized by economic vitality and cultural diversity, comprising nine cities in the Pearl River Delta of Guangdong Province, as well as the special administrative regions of Hong Kong and Macao. In 2019, the Chinese government issued the "Outline Development Plan for the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area," emphasizing the promotion of technological innovation, economic integration, and infrastructure interconnectivity. The plan also highlights the importance of green sustainable development and strengthening education, cultural, and tourism exchanges and cooperation, with the aim of making the Bay Area a world-class bay area and a showcase for China's reform and opening-up, reflecting its significance as a national strategy and innovation.

With the rapid development of the global tourism industry, high-quality tourism vocational education is increasingly valued. The Macao Occupational Skills Recognition System (MORS) standards, as a successful industry certification system, have shown their importance and effectiveness in the Macao tourism industry. MORS was initiated in 2001 as a collaborative effort of the Institute for Tourism Studies (IFT) and the Macao tourism industry. Its main goal is to enhance the human resource level of Macao's tourism industry by introducing a series of occupational certification programs. The MORS certification includes a wide range of tourism-related professions, such as chefs, bartenders, front desk staff, etc. [1].

The MORS standards have played a significant role in improving the service quality of Macao as a tourist destination. IFT's School of Tourism and Hotel Management offers various professional training courses, including MORS training and assessment, which help to enhance the city's competitiveness. This system has received widespread recognition from the government and industry in Macao and is actively promoted in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area to improve the quality of tourism services in the region [2].

This study selects Jiangmen Polytechnic as the subject for a case study, aiming to deeply explore the application and impact of MORS standards in the field of tourism vocational education in mainland China. As an important vocational and technical college in Guangdong Province, China, Jiangmen Polytechnic's practices in tourism education represent the development trend of vocational education in China. The introduction of MORS standards at the college is not only a significant reform of the existing education system but also a positive attempt to improve education quality and meet industry demands. Studying the process of introducing MORS standards at Jiangmen Polytechnic can provide valuable experience and insights for other vocational and technical colleges, especially in terms of innovation and improvement in tourism vocational education.

The main purpose of this study is to explore and evaluate the strategies, challenges, and effectiveness of Jiangmen Polytechnic in the process of introducing MORS standards. Through in-depth research on these issues, this thesis aims to provide valuable insights and strategies for tourism vocational education institutions in China and other regions of the world, especially in introducing industry standards and improving education quality.

2. Literature References

2.1. Educational Regional Cooperation

In the field of education, the importance of regional cooperation is increasingly prominent, especially in the Asia-Pacific region. With population growth, the democratization of secondary education, and the growing wealth of many countries, higher education systems are rapidly expanding,

leading to an urgent need for diversified funding sources and resources. To address these challenges, higher education institutions from different countries are forming and developing strategic partnerships and collaborations to mobilize resources, facilitate academic exchanges, and offer joint programs. For instance, Molly N. N. Lee (2012) in her study explored different types of university exchanges and analyzed some regional cooperation initiatives launched by intergovernmental organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) [3]. In the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) countries, the assessment of the need for ophthalmology education represents another aspect of educational cooperation. The study by H. Awan and others (2014) indicated that the region faces challenges in maintaining and increasing the ophthalmic health workforce to meet the growing and aging population's needs [4]. Furthermore, the research by B. Hoinle, Ilka Roose, and Himanshu Shekhar (2021) emphasized the increasing importance of teaching forms involving non-university partners in providing key competencies needed for sustainable development. These teaching forms might also create new interdisciplinary spaces, allowing different actors to influence the regional transformation towards sustainable development [5]. Lastly, the study by I. Terentyeva and others (2018) provided practical guidance on labor market and regional vocational education system cooperative arrangements. This study revealed the characteristics of national models and general tools used for collaboration between vocational education institutions and businesses [6].

2.2. Development of Tourism Vocational Education

Tourism vocational education is undergoing significant transformations worldwide, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research conducted by Faruk Seyitoğlu and others (2022) explored the views of undergraduate students in tourism-related majors regarding the future of the tourism industry post-pandemic, as well as their career development and planning. The study found that the pandemic had an impact on students' professional and psychological aspects, which in turn influenced their future career decisions [7]. Another study by P. Silitonga (2021) examined the application of Competency-Based Education (CBE) in the career development and job satisfaction of tourism vocational high school graduates. The results indicated that the implementation of CBE and Competency-Based Assessment (CBA) is critical in providing employment opportunities and career development [8]. Natascha Röhrer and others (2021) focused on the role of regional actor networks in tourism vocational education and training, using Cancun, Mexico, as a case study to analyze the regional actor network in the tourism sector of that area [9].

2.3. Educational Cooperation in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area

Educational cooperation in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area is an important component of China's regional development strategy. The study by Hong Jiang and others (2021) focused on the ecological security model of the Greater Bay Area. While primarily concentrating on ecological backgrounds and needs, it also indirectly reflects the potential and challenges of regional educational cooperation in the area [10]. Gao Tian's study (2019) more directly addressed the development of the tourism industry in the Greater Bay Area, including the historical background of tourism integration, current developments, obstacles, and prospects. This research is crucial for understanding the role of regional educational cooperation in promoting tourism and cultural development [11]. Dun Liu's study (2020) explored the internationalization practices of Dongguan University of Technology as a new high-level polytechnic university, providing a case study for understanding international cooperation among higher education institutions in the Greater Bay Area [12]. The research by Xuanfei Wang and S. Liang (2022) analyzed the ecological model of central ports in the Greater Bay Area from the perspective of port competition and cooperation. Although primarily focused on port operations, its insights are also relevant for understanding how educational institutions in the region can develop through competition and cooperation [13].

3. Research Methodology

This paper adopts a multimethodological approach, combining the characteristics of qualitative research and case study. Initially, through semi-structured interviews, the study collected in-depth information about the adoption and implementation of MORS standards from the college's administrators, teachers, and students (Smith & Firth, 2011) [14]. Following this, by conducting document and record analysis, the study thoroughly examined the college's official documents and policy records to understand the background and details of the MORS standards implementation (Johnson, 2014) [15]. Additionally, participatory observation of on-site teaching activities provided direct evidence for evaluating the application of MORS standards in educational practice (Wang & Hannafin, 2005) [16].

In terms of data analysis, the study employed thematic analysis, revealing key factors in introducing MORS standards by identifying recurring patterns and themes across different data sources (Braun & Clarke, 2006) [17]. To enhance the credibility and validity of the research, theoretical triangulation was used, synthesizing, comparing, and analyzing results from different data sources (Carter et al., 2014) [18]. Furthermore, the study strictly adhered to ethical guidelines, ensuring the privacy of participants and the confidentiality of data (Flick, 2018) [19].

Through this comprehensive research methodology, the study aims to provide a thorough and in-depth analysis of the process of introducing MORS standards at Jiangmen Polytechnic, thereby offering an empirical basis for understanding and evaluating the application of MORS standards in China's tourism vocational education.

4. The Process of Introducing MORS Standards at Jiangmen Polytechnic

Jiangmen Polytechnic demonstrated a deep commitment and innovative practices in integrating the MORS (Macao Occupational Skills Recognition System) standards into its tourism vocational education. Since signing a cooperation framework agreement with the Macao Institute for Tourism Studies (IFT) in 2017, the college has continually deepened its collaboration with Macao in tourism talent training, becoming one of the early vocational colleges in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area to participate in this field.

Firstly, in terms of faculty and student exchange, the

college implemented a vigorous visiting and exchange program. By the end of 2022, 12 teachers and 20 students were sent to IFT for visits and training. Moreover, over 300 individuals participated in online training sessions hosted by IFT. The college also successfully organized a seminar on "Transformation and Talent Cultivation in the Tourism Industry of the Greater Bay Area," inviting experts from Macao, Guangzhou, Zhaoqing, and Jiangmen, with nearly 200 attendees both online and offline.

Secondly, in promoting occupational standards, the college has been collaborating with IFT since 2018 to introduce and promote the MORS standards. Students and teachers from other institutions like Zhongshan Vocational and Technical College, Huizhou City Vocational College, Dongguan Vocational and Technical College, and Guangzhou City Tourism and Trade Vocational School have participated in training at the college, with over 60 training sessions. Experts from IFT were invited to conduct three training sessions for mid-to-senior level tourism management professionals in Jiangmen, with over 200 participants. Furthermore, students participated in MORS assessments for front desk service, with an 85% pass rate. The faculty in the tourism management department obtained 18 MORS qualifications as instructors and trainers. This cooperation not only enhanced the vocational skills of the college's faculty and students but also extended MORS standards to other vocational colleges in the Greater Bay Area, strengthening regional vocational education collaboration.

Thirdly, in terms of practical training facilities, the college focused on upgrading educational infrastructure. In 2019, it renovated its catering and housekeeping training rooms to ensure they met the MORS training and assessment needs. This moves not only improved teaching quality but also provided students with a learning environment closer to real-world work conditions.

Finally, in terms of teaching and curriculum development, the college achieved significant accomplishments through its cooperation with Macao. In the first half of 2020, front desk service training was incorporated into the curriculum, exploring the integration of certification and coursework. Additionally, this certification was included in the talent cultivation plan for the tourism management major as a recommended qualification. By 2023, under the Macao cooperation project, the college achieved numerous outcomes, including one provincial-level training base, three provincial teaching committee projects, two school-level teaching and research projects, one municipal-level research project, one integrated course-certificate program, and two published related research papers.

Overall, Jiangmen Polytechnic has made significant contributions to the tourism vocational education in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area through its close collaboration with IFT and effective implementation of MORS standards, enhancing its own educational quality and level.

5. Case Analysis

5.1. Analysis of the Effectiveness of Introducing MORS Standards

Many scholars believe that vocational education and training (VET) programs should better fulfill the function of human capital development compared to general education programs. They emphasize that VET programs contain occupation-specific elements closely linked to specific occupations and labor market demands (van der Velden & Wolbers, 2003; Wolbers, 2003; Levels et al., 2014 [25,26,27]). Changes in industry skill demands necessitate improvements in vocational standards and curricula (Clarke et al., 2016) [23]. The integration of industry standards significantly enhances the practicality and relevance of education. In this case, the curriculum content of the college was substantially enriched and optimized through the MORS standards, making the teaching content of tourism majors more aligned with industry demands.

Occupational assessment and certification measure the quality of VET outputs by evaluating learners' acquired competencies based on occupational standards (Baraki & Kemenade, 2013; Brockmann et al., 2008b) [21,22]. Many studies indicate that VET can be seen as an effective solution to enhance employability (Achtenhagen & Achtenhagen, 2019) [28]. In this case, students significantly enhanced their skill levels and employment competitiveness by participating in MORS training and certification. This is partly due to the well-structured training and certification system that helped students better master professional skills, and partly because the MORS certification system is based on an international development background. Developed in 2001 with the assistance of EU experts, this occupational skill certification system won the Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA) Gold Award for Education and Training in 2002. In collaboration with the Macao Institute for Tourism Studies, the college integrated the American Hotel & Lodging Association (AH&LA) exam with MORS certification, allowing students to obtain two internationally influential certificates through one examination. This will benefit students' future employment prospects.

Introducing MORS standards not only enhanced students' professional skills but also indirectly improved service standards in the regional tourism industry through the practical application of graduates. A unique combination of skills is the foundation for maintaining regional competitive advantages (Lauder et al., 2008) [20]. Jiangmen Polytechnic innovatively extended these standards to industry practice through school-enterprise cooperation. Besides collaborating with local tourism management departments and organizing industry training for local tourism enterprises, the college integrated MORS training into apprenticeship courses and organized apprentices with dual roles as students and employees to obtain MORS and AH&LA certifications. Since apprentices learn on the job as formal employees, the outcomes of training and certification are immediately reflected in their daily work. Other employees of the enterprise also learned about these standards and continually optimized their training systems based on this certification system. Clearly, such cooperation can promote innovation and sustainable development in the tourism industry, especially in the application of new technologies and service models, enhancing industry service standards and fostering industry innovation and development.

5.2. Challenges Encountered and Response Strategies

Introducing new educational standards often comes with challenges in resource allocation and teacher training. The school responded to this challenge by increasing investment, optimizing resource allocation, and organizing teachers to participate in MORS-related training. Since 2017, teachers

from the tourism management department have been organized multiple times to participate in learning and exchanges in Macao. Leveraging the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Tourism Vocational Education Alliance, the school also hosted training courses for teachers from sister institutions.

Another significant challenge came from the standard itself. The international development background and influence of the MORS certification system is an advantage, but introducing this standard was not just about obtaining an impressive certificate; it aimed to enhance students' professional skills to better serve their future career needs. VET usually ensures employment security and smooth transition to the labor market (Shavit & Müller, 2000) [24]. However, the standard, based on Macao's local tourism industry background, differs from the industry realities in Guangdong Province, where most students are likely to be employed. For example, differences exist in catering service processes and dining habits of customers. In response, the college selectively introduced MORS certification benchmarks for certain occupations. For instance, priority was given to front desk service personnel, a relatively uniform industry standard, and western-oriented occupations like Western-style waiters and bartenders were also prioritized. In contrast, occupations like Chinese-style waiters were not chosen. On a macro level, industry standards in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area require collaboration among governments, schools, and enterprises. In November 2021, the Guangdong Provincial Department of Human Resources and Social Security, the Labor Affairs Bureau of the Macao SAR Government, the Economic and Technological Development Bureau of the Macao SAR Government, and the Macao Social Security Fund signed a cooperation agreement on vocational skills talent evaluation. Jiangmen Polytechnic actively participates in promoting this project. Currently, one teacher has obtained the qualification of vocational skill level certification assessor from the Guangdong Provincial Vocational Skills "One Exam Three Certificates" Working Committee and will actively participate in related training and assessment work in the future.

6. Conclusion

This study, through an in-depth exploration of the process of integrating MORS standards into the tourism vocational education at Jiangmen Polytechnic, reveals the significant impact of this approach on enhancing educational quality and students' vocational skills. The successful integration of MORS standards not only enhanced students' professional skills but also raised the service level of the regional tourism industry. The college innovatively combined school-enterprise cooperation to extend the MORS standards to industry practice, significantly raising industry service standards and promoting innovation and sustainable development in the sector.

Despite facing challenges in resource allocation and teacher training during the introduction of MORS standards, the college addressed these challenges through effective strategies such as increasing investment, optimizing resource allocation, and organizing teacher participation in relevant training. Additionally, the college adopted a selective approach to introducing certification standards for occupations, ensuring the training content met students' employment needs, considering the differences between MORS standards and the actual industry requirements in Guangdong Province.

In summary, Jiangmen Polytechnic demonstrated capabilities in educational innovation and adapting to industry needs in the process of introducing MORS standards. This practice provides valuable experiences and insights for other vocational and technical colleges, especially in terms of innovation and improvement in tourism vocational education. Looking forward, the college will continue to explore pathways to align with international standards, further enhancing the level and effectiveness of vocational education.

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