

An Exploration of the High-End Path of the Development of Higher Vocational Education in China from Teachers' Perspectives

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Abstract: In recent years, China's higher vocational education has made remarkable progress, but faces some challenges in the process of development. This study aims to explore the effective development of higher vocational education, especially in terms of teachers' professional development and educational innovation. Through online semi-structured interviews with four teachers in higher vocational schools, their perceptions of higher vocational education and their specific implementation (implementation methods, implementation content, benefits experienced and difficulties faced in implementing higher vocational education) were examined. The study found that teachers encouraged students to analyse problems from multiple perspectives and develop integrative and critical thinking skills. By providing internships in relevant industries, teachers helped students gain practical experience and skill development, and helped them clarify their career goals and directions. However, the study also revealed the difficulties encountered by teachers in implementing higher vocational education, such as China's exam-based education system and some parents' and the public's inherent perceptions of higher vocational teachers, schools and education, as well as students' sense of responsibility. The study also mentioned teachers' lack of insight and inadequate teaching methods and skills in implementing higher vocational education. Therefore, this study argues that higher education schools and society should address the issue of inadequate funding and training. Despite the limitations of this study, it provides research perspectives for future studies to explore the benefits of implementing higher vocational education and the challenges faced by parents or students, and to promote diversity and innovation in the implementation of higher vocational education.

Keywords: Higher Vocational Education; Teacher Professionalism; Advantages; Challenges.

1. Introduction

Recent years have witnessed a spurt of progress in higher vocational education (HVE) in China. Chinese government has increased financial investment in HVE, and HVE development has ushered in favourable policies. HVE development has encountered a more promising social and market environment. Through the enhancement of the quality of HVE and the promotion of the national government in recent decades, a growing number of individuals have recognised the bright career prospects and development chances in HVE, thus raising their interest in the area. On the other hand, China's market demand for technically skilled personnel has been burgeoning as the country's economic structure shifts and industries upgrade.

Despite the mounting support for HVE in China, it confronts a number of challenges and troubles in its development process. Some parents who have a general cognitive bias against the "college entrance examination" are concerned that the learning environment in HVS is not conducive for their children to develop positive learning habits [1]. Moreover, some employers in society have a narrow definition of employment, and sometimes recruitment is not in accordance with the requirements of the position, but mainly depends on academic qualifications [2]. Another obstacle is the relatively lagging and insufficiently balanced educational resources in some regions. Especially in the northwestern region, the lack of funding for HVS has constrained the quality and development of HVE [3]. Nevertheless, some HVS have difficulties in hiring qualified teachers, resulting in the problem of teacher shortage [4].

In general, the above background reflects the contradiction between the tremendous potential and the present impediments to the development of HVE. Consequently, this research aims to put forward some feasible recommendations for the efficient development of HVE, particularly in the areas of teacher professional development and pedagogical innovation. We will investigate several HVE-related policies and documents, as well as their actual implementation, to examine the discrepancies that exist between the ideal situation and the reality of implementing HVE in Chinese HVS. Furthermore, we also endeavour to investigate some HVE-related practices to discover more advantages and the challenges of HVE implementation in HVS from the standpoints of teachers. This study provides effective guidelines for instructional design, teaching methods, and teacher training and addresses barriers faced by teachers, optimising the development of teacher professionalism and current HVE theory.

2. Literature Review

The development of HVE has gone through the three-education coordination, connotation construction, and internal construction phases, and the strength of schooling and training capacity has increased significantly. The past decade has been a period of comprehensive reform of HVE in China. During the period of comprehensive reform, the development of HVE has shifted from the previous focus on reforms in the teaching field to many factors outside the teaching field that affect the HVE development, such as funding, specialisation, faculty, management and examination format [5]. After a decade of development, the

strength of HVS in running schools has been greatly enhanced, and their ability to train personnel has been substantially refined.

However, HVE's introduction and spread have been hotly contested in China. The public has reservations about teachers' teaching abilities and the learning atmosphere at HVS. The challenges confronted by teachers were inevitably revealed. Therefore, we focus on articulating these benefits and challenges from the teachers' standpoints to provide insights into student learning and HVE implementation.

One of the most outstanding values of teachers in implementing HVE is to accelerate the training of various talents to meet the needs of society and market demand through HVE teaching and to deliver suitable high-quality human resources to various industries [6]. Nooruddin and Bhamani added that when teachers saw the progress of students in their learning and professional development, such positive feedback could motivate teachers to continuously improve their teaching ability and further smooth their teaching work [7]. Nevertheless, the shortage of teachers in HVS has become more and more evident due to the continuous expansion of the student population. Xu ascribed a severe constraint to lack of systematic skills training, claiming that it may prevent teachers from being proficient in practical operations [8]. Another crucial issue raised by Lambriex-Schmitz et al. was that some so-called renowned teachers may rely too much on their previous experience and teaching methods, rather than keeping up with developments and changes, and continually learning and upgrading themselves [9]. In Mei and Symaco 's opinion, some HVS teachers not only had to bear heavy teaching tasks but also faced the pressure of establishing a practical teaching environment, coupled with the limitations of the development of the times and scientific and technological innovation on the improvement of teachers' teaching level, which led to the inability of teachers to ensure the teaching progress and efficiency [10]. Therefore, to alleviate the negative impacts, HVS should pay attention to the cultivation of teachers'

teaching ability.

The current literature has not focused on teachers' professional development and cultivation, but on giving instructions on teachers' behavioural norms and teaching guidelines. Therefore, this study explored the development opportunities and challenges brought by HVE from the perspective of HVE teachers and give relevant suggestions.

3. Methodology

In this study, semi-structured online interviews were employed and four high vocational teachers discussed their opinions on HVE and their individual ways of implementing HVE. Given the limited number of participants, the research was restricted in scope and the findings lacked generalisability. However, the researchers were able to extensively investigate the research questions because of the small number of respondents.

Online interviews were utilized as the primary means of data collection. A purposive sampling strategy was used to select the participants for this study. Two of the four interviewees are teachers employed at a higher vocational education school in Jingdezhen, Jiangxi Province; and the remaining two are HVE teachers working in Nanchang, Jiangxi Province. The firsthand insights shared by frontline teachers during the interviews could genuinely capture the positive outcomes of HVE and the challenges they face while implementing it. Besides, these viewpoints are most likely derived from the actual experiences of many Chinese HVE teachers. However, since some of the respondents were new to the profession and lacked adequate knowledge and practice in HVE, the content of the interviews may have been unscientific and generic. Small sample sizes will also reduce the generalisability of findings. Consequently, we conducted a comparative analysis between their perceptions and those of more seasoned teachers. The subsequent table presents some fundamental details regarding the participants in the interviews:

Table 1. Summary data regarding the respondents

	Participant A	Participant B	Participant Y	Participant Z
Workplace	Jingdezhen	Nanchang	Nanchang	Fuliang County in Jingdezhen
Years of experience	3	2	4	8
Gender	Female	Female	Male	Female
Subjects taught	Tourism services and management	Aviation services	Hospitality services and management	Early childhood education (Craft and creative)

Furthermore, the semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for slight adjustments in the interview questions based on the participants' responses within the research focus. Transcriptions of all four interviews were conducted in written form, and thematic analysis was performed on the collected data.

4. Findings and Discussion

This study followed Braun and Clarke's 6-step thematic analysis method: familiarisation, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing [11]. We conducted in-depth interviews with four HVS teachers participating in the experiment, with each interview lasting between 24 and 34 minutes. The survey generated a

substantial text record of approximately 90,000 words. The findings from the analysis shed light on the current implementation status of HVE in China, resulting in the identification of four key themes related to the corresponding topic.

4.1. Teachers' Opinions on HVE

Three codes related to teachers' opinions towards HVE: "different definitions of HVE", "high expectations for HVE" and "positive attitudes towards HVE".

Interviewee A viewed access to HVE as a way for students to gain a foothold in society and insisted that HVE is orientated towards practicality. Interviewee Y held a similar viewpoint and argued that: *"The most distinctive aspect of*

higher vocational education is that it centres on the development of practical skills and professionalism." In comparison, interviewee X claimed that HVE is still predominantly a lecture on knowledge.

Given the disparity in high vocational teachers' interpretations of the HVE definition, their expectations and attitudes towards HVE displayed considerable variation accordingly. Respondent X was in favour of incorporating HVE into Chinese higher vocational schools. Respondent B and Y were also enthusiastic about the HVE implementation and felt encouraged about the growth of HVE in China. *"Although China has introduced many favourable policies to promote higher education, I still hold the view that HVE has a long road ahead before it becomes well-established in China." "It will take some time for many Chinese parents and society at large to accept HVE."* Moreover, all teachers sketched their desired profile for the implementation of HVE. Respondent A intended to foster teamwork and communication skills in students through HVE, while Respondent Y highlighted that the implementation of HVE had a vital influence effect on children's hands-on skills.

Besides, teachers' teaching philosophy and the proportion of practical lessons in teaching are also significant factors affecting the effectiveness of the implementation of HVE. Respondent Y's answer, for instance, demonstrates the importance she placed on practical application skills. On the other hand, teachers' concerns reveal an inconsistency between the ideals and realities of implementing HVE. An example of this is that respondent A noticed that *"parents lack basic knowledge about HVE and higher vocational institutions"*.

Considering the practical realities, HVE practitioners may hold a more cautious outlook when it comes to conducting HVE in Chinese higher vocational institutions. Interviewee A implementing HVE in China has also turned into educational pressure. Therefore, an in-depth study of the strategies used by higher vocational teachers to implement HVE is conducive to the smooth implementation of HVE and the enhancement of teachers' teaching professionalism.

4.2. Teachers' Implementation Strategies

Three codes relate to teachers' implementation strategies: "practice-based or theory-based", "observer, facilitator or leader" as well as "communication, and collaboration".

With regard to the teachers' instructional design over the course of HVE implementation, both participant A and Y emphasised the imperative of theory classes. However interviewee Y adopted a different teaching approach: *"I like to make use of virtual reality technology or computer simulation software to create virtual work scenarios for students to practise and experience, so as to develop their independent learning ability and resilience."*

It is apparent that respondents A and Y were more inclined towards theory-based teaching philosophy and played the role of facilitators in teaching and learning. Both of their responses also regarded teachers as observers during the process of HVE implementation. As interpreted by respondent Y: *"Teachers could play the role of supervisors, observing students in practice, ensuring that they perform tasks in accordance with occupational standards, and providing guidance and corrections as necessary."* Respondent A insisted, "teachers could get a more accurate picture of student's learning progress and needs by observing their learning behaviours, such as their engagement, cooperation,

problem-solving, and use of practical skills." On the other hand, although respondent X affirmed the value of teachers in giving timely feedback and guidance by observing students' learning performance, he preferred to compare higher vocational teachers to leaders.

Besides, respondent X showed his adherence to a practice-based teaching philosophy. In disagreement with these three interviewees, interviewee B considered the combination of theoretical and practical lessons as teaching and learning philosophy in HVE: *"In theory classes, I systematically introduce students to the theoretical knowledge and fundamentals of aviation service, providing them with a foundation in the subject and a framework for learning." "I simulate a scenario as close as possible to the actual working environment to facilitate students to gain a more thorough insight into the requirements and practice standards of the aviation service industry, allowing them to adapt to the needs of career development in advance."*

In addition to teaching some professional knowledge, interviewee B introduced some teaching methods that she found effective: *"Sometimes, I share my understanding and experience. Through communicating and discussing with students, I can better observe their interests, abilities and goals in career development, so as to provide them with career planning and development advice and help students understand the needs of the job market."* It is evident that her role oscillated between that of an observer and a facilitator. Notably, respondent B explained that she would sometimes take on the role of a leader in her teaching.

As for "communication, co-operation or not", all four interviewees confessed to developing interdisciplinary teaching or partnerships with related industries. Moreover, interviewee X appealed to the necessity of establishing co-operative relationships with relevant industries: *"In some workshops, industry experts can share their difficulties and solutions discovered in practical work, providing me with real-life examples and industry insights that allow me to adjust my teaching content to make it more relevant to practical applications."* Interviewee A pointed out that the collaboration with industry can provide students with practical opportunities and internship placements.

However, many teachers are not well positioned or have limited comprehension of teaching philosophies. The outcomes of my research, which investigated the benefits and drawbacks experienced by teachers during the implementation of HVE, provide a tangible and pragmatic solution to aid teachers in facilitating the scientific and efficient adoption of HVE.

4.3. Advantages for Teachers in Implementing HVE

Three codes related to teachers' advantages of HVE implementation are: "nurturing expertise for economic and social development", "motivating both teachers and students" and "promoting the HVE field".

All four respondents contended that the most significant benefit of implementing HVE was that it produced a huge number of professionals who could meet the needs of a variety of sectors. Interviewee A indicated that HVE focused on the development of practical skills required by students in specific higher vocational fields. Interviewee B illuminated the significance of expertise in fuelling technological innovation in all sectors of society: *"HVE graduates can contribute their professional knowledge and skills in different*

fields by providing innovative solutions to promote industry upgrading and development."

Additionally, the responses from the interviewees indicate that the implementation of HVE could result in beneficial motivational impacts for both students and teachers. Respondent A explicated that HVE implementation encourages students to apply the knowledge and skills they have learned in a real work context, hence increasing their competitiveness in the job market. She further expressed her feelings after HVE implementation: *"Through my active interactions with students in class (e.g. asking questions, exchanging ideas, organizing group discussions, etc.), I find that many students are willing to share their understanding of the course content with me thus allowing me to be more informed about whether my teaching is effective or not and motivating me to be more passionate about my teaching."*

"Promoting the HVE field" refers to the implementation of HVE facilitates the contribution of teachers to higher and vocational education fields. Interviewee X anticipated that: *"I consider the incorporation of HVE as a crucial landmark in the progress of Chinese higher vocational schools, and numerous teachers have initiated the investigation of HVE practices within HVS."*

As mentioned earlier, all interviewees acknowledged the notable benefits of implementing HVE for both teachers and students. When it comes to the implementation of HVE, instructional programming requires adjustments to include more practical courses and foster the development of professional skills. This enables teachers to experience heightened pleasure, a more favorable teaching environment, and an enhanced feeling of fulfillment. Moreover, students were also motivated by the interactions and communications with their teachers and consequently developed a deeper attachment to them. Therefore, a constructive cycle of reciprocal stimulation is likely to be established between teachers and students.

4.4. Challenges Encountered by Teachers in Implementing HVE

Four codes relate to challenges encountered by teachers in implementing HVE: "insufficient understanding of HVE", "Chinese examination-based education system", "inadequate teaching philosophy and teaching skills in HVE" and "financial and training constraints on HVE in China".

Interviewee B shared her teaching unforgettable experience: *"One of the things that stuck with me was that after I had taught a few Crafts and Creativity classes to my students, a parent approached me in a huff and scolded me, saying that I didn't do my classes properly just to kill time, and that this was very unethical of me as a teacher."* This suggests that some parents may overlook the emphasis placed on the development of practical skills in HVE, considering these skills to be unimportant or of secondary importance compared to purely theoretical knowledge.

When asked about the most serious difficulty when implementing HVE, interviewee Y recalled her teaching experience which is really thought-provoking: *"When the new students first enrolled, a parent approached me and said he hoped that I could teach his child more academic knowledge, preferably the same things as those taught at the university, so that the child could be even more outstanding."* It can be seen that some parents have questioned the educational value of HVE, contending that this form of education does not provide the same level of knowledge and academic excellence

as traditional academic universities.

Furthermore, due to some parents' ignorance of the mechanisms for teacher training and selection in HVE and their perception of the generally high academic reputation of teachers in traditional academic universities, they may perceive teachers in HVE to be less qualified and less capable of teaching than teachers in traditional academic universities.

Besides, Some employers perceive HVE degrees or certificates to be relatively low in value, or consider HVE graduates to be less academically and vocationally competent for high-level careers, while students from traditional academic universities are considered to be better suited for high-level careers and managerial positions given their strengths in terms of general qualities and professional knowledge [12].

In addition, all teachers confessed during the interviews that they were under considerable pressure to implement HVE due to their teaching skills and instructional design. Interviewee A exemplified that: *"I am not particularly familiar with the policies and job prospects related to tourism services and management, and the school does not provide me with many seminars and practical training in this area."* Respondent B, who is also a young teacher, described the challenge of being flexible in the use of teaching methods and teaching aids.

Moreover, interviewee X mentioned some noteworthy phenomenon: *"When I was talking to some teachers who had been teaching for a long time, I found that they relied too much on traditional teaching methods and teaching materials and would not update their teaching contents and methods."* While interviewee Y had a totally opposite viewpoints: *"I found that some young teachers have shallow teaching philosophy. Some of them think that HVE and general higher education do not differ much and could not distinguish between some confusing concepts."*

Together, their responses demonstrated that teachers' pedagogical philosophy and professional competence also affect the implementation of HVE in China. HVE finds itself in a challenging predicament as teachers encounter difficulties arising from parents, the broader community, and even their own internal struggles.

In China, HVE remains a relatively nascent pedagogical philosophy, with limited policies or papers available to provide teachers and parents with clear guidance on the detailed components and tools. It is understandable that high vocational education institutions necessitate a dedicated timeframe for teacher training and the provision of essential equipment and environments for a smooth HVE introduction and performance [13]. As mentioned by respondent X, it is necessary to implement additional measures to ensure the effectiveness of HVE, including studying HVE philosophy, practicing HVE, increasing funds and receiving relevant training. The fact that Interviewee B further pointed out that *"certain endeavors we undertook might not have yielded the intended outcome or, in some cases, even had adverse effects"*, underscoring the importance of a more in-depth comprehension and frequent application of HVE. Despite the individual variations in their interpretation of HVE, all the teachers endorsed its integration into Chinese HVS and engaged in experimental practices utilizing diverse tactics, like raising recognition to HVE, providing funds and resources to create a favorable environment and development opportunities for teachers. There is no denying that HVE can nurture high-precision talents, handle the pressure of

employment, and enhance teachers' instructional competencies. Nevertheless, the present state of HVE implementation fails to meet the desired standards.

5. Conclusion

Many HVE teachers advocate the implementation of HVE in Chinese HVS since they anticipate the cultivation of high-quality vocational talents could meet the needs of socio-economic development through HVE courses. The study explores higher vocational teachers' present implementation strategies, which vary in practice. Teachers encourage students to consider multiple factors and analyses problems from multiple perspectives to develop integrative and critical thinking skills. By providing internship opportunities in related industries, teachers enable students to gain practical experience and skill development, and helps them to clarify their career goals and development direction. The study discusses the advantages of teachers' implementation of HVE in three main ways: nurturing expertise for economic and social development; motivating both teachers and students; and promoting the HVE field. Furthermore, the research illustrates the challenges experienced by teachers while implementing HVE, specifically stemming from the Chinese exam-based education system and the ingrained perceptions held by certain Chinese parents and the wider public regarding higher vocational teachers, schools and education, as well as students' responsibilities. Next, the study brings to light the hurdles that teachers encounter in HVE implementation, including a lack of multifaceted comprehension regarding HVE, as well as insufficient pedagogical strategies and techniques. Finally, inadequate funding and training are mentioned in the study as issues that need to be addressed by HVS and the community.

Nevertheless, the small sample size and non-random selection of participants in this study may have an impact on the generalizability and accuracy of the results to some extent. Furthermore, the effectiveness of the new strategies proposed by the researchers has not been validated through practical application in teaching.

It is worth noting that HVE, as an immature pedagogical mode in China, demands deeper and more comprehensive research from various perspectives. Subsequent studies might delve into the advantages of HVE implementation as well as the obstacles parents and students may face. This would provide valuable research insights and encourage diversity and creativity in the application of HVE.

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