

Analyzing the Development of Vocational Education in China

– Using Dual VET System as an Exemplar

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Abstract: The emphasis on technical and vocational education has become a pivotal focus in addressing the unemployment rate globally. China employs a similar strategy as evident in “On The Decision of Developing Technical and Vocational Education in China” issued by the State Council of the People’s Republic of China in 2005. This paper examines China’s development of technical and vocational education, especially in light of comparison to more advanced models. By analyzing China’s vocational education against the Dual VET system, this paper summarized three main points that China could improve on, namely policy implementation, career development, and social status. This paper concludes that the advancement of technical and vocational education is a multi-dimensional effort that requires all economic players to invest. Particularly, the responsibility falls on policymakers to make policies that will guide society to put down prejudice and young adults to see the potential in pursuing technical and vocational education.

Keywords: vocational education, Dual VET, comparative education, education policy, China

1. Introduction

Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) has gained significant attention worldwide as a crucial component of workforce development and economic growth [1]. In the past decade, it has been especially focused on as a means to tackle the surging unemployment rate, especially among young adults [2]. Globally, researchers found evidence that TVET can lead to beneficial outcomes for individuals. For example, Tripney et al’s study in 2013 found that TVET intervention has a positive and statistically significant effect on both formal employment and monthly earnings.

China, as a prominent global player, has also placed substantial emphasis on TVET development to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing economic landscape. To address this issue, China employs “On The Decision of Developing Technical and Vocational Education in China”, which was issued by the State Council of the People’s Republic of China in 2005, which mentioned that the number of students enrolled in vocational school should be roughly the same as general education [3]. In 2020, the Ministry of Education along with 8 other departments issued the “Action Plan for Improving the Quality and Excellence of Vocational Education (2020-2023)”, which made maintaining a roughly equivalent scale and promoting mutual recognition between vocational education and general education a primary goal [4]. In short, the ultimate goal of all of these action plans points to the fact that China deeply recognizes the importance of developing TVET to economic

growth and social prosperity. As such, China has put great emphasis and effort on developing vocational education.

However, past literature on relevant topics often fails to address the difficulties that this advancement faces, especially in recruitment and enforcement. TEVT institutions find it difficult to recruit students in comparison to their counterparts, academic institutions, despite some obvious benefits. Researchers find that Chinese students and parents have an overwhelming preference for academic degrees. Therefore, this study aims to explore the reasons behind this phenomenon and find solutions.

2. Challenges of TVET Development and Their Causes

There are a few different reasons that hinder the development of TVET in China, namely policy implementation, student career development, and societal status. These obstacles cause students and parents to hesitate to pursue a vocational pathway. The following section will illustrate these issues in detail.

2.1. Lack of Policy Implementation

Even though China is experiencing unprecedented scale and magnitude in its development of vocational education, many scholars argue that the quality is not keeping pace with quantity, causing many parents and students to hesitate [5]. One reason is the lack of investment to suffice the rapid increase in vocational schools due to the expansion policy. The inadequate human capital, facilities, and resources will further contribute to the negative impression and inadequacy of vocational schools.

The difference across various regions, as well as different types of institutions in China further contributes to the difficulty of policy implementation. For example, private and public institutions are very different in terms of structure, administration, and resources. Without a top-down approach to guide the schools, some of them fall years behind in industrial needs, causing graduate students to find their skills impractical or insufficient to meet the demands of their employers.

2.2. Career Development Impeded

The weak connection between vocational education and industry makes it hard for students to find jobs where their education is applicable, leading students and parents to think that the skills they acquired in vocational school are useless. At the same time, some teachers at vocational schools do not have relevant experience; they often graduate from teacher's college, instead of the field. This means that these teachers only know theoretical concepts, but they do not have any practical knowledge. Under such circumstances, the teachers are unable to aid their students in career development. Additionally, the system of standards in China is often inflexible and not subject to change, whereas changes in the labor market demand side are constantly changing due to evolving technology and updating international standards. When educators in the institution are not aware of changes in the respective field, it would be hard for them to change the curriculum and standards accordingly.

2.3. Low Societal Status

One of the main obstacles to TVET development in China is the overwhelming preference of Chinese students and parents for general education over vocational education. Hao and Pilz's study in 2021 concluded that students and parents aim towards higher degrees whenever possible, due to the belief that it would result in a wider career choice and promotion possibilities in the future [6]. They also

believe that an academic diploma is much more recognized and viewed as superior in comparison to technical and vocational training diplomas in society, just as society views blue-collar jobs as inferior to white-collar jobs [6]. This is evident through the fact that even though college graduates in China and experiencing an increasing unemployment rate, students still try to pursue academic degrees whenever possible, even if the cost-benefit analysis would suggest otherwise. Parents also generally doubt the resources and reliability of technical schools to properly educate and train students [7]. Such concerns are valid and awaiting resolutions, especially in the era of rapidly developing technology and automation. Technical skills have a greater risk of being replaced by machines and computers, which is one of the primary reasons that parents are pessimistic about future career development.

3. Exemplar from Western Education - Dual VET System

West European countries, especially German-speaking countries, have made some significant strides in vocational education development compared to China, offering numerous commendable practices worthy of adoption, namely the practice of the Dual VET system. Dual VET is an educational system that combines vocational education and apprenticeship. In this system, vocational education is provided at a vocational school that can award students respective degrees; while internship is provided by companies in the respective industry. This system is most well-known in Germany and practiced by several European countries. Ebner's study found that dual VET students enjoy far better protection against unemployment and are far less likely to work in temporary employment [8]. Unlike the global trend, countries with a well-working dual VET system have a very low youth unemployment rate [9].

Successful implementation of the dual VET system simultaneously fulfills the principles of both Human Capital Theory and Signal Effect. Under Human Capital Theory, successful technical and vocational education should provide students with skills that enhance their ability to perform jobs in their respective industries. A successful dual VET system contains this feature. At the same time, it also provides students with recognized degrees and credentials which signals to employers that the students are capable. Dual VET has played a significant role in the successful advancement of vocational education in Western European nations, in terms of labor market outcomes and social reputation. The following section will summarize the characteristics of the system that contribute to the efficiency and effectiveness of Dual VET.

3.1. Effective Policy Implementation

The dual VET system is a cohesive system that ensures students benefit from training to employment. Partnerships with companies and their branch offices can solve the issue of weak connections to the industry. Students are trained at companies where their skills are guaranteed to be practical and up-to-date. By partnership with companies in the industry, the quality and resources of the training can be guaranteed. Such partnership also secures the future employment of students, since it puts career pathway as one of the major goals. With such partnerships, individual institutions no longer have to worry about their curriculum, as their social partners would take care of this aspect.

In the Dual VET system, the vocational school also receives policy support from the government. Under supporting laws, companies have social and legal responsibilities to help train students, which means that it is not up to individual institutions to find apprenticeships for students. For example, in Austria, there is the Berufsausbildungsgesetz or the Vocational Training Act, which contributed significantly to the success of the development of vocational education by mandating social responsibilities to companies [10].

3.2. Successful Career Development

Since apprenticeship is conducted by social partners, their training paradigm inherently possesses adaptability to emerging changes, encompassing global benchmarks and emergent technological advancements. This directly addresses the prevailing challenge of inflexible standards and curricula, which China currently confronts. Their teachers are not only teachers in their classrooms, but also their seniors in the industry, who are equipped with relevant resources and experiences.

In most settings, students do not have to wait until graduation to see the economic returns to their education, since apprenticeship is paid by companies. In this aspect, the quality of the training is also guaranteed, because, unlike institutions, companies are not training these trainees for other sectors of the economy, but for the production of their own companies. Therefore, companies have more incentive to make sure that the students are fully equipped with the knowledge and skills to perform their respective production roles [10].

3.3. High Societal Status

The dual VET training equips the trainee not only with professional qualifications but also with professional identity and professional confidence. Ensuring the quality of the training, concurrently signals to the job market that students are competent. This will result in higher wages and more stable employment, which will in turn make the vocational track more attractive. As the potential trajectories become more auspicious, the social perspective of vocational degrees and blue-collar jobs will also be more positive, therefore students and parents will be more willing to pursue the pathway. In societies with a well-working dual VET system, there is no prejudice against vocational education and labor. They are well respected just like white-collar jobs [10].

4. Suggestions

In light of the findings, this study believes that a well-implemented dual VET system solves the two major obstacles to technical and vocational education development in China. The first obstacle is the negative social outlook of vocational degree and job, which cause parents and students to hesitate to pursue this pathway. The second obstacle is the loose connection between theoretical knowledge and practical skills that makes vocational education feel useless. Based on these two major shortcomings, this study suggests that China incorporate the following concepts into its policy framework in developing vocational education. Firstly, China should pay attention not just to its policies but also to how they are implemented on the local level. Responsibilities should be carefully divided so that all proposed actions can be carried out and followed through. The responsibility of providing sufficient training should not be left to vocational schools alone, rather, there should be policy and legal support. For example, policymakers should give companies incentives to partner with vocational schools and accept apprenticeships. Secondly, China should pay more attention to advancing career paths for vocational students through the partnership with big companies. Such partnerships can help students gain practical skills and pragmatic experiences, as well as secure stable employment and reasonable wages. The balance between apprenticeship and classroom learning allows students to achieve the most from the two parallel learning sites. Additionally, China needs to focus on enhancing the social reputation and public acceptance of TVET. Policymakers should pay attention to media reports as they can either promote the underlying benefits of vocational education or perpetuate the negative social connotations against it. Therefore, relevant authorities should supervise media and press to portray a positive image of vocational degrees and labor, so that public prejudice can be overturned. At the same time, parents and students need to see the tangible benefits and potentials of TVET, such as stable employment and reasonable wages, for them to find the pathway attractive. This requires that policies lean towards TVET in the distribution of resources and capital.

Under such a system, different technical and vocational institutions in China do not have to develop their curriculum or worry about matching up with labor demand. Institutions would simply partner with respective corporations which can provide students with the most up-to-date training and practical experience. With companies playing a crucial role in the training, it also solves the issue of teachers being inexperienced or layman. By making the key framework employment-orientated and employing the aforementioned strategies, dual VET can secure stable and good-paying jobs for its students. Once the social and individual return to vocational education increase in ways that are tangible, such as more stable employment and higher wages, the social outlook for the reputation of vocational education would correspondingly change for the better.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, China's Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) development has undergone a remarkable journey. Policymakers have realized that it would play a crucial role in the country's economic growth and social advancement, thereby prioritizing its advancement, and promising progress has been made. However, current policy and investment still have fatal shortcomings in their holistic ability to provide students with adequate training and stable careers. This paper analyzed the major challenges that prevent vocational education in China from reaching its full potential, which is its inability to provide students with necessary resources and its negative social reputation.

To confront these issues, this study suggests that China incorporates valuable experience from the Dual VET system as its success has been observed in many countries that employed the system. Successful models demonstrate that the system bridged the gap between academic study and industrial training, which can foster a workforce that is competent to meet the demands of the labor market. By embracing this system, China can better develop its vocational education by improving its relevance, quality, as well as effectiveness.

Certainly, implementing dual VET alone may not provide an immediate solution to the challenges that China's development faces. Several factors contribute to this gradual process. Firstly, it will take time for employers to witness the tangible outcomes of this training approach before they extend improved incentives to students pursuing vocational degrees. Secondly, shifting the societal perception of vocational education and its associated career prospects necessitates more efforts from not just the outcome of vocational education, but also media reports to destigmatize its negative social conceptions. Nonetheless, the concept and exemplar of dual VET shed light on a prosperous and competitive future for the development of vocational education in China. This study uses Dual VET as an example but could not analyze the specific situations in different Western countries due to the scale of the project. As such, future research should dive further into this direction.

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