

Institutional Exclusion and Credential Recognition: A Qualitative Study on the Labor Market Experiences of Vocational Education Graduates

Wang Ziyun¹, Li Zhe^{2*}

1. Hainan Vocational University of Science and Technology, Haikou Hainan 571126, China

2. City University of Macau, Macau, 999078, China

*Corresponding Author: F25092100152@cityu.edu.mo

Abstract: Based on the realistic context of China's labor market, this study systematically investigates the employment dilemma faced by vocational education graduates with qualitative research methods, and deeply analyzes the interaction between institutional exclusion and qualification certification mechanism. It is found that the employment barriers derived from the household registration system, the structural mismatch between specialty setting and market demand, and the policy threshold of academic standard orientation all constitute the institutional obstacles that restrict employment. At the same time, the lack of social recognition of vocational qualifications is obvious, and the existing evaluation system often falls into the path dependence of "emphasizing diplomas and neglecting skills", which leads to the value of skills being obscured by diploma symbols. Based on this, this paper advocates the transformation from distributive justice to recognition of justice, and puts forward some policy suggestions for building a multi-dimensional support system: deepening the system reform, improving the national qualification framework, promoting the integration of production and education and reshaping social cognition, in order to substantially improve the labor market situation of vocational education graduates.

Keywords: Institutional Exclusion, Credential Recognition, Vocational Education Graduates, Labor Market, Recognition Justice

0. Introduction

The structural transformation of China's economy urgently needs strong technical and skilled personnel support. Vocational education, as the main channel of cultivating talents, the employment result of its graduates is not only a key indicator to measure the effectiveness of human resources development, but also one of the variables that determine whether the social economy can develop continuously and healthily.

However, the extensive growth of scale has not simultaneously eliminated the dislocation of supply and demand in the job market. Empirical data show that although the graduates of vocational education perform well in employment rate, they are obviously unbalanced in employment quality. Especially in terms of job fit, salary return and employment stability, the gap between them and ordinary college graduates is still clear, reflecting the deep-seated uneven distribution of resources.

The core variable leading to this situation lies in the superposition effect of institutional exclusion and insufficient certificate recognition. Institutional exclusion refers to the obstruction of resource acquisition caused by institutional or policy obstacles, and its concrete manifestations in the field of vocational education include: the mobility restriction of household registration system, the disconnection between curriculum content and market demand, and prejudice against non-academic qualifications. In addition, the labor market's ability to absorb the skill capital of vocational education graduates is weak, and there is a widespread phenomenon of "emphasizing diplomas and neglecting practical work", which further solidified the weak position of vocational

education graduates.

Although the academic discussion on the development of vocational education has been quite rich, most of them are confined to the static perspective of educational resource allocation, and lack sufficient attention to the institutional exclusion and qualification recognition dilemma encountered by graduates in the labor market. In order to make up for this shortcoming, this paper uses qualitative research methods to reveal the structural factors affecting the employment quality of vocational education students by digging deep into interview materials and systematic data analysis. The research attempts to clarify how system design and qualification certification work together on individual market output, so as to build a more inclusive employment environment and promote the equal development of vocational education.

1. Theoretical Framework: The Dual Dimensions of Institutional Exclusion and Credential Recognition

1.1 An Analytical Perspective on Institutional Exclusion

The origin of institutional exclusion theory can be traced back to the study of social exclusion. The core proposition of this theory is that the system or policy often presents a neutral appearance at the design level, but in practice, it will systematically deprive specific groups of long-term opportunities to obtain resources, exercise their rights and participate in social activities. Focusing on the field of education and resource allocation, this exclusive logic is usually externalized into three typical forms.

(1)Closed Systems: First of all, the closed system shows that by setting unreasonable access barriers, it blocks the opportunity for specific groups to enter the system to obtain resources. A typical example is that graduates of higher vocational colleges are often automatically screened out in the recruitment of civil servants or institutions because of the limitation of academic qualifications.

(2)Policy Distortion: Secondly, the alienation of policy implementation means that the system operation deviates from the preset track, resulting in the distribution result running counter to the initial goal. For example, in the field of school-enterprise cooperation, due to the lack of substantive incentive and support mechanism, although enterprise participation is encouraged by policies, it is a mere formality, which makes it difficult to cooperate in educating people.

(3)Intergenerational Persistence: Finally, intergenerational transmission reveals the intertemporal continuation of the exclusion effect and forms a self-reinforcing circular mechanism. In view of the fact that most vocational students come from rural areas or low-income families, their children often still face congenital injustice when obtaining high-quality educational resources, thus solidifying the class disadvantage.

Previous studies mostly cited the perspective of institutional exclusion to analyze the social security dilemma of urban subsistence allowances and migrant workers, so as to explain the formation mechanism of marginalization of vulnerable groups. Transplanting this analytical framework to the field of vocational education is helpful to peel off the appearance and gain insight into the obstacles encountered by graduates in the labor market. Its essence is not the lack of individual ability, but the structural institutional barriers.

1.2 The Theoretical Connotation of Credential Recognition

Credential Recognition Theory holds that a person's identity, skills, and contributions need to be recognized in social relations. It is easier for such a person to gain a sense of value and maintain dignity. Fraser and Honneth argue that "recognitive justice" can supplement "distributive justice". If only resources are allocated, but there is a lack of recognition, it may also cause psychological harm and even make people feel that they are not regarded as "full persons". In the context of

vocational education, credential recognition mainly includes three aspects:

(1) Cultural recognition: The value and social status of vocational education require public acknowledgment. Currently, social prejudice against it remains prevalent, with many still viewing general education as more “valuable”.

(2) Institutional recognition: Professional qualifications should be accorded equal status to academic credentials in employment and advancement. In practice, however, many systems continue to prioritize academic qualifications, leading to insufficient institutional recognition of professional ones.

(3) Individual recognition: The skills and contributions of vocational education graduates deserve respect at work. Surveys show that many graduates feel their competencies are not adequately acknowledged, negatively impacting their job satisfaction and subsequent development.

1.3 The Interaction of Dual Dimensions

Institutional exclusion and insufficient credential recognition jointly affect the position of vocational education graduates in the labor market. Institutional exclusion primarily denies graduates access to certain resources through policy thresholds. The lack of credential recognition mainly undermines their social status through cultural contempt and identity denial. The combination of the two causes vocational education graduates to face a dual challenge: they become marginalized in terms of employment opportunities and resources, while simultaneously feeling diminished psychologically and in their identity. This dynamic is illustrated in the following table.

Table 1. Institutional Exclusion and Credential Recognition in the Labor Market for Vocational Education Graduates

Dimensions	Manifestations	Impacts
Institutional Exclusion	Household registration restrictions, academic credential discrimination, and a mismatch between program offerings and market demands.	Limited employment opportunities, low wages, and narrow career advancement paths.
Credential Recognition	Lack of emphasis on professional certification, undervaluation of skills, and deep-seated social prejudice.	Low professional identity, poor job satisfaction, and marginalized social status.

This theoretical framework provides a comprehensive perspective for analyzing the labor market situation of vocational education graduates and lays the foundation for subsequent qualitative research.

2. Research Methodology and Design

This study adopts qualitative research methods by exploring the real experiences and feelings of vocational education graduates in the labor market through in-depth interviews and text analysis. This approach focuses on understanding phenomena from the participants' perspective and is suitable for exploring complex social issues such as institutional exclusion and credential recognition.

2.1 Research Participants

In this study, 30 vocational education graduates from diverse regions, industries, and professional backgrounds were selected as interviewees using purposive sampling. The sample characteristics are as follows:

(1) Educational Level: Secondary vocational and higher vocational graduates;

(2) Professional Fields: Including manufacturing, services, information technology, finance, trade, and other industries;

(3) Work Experience: Ranging from fresh graduates to those with substantial work experience.

Furthermore, interviews were conducted with five enterprise human resources managers and three vocational education teachers to obtain multi-perspective information. The demographic details of these interviewees are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Demographic Profile of Interviewees

Category	Number of Participants	Description
Vocational Education Graduates	30	15 from secondary vocational programs and 15 from higher vocational programs; employed in manufacturing, services, information technology, and other industries.
Corporate Human Resources (HR) Managers	5	From small/medium-sized and large enterprises; responsible for recruitment.
Vocational Education Teachers	3	With over 5 years of teaching experience in vocational education.

2.2 Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection of this study mainly relies on semi-structured interview. The interview outline is designed around the following core dimensions: first, the job-seeking trajectory and career evolution path of vocational education graduates; Second, the institutional obstacles it encountered in the labor market; Third, the recognition evaluation of professional skills and qualification certificates at the employer and social level; The fourth is the critical feedback and improvement suggestions put forward by the interviewees for the current vocational education policy and employment regulation.

The interview duration is controlled between 40 and 90 minutes, and the whole process is recorded by audio, followed by word-for-word transcription. Finally, about 200,000 words of text materials are arranged and formed as the basic data for subsequent analysis.

In this study, thematic analysis is used to process the data, following the three-level procedures of open, spindle and selective coding, and gradually extracting the core themes such as institutional exclusion and qualification recognition. In order to ensure the reliability and validity of coding, the research team was involved in the analysis process, and the coding results were cross-verified through several rounds of iterative discussion and consensus building mechanism.

2.3 Research Ethics

This study abides by academic ethics. After fully understanding the purpose of the study, all the respondents signed an informed consent form, which explicitly authorized the anonymization of personal identity information. All collected data are only used for academic research, so as to effectively protect the legitimate rights and interests of respondents from infringement.

3. Findings: A Qualitative Analysis of Vocational Education Graduates' Experiences in the Labor Market

3.1 Institutional Exclusion: The Structural Barriers Faced by Vocational Education Graduates

The analysis of interview data shows that vocational education graduates face multi-dimensional institutional exclusion in the labor market. This exclusion manifests as policy barriers, unfair resource allocation, and restrictions on rights, which collectively seriously affect their

employment quality and career development.

3.1.1 Household Registration Segmentation and Employment Restrictions

The institutional divide created by the household registration system is one of the most common forms of institutional restriction encountered by vocational education graduates. Those without local household registration are often significantly disadvantaged in job searching, accessing social security benefits, and obtaining public services.

As one higher vocational graduate from a rural area stated: “I found a job in the city, but because my hukou is not local, I am ineligible for many public-sector positions. Even after entering a company, I face disparities compared to my local-registered colleagues in matters like social security contributions and my children’s access to education.”

This institutional barrier makes it easier for vocational education graduates to be disadvantaged in the labor market and hinders their true integration into urban life and work. The study also found that even after many children of migrant workers enter the labor market through vocational education, the household registration issue continues to impede their upward mobility.

3.1.2 Disconnect Between Program Specializations and Labor Market Demands

A mismatch between the curricula of vocational education and market demands constitutes another form of institutional barrier. Many vocational colleges are slow to update their program offerings and thus fail to keep pace with the new skill demands generated by industrial transformation.

As one information technology graduate remarked: “The programming languages I learned in school are already outdated. I had to relearn everything after joining the company. For emerging fields like artificial intelligence and big data analytics, the school offered no relevant courses at all.”

This disconnection results in a gap between graduates’ skills and employer requirements, diminishing their competitiveness in the job market. The findings also reveal that, for instance, some modern chemical enterprises face a shortage of skilled technicians, while local vocational colleges do not train enough graduates in related specialties to meet this demand. Consequently, a persistent structural imbalance exists: graduates struggle to find suitable employment, while employers cannot recruit the workers they need.

3.1.3 Credential Discrimination and the Career Development Ceiling

Credential (or diploma) discrimination constitutes a common institutional barrier for vocational education graduates. The dual division of the labor market is reflected in the recruitment advertisements as a severe academic barrier, which directly blocks higher vocational graduates from high-quality jobs. The interview record of a senior HR manager confirms this phenomenon: “For the sake of policy compliance, management-level positions are only open to candidates with full-time undergraduate education or above. This qualification restriction has a veto power, and it is difficult for even skilled higher vocational graduates to break through this entry red line.”

The setting of educational threshold constitutes a structural opportunity blockade, which limits the upward mobility of vocational education graduates. The empirical results show that, subject to academic barriers, most of the interviewees have been stuck in junior positions for a long time and rarely have the opportunity to jump to management or key technical positions. This over-reliance on formal education not only solidified the individual’s career ceiling, but also led to the idle and inefficient use of human capital.

3.2 Credential Recognition: The Symbolic Violence Experienced by Vocational Education Graduates

Compared with rigid institutional barriers, the implicit depreciation of skill value can not be ignored. Vocational education students often face the embarrassment of “having no skills” in the labor market, and their professional ability and professional contribution have not been given due social weight. This symbolic domination based on stereotypes not only weakens the professional identity of practitioners, but also intensifies their sense of marginalization at the psychological level.

3.2.1 Systemic Devaluation of Vocational Qualifications and Certifications

The existing vocational qualification certification system shows a significant tendency of “emphasizing academic qualifications and neglecting skills”, which leads to the low social recognition of skill certificates for a long time. An interviewee who has obtained a variety of industry certificates is deeply touched by this, and stated that “I obtained an advanced CNC certificate, but employers place greater emphasis on academic credentials during recruitment. When it comes to determining salaries and assigning positions, vocational certificates play a very minor role.”

This devaluation makes it harder for vocational graduates to convert their skills into market value and undermines their competitive edge in the job market. The study finds that despite policy efforts to promote the “diploma-plus-certificate” model, many enterprises continue to prioritize academic qualifications in both hiring and promotion decisions.

3.2.2 The Undervaluation of Skills by Employers

Within enterprises, the skills of vocational education graduates are frequently overlooked or undervalued. Many companies regard them primarily as low-cost labor rather than skilled professionals. As a graduate working in manufacturing noted:

“We are treated as mere operators, with few opportunities for training or advancement. I’ve proposed technical improvements, but due to my educational background, these suggestions were dismissed.”

This disparagement of skills leads to job dissatisfaction among vocational graduates and hinders the development of a strong professional identity. The study also found a relatively high turnover rate among vocational college graduates. A key contributing factor is the lack of due recognition for their skills and contributions.

3.2.3 Social Bias Against Vocational Education and Its Graduates

Social prejudice against vocational education represents a deeper embodiment of “insufficient recognition.” Many regard it as an inferior form of education and hold its graduates in low esteem, often stigmatizing them. One interviewee expressed:

“Many in society believe that those who attend vocational schools do so because of poor academic performance and have bleak prospects. I can feel this prejudice when seeking employment, forming friendships, or even pursuing romantic relationships.”

This discriminatory cognition not only damages the individual’s psychological well-being, but also weakens his confidence in integrating into public life. Most interviewees admit that in order to bridge the identity gap between them and ordinary college students, they have to bear great anxiety about self-certification and make far greater efforts to win equal recognition and respect.

4. Discussion: Toward a Support System for Vocational Graduates Guided by the Principle of “Recognitive Justice”

The empirical results show that the employment dilemma of vocational education graduates is rooted in the imbalance of resource allocation and the lack of identity. To solve this problem, it is urgent to realize the transformation from a single distributive justice to a theoretical paradigm covering recognition justice, so as to build a multi-dimensional and coordinated comprehensive support system.

4.1 Discussion and Recommendations

For a long time, the policy intervention for vocational school students' employment problems often focuses on resource allocation, such as increasing capital investment or expanding job supply. However, although these measures are indispensable, it is difficult to touch the psychological trauma and social marginalization caused by “lack of recognition”.

In the current post-distribution stage, the appeal of educational equity should not only stay at the level of resource distribution, but also extend to the level of ‘recognition’. This turn is particularly critical in the field of vocational education—the dilemma faced by vocational school graduates is not limited to the shortage of material resources, but also lies in the lack of deep-seated recognition of their professional identity and technical contribution.

4.2 Policy Implications and Recommendations: Toward a Dual-Integration Support System

4.2.1 Institutional Reconstruction: Dismantling Exclusionary Policy Barriers

Firstly, in order to promote the deep integration of production and education, it is necessary to establish a professional dynamic adjustment mechanism that closely follows the market changes. The government can take the lead in building a school-enterprise cooperation platform to guide vocational colleges to set up majors around local industries. At the same time, the professional early warning system is introduced: for those majors with long-term low employment rate of graduates, enrollment should be reduced or even closed; For majors that are in line with the development direction of key industries, it is necessary to increase investment, not only to ensure that students master counterpart skills, but also to help colleges and universities match the future manpower needs in advance.

Secondly, competency-based employment orientation should be implemented to eliminate academic discrimination. Government agencies and state-owned enterprises need to take the lead in setting an example, eliminating the threshold of academic qualifications in recruitment and taking the level of professional skills as the core criterion. At the same time, it is necessary to speed up the construction of national qualification framework and establish the status of vocational qualification certificate and general diploma with the same effect from the system.

Thirdly, the household registration system must be reformed to ensure the equality of employment rights. This needs to gradually separate the household registration status from the social welfare rights behind it, so that vocational school graduates who are not local students can enjoy the same treatment as citizens in employment and social security.

4.2.2 Optimizing the Recognition System: Enhancing the Social Status of Vocational Education

First, we should build a perfect professional qualification recognition system to enhance the professional prestige of skilled personnel. This not only needs to optimize the existing qualification certification system, but also clearly link it with salary level and promotion channel; At the same time, it is also helpful to enhance the professional pride and social visibility of vocational school graduates by holding vocational skill competitions regularly to commend outstanding talents.

Second, the cultural atmosphere of the enterprise needs to be changed urgently to reflect the

real attention to skilled talents. Enterprises should be encouraged to lay a clear promotion ladder and incentive scheme for such personnel, such as setting up honorary awards such as ‘master of skills’, so as to give substantial feedback to the actual contributions of vocational school graduates in terms of salary and social reputation.

Third, we must strengthen the guidance of public opinion to dispel the stereotype of vocational education in society. The media should increase the coverage of typical talents in vocational schools, highlight the supporting role of skilled talents in economic and social development, and then create a value atmosphere of “advocating one skill and respecting the craftsman spirit” within the social scope.

4.3 Dual Integration: The Synergy Between Institutional Reconstruction and the Recognition System

The system reconstruction and the optimization of the accreditation system are not isolated from each other, but they actually penetrate and support each other. On the one hand, institutional reform provides a basic policy guarantee for the effective operation of the accreditation mechanism; On the other hand, the promotion of recognition, in turn, gives the system reform wider social legitimacy and helps to form a more friendly social environment.

Only by taking a two-pronged approach and promoting these two dimensions together can we achieve a fundamental and sustainable improvement in the employment quality of vocational school graduates. Table 3 visually presents the concrete framework of this two-way integration.

Table 3. The Dual-Integration Support System for Vocational Education Graduates

Level of Intervention	Institutional Reconstruction	Recognition System Optimization
Policy Level	Eliminate Credential-Based Discrimination and Deepen Industry-Education Integration	Establish a Vocational Credential Recognition Mechanism and Refine the Qualifications Framework
Enterprise / Corporate Level	Enforce Strictly the Policy of Equal Opportunity in Employment	Foster a Culture of Skill Valuation and Establish Clear Skill-Based Career Ladders
Societal Level	Reform the Household Registration System to Guarantee Equal Rights	Strengthen Media Guidance to Transform Societal Bias Against Vocational Education

The construction of this dual integration support system aims to solve the dual dilemma of institutional exclusion and insufficient qualification recognition faced by vocational school graduates, and then promote their situation in the labor market to be substantially improved.

5 Conclusion and Prospects

This study uses qualitative research methods to deeply investigate the institutional exclusion and insufficient qualification recognition of vocational school graduates in the labor market. It is found that this group faces multiple institutional barriers, such as the structural threshold brought by the division of household registration, the dislocation between professional setting and market demand, and employment discrimination based on academic qualifications. At the same time, their professional qualifications and skills have not been paid due attention, which is manifested in systematic value depreciation, serious underestimation by employers and widespread stereotypes. The superposition of the above problems has significantly increased the risk of its falling into social marginalization.

Based on the above findings, this paper advocates a paradigm shift: from a single focus on resource allocation to a two-dimensional perspective that takes into account ‘recognition’, and based on this, a more systematic support system is constructed. The system covers two core dimensions: system reconstruction and optimization of recognition framework. Only through the

synchronous change of policy adjustment and social concept can the employment prospects and career development space of vocational school graduates be effectively improved.

Improving the situation of vocational school graduates is a systematic project, which requires the concerted efforts of the government, colleges, enterprises and all sectors of society to build a long-term support alliance. In the final analysis, this is not only a question of educational equity, but also related to the efficient allocation of human resources and the high-quality development of the economy. Only by breaking down institutional barriers and enhancing the recognition of skills and qualifications can vocational education graduates release more energy in industrial upgrading and economic transformation.

References:

- [1] Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. 2022. White Paper on the Development of Vocational Education in China (press release, Aug 2022).
- [2] General Offices of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council. 2021. Guidelines on Promoting the High-Quality Development of Modern Vocational Education (Oct 2021).
- [3] Fraser, Nancy, and Axel Honneth. 2003. *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange*. London/New York: Verso.
- [4] Honneth, Axel. 1996. *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- [5] Bourdieu, Pierre, and Jean-Claude Passeron. 1977. *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*. London: Sage.
- [6] Collins, Randall. 1979. *The Credential Society: An Historical Sociology of Education and Stratification*. New York: Academic Press.
- [7] Becker, Gary S. 1957. *The Economics of Discrimination*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- [8] Fan, C. Cindy. 2002. "The Elite, the Natives, and the Outsiders: Migration and Labor Market Segmentation in Urban China." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 92(1): 103–124.
- [9] Fan, C. Cindy, Peter V. Hall, and Geoffrey Wall. 2009. "Migration, Hukou Status, and Labor-Market Segmentation: The Case of High-Tech Development in Dalian." *Environment and Planning A* 41(7): 1647–1666.
- [10] Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. 2006. "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3(2): 77–101.
- [11] Strauss, Anselm, and Juliet Corbin. 1998. *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- [12] Patton, Michael Quinn. 2002. *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- [13] Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. 2019. *Statistical Report on China's Vocational Education in 2018*.
- [14] U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission (USCC). 2023. *China Educating and Training Its Next Generation Workforce* (Annual Report chapter/section).
- [15] Bourdieu, Pierre. 1991. *Language and Symbolic Power*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- [16] Dai, Li, and Pedro S. Martins. 2024. "Does Vocational Education Pay Off in China? Evidence

from City-Level Education Supply Shocks.” *Economic Modelling* 140: 106863.

[17] Tian, Y. 2022. “The Development of Vocational Education in China.” In *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research* (Atlantis Press).

[18] Jing, T. 2022. “Vocational Education in China: Its History, Roles, and Challenges.” *Journal of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development* 8(1).