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Skill mismatch and career aspirations of humanities students in vocational schools: a Jiangxi case study

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Abstract. China has built the world's largest vocational education system, yet concerns remain about whether vocational graduates are able to realise their career goals. This study focuses on humanities and liberal arts students in Chinese vocational colleges, examining how they experience skill mismatch and how this shapes their career aspirations. Drawing on a qualitative case study at a vocational college in Jiangxi Province, the research uses semi-structured interviews, supported by questionnaire data, to explore students' perceptions of curriculum relevance, internship experiences, and career guidance. The findings show that skill mismatch among humanities students is not simply an individual problem, but is structurally embedded within China's vocational education system. Two mechanisms are particularly salient: curriculum lag, shaped by institutional and resource constraints, and career guidance that students perceive as weak and lacking practical relevance. Together, these dynamics contribute to uncertainty about employment prospects, lowered expectations, and increasingly constrained career aspirations. By foregrounding students' lived experiences, this study contributes to the literature on skill mismatch in vocational education by highlighting how career aspirations are formed through everyday encounters with institutional structures, curricular arrangements, and credential hierarchies.

Keywords: skill mismatch, career aspirations, dilemma, vocational education, humanities students, China

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Higher vocational education presents the public with a picture of training "skill-focused" professionals. The concept of "skills" is often associated primarily with technical and engineering-oriented vocational education, and this is also what most people widely recognise as the core difference between higher vocational education and regular undergraduate education. For arts and humanities programmes in higher vocational schools, which don't put as much stress on "hard-core technology", the students they train often receive less public attention. The employment quality of these arts and humanities graduates from vocational colleges is generally not high, with key problems such as jobs that poorly match their fields of study, low pay, and frequent job changes. For example, according to official statistics from China's Anhui Water Conservancy Technical College, out of 457 arts and humanities graduates in 2012, only 112 got jobs related to what they studied, indicating a job

relevance rate of just 24.5% [1]. Furthermore, the average starting salary given to these graduates by employers was 1,600 yuan, a figure much lower than what the graduates had expected.

1.2. Research questions

The study investigates two main research questions:

(1) What factors contribute to the skill mismatch between the requirements of the employment market and the qualifications of arts and humanities graduates from vocational colleges?

(2) How can we improve the quality of employment for these students?

2. Literature review

2.1. Skill mismatch and the career aspirations dilemma

According to the definition put forward by the International Labour Organization (ILO), skill mismatch refers to a gap between the skills employers are looking for and those job seekers actually have, meaning that the supply and demand of skills are not aligned. Because of this, education and training systems often fail to provide the exact skills that the labour market needs.

Brown and Green compared skill mismatch types between humanities and technical majors in vocational education and revealed that humanities students are more prominent in dual mismatches: skill shortage (insufficient practical skills to meet job requirements) and skill surplus (humanistic literacy skills that are inconsistent with actual job needs) [2]. The root cause lies in the disconnection between curriculum design and industry demands, as well as the imbalance between theoretical teaching and practical training.

Wu and Pei demonstrated that the mismatch of skills in the ASEAN context is manifested in forms such as skill shortages, skill gaps, skill obsolescence, and skill surplus or insufficiency, which are becoming the most influential obstacles to digital integration and economic growth [3]. The core reason for this is that factors such as globalisation, technological advancements, demographic ageing, and climate change are driving enterprises to seek employees with diversified skill sets, which creates new demand for job seekers. Other reasons contributing to this problem include the vocational education systems' lack of sufficient adaptability, while workforce upskilling and skills renewal services remain inadequate, making it difficult to meet emerging labour market demands.

According to Zhang and Wang, against the backdrop of globalisation and economic transformation, the construction of a skill-oriented society has become an important part of China's development strategy [4]. Vocational education, as a key approach to cultivating skilled talents, is gaining increasing prominence. Currently, vocational education faces prominent issues such as insufficient professional identity among students, low intention to engage in related occupations, and skill mismatch in employment.

In 2023, an actual match method was adopted to measure skill mismatch among university graduates in China's labour market, leading to the conclusion that skill mismatch among university graduates in China has become a pervasive and nationwide phenomenon [5]. In terms of education mismatch, overeducation predominates, while skill deficiency is increasingly emerging as the dominant form of skill mismatch. Through a comparative analysis of education mismatch and skill mismatch, the study reveals deeper issues in talent cultivation versus labour market demands beyond mere "overeducation". Chen and Liu [5] also proposed that the number of years in education is a key factor influencing skill mismatch, i.e., workers with longer education durations are more likely to experience overeducation, mismatched numeracy skills, excessive literacy skills, and insufficient social skills.

Liu administered digital surveys across 18 IT companies and 12 eldercare/household service providers to gather employee skill and occupational data [6]. Our analysis specifically focuses on respondents with four educational attainment levels: general high school, secondary vocational education, higher vocational training, and conventional bachelor's degree programmes. From the perspective of individuals with higher education qualifications, vocational college graduates appear more prone to skill deficits, whereas bachelor's degree holders are more likely to experience skill surplus. Among those with secondary education, general high school graduates seem comparatively more susceptible to skill inadequacy. Additionally, improvements in school quality significantly reduce the likelihood of workers experiencing skill mismatch (primarily manifested as skill deficits). Moreover, within the higher-educated population, the impact of individuals' school quality on skill mismatch operates independently, unaffected by the type of higher education institution attended.

Lucas noted that employer organisations are gaining a clearer understanding of the "foundational skills" that they expect from educational institutions [7]. In 2015, the World Economic Forum (WEF) further delineated these competencies into three dimensions as described by the Competency-Based Education (CBI) framework: foundational literacy (application of core skills to daily tasks, including: literacy, numeracy, scientific literacy, ICT literacy, financial literacy, cultural & civic literacy); competencies (response to complex challenges, including critical thinking, creativity, communication, collaboration) and character qualities (adaptation to changing environments, including curiosity, initiative, grit/perseverance, adaptability, leadership, social & cultural awareness).

Based on the newly developed CBI framework, the team formulated a Real-World Learning Model and 6 Engineering Mind Formation Models, demonstrating how teachers should teach these habits effectively, thereby facilitating their development in students. Education authorities worldwide should seize this opportunity to reform curricula, thereby bridging the gap between academic preparation and labour market demands.

2.2. Current situation of humanities students in chinese vocational colleges

According to Wu, in China's oversupplied labour market, prevalent credential inflation among employers has created significant challenges [8]. While liberal arts vocational graduates possess advantages such as interdisciplinary versatility, broad applicability, and transferable skills, they lack the relative employment flexibility conferred by specialised occupational barriers. Given these conditions, the employability of vocational liberal arts graduates has become critical for related academic programmes. Vocational institutions bear unequivocal responsibility for enhancing students' comprehensive competencies, yet the graduates' self-directed improvement remains paramount.

Xia demonstrated that the core skills of vocational students are often labelled as "hands-on competencies", which reinforces the dominance of STEM-focused students who naturally excel in practical applications—allowing them to occupy "half the territory" in vocational institutions [9]. This trend has further marginalised liberal arts students in the job market. Through a comparative analysis of students from different academic tracks, this paper argues that vocational liberal arts students should prioritise developing "strong communication abilities".

Wang concluded that the reasons for the employment challenges faced by vocational liberal arts graduates include structural unemployment in the broader socioeconomic context, outdated programme design and pedagogical models, and misaligned career expectations coupled with insufficient transversal competencies [1].

Zeng and Xing demonstrated that China's vocational colleges are predominantly government-operated and lack timely and effective market demand signals to guide their programme optimisation and talent development strategies [10]. This has resulted in homogeneous programme structures with limited specialisation, overrepresentation of generic programmes, and misalignment between disciplinary offerings and regional industrial profiles.

Liu and Zhao, taking Jiangxi Province as an example, empirically analysed the adaptability between the supply of skilled talents from higher vocational colleges and the demand of enterprises based on statistical data and crawler data from the recruitment market [11]. They found that there is an obvious structural deviation between the supply and demand of skilled talents—insufficient training of skilled talents in traditional producer services, as well as in labour-intensive and capital-intensive manufacturing industries. The core reasons include the low degree of alignment between major settings and industrial structure, insignificant effects of industry-education integration, dual imbalance between salary competitiveness and talent satisfaction, and inadequate accuracy in the layout of major settings.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

The main goal of this study is to gain an in-depth understanding of the career aspiration troubles that vocational college students majoring in humanities and liberal arts face, and to explore how skill mismatch manifests among these students in China, as well as its underlying causes.

This study used a qualitative research method. Semi-structured interviews were the primary method to collect data, and questionnaires were used as a supplementary tool. For example, this study selected a vocational college in Jiangxi Province as a specific case for analysis.

Separate interview questions and questionnaires were developed for the current students and graduates of this college. These materials assessed how well the target group understood the gap between the professional knowledge they had learned and what the labour market actually requires. At the same time, they investigated possible contributing factors from several angles, such as social attitudes, the overall education system, and the school's curriculum setup.

3.2. Data collection

3.2.1. Participants

Participants were recruited from this target vocational college to ensure they fit the study's focus. The sample was divided into two groups:

Current students: 30 participated in the interviews, and 200 completed the questionnaire.

Graduates: 10 participated in the interviews, and 50 completed the questionnaire.

The size of the interview sample was decided based on the principle of data saturation, which is a common standard in qualitative research to ensure that the collected qualitative data is sufficient. The questionnaire sample was set to a size that could capture the basic distribution features of the wider group, which complements the deep insights from the interviews.

3.2.2. Semi-structured interview guide

An interview guide was developed to maintain consistency while allowing for flexible in-depth exploration. This guide was built around three core theme areas derived from the research objectives: participants' career aspirations, their views on skill development and application, and the factors that influence them. Pilot

interviews were conducted with 3 current students and 1 graduate first to refine the guide; ambiguous questions were adjusted, and redundant items were removed before the formal data collection started.

3.2.3. Supplementary questionnaire

A self-administered questionnaire was designed to gather basic demographic information and the participants' initial thoughts. The questionnaire consisted primarily of closed-ended questions to make data sorting quicker, with 1 to 2 open-ended questions added to capture extra qualitative details. The questionnaire was pre-tested with 15 current students to confirm that the questions were clear and valid, and minor wording adjustments were made after that.

3.3. Data analysis

Consistent with the mixed-methods design that leans heavily on qualitative approaches, when analysing data, in-depth interpretation of interview data - the core source of information here - is given top priority, while questionnaire data is brought in to provide contextual support. The analysis followed a systematic, repeatable process that aligns with qualitative research standards. First, thematic analysis was conducted on interview transcripts to extract key themes tied to what participants experienced. Then, survey responses were checked to see if they were complete, and any responses with missing data were removed. For coding the qualitative interview transcripts, NVivo was used, which helps identify themes that recur throughout the data.

3.4. Ethical issues

Written consent forms, which lay out detailed research goals and confidentiality steps, were provided to all participants. Informed consent was obtained from every participant. Identifying details, such as names and specific locations, were removed from all transcripts; instead, the study used stand-in names, like "P1" and "Teacher A". Additionally, all data were stored in an encrypted database, and only the researcher has access to it.

4. Findings

4.1. Students' views on skill mismatch

4.1.1. Curriculum design limitations

Education has a built-in lag when it comes to teaching content that's up-to-date. When teachers create lessons or training programmes to prepare students for jobs, they can only approximate what's actually happening in the workplace. Mostly, they end up transmitting ideas, practices, and methods of conducting work tasks that have already become standard or well-established [12]. However, because society is changing rapidly, with new knowledge, perspectives, skills, and technologies emerging every day, this formalised way of delivering education runs into structural limits.

As Student A points out, "I know our college is trying new things, like adding 'HR Analytics with Big Data' next term. But let's be honest: society and workplaces are changing at a crazy pace. Keeping up is really hard, and there's no way to do it just by sticking to the school's official curricula. We have to take charge of our own learning outside of class too".

4.1.2. Problems related to internships

Students at this vocational college have to do a 6-month internship during their final semester; the original purpose of this requirement was to help them build job-related abilities and gain professional experience. From what's known, this is a standard requirement across the whole vocational education field. However,

finding an internship that aligns with their major is a huge struggle for these soon-to-graduate vocational students. For example, participants shared:

"Our seniors could only get internships doing office work which has nothing to do with their majors, or manual labour in factories, or waiting tables at hotels. This makes us feel like what we learned in school is totally useless. To me, internships like that just feel like a waste of time" (Student B).

"I'll probably just take whatever job any company will offer me, do some random menial work like grabbing tea for the office or sweeping the floors. Gotta check that internship credit box, right? Even if it means… you know… trading a bit of self-respect just to get that diploma stamp" (Student C).

Most of the students we interviewed saw the mandatory 6-month internship in the 6th semester as the school avoiding its responsibility. Even though vocational colleges hold the core responsibility for work-integrated learning, they shift this developmental task straight onto students. This leads to a double burden: on one hand, soon-to-graduate students, who have little say in the matter, struggle to land a decent placement. On the other hand, companies don't want to invest in trainees who'll only be around for a short time, especially since many of these students will go on to pursue a bachelor's degree later, or use their diploma to hunt for better jobs after graduation.

4.1.3. Low relevance between academic content and workplace requirements

This research also observed that what the college teaches in class often doesn't match workplace needs. Vocational colleges are supposed to train practical professionals, so teaching should focus more on work-process knowledge, like how to complete industry tasks [13]. Take the Human Resource Management course, for example: some students said that most of what teachers cover is highly abstract theoretical material. Even after finishing the whole course, participants shared their lack of understanding regarding how they could use what they learned in real work situations. Therefore, instead of vague theories, schools should teach actionable workflows for the six core HR modules: Strategic HR Planning, Talent Acquisition, Corporate Training, Performance Management, Compensation & Benefits, and Labour Relations. If graduating students cannot handle these real-world tasks, the vocational school has failed to meet its talent development objectives.

4.2. Students' career aspiration dilemma

4.2.1. Identity challenges as vocational college students

In China, both employers and students perceive vocational diplomas as less valuable than bachelor's degrees, and this perception negatively impacts employment outcomes for vocational graduates [14]. As a result, vocational graduates end up clustered in entry-level jobs, creating a cycle where their career aspirations continue to shrink. Students start to believe that their qualifications can never get them a good job, and they eventually accept this reality.

For instance, Student D said, "…, we're in vocational colleges because we got lower scores on the Gaokao. In society's eyes, that labels us as less capable, no ifs, ands, or buts. Less good at studying, less… well, just plain lesser than bachelor's grads in every way that matters".

Despite national policies framing vocational education as "different but equal" to bachelor's programmes, a deep-seated hierarchy placing vocational graduates below degree holders still lingers, and this bias has grown stronger because credential inflation has intensified. For students in this situation, overcoming the stigma they have internalised from this system is a difficult systemic problem to tackle.

4.2.2. Concerns about employment quality

Across the entire labour market, job postings regularly offer vocational graduates below-average starting salaries. For example, any position that even offers slightly higher pay or better benefits will almost always set a bachelor's degree as the minimum requirement. Furthermore, most jobs targeted at vocational graduates do

not specify any disciplinary requirements at all, which shows that employers see these roles as replaceable, routine work. They don't need specialised skills; they just want workers who can be easily shifted around to do side tasks.

As Student E stated, "I've accepted that I'll never get a good job unless I go back to school and get that bachelor's diploma. That little piece of paper? It's the only way I can get out of this going-nowhere situation".

4.2.3. Uncertainty and ambiguity in career planning

Even though most colleges have added career guidance courses to their talent development programmes, the content is superficial and lacks practical use, so students widely see these classes as easy electives they can check off [15]. Having been asked to teach some of these related lectures, the researcher found that career planning curricula are not designed based on real-world data. Students, on the other hand, mostly see these courses as a way to earn the credits they need, and they do not realise how useful these classes could be for their future careers while they're sitting through them.

At this college, few departments seriously considered what students actually need when they transition from being in-school learners to working adults. So students cannot develop the skills they need to adjust their mindset for the job market or make the best personalised career plans for themselves. The students taking part in this study shared their worries:

"Career guidance classes? Honestly, most teachers just read straight from the textbook word for word. The only reason we show up is to get that credit marked off. I don't expect to learn anything that will be actually useful for real jobs" (Student F).

"Let's be real, just getting any job that pays after graduation feels like climbing a mountain. Career planning is just a luxury for people who have other options. For us, it's more like daydreaming" (Student G).

Clearly, vocational schools need to rethink and redesign their career development courses, moving away from outdated teaching methods. The key priority is to focus on frameworks that are practical and rooted in real-world contexts. When schools do this, it can help students gain a stronger competitive edge in specialised job markets.

5. Discussion

5.1. Interpreting the findings

From the findings presented earlier, the main reason liberal arts students in higher vocational colleges face skill mismatches is not only due to how individual colleges operate; it's a structural issue embedded throughout China's vocational education system.

First, education is inherently slow to catch up with knowledge and technology innovations, which creates challenges for higher vocational colleges when designing talent training programmes and course structures. For students, this means that even though they hope to learn skills and knowledge that will help them get jobs after graduation, the training they receive might not align with the rapid changes in industries and workplaces. Despite vocational colleges' efforts to design forward-looking programmes, students often find that the curricula, teaching methods, and available resources lag behind the latest technologies and market demands. As a result, many students end up confused and frustrated when the skills they learned don't match what employers require. This hampers their ability to secure desired jobs and also creates a gap between their career expectations and reality.

Second, when vocational colleges offer career guidance courses, they do not demonstrate why these courses matter or how they can be applied in practice. Consequently, students do not take these courses

seriously and do not believe that participation will help them develop a more mature approach to job searching.

Finally, in a society where academic degrees carry less weight than before, vocational college graduates already have low expectations for high-quality jobs. They see their three years of vocational education as just a transitional phase that offers limited value, and they do not expect to acquire the skills and knowledge they will need for future jobs during this time.

5.2. Implications for policy and practice

These findings show that behind the current skill mismatch and career struggles of liberal arts students in higher vocational colleges, there are problems and gaps in three areas: the education system itself, the vocational colleges, and the students. Thus, reforms should focus on these areas:

First, when it comes to the education system, efforts are needed to improve the public understanding that vocational education and general education are two different yet equally valuable types of education. This would help society recognise and value vocational education more.

Second, higher vocational colleges need to strengthen their collaborations with the job market and enterprises, instead of relying on outdated cooperation models. For example, in the past, school-enterprise cooperation often involved inviting corporate mentors for classes and finding internship placements. While these mentors may have rich on-the-job experience, they may lack effective classroom teaching skills. For students' internships, most students end up performing basic office tasks like sorting documents or answering phones, with almost no opportunity to apply core skills from their chosen fields.

Before inviting corporate mentors to teach, higher vocational colleges should first facilitate detailed discussions between programme heads and mentors to develop a solid course plan, ensuring teaching quality meets required standards. When arranging internships, colleges should also encourage enterprises to provide more hands-on practice opportunities, allowing students to apply classroom knowledge to solve real-world problems. This not only reinforces learning but also enhances students' engagement and helps them make informed career decisions.

Finally, vocational guidance courses should focus more on building students' vocational identity and supporting career planning. Students should understand the value of vocational education themselves, such as how it helps them integrate into the workplace more efficiently and provides a distinctive advantage. For liberal arts students, career guidance classes should also enhance their humanistic qualities and professional ethics. In many liberal arts-related jobs, practical technical skills are not the main differentiator, so better personal qualities can make students stand out. These courses should also help students develop realistic expectations for employment, avoiding unrealistic assumptions about their first jobs.

5.3. Limitations of the study

First, this study has a relatively small sample size, as all participants were recruited from a single vocational college in Jiangxi. This convenience sampling may have led to selection bias because most of the participants were second-year Human Resources majors, and students from other arts-related majors were excluded. Therefore, the results may not be generalisable to vocational college students in other regions or with different academic backgrounds. Future studies could expand the sample to include multiple regions and a wider variety of majors to improve representativeness.

Second, relying solely on self-administered questionnaires can introduce response bias. For example, social desirability bias might skew students' responses: to fit the social stereotype of "capable vocational students", respondents may overstate their practical skills like digital literacy or communication, or underreport their

career concerns. Cognitive bias may also affect self-evaluation accuracy, as many students may confuse theoretical knowledge with real-world ability. Additionally, retrospective reporting bias may occur when students recall changes in their career goals or skill gaps over time.

Third, the lead researcher's background in vocational education may have introduced minor biases during interviews. For example, follow-up questions tended to focus on students' personal learning experiences rather than the implementation of relevant policies. Although efforts were made to avoid one-sidedness, some residual bias may remain because the first interview guide was developed around the researcher's framework, which focused mainly on educational aspects. Future studies should include perspectives from policy researchers or vocational education managers, and research tools should cover both small-scale teaching practices and large-scale policy environments for a more comprehensive analysis.

Lastly, while this study centres on students' perspectives, it does not adequately consider school-level and regional factors affecting skill mismatches and career goals. At the institutional level, the research did not systematically analyse how curriculum design (e.g., theory vs. practical class ratios), teaching methods (e.g., lectures vs. project-based learning), or school-industry cooperation (e.g., internships or talks given by enterprise staff) impact skills acquisition and career expectations. At the regional level, Jiangxi's industrial structure (e.g., dominance of traditional manufacturing over new service industries) and local job market characteristics (e.g., salary standards or availability of jobs for liberal arts graduates) may constrain career choices and exacerbate skill mismatches. Limited time and resources prevented full consideration of these factors, so the findings may not capture the entire picture.

6. Conclusion

This study finds that skill mismatch among vocational liberal arts students stems from structural issues within China's vocational education system.

Core problems identified include: curricula tend to lag behind industry needs due to resource constraints, and career guidance is ineffective because students generally see it as irrelevant to their actual job search.

This research adds empirical support for the "education lag theory" in vocational settings and offers actionable suggestions. Vocational colleges should establish sustainable industry-university collaboration mechanisms to update curricula promptly and redesign career guidance courses using real-world cases to make content more relevant.

The study has limitations, including a small sample size, which may limit generalisability. Future research could expand the sample to include more regions and incorporate enterprise perspectives to provide a more holistic understanding of the issue.

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