

Chapter 6

Chinese Higher Vocational Education Development and Reform

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ABSTRACT

Education researchers have examined whether innovative education and training initiatives might assist in promoting a nation's economic growth. A focus upon Chinese higher vocational education (CHVE) offers an opportunity to study these factors, as CHVE plays an important role in China's educational, economic, and social development. The role of CHVE is to contribute a skilled workforce to the knowledge economy; however, it faces challenges from cultural traditions, teaching/curriculum, and funding issues. The question of how CHVE might better serve social and economic development is of concern to both the nation and government because it is associated with the nation's future economic reform. Through analysis of government policy, the author discusses the development of CHVE as having four major stages with different policy emphases. The new policy reform addresses movement towards optimization of teaching/curriculum, development of decentralization/localization, improvement of industry cooperation, and enhancement of internationalization.

INTRODUCTION

China's transition since the 1980s from a planned economy to a partially market-oriented economy is characterized by booms in new industries and businesses (Stewart, 2015). After more than thirty years of rapid economic growth, the country has transformed into an industrial society (Ngok, 2007). This industrial development has created considerable demand for trained personnel to fill job positions for specialized fields (Cheung, 1996). Thus, around the 1980s, the Chinese government launched postsecondary vocational education as a supplemental form to existing educational institutions (Lai, Maturu, Stamberger, Stephens & Sze, 2011). The basic function of vocational education is to train highly skilled personnel needed on the front lines of production, construction, services, and management (Jia, 2015).

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-5861-3.ch006

The development of vocational education contributes to sustainable economic and social development and provides work opportunities for young people (Min & Wu, 2009).

After more than thirty years of rapid development, however, the overall quality of Chinese Higher Vocational Education (CHVE) has not kept up with its quantity development (Shi, 2013). More specifically, CHVE faces challenges from the misconception of culture, low teaching quality, out-dated curriculum, and mismatched student skills, problems that could undermine CHVE's power as a knowledge economy accelerator (Catterall, Davis, & Yang, 2013). Although these issues have been debated amongst scholars for years, many of them have remained unresolved. The purpose of this literature review is to discuss some of these issues by using ideas from studies of policy, system and culture aspects. Furthermore, the chapter provide analysis of the current CHVE reform and development trends under market influences.

Traditionally, higher education literature focuses on industrial and English speaking countries, with much less discussion on developing countries (Simmons & Polgar, 2005; Ding & Levin, 2007). To be more specific, in CHVE, the most current CHVE literature reviews have focused on learning from a Western perspective with comparative studies of single countries (Chen, 2012). On the other hand, most of this research focuses on the technical aspects of higher vocational education, such as reforms to recruitment methods and approaches for teaching the curricula (Wang, 2011). Moreover, while CHVE has experienced structural change in higher education during the past 20 years, many of these literature reviews have looked only at the policy reform strategies within the system and neglected the internal issues in CHVE that could bring more innovation and systemic change (Ding & Levin, 2007).

In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of CHVE, I first chose articles based on CHVE background history, policy reform, and issues related to its current development. Then, I gathered information from selected literature to understand their arguments and to construct my chapter based on these previous key studies. Thirdly, by combining these major aspects, I developed this chapter with discussion of background, policy overview, and an explanatory of current issues. This literature review seeks to sort and analyze various issues and change that have arisen in CHVE, propose future reform strategies, and provide an example of institutional change in a global context for international policy makers.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ABOUT CHVE AND POLICY DEVELOPMENT

CHVE Definition

According to UNESCO's International Standard Classification of Education, higher vocational education can be defined as a junior stage of post-secondary education with programs focusing on practical occupational specific skills for workforce preparation, rather than leading directly to an advanced degree (UNESCO, 2011). In China, vocational education belongs to the categories of Technical and Vocational Education and Training. As vocational education emphasizes practice-oriented training, the goal of CHVE is to design the knowledge, structure, and training programs of cultivating students in practical training and professional skills (Stewart, 2015). With acquired vocational skills, CHVE graduates are expected to obtain corresponding certificates and be competent in professional occupations at intermediate and lower levels of the local job market (Ministry of Education of China, 2010).

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