

# An Analysis of Diploma Discrimination in Chinese Higher Vocational Education within the Context of a Knowledge-Based Society

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**Abstract.** In the context of a knowledge-based society, the persistent problem of educational credential discrimination within higher vocational education remains a formidable challenge for graduates. This paper employs existing literature and data to undertake a comprehensive analysis of this prevailing phenomenon. Furthermore, it compares these findings with the practices observed in well-established vocational education systems of other developed nations, in order to elucidate the underlying issues associated with such discriminatory practices and put forth viable strategies for their alleviation. This discrimination results in a range of adverse consequences, including the depreciation of educational qualifications, diminished compensation packages, and obstacles to upward mobility. The roots of this issue can be attributed to various factors, including suboptimal educational quality in higher vocational institutions, disparities between general and vocational education, company recruitment practices, and the societal prioritization of Confucian values, often neglecting the importance of practical skills. It highlights the need for a comprehensive approach to address these multifaceted challenges. Firstly, educational reforms are imperative to enhance the overall quality of higher vocational institutions, thereby increasing their competitiveness in the job market. Secondly, recalibrating vocational education and recruitment policies is essential to establish a more equitable system that values both academic and practical skills. Thirdly, fostering effective public discourse and conducting awareness campaigns play pivotal roles in challenging prevailing misconceptions and reshaping public attitudes towards vocational education. This research underscores the urgency of addressing educational credential discrimination within higher vocational education to ensure a fair and inclusive educational landscape in a knowledge-based society.

**Keywords:** knowledge society; Chinese higher vocational education; educational credential discrimination.

## 1. Introduction

In a knowledge-driven society, human capital and technological innovation have risen as the foremost catalysts of economic advancement. Currently, in China, intensified job market competition and the prevalence of the “neijuan” phenomenon which means involution have exposed a mismatch between industry structures and the availability of skilled talent. Consequently, educational qualifications have become a standard criterion for companies to rapidly screen job applicants [1]. The multifaceted consequences of educational credential discrimination have become a topic of extensive discourse in society. These consequences encompass the depreciation of educational qualifications, decreased salary and compensation packages, and impediments to the upward mobility of young individuals [2]. The academic community has increasingly focused on addressing the historically marginalized status of vocational education with the introduction of the new Vocational Education Law and the national initiative to establish a modern vocational education system. Presently, there exists a dearth of academic research on social or identity-based discrimination, especially within the realm of higher vocational education. The existing body of literature primarily comprises works by Li Hongrong and others, including “An Analysis of Identity Discrimination in Higher Vocational Education [3].” Nevertheless, these studies do not offer a comprehensive examination of the problem of educational credential discrimination within the domain of higher vocational education.

In this context, this paper seeks to offer a systematic and comprehensive analysis and reflection on the phenomenon of educational credential discrimination in Chinese higher vocational education, all within the overarching framework of a knowledge-based society. It endeavors to define the concept, delve into its underlying causes, and proffer potential solutions. This study holds substantial significance as it provides a scientific evaluation and specific recommendations to tackle educational credential discrimination in Chinese higher vocational education. The paper is structured as follows: it commences with an introduction to the concept of educational credential discrimination and its impacts. It then proceeds to scrutinize the diverse factors that contribute to this phenomenon, encompassing aspects pertaining to institutions, policies, and societal culture. Finally, the paper presents practical recommendations for addressing the root causes.

## **2. Definition and Impacts of Educational Credential Discrimination**

### **2.1. Definition**

Educational credential discrimination, affecting both individuals and groups, entails unequal treatment by employers and the whole society, predicated on one's educational background or diploma. Linguistically, this type of discrimination is evident in derogatory remarks that unfairly label individuals based on their educational backgrounds. Behaviorally, disparities in educational credentials give rise to prejudicial practices that categorize and treat individuals hierarchically. Higher educational achievements are praised and elevate social status, whereas those with lower educational backgrounds experience suppression and exclusion. From a policy standpoint, local governments actively pursue highly educated individuals by offering incentives to attract them, while concurrently imposing residency restrictions on those with qualifications below a certain level, especially those lacking diplomas or holding only college degrees. This illustrates a distinct policy bias. In civil service examinations, opportunities for candidates with associate or bachelor's degrees have dwindled over time, as an increasing number of positions demand postgraduate qualifications and beyond. This has made graduates of higher vocational education programs less competitive and deprived them of equal access to the job market. Against the backdrop of a knowledge society, educational credentials, initially grounded in meritocracy and performance-oriented principles, have unfortunately been oversimplified to merely represent knowledge. Consequently, individuals with lower educational credentials have become unfortunate targets of discrimination based on their credentials.

### **2.2. Impacts**

Within China's intensely competitive knowledge society, discrimination based on educational credentials within higher vocational education has intensified employment market disparities. Data released by the Chinese Ministry of Education unveils China's status as the world's largest higher education system, boasting a total student enrollment surpassing 44.3 million [4]. The gross enrollment rate in higher education has ascended from 30% in 2012 to 57.8% in 2021, signifying a historic milestone and propelling higher education into a globally acknowledged era of massification [4]. This substantial surge in the number of higher education students in China has resulted in an abundance of labor supply in the job market, giving rise to a phenomenon colloquially known as "involution." As a result, the depreciation of educational credentials has gained momentum, with factors like family background and social resources assuming greater significance in the job-seeking process for graduates [2].

In accordance with human capital theory, graduates holding higher education qualifications are likely to possess enhanced job-related skills and capabilities [5]. As a result, educational credentials have become the primary and expeditious screening criterion for employers in the recruitment process. Currently, society frequently views higher vocational education as being inferior to traditional higher education. Consequently, graduates of higher vocational education programs encounter significant challenges in the job market, leading them to lower their career expectations and accept less favorable employment conditions. Throughout their protracted job search efforts, they struggle to secure

competitive positions and advance their careers in negotiations with Human Resource (HR) personnel, or to expect treatment equivalent to that of university graduates.

Within this framework, educational credential discrimination additionally impedes the motivation of young individuals toward achieving upward social mobility. Consequently, graduates of higher vocational education are compelled to adjust their employment expectations downward, and often find themselves commencing their careers from entry-level positions. To pursue career advancement, advancing up the career ladder requires pursuing additional education to bolster their credentials. Additionally, higher vocational education encounters various degrees of discrimination in diverse settings, such as the marriage market, and may even be the target of ridicule during comedic performances. As an example, graduates of junior colleges are frequently subjected to unjust stereotypes that label them as possessing lower qualifications, deficient skills, and diminished emotional intelligence, among other misperceptions. This type of discrimination fosters feelings of inferiority among students, spurring them to contemplate strategies for escaping this predicament and enhancing their social status.

### **3. Origins of Educational Credential Discrimination**

#### **3.1. Historical Development of Chinese Higher Vocational Education**

The inception of higher vocational education in China can be traced back to the early 20th century when industries such as machinery, electronics, and agriculture demanded skilled workers plus practical skills. In the early 1990s, the Chinese government embarked on vocational education reforms, which included a substantial increase in investments in higher vocational education. Over time, the higher vocational education system in China expanded, incorporating technical schools, vocational high schools, and higher vocational colleges. The evolution of higher vocational education played a vital role in fostering technical talents, ultimately leading to improved employment rates and contributing to economic growth. Since 2012, higher vocational education in the nation has experienced extensive reforms. In pursuit of alignment with industrial progress and the enhancement of talent cultivation, higher vocational colleges have proactively enlisted industry experts, stressed the training of educators adept in both theory and practice, and undertaken ongoing educational and pedagogical reforms. These reforms have encompassed revisions in curriculum standards and textbooks, the embrace of internationalization, the expansion of student enrollment, and the implementation of cluster-based education models.

Nevertheless, despite these endeavors, higher vocational education grapples with persistent challenges. Firstly, the academic standards of higher vocational institutions are generally lower, leading to reduced competitiveness among their graduates in the job market. Secondly, despite the introduction of vocational undergraduate programs, concerns endure about the quality of education offered, encompassing issues such as blindly seeking to decrease the student-teacher ratio, regardless of the prevailing conditions, to fulfill the criteria for obtaining degree-granting status, the recruitment of inexperienced faculty, campus expansion, and administrative complexities. The elevation of vocational colleges to confer bachelor's degrees frequently seems ceremonial, devoid of substantial enhancements in educational outcomes. Last but not least, the caliber of students entering higher vocational colleges varies, with numerous students lacking essential skills, guidance regarding job prospects, and career planning. Consequently, this phenomenon has resulted in disparities between their chosen fields of study and their capabilities, leading to underutilization of their potential and a deficiency in societal recognition. Hence, skepticism and biases regarding the value of higher vocational education credentials endure within society.

#### **3.2. Influence of Societal Beliefs and Cultural Factors**

Confucianism, the prevailing culture in ancient China, offered a deep comprehension of education, encompassing its essence, significance, and effective conduct model [6]. To attain the status of a virtuous individual, known as a “junzi,” one had to undergo a comprehensive educational system that

instilled virtues encompassing benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and trustworthiness. This form of education equips individuals with the necessary skills to effectively engage in societal roles and adhere to the authority of their rulers. Concurrently, Confucianism underscores the importance of cultivating personal virtue during times of adversity and promoting the betterment of the world during periods of prosperity. The imperial examination system facilitates social mobility through academic study and rigorous testing, thereby enabling individuals to apply their personal talents [6]. This method of talent selection, rooted in academic performance, became the linchpin of talent development, forging a close nexus between an individual's education and the nation's progress [6]. The veneration of educational traditions endured across generations, as exemplified by the proverb: "All things are secondary to learning."

Nevertheless, this approach had its limitations. Individuals aimed to attain managerial roles rather than engaging in manual labor, perpetuating a desire toward academia over practical experience, which has become a pervasive concern in contemporary Chinese higher education [3]. The notion of "learning to become a government official" warped students' career aspirations and values, leading many to prioritize entry into the bureaucratic system to get power [6]. To achieve this objective, attaining an undergraduate degree emerged as the primary pathway. Most companies also favored hiring individuals possessing at least a bachelor's degree. Conversely, vocational education was frequently perceived as inferior, garnering limited comprehension and interest. This culture, which prioritizes "theory over practical skills," has resulted in higher vocational institutions relentlessly striving for academic excellence while disconnecting from the actualities of society and falling short in meeting the requirements of local industrial development [7]. During the planned economy era, the working class, in its role as the ruling class, significantly elevated the importance of skills to a level that was universally pursued. However, the emergence of economic reforms and the shift to a market economy ushered in a resurgence of traditional culture, presenting challenges to the development of higher vocational education, as it has not been duly acknowledged for its societal role.

### **3.3. Policy Analysis**

To begin with, considering the source of students, China's enduring policy of segregating academic and vocational education has garnered substantial public critique. Middle school entrance examination scores have evolved into the sole determinant for graduates' pathways into high schools or vocational institutions. The prevalence of examination-driven education remains, significantly influencing pivotal life choices for all students. Naturally, individuals with lower scores are considered unsuited for pursuing academic studies. Likewise, higher vocational education encounters enrollment disparities, frequently assigned to the final admission phase. This often results in challenges in attracting students, compelling a reduction in admission standards. As a result, the student body tends to demonstrate lower overall academic credentials, leading to diminished societal regard. Graduates from vocational institutions often confront discrimination in the job market [8].

Examining this situation from an instructional standpoint reveals several significant concerns. Initially, the existing curriculum design in primary and secondary education exhibits specific shortcomings. The lack of dedicated career planning courses leaves students without a well-defined academic advancement strategy. Even within the realm of higher vocational education, the development of employability skills is frequently deferred to the last part of the educational journey [8]. Consequently, this situation fosters impractical career aspirations among students and hasty job choices, ultimately contributing to unjustifiable employment discrimination. Moreover, educational authorities exhibit deficiencies in comprehensive planning and visionary strategies while often undervaluing the significance of delivering early career planning and employment guidance to students. Secondly, within higher vocational education institutions, the role of teaching has been relegated to the periphery. Owing to inadequate school resources and staffing shortages, grassroots educators are frequently obligated to manage a multitude of supplementary administrative duties, engage in extensive documentation, and participate in numerous meetings. Consequently, they have limited time and energy remaining for substantive teaching and educational reforms. Furthermore,

teaching reform initiatives introduced by higher authorities frequently struggle to harmonize effectively with the practical realities at the institutional level, resulting in superficial changes that do not produce substantial enhancements in educational quality.

Thirdly, the former national curriculum standards allotted inadequate time to physical education courses, resulting in a deterioration of students' physical fitness levels. Therefore, students have developed a preference for intellectual work over physical labor. Nonetheless, within the job market, numerous roles sought after by higher vocational graduates, particularly within sectors like manufacturing, frequently necessitate robust physical fitness and the capability to fulfill specific physical requirements. This divergence in physical qualifications stands as one of the factors contributing to their encounters with discrimination.

Regarding recruitment policies, a form of educational discrimination against higher vocational graduates persists within the national civil service recruitment framework. Numerous positions that do not necessitate stringent educational prerequisites for professional competencies remain beyond their reach. For example, positions in administrative law enforcement typically demand fundamental social management skills, yet they are exclusively available to candidates holding a minimum of a bachelor's degree [1]. Likewise, within corporate recruitment systems, companies typically conform to national standards. Higher vocational graduates commonly seek roles in operational and technical capacities at the forefront of industries, which can be arduous to evaluate within a brief interview. Consequently, employers frequently revert to a simplistic and inflexible dependence on educational credentials as a conveniently accessible gauge of capabilities [8]. This underscores the underdevelopment and insufficiency of the talent recruitment system while intensifying the problem of educational discrimination.

#### **4. Strategies for Eliminating Credential Discrimination in Higher Vocational Education**

##### **4.1. Educational Reforms**

In the pursuit of eradicating educational discrimination in China, an ancient Chinese proverb aptly asserts, "To forge iron, one must possess strength." Higher vocational institutions are compelled to elucidate their educational positioning and enhance their academic standards.

Germany boasts a venerable history of vocational education development, culminating in the establishment of a prominent dual-track system that has yielded a substantial cadre of technical professionals. The "dual-track system" denotes an approach wherein students simultaneously acquire theoretical knowledge through academic coursework and practical skill training as apprentices within corporate settings. Japan's higher vocational education system is equally well-established and diverse, encompassing specialized colleges, junior colleges, and technical universities that offer education beyond the undergraduate level. This system exhibits a high degree of structure, with the primary objective of imparting fundamental skills essential for professional endeavors. Conversely, the United States is renowned for its community colleges, renowned for offering cost-effective, brief programs aimed at facilitating lifelong learning and fostering versatile vocational skills [9]. China can glean numerous insights from these models to inform its own approach.

Firstly, vocational education inherently leans towards employment and entrepreneurship. Higher vocational institutions should unwaveringly prioritize the development of applied talents, placing a significant emphasis on fostering employment and entrepreneurial skills, thereby making substantial contributions to regional economic and industrial growth. Secondly, higher vocational schools should enhance faculty development. In Germany, the recruitment criteria for vocational education instructors usually entail holding a doctoral degree alongside three to five years of practical work experience [9]. Japan employs a tiered approach, with instructors at specialized schools giving precedence to practical experience and vocational qualifications, while educators at higher specialized institutions emphasize elevated academic qualifications [10]. In light of this, Chinese higher vocational institutions ought to pivot away from solely emphasizing educational credentials

and diversify their assessment criteria. This should encompass the development of educators who can effectively serve in dual roles, possessing not just academic qualifications but also practical expertise. Moreover, implementing measures such as enhancing faculty compensation, involving seasoned industry professionals as part-time instructors, promoting educators to acquire practical experience within enterprises, creating conducive working environments, and bolstering faculty training programs is imperative.

Thirdly, vocational institutions are supposed to initiate school-enterprise cooperation, and digital transformation and create an information-sharing platform. Under the context of the knowledge society, technology has been developing rapidly, which leads the main component of industry moving into technology-orientated. According to this phenomenon, the future industry has a high possibility to be high-tech orientated. For instance, industries such as IT, and machinery R&D will be the main economic benefits. In other words, general universities are unable to meet society's needs. Hence, future knowledge society might have new institutions specific to high-tech areas. Higher vocational schools might take the responsibility of innovating cooperating with corporations, leveraging the digital campus infrastructure, providing support to students in consolidating employment information to align precisely with corporate recruitment demands, and ensuring ongoing awareness of individual student requirements. Moreover, engage industry enterprises and alumni with relevance to mentor students in career planning. This guidance aids students in formulating life and employment plans, mitigating unrealistic expectations in the absence of practical skills [8].

Fourthly, the vocational education system should undertake the reform of evaluation standards. The most significant challenge to reforming higher vocational evaluation standards lies in the obstacles presented by exam-centric, singular criteria, and non-standardized regional norms. Conversely, nations with well-established vocational education systems, such as Germany, Australia, and the United Kingdom, have embraced tiered assessment standards guided by industry expertise and centered on human development [11]. Within China's higher vocational education system, the foremost urgency lies in establishing a practical curriculum evaluation body with a predominant enterprise focus. This entity should involve collaboration between the government, industry, enterprises, and educational institutions. This guarantees that students' learning content aligns authentically with job prerequisites, and the qualifications they acquire signify their skill proficiency, rendering them adaptable to corporate positions.

#### **4.2. Institutional Adaptation**

At first, national education authorities should vigorously advocate for the reform of the degree-granting system, elevating vocational education to bachelor's and higher levels. They should establish a degree system customized to its unique features, introducing titles like "Craftsman," "Master of Work," "Associate Bachelor," and similar designations [3]. Moreover, fostering partnerships with undergraduate institutions, they should embrace an "upgrading from junior college student to university student" model to confer degrees upon students [3]. Secondly, educational authorities should expand the number of teaching positions and delegate the authority for independent teacher recruitment and title assessments to individual schools. Drawing inspiration from Japan's school-based management approach, vocational schools should be encouraged to attract exceptional talent in accordance with their distinct educational contexts [10]. This will bolster their institutional capacities and clarify the responsibilities of both professional educators and administrative staff. Empowering teachers to shed administrative burdens and the constraints imposed by title assessment criteria enables them to concentrate on teaching and curriculum enhancements, ultimately enhancing the quality of higher vocational education.

Thirdly, it is advisable to lower the threshold associated with civil service examinations. The government should take the initiative in moving away from a sole focus on educational qualifications. The improvement of employers' recruitment systems is crucial. Candidate assessments should include a comprehensive evaluation that considers both hard skills, such as specialized knowledge and technical proficiency, and soft skills like teamwork and interpersonal communication abilities.

This approach will guarantee equitable employment opportunities and conditions for graduates of higher vocational education. Lastly, it is imperative to encourage regions across the nation to eliminate policies that rigidly allocate student admissions to either general or vocational tracks. Instead, the allocation should be reasonably adjusted based on local school sizes, development status, and regional industrial demands. Admissions should involve a thorough evaluation of students' attributes, with admission schedules synchronized with the national college entrance examination, guaranteeing students equitable opportunities in higher vocational education.

### **4.3. Societal Awareness and Advocacy**

Historically, Chinese society held the misconception that higher vocational education was inferior to traditional higher education [3]. However, this is inaccurate. The recently enacted Vocational Education Law has established their equal status; they simply serve different purposes and roles. Presently, China is undergoing a crucial phase of industrial transformation and upgrading, with technological innovation playing a pivotal role. Higher vocational education has a mission to drive the nation's industries and is highly responsive to market demands. It goes beyond mere workforce education, also undertaking research tasks and technical innovations. To reshape public perceptions of academic qualifications, both the government and media must bolster their efforts to promote the reform and progress of higher vocational education. This includes showcasing exemplary teachers and students in vocational colleges, organizing advanced achievement presentations and skills competitions, and setting examples for society to establish an equitable perspective on talents and education.

Secondly, individuals should adopt the concept of lifelong learning, particularly due to the accelerating pace of technological advancements. Staying abreast of current knowledge is imperative. It demands that workers cultivate robust abilities in lifelong learning and job adaptation. Higher vocational education occupies a crucial role within the lifelong education and training framework [12]. It should offer pertinent vocational skills training courses aligned with regional economic requirements. Emphasizing collaboration with businesses and consistent employee training are of utmost importance. These measures will contribute to establishing a favorable reputation. Lastly, society and the media should enhance the dissemination of information and resources concerning higher vocational education. They should actively participate in public discussions about credential discriminatory hiring practices by corporations, offering guidance and legal support. This will present students and parents with alternative educational options.

## **5. Conclusion**

In the context of a knowledge-based society, this paper provides a comprehensive overview of the enduring problem of educational credential discrimination in Chinese higher vocational education. Despite some progress over time, this form of discrimination remains deeply entrenched in everyday discourse, influences the status of educational certificates, and is reflected in disparities within corporate recruitment policies. Consequently, it exacerbates the depreciation of educational qualifications, resulting in reduced employment prospects and income for graduates, thus hindering their upward social mobility. This phenomenon can be elucidated through the following key observations: Firstly, higher vocational institutions often uphold lower academic standards and lack comprehensive career planning and guidance for their students. Consequently, doubts persist regarding the credibility of their educational certificates. Secondly, societal reverence for Confucian traditional values has fostered the perception that the pursuit of academic excellence is the most esteemed goal, thereby undervaluing technical and employment-focused higher vocational education. Lastly, the inattention of educational authorities has resulted in lower-quality students entering higher vocational education, limited resource allocation, and insufficient employment support for graduates. Furthermore, prevailing job market recruitment policies favor candidates with bachelor's degrees and higher qualifications, further aggravating the issue of educational credential discrimination.

Addressing these challenges, this article proposes a series of pragmatic recommendations. Firstly, higher vocational colleges should draw insights from the experiences of other developed nations and proactively champion educational reforms to enhance the overall quality of their educational offerings. Secondly, education authorities should expediently revise policies, advance degree-granting systems, distinguish between general and vocational education more clearly, and overhaul corporate recruitment practices, among other pivotal measures. Thirdly, it is imperative for society and the media to engage in constructive public discourse, establish role models, promote a lifelong learning ethos, cultivate positive perceptions of school-enterprise collaboration, dispel unfounded rumors and biases, and cultivate a favorable image for vocational education.

Overall, this study addresses the research gap concerning educational credential discrimination in Chinese higher vocational education, aiming to provide a scientific and objective analysis of the current challenges faced by this sector. It assists stakeholders in refining their strategies and differentiating educational credential discrimination from other types of bias. However, it is important to note that this study is limited by the lack of extensive data support and an in-depth literature review. Additionally, the study may have inadvertently omitted consideration of some stakeholders, including the responsibilities of businesses and their social roles in this context. Subsequent research endeavors can enhance and refine these dimensions to enable a more comprehensive investigation into this subject matter.

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