



# Innovative Research on the Professional Development Pathways of Teachers in Higher Vocational Colleges

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**Abstract.** Vocational college teachers are pivotal in imparting skills and knowledge, as well as nurturing talent and shaping character. Leading practice and innovation is crucial, and their own professional development plays an essential role. Currently, there are three main issues in the professional development of vocational education teachers in China, encompassing individual, social, and systemic levels. Based on this, the paper proposes that the professional development of vocational college teachers primarily revolves around enhancing teaching skills, updating professional knowledge, deepening scientific research, and engaging in social services, and goes through four stages: the initial employment period, the junior teacher period, the intermediate teacher period, and the associate senior/senior teacher period.

**Keywords:** Professional Development, Initial Employment Period, Junior Teacher Period, Intermediate Teacher Period, Associate Senior/Senior Teacher.

## 1 Introduction

The professional development of teachers in higher vocational colleges refers to the systematic training, learning, and practice through which teachers continuously enhance their professional competencies and qualities in teaching, education, research, and social services. This process involves various aspects such as the planning of individual career paths, the improvement of teaching skills, the updating of professional knowledge, the deepening of academic research, and collaboration with industry and enterprises. The aim of professional development is to help teachers adapt to the rapidly changing educational environment, meet the diverse learning needs of students, and fulfill the mission of cultivating a new generation of engineering technicians and vocational talents. However, the professional development of vocational teachers faces numerous challenges, which not only hinder the personal advancement of teachers but also affect the overall quality and effectiveness of vocational education.

## 2 Current Status and Challenges of Professional Development for Vocational College Teachers

To strengthen the professional development of vocational education teachers in China, a series of policies and measures have been proposed by the Ministry of Education and other departments. For instance, in December 2022, the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council issued the "Opinions on Deepening the Reform of the Modern Vocational Education System Construction" [1]. One of the key work contents is to strengthen the construction of the "double-teacher type" teacher team. It is necessary to build a number of national-level vocational education "double-teacher type" teacher training bases, implement vocational school teacher academic promotion actions, implement vocational school famous teacher (master craftsman) and famous principal training plans, set up flexible employment mechanisms, establish a number of special positions for industrial tutors, and hire corporate engineering and technical personnel, highly skilled talents, management personnel, and craftsmen according to regulations to work in schools through part-time teaching, cooperative research, and project participation.

Under the strong guidance and active promotion of national policies, the professional construction of vocational college teachers has achieved significant results. This has not only provided valuable opportunities for the personal growth of vocational college teachers but also injected strong momentum into the overall development of China's higher vocational education, positively promoting the improvement of the country's overall human resource quality and international competitiveness. However, existing research by Chinese scholars indicates that there are still some issues in the professional growth of vocational teachers.

In terms of the professional development of young teachers in vocational colleges, there are issues such as insufficient professional quality, professional knowledge, and professional ability, unclear professional development goals and weak capabilities, lack of career planning awareness, the training and education system for the integration of industry and education for double-teacher type teachers needs to be improved, and support policies for professional development need to be optimized [2]. From the perspective of the spirit of craftsmanship, scholars believe that the professional development of vocational teachers is trapped by insufficient school-enterprise cooperation, the construction of relevant security systems is not in place, and teachers' professional abilities are insufficient [3]. Some scholars have conducted a questionnaire analysis on the current situation of the professional development of vocational college teachers and found that: teachers have a strong willingness for professional growth, but the overall satisfaction is not high. From the statistical situation of teachers' satisfaction with their current professional development, only 13.7% of teachers are satisfied, and 71.8% of teachers think it is general and basically satisfied, indicating that the satisfaction of teachers' professional development has not reached the expected level and there is still a large room for improvement [4]. Research also shows that teachers face great pressure in professional growth, but the path of professional development is not smooth; the size of the teacher team is continuously expanding, but the proportion of "double-teacher type" teachers is insufficient. On the road to the

professional development of "craftsman type" teachers, research by scholars shows that the current core professional ability of teachers is still weak, the school's security mechanism is still weak, the support of enterprises is still limited, and the macro guidance of the government needs to be strengthened [5]. In response to the professional development of "double-teacher type" teachers, scholars have proposed that the main difficulties are first the unclear positioning and boundaries of teachers' professional development, and the development goals are naturally unclear, lacking a systematic and standardized development plan for the profession; the second is the imperfect training system for teachers' professional development; and finally, the security mechanism for teachers' professional development is imperfect, and the internal driving force for teacher development is insufficient, resulting in teachers' professional quality and ability not being able to meet the requirements of talent training in the new era [6]. In the study of the role expectations and multiple role models of vocational teachers, scholars have indicated that the current vocational teachers have insufficient willingness and ability to practice, the overall scientific research level is low, and there is a lack of initiative in professional development [7]. The case study shows the struggle that individual teachers are going through to get their everyday teaching repertoire more in line with new ideas on competence-based education [8].

Combining the aforementioned analysis, the current state of professional development for vocational college teachers in China can be viewed on three levels: individual, social, and systemic. Firstly, on the individual level, teachers generally express dissatisfaction with their overall professional development. There is a prevalent deficiency in professional knowledge and capabilities, lower levels of research, unclear development goals, and a lack of initiative. Secondly, on the social level, the cultivation of practical abilities urgently needed by vocational teachers is limited by the support from enterprises, and there is a need for increased financial input from the government and schools. Lastly, on the systemic level, vocational teachers face significant pressure for professional growth, but the pathways are not smooth. There is a lack of a comprehensive development motivation system for individual teachers and a scientific evaluation and incentive mechanism. The school's safeguard mechanisms and the government's macro guidance need to be strengthened.

In addition, a search on the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) for articles with the theme "teacher professional development" yielded a total of 7,563 papers. Further searching within these results for the theme "vocational education" yielded 470 results. According to the content of related literature, the research depth on the professional development of vocational college teachers in China is insufficient. Research on teacher professional development needs to delve into the individual teacher, understanding their actual needs, challenges faced, and opportunities for growth. However, current research seldom starts from the perspective of the individual teacher.

### **3 Survey on the Professional Development of Vocational College Teacher**

To accurately grasp the professional development of vocational teachers and provide effective reference for the proposal of professional development pathways for vocational college teachers, a questionnaire survey method was adopted for the research. The survey questionnaire targeted teachers from Qujing Vocational and Technical College, conducted via the Wind Chime System survey questionnaire response. A total of 70 valid questionnaires were collected, and the results of the reliability and validity tests met the requirements.

Teachers have a strong willingness for their own professional growth. However, they are not satisfied with the overall state of their current career development. Survey data indicates that among the teachers at the college, a large proportion are young teachers, with those under 30 years old accounting for 57.14%. 84.29% of teachers have a strong desire for their own professional development, and 58.57% of teachers stated that they will strive to promote their professional development. In terms of teacher development planning, 40% of teachers have a clear plan and are executing it, 48.57% have a plan but have not executed it, and only 11.43% have no plan. Looking at the opportunities for professional development, only 40% of teachers believe that the opportunities provided by the school are sufficient, while 60% believe that the opportunities provided by the school are average and the promotion effect on self-ability improvement is limited.

According to the satisfaction survey of teachers' professional development status, only 11.43% of teachers expressed great satisfaction, while those who think they are basically satisfied and general account for as high as 82.86%, and even 5.71% of teachers expressed dissatisfaction. This data reflects that teachers are not ideally satisfied with their overall professional development, indicating that there is still a considerable room for improvement in the aspect of teacher professional development. When asked about the reasons that hinder their own professional development, the primary reason is the issue of work time and energy, followed by the unclear path of development. Therefore, it is urgent to provide a personal professional development path suitable for vocational teachers.

### **4 Professional Development Pathways for Vocational Teachers**

Starting from the individual teacher, proposing specific development pathways undoubtedly has an important role in the professional development of vocational teachers and is also urgently needed by most vocational teachers at present. According to the growth patterns and characteristics of teachers in vocational colleges, this study divides the professional development of teachers in vocational colleges into four stages: the initial employment period, the junior teacher period, the intermediate teacher period, and the associate senior/senior teacher period.

#### 4.1 Initial Employment Period

Newly employed teachers in vocational colleges mainly refer to teachers who have been working in vocational colleges for less than 2 years. Most of these teachers come from newly graduated students, and a few come from professional personnel in enterprises. New teachers all face the issue of role transformation. To become a qualified teacher, the primary task is to follow the Party's educational guidelines and policies, have a firm political stance, and establish good teaching ethics and style. Based on the "Ten Guidelines for the Professional Behavior of College Teachers in the New Era," firmly establish the original intention of moral education and enhance educational beliefs. New teachers should enhance their internal motivation for professional development and make a good career development plan. On the one hand, they should actively learn educational teaching knowledge and obtain a higher education teacher qualification certificate within the initial employment period. On the other hand, they should improve their own educational teaching ability, learn from experienced teachers, observe and imitate the demonstration courses of famous teachers, and accept detailed evaluation of their classroom teaching by mentors, which can cultivate a correct understanding and recognition of vocational education classroom teaching, allowing them to smoothly transition from the "survival focus stage" to the "student focus stage," implement the teaching philosophy of "student-centered, teacher-guided," select appropriate teaching methods according to teaching content and student learning styles, adhere to practice-oriented, and truly improve teaching effectiveness [2]. In terms of updating professional knowledge, by participating in practical activities such as enterprise internships, they can make up for the lack of technical practical knowledge and become proficient in the professional skills of related fields, thus forming a deep understanding and practical cognition of job tasks.

#### 4.2 Junior Teacher Period

Teachers in the junior teacher period typically refer to educators who have been working for 2 to 5 years and have preliminarily established their own teaching models. At this stage, teachers have developed more mature action strategies in classroom teaching. Their knowledge structure begins to shift from a traditional academic system to one that emphasizes practical application. They have the awareness and initial capability to conduct teaching according to the training needs of technical and skilled talents, considering the characteristics of vocational school students and the teaching environment.

Improvement of teaching skills. Teachers in the early career stage still need to continuously improve their teaching skills.

Participate in teaching skill competitions. Joining such competitions is an important way to enhance teachers' professional standards and teaching abilities. Through these events, teachers have the opportunity to showcase their teaching philosophies, designs, and techniques, while also learning from the excellent practices of others, broadening their horizons, and stimulating innovative thinking. During the competition, teachers can learn from each other, make collective progress, and not

only improve individual teaching quality but also promote the professional growth of the entire educational team.

**Strengthen digital teaching capabilities.** With the rapid development of technology, the field of education is undergoing an unprecedented transformation. Teachers need to continuously improve their skills in digital teaching to adapt to this change and effectively use digital tools and resources to enhance teaching quality and students' learning experiences. Strengthening digital teaching capabilities means that teachers need to become familiar with and master the use of various teaching software and platforms, including online course management systems, interactive whiteboard software, student assessment tools, etc. Through these tools, teachers can manage classrooms more efficiently, create interactive learning environments, and track students' learning progress in real-time.

**Engage in school-based teaching research.** Participation in school-based teaching research activities facilitates mutual learning and experience sharing among teachers, promoting continuous updates and improvements in teaching methods and content. Through school-based teaching research, teachers can better understand teaching philosophies, enhance teaching skills, and carry out effective teaching practices tailored to the school's actual situation and students' needs.

**Improve teaching reflection skills.** In-depth reflection on one's own qualities, growth experiences, and every aspect of teaching activities requires the ability to make wise decisions and be accountable for them. Through such reflection, early-career teachers can guide their educational teaching practices and thereby enhance teaching effectiveness.

**Update of professional knowledge.** Unlike other teachers, the knowledge content required for the professional development of vocational teachers is not academic knowledge but vocational knowledge, which includes both theoretical and practical knowledge. Vocational knowledge is the source of teaching content for vocational education teachers and is a core element of their professionalism [9]. The following are ways to update professional knowledge:

**Actively participate in training for 1+X certificates and guidance for vocational skills competitions.** Teachers in the early career stage should combine their courses and majors to actively engage in training and guidance for students' certificate acquisition and skills competitions. By preparing for competitions with students, teachers can strengthen their professional knowledge and stimulate innovative thinking. During the competition, teachers can also provide guidance on students' deficiencies in professional skills, thereby enhancing the professional skills of both teachers and students.

**Engage in enterprise practice aimed at improving technical knowledge development capabilities.** On the one hand, maintain close contact with relevant enterprises to understand the latest industry trends; on the other hand, participate in enterprise project practices to enhance professional skills.

**Develop into a "dual-teacher type" teacher.** The "Implementation Plan for the Construction and Reform of the 'Dual-teacher Type' Teacher Team in the New Era of Vocational Education" points out that building a high-quality "dual-teacher type" teacher team is a foundational task for accelerating the modernization of vocational

education. The professional development of vocational teachers should closely follow national policies and develop towards becoming a vocational teacher with noble ethics and exquisite skills. The "Basic Standards for 'Dual-teacher Type' Teachers in Vocational Education (Trial)" clarifies the conditions required to become a "dual-teacher type" teacher. Vocational teachers in the early career stage can compare these conditions with their own situation and make up for any deficiencies.

Obtain vocational skill level certificates. Obtaining vocational skill level certificates by vocational teachers is a certification of their professional skill level, which not only helps to enhance the teacher's own professional literacy but also enhances their authority and practical guidance ability in the teaching process.

In-depth academic research. Conducting academic research is one of the functions of college teachers, and on the road to professional development, academic research is also indispensable.

Academic qualification enhancement. Vocational teachers in the early career stage generally have lower academic qualifications and lack experience in academic research. Through the path of academic qualification enhancement, they can not only strengthen their professional knowledge but more importantly, cultivate academic research capabilities.

Academic exchange. Participation in academic exchanges allows one to understand the latest research results and development trends in the field, stimulate research ideas, and promote the improvement of individual research capabilities.

Lead or participate in research projects. Vocational teachers in the early career stage can try to lead or participate in research projects, starting from school-level projects to city-level and then to provincial-level projects. Through project research, teachers can deepen their understanding and cognition of their professional fields. Research results can be published in the form of papers, reports, and seminars, which can promote exchanges and cooperation with other scholars, broaden academic horizons, and lay the foundation for further research projects.

### **4.3 Intermediate Teacher Period**

Teachers in the intermediate career stage typically have 5 to 15 years of work experience, with more than 8 years of teaching experience. These educators have established mature and personalized methods of teaching and educational research, and have achieved certain accomplishments on their professional growth path. Analysis of survey data indicates that teachers with intermediate titles often feel that their work is at a bottleneck, and they experience a strong sense of professional burnout [10]. The negative impact of this professional burnout is related both to the constraints of the external institutional environment and to the teachers' own motivation for professional development. Teachers in this period should focus on self-reflection to find their path for professional development.

**Improvement of Teaching Skills.**

In terms of improving teaching skills, through early accumulation, vocational college teachers in the intermediate stage can focus on creating model classrooms and integrating high-quality teaching resources, such as textbooks, multimedia materials, and online courses, to build a rich library of teaching resources. Additionally, they can take the lead in establishing teaching teams, including new teachers, teaching assistants, and practical training teachers, to jointly participate in course construction, teaching activities, and the compilation of teaching materials. This not only continuously promotes their own professional development but also provides a way to "inherit, help, and lead" for new teachers and those in the early and intermediate stages in terms of teaching skills.

**Updating Professional Knowledge.**

Facing professional burnout, it is particularly important for teachers to establish the concept of lifelong learning. The field of education is constantly advancing, and teachers need to adapt to educational reforms and the application of new technologies through lifelong learning. Vocational college teachers in the intermediate stage can develop personal development plans, including participating in seminars, workshops, and online courses, to learn in a structured way. Moreover, they should also work closely with industries and enterprises, regularly learn from technical masters in the same field from similar institutions and industries, and improve their technical skills in a spiral manner. Through continuous learning and repeated practice, they can cultivate exquisite skills and form their own characteristics and advantages in their professional field.

**In-Depth Academic Research.**

Vocational college teachers in the intermediate stage have strong scientific research capabilities and can lead educational reform projects, promoting verified educational reform results to a broader educational practice. This not only enhances their research capabilities and teaching level but also contributes to educational reform and development. By participating in academic research and educational reform projects, and actively applying for national patents, writing textbooks, works, and publishing papers in combination with technical practice, they can transform research content into teaching achievements and scientific research results, enriching their theoretical knowledge. In addition, vocational college teachers in the intermediate stage should actively cooperate with enterprises to carry out technical problem-solving, project research, and project development, promoting the transformation and implementation of scientific research results, and enhancing teachers' professional practical skills and social service capabilities.

**4.4 Associate Senior/Senior Teacher**

The associate senior/senior career stage can also be called the expert stage. Vocational teachers at this stage usually have more than 15 years of work experience and more



than 12 years of teaching experience. Teachers at this stage have not only accumulated profound knowledge and skills in their professional fields but have also demonstrated excellent abilities in teaching and educational practice. They have preliminarily qualified and strength to become leaders in their professional fields and have gradually developed into influential expert teachers within the school. The professional development of vocational college teachers in the associate senior/senior stage can focus on four aspects: education and teaching, scientific research, social service, and team building.

In terms of education and teaching, teachers can focus on creating high-quality public demonstration courses and national-level quality courses. Creating high-quality public demonstration courses and national-level quality courses is an important way to improve teaching levels, enhance personal teaching reputation, and showcase teaching achievements. In addition, they can write monographs and participate in the editor-in-chief work of provincial and ministerial or national planning textbooks, etc.

In terms of scientific research, one should have the attitude of being brave in exploration, actively practicing, and continuously innovating, leading scientific research projects at the provincial and ministerial level or above, publishing papers in core journals, applying for invention patents, etc. One should also be brave in cross-disciplinary cooperation, cooperate with experts and institutions in different fields, promote interdisciplinary exchange and cooperation, and broaden the vision of research and application. More importantly, pay attention to the transformation and application of research results, and transform research results into teaching cases, patents, products, etc.

The social service of vocational college teachers is an important part of their professional responsibilities, reflecting the teachers' capabilities in practical teaching, applied research, technical services, cultural inheritance, and innovation. Some activities that vocational college teachers can carry out in social services include: (1) technical services. Use their professional knowledge to help enterprises solve technical problems and participate in product research and development and upgrades; (2) training services. Carry out social training for the industry and enterprises to improve the professional skills and vocational qualities of on-the-job personnel, and promote the continuous growth and development of talents; (3) cultural inheritance and innovation. Participate in local cultural research, serve local cultural construction, improve students' comprehensive qualities through educational activities, and promote campus cultural construction; (4) industry-academia-research cooperation. Cooperate with industries and enterprises, form industry-academia-research alliances, build school-enterprise collaborative innovation platforms, carry out cooperative project research, and solve practical problems of enterprises.

Team building refers to the construction of teaching and research teams with expert teachers as the core, aiming to build a team with a reasonable combination of full-time and part-time personnel, school-enterprise linkage, and a rational talent echelon, giving full play to the leading role of expert teachers in teaching, research, and social services, and cultivating teaching schools with individual teacher styles and concepts. At the same time, deeply cooperate with course teaching experts, jointly build a complete teaching theory system around teaching concepts, insights, and

achievements, form and accumulate the theoretical foundation of the school, promote innovation in teaching practice and academic exchange, and enhance the promotion and social influence of teaching achievements. Team building with expert teachers as the core is conducive to driving the formation of a good traditional culture of "inheriting, helping, and leading."

Changes in society and in work practices impose demands on teachers, who are required to engage in continuous learning and development. Teacher learning is key to the quality of teaching, to students' learning, and to school development [11]. In addition to the teachers' own professional development planning and implementation, the social and institutional levels also need to work together to broaden the path of professional development for vocational teachers and smooth the development path. Schools should strengthen cooperation with enterprises, clear the way for vocational teachers to practice in enterprises, and provide policy support; enterprises should train vocational teachers in combination with industry trends, provide real enterprise project practices, and carry out targeted training; institutionally, vocational colleges need to motivate teachers to take the initiative to develop through institutional incentives, provide teachers with an operable development goal, provide the driving force for progress, point out the direction of effort, create a good professional development environment, so that vocational teachers can systematically combine work and learning, and improve their professional level.

## 5 Conclusions

To strengthen the professional development of vocational education teachers in China, the Ministry of Education and other departments have proposed a series of policies and measures, providing valuable opportunities for the personal growth of vocational teachers and injecting strong momentum into the overall development of China's higher vocational education. However, existing research by Chinese scholars indicates that there are still some issues in the professional growth of vocational teachers. This paper points out that there are problems in three aspects of the professional development of vocational college teachers in China. Firstly, at the individual level, teachers are generally not satisfied with their overall professional development, and there are widespread phenomena of insufficient professional knowledge and capabilities, lower levels of scientific research, unclear professional development goals, and lack of initiative. Secondly, at the social level, the cultivation of practical abilities urgently needed by vocational teachers is limited by the support of enterprises, and the financial input from the government and schools also needs to be increased. Finally, at the systemic level, vocational teachers face great pressure in their professional growth, but the path of professional development is not smooth, lacking a comprehensive development motivation system for individual teachers and a scientific evaluation and incentive mechanism. The school's safeguard mechanisms and the government's macro guidance need to be strengthened. In addition, there are many studies on the professional development path of vocational teachers in China, but current research seldom starts from the perspective of individual teachers.

This paper starts from the individual teacher and proposes that the professional development of vocational teachers mainly revolves around improving teaching skills, updating professional knowledge, deepening scientific research, and social services, and goes through four stages: the initial employment period, the junior teacher period, the intermediate teacher period, and the associate senior/senior teacher period. Starting from the individual teacher, this paper provides a reference path for the professional development of vocational teachers, and more importantly, provides development ideas for teachers in the period of confusion and professional burnout, encouraging vocational teachers to develop into expert teachers with noble ethics and exquisite skills. The professional growth of teachers is a continuous process of education, in which the original intention of moral education, good teaching ethics, and the concept of lifelong learning should be throughout.

The limitation of this paper lies in the insufficient breadth of the research. The article points out that there are problems at the individual, social, and systemic levels in the professional development of vocational college teachers, but it does not expand on how to provide assistance for the professional development path of individual vocational teachers in these two aspects. Future research should more broadly study how to provide support for the professional development path of individual vocational teachers at the social and systemic levels.

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