Reflections on Adult Academic Education Based on the Motivation of Higher Vocational Students' Needs for Continuing Education

Yihui YU
Wuhan Railway Vocational College of Technology, Wuhan, Hubei, China
yyh-lzy@foxmail.com

Key word: Higher Vocational Students, Continuing Learning, Motivation, Adult Academic Education

Abstract. Strong internal psychological needs, external pressures of realistic social environment and the demand for sustainable development of individual career make the group of higher vocational students have strong demand for continuing education (preferred adult academic education). Based on this practical problem, this paper analyses the demand motivation of higher vocational students to choose continuing education from four aspects, and discusses the main reason why adult education has become a practical choice for Higher Vocational students. On this basis, from a systematic perspective, this paper analyses adult education and its development in the context of strong demand, and puts forward the development ideas and construction measures of adult education from the perspective of four internal factors and one external environment. In order to continuously improve the attraction of Higher Vocational students, adult (academic) education should focus on standards, quality, paths and methods. Government departments should also strengthen supervision, supervision and support.

Introduction

China's higher vocational education entered a rapid development stage in the late 1990s [1]. According to the statistics of the Ministry of Education, in 2017, there were 2,631 universities (including 265 independent colleges) in China, where the number of undergraduate students enrolled was 4.1075 million, there were 3.8418 million graduates and 16.4863 million students still in school. Higher vocational colleges enroll 35.074 million students, 3.5164 million graduates and 11.4496 million students [2]. In just 20 years, higher vocational education has supported half of higher education and become the main force of the popularization of higher education in China. The large group of higher vocational students is the main beneficiaries of the popularization of higher education in China.

With the development of economy and society, especially under the "new normal" economic development mode, facing a series of new situations and measures, such as transformation and development, state-owned enterprise reform, industrial restructuring, technological upgrading, innovation-driven and so on, the employer's requirements for employees (most typically expressed as academic qualifications) are increasing [3]. This makes higher vocational students feel bigger pressure than ever before. More and more of them hope to achieve self-improvement through continuing education in order to meet the requirements of the workplace and society [4-6].

From a new CEE (Continuing Education Engineering) developed in the United States in the 1930s to the present, the world has attached importance to continuing education for decades [7-10]. It has become an important strategic means of national and social development [11]. Continuing education usually refers to all kinds of education received by people who have been separated from formal education, have participated in work and have adult responsibilities. It is a kind of high-level supplementary education for professional and technical personnel to update, supplement, expand and improve their knowledge. It is an important part of lifelong learning system [12]. In academic education and non-academic education, higher vocational students prefer the former, that is, continuing education with the emphasis on improving academic qualifications.
Motivation Analysis of Higher Vocational Students' Demand for Continuing Education

Many higher vocational students take continue education as their own short-term plan, and its driving force comes from many aspects [13-15].

Survey on the Needs of Higher Vocational Students for Continuing Education

For the purpose of understanding the ideas and plans of higher vocational students' continuing study and future development, the project team conducted a special survey. The respondents included 1103 freshmen, 1072 sophomores and 936 juniors in higher vocational colleges [16,17]. As can be seen from Table 1, 51.1% of the respondents are ready to improve their educational level and broaden their career development path through continuing education. Among the freshmen, sophomores and juniors, 405, 476 and 677 students chose to obtain undergraduate certificates through continuing education, accounting for 36.7%, 44.4% and 72.3% respectively.

Table 1. A Survey of Students' Willingness to Choose Continuing Education.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>A: Number of respondents</th>
<th>B: Number of Choosing Continuing Education</th>
<th>B/A (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>1103</td>
<td>405</td>
<td>36.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>1072</td>
<td>476</td>
<td>44.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>936</td>
<td>677</td>
<td>72.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3111</td>
<td>1558</td>
<td>51.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition, 53% of all the respondents who are preparing for the promotion to a junior college say that they will obtain a postgraduate diploma by participating in part-time postgraduate studies after they have obtained their undergraduate diploma in the future.

These data can reflect the higher vocational students' strong desire for continuing education.

In the survey, it is also found that at this stage, many vocational students also have a very obvious ambivalence. On the one hand, they are clear about their career orientation and know that their advantages lie in having "one skill" or "some skills" and hope to face future job competition and work demand with higher skills. In recent years, there have been continuous reports about Masters and even doctoral students from famous universities at home and abroad choosing to enter higher vocational schools to learn specialized skills after graduation, which also encourages higher vocational students. According to their understanding of the job market, "low education" may become a short board for their future development. This also prompted many of them to choose continuing education.

Motivation of Higher Vocational Students' Demand for Continuing Education

Fig. 1 shows the multiple motivations of Higher Vocational students' demand for continuing education. They mainly come from four aspects.

![Figure 1. Motivation of Higher Vocational Students' Choice of Continuing Education.](image-url)
Originating from Strong Internal Psychological Needs. Along with the rapid development of China's higher vocational education, an increasing number of students choose higher vocational education. However, in the deep heart, higher vocational students (including their parents) are not satisfied with the academic level of higher vocational education. In some vocational colleges, it is not uncommon for students to choose not to enroll, or drop out for taking entrance examination again. For most students, the choice of higher vocational education is entirely based on employment considerations. On the one hand, students hope to find a job and enter society smoothly through three years of study. On the other hand, many people have inferiority complex to their own status. Because the college degree cannot meet their deep need for fame and achievement, it has become their inevitable choice to improve their academic level through continuing education [18].

Feeling the External Pressure of the Real Social Environment. It is not difficult for higher vocational students to find a job after graduation, but the chances of obtaining high-quality jobs are far lower than those of undergraduates, and the quality of employment is not satisfactory. Many enterprises or employing units set the threshold of undergraduate starting point when recruiting employees, which directly excludes vocational college students with professional qualifications; some enterprises with large workload accept a large number of graduates from higher vocational colleges to enter the enterprise's pipeline work, which in fact only replaces some of the posts of migrant workers [19]; some government departments recruit civil servants, affairs. Employees are often excluded from their professional qualifications when they recruit staff.

Some students entering large enterprises, whether salary treatment or career development space, have a considerable gap compared with employees with undergraduate and postgraduate degrees; some positions in enterprises are not open to higher vocational students at all. All kinds of restrictions or barriers in the real social (workplace) environment bring a strong sense of frustration to higher vocational students. The best way to break through the obstacles and open up the career development space is to strive to improve the educational level. The pressure of these realistic social environments is the direct external motivation for higher vocational students to choose continuing education.

Steming from the Strong Demand for Sustainable Career Development. Higher vocational education has been organizing teaching content on the principle of "necessary" and "sufficient", and its main basis is the post needs of enterprises. Although this meets the occupational requirements of employees in a certain position of an enterprise, due to the lack of systematicness of knowledge learnt by students and the weak theoretical knowledge foundation, to a large extent, it limits the ability of students' career migration and the space of career development, and affects the sustainable development of students. The survey shows that most of the vocational students have high expectations for their future career development. They cannot satisfy themselves with a certain position in the enterprise and take a long-term step in the same place. Through continuing education, they are eager to enrich, improve and perfect themselves in terms of professional knowledge, comprehensive ability, synthetic quality and self-cultivation, so as to obtain more career development space and more progress opportunities [20].

Dying to the Pursuit of a Better Life in the Future. As a type of higher education, vocational education has not changed the impression and status of "second-class education" in people's minds, although it supports half of higher education. Higher vocational students are far less recognized than undergraduates after they enter the society, as well as the development opportunities and platforms they can obtain. The survey shows that more than 50% of higher vocational students believe that the professional diploma of higher vocational education will largely restrict the realization of their professional and physiological ideals. They are eager to achieve the desire of increasing economic income, improving living conditions, changing social status and gaining social recognition by upgrading their educational level.

Adult Academic Education as a Practical Choice for Higher Vocational Students

The survey shows that the choice of the way of continuing education for higher vocational students has the characteristics of pragmatism, effectiveness and efficiency.
Continuing education includes academic education and non-academic education. As far as higher vocational students are concerned, they pay more attention to the education of academic qualifications. In view of the limitations of various conditions for students at the junior college level to apply directly for postgraduate examination, the first step for students at this level to upgrade their academic qualifications is to promote their undergraduate education. Current, there are two channels for higher vocational students to upgrade to undergraduate level: one is to improve to undergraduate level in general higher education; the other is to raise to undergraduate level in adult education. Comparatively speaking, they have their own strengths and weaknesses. Upgraded higher education is a general full-time diploma education included in the national unified enrollment plan. After graduation, the first diploma of students is undergraduate certificate. This has great attraction for students.

However, due to the stringent registration conditions, the limited number of enrollment schools and majors, the small number of enrollment places, the small proportion of the enrollment, the difficulty of upgrading, and the students who can benefit from it are very limited. There are various ways and forms for adult education to be promoted to higher education, where adult degree certificates are issued. The undergraduate degree obtained belongs to the second degree. Compared with general higher education, the threshold of adult education is not high, and it is relatively easy to enter and graduate, but the social recognition is relatively low.

The general mentality of higher vocational students is to solve the problem of employment first. On the premise of employment, they gradually improve their educational level by learning while working. Based on this, in consideration of the time cost and employment problems, more students do not regard the upgraded version of general higher education as their first choice, but focus on the upgraded version of adult education with more flexible forms and more choices. Surveys show that more than 50% of students want to get undergraduate degree, through continuing to study part-time graduate students, to open up their own career development space. Participation in adult education upgraded to undergraduate level can not only enable them to balance work and learning, but also help them to achieve the purpose of applying for postgraduate examination by obtaining a series of undergraduate diplomas in adult education. For these previous reasons, adult education upgraded to junior college is therefore favored by higher vocational students.

Reflections on the Development of Adult Education under the Background of Strong Demand

Compared with the vigorous demand of higher vocational students for adult diploma education, the current situation of adult diploma education development is not optimistic. With the expansion of general higher education enrollment, adult education (academic qualifications) has encountered difficulties and falls into a cycle of uneven quality of students - unsatisfactory quality of teaching - low social acceptance. The survey presents that although most vocational students tend to realize their desire to continue their studies through adult education; many people are hesitant about this choice because of the low quality of adult education and the low social acceptance. In the process of putting ideas into action, more students choose to wait and see before making decisions, which reflects the contradictions in students' hearts, and also reflects the embarrassing situation of adult education.

How to get out of the predicament and improve the attraction is a problem that educators should seriously consider.

Standards, Quality, Path and Method: Adult Education Should Strengthen itself

Considering adult education as a system, its development depends on both internal and external factors. Internal factors mainly include four.

Adhering to the Standards of Higher Education and Improving Social Acceptance. It is an indisputable fact that the social acceptance of adult education is not high. The primary way to change this situation is to improve the quality of running a school.

Firstly, adult education for academic qualifications should formulate a complete set of operating and implementing standards in accordance with the standards of higher education in terms of
school-running conditions, education and teaching management, allocation of teaching resources, construction of practical training conditions, construction and allocation of teachers, and management of students, so as to ensure high-quality adult education.

Secondly, it is essential to formulate a talent training program that meets the standards of higher education, standardize teaching, strictly assess, change "wide entry and wide exit" to "wide entry and strict exit", and keep the bottom line of "higher education" of adult education.

Third, adult diploma education should keep pace with the times, closely integrate with the reality of social development and economic development, combine with the needs of sustainable development of learners, set up specialties, develop courses, update teaching contents, improve the practical value of specialties and courses, so as to make students truly learn something [21].

Fourthly, the educators should constantly innovate and reform teaching methods and means, improve students' interest in learning and learning enthusiasm, and improve the quality of students' learning, so as to improve the quality of personnel training.

Making Efforts to Implement the Teaching Reform and Build the Quality Project of Adult Education. Compared with general higher education and higher vocational education, the teaching reform of adult diploma education is relatively weak. It is the best choice for adult education to enhance its reputation and influence to intensify teaching reform and strive to build quality engineering. Firstly, it should be important to strengthen the professional construction and form the professional attraction. According to the needs of national economic development, regional economic development, enterprise development and students' personal development, it is vital to build special majors and win social attention and public praise with professional brands. Secondly, putting forward the curriculum development and forming curriculum attraction are necessary. High-quality education depends on high-quality courses. Nowadays, the country has provided not only policy support, but also a large amount of financial investment in curriculum construction. In this context, considering the needs of specialty construction and curriculum building, actively developing micro-courses and MOOC, focusing on the construction of quality courses, making full efforts to build a shared curriculum resource pool, so as to form a brand effect, are all effective measures to build quality engineering, enhance their own influence and reputation. Thirdly, to introduce the team of famous teachers in adult education is available to form the brand effect of famous teachers. To build a team of famous teachers in adult education, the project of continuous education is able to start from three aspects: cultivating our own teachers' team and forging our own famous teachers; inviting experts and notable scholars from the industry to enrich the team of teachers; and selecting excellent teachers from ordinary colleges and universities into their own teacher resources.

Giving Full Play to the Advantages of Network Technology to Meet Students' Individualized Learning Requirements. The important motivation for higher vocational students to choose adult education is to consider the time cost. They hope to study in their spare time without interrupting their work. Adult education has the characteristics of openness and flexibility in terms of system, learning time, learning forms and assessment methods, which are not available in general higher education and higher vocational education at present. Today, with the progress of network technology and modern information technology, adult education for academic qualifications should give full play to the advantages of mobile terminal, Internet and information resource database, such as convenience, rapidity, large capacity, wide coverage and high efficiency, construct a digital and networked adult education system, break the limitation of time and space, and provide more convenient and more efficient for learners. Flexibility, learning everywhere, learning whenever possible, and ways to meet students' personalized learning needs;

Establishing a Linkage Mechanism between Vocational and Adult Education and Exploring New Enrollment Model. The research states that vocational college students know little about the connotation, form, content, method and requirements of adult education, which shows that adult education has relatively limited influence in the audience, and furthermore, it also reflects the lack of propaganda of adult education itself. In order to get out of the predicament, adult diploma education should not only strengthen the connotation construction and improve the quality of
education and teaching, but also actively reform the enrollment model. The main body of adult education primarily comes from vocational colleges, which has a huge stock of students. According to the state's development plan for Vocational education, from 2019, vocational education will enroll 1 million people on a large scale, and these people will become potential sources of adult education. Therefore, strengthening cooperation with vocational colleges, forming linkage, actively locking in students, are called win-win methods and paths, and yield twice the result with half the effort, as it said.

**Monitoring, Supervision, and Supporting: A Great Environment the Government Should Provide**

The external factors of the system of adult academic education are the environmental factors.

To give full play to the role of adult (academic) education in the construction of lifelong education system for all, it is indispensable to the strong support and effective supervision of the government and education authorities. Above all, government departments should perfect laws and regulations, improve policies and measures to promote the healthy development of adult education; also, establish a quality assurance system for adult education.

Effective evaluation system of educational quality should be set up, effective external quality evaluation mechanism and internal quality diagnosis mechanism be formed, and scientific, systematic, objective and accurate evaluation and diagnosis be made to jointly boost the improvement of school running level and educational quality.

Besides, the competent educational authorities should give full play to the role of supervision and regularly issue it to the society. To publicize the basic situation, achievements, problems and shortcomings of adult education institutions through quality analysis and evaluation reports; and, to establish elimination mechanism, timely elimination of substandard majors, schools or institutions, in order to provide institutional guarantee for high-quality adult education; fifthly, to increase funding. Investment will help to improve the quality of running schools and avoid adult (academic) education degenerating into pure education for the purpose of income.

**Conclusion**

As the main bone of the system in building a learning society and lifelong education environment, adult education is proved to be an irreplaceable part of the national education system. Nowadays, with the rise of academic level and employing standard, adult education has attracted more and more attention from students and graduates of higher vocational colleges. The contradiction between the potential strong demand and the low social recognition inevitably leads to the entanglement of the demander and the embarrassment of the supplier.

To alter this situation, thinking about change of the thought is the first way out. Educators should provide higher quality education, richer teaching methods and means, and more effective ways of enrollment. At the same time, the competent government departments should escort the development of adult education. In short, in the face of a large number of higher vocational students, only to improve the education quality and enhance the gold content of academic credentials so as to raise social acceptance are the reasons and bases for attracting the higher vocational students to make final choices.

**Acknowledgement**

This research was financially supported by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Subject of Hubei Education Department in 2017: Research on the Training of College Students' Executive Ability from the Perspective of Career Development. (Project Number: 17G159)
References


