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Faculty Development in Chinese Higher Vocational Education: Persistent Bottlenecks and Practical Pathways

Jun Ma. Huadong Zang
Suzhou Vocational Institute of Industrial Technology, Suzhou, 215104, China

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Abstract

China's shift toward advanced manufacturing and high-value services has intensified pressure on vocational colleges to deliver practice-oriented instruction, yet teaching faculty quality remains uneven across the sector. This article examines three structural constraints that shape faculty development: inconsistent dual-qualification certification, thin integration of enterprise experience into teaching practice, and evaluation systems that reward research output at the expense of applied instruction. Drawing on policy documents, prior scholarship, and two institutional cases—a tiered mentorship program and a jointly operated industry college—the analysis outlines four areas where institutional reform can make a tangible difference: certification standards that reflect actual competence, structured two-way mobility between colleges and industry, role-specific evaluation criteria, and sustained investment in professional development infrastructure. The cases suggest that models working well in resource-rich Double High-Level institutions need careful adaptation before they transfer to regional colleges with fewer industry linkages.

Keywords

Higher Vocational Education; Faculty Development; Dual-Qualification Teachers; Industry-Education Integration; Teacher Evaluation

Introduction

Vocational education sits at the center of China's human capital strategy. As the economy moves toward advanced manufacturing, digital services, and emerging industries, demand for skilled technical workers has intensified across sectors. The 14th Five-Year Plan for vocational education sets explicit targets for enrollment expansion, program restructuring, and quality improvement. None of these targets will be met without a teaching workforce capable of delivering up-to-date, practice-oriented instruction.

The teaching workforce in higher vocational colleges has long been identified as a

weak link. Researchers have documented gaps in industry experience, uneven pedagogical training, and incentive structures misaligned with vocational education's practical mission (He, 2021; Li, 2021). The second phase of the Double High-Level Plan places faculty development at the core of its evaluation criteria, signaling that institutional performance will increasingly be measured by teacher quality rather than enrollment scale.

This article addresses three questions that cut across policy and practice. What structural obstacles constrain faculty development in Chinese higher vocational colleges? What policy and organizational pathways have shown promise in practice? And how transferable are successful models from leading institutions to colleges with fewer resources? The analysis draws on national policy documents, peer-reviewed scholarship, and two illustrative cases from institutions at different stages of development.

1. Dimensions of Faculty Development

1.1. Core Dimensions

Faculty development extends well beyond initial recruitment and formal qualification. In vocational education, it encompasses several interconnected areas that together determine whether an institution can deliver quality applied instruction.

Staffing quantity and structure form the baseline. Teaching capacity must scale with student enrollment and program offerings, with balanced distributions of age, academic title, and educational background. A workforce concentrated near retirement or over-reliant on graduates from a single institution compromises both quality and long-term sustainability.

Teacher competence sits at the center. Vocational educators need both solid disciplinary knowledge and hands-on practical skills to deliver integrated theory-and-practice instruction. Unlike their counterparts in conventional universities, vocational teachers move between classroom teaching, workshop supervision, and industry-based technical problem-solving. Each setting demands a different set of abilities.

Workforce composition also matters. A healthy vocational teaching force combines full-time faculty with part-time instructors drawn directly from industry. These practitioners bring current technical expertise and industry networks that full-time teachers often lack, and their presence in the classroom gives students a clearer picture of what workplace practice actually looks like.

Organization completes the picture. Structured teaching innovation teams, built around specialty clusters rather than individual disciplines, allow teachers with different backgrounds to bring complementary expertise to curriculum design and practical project development. These teams serve as the organizational unit through which individual development translates into institutional capacity.

1.2. Contemporary Pressures

Three external forces are reshaping what faculty development needs to accomplish. Industrial upgrading moves fastest in fields such as intelligent manufacturing, digital economy, new energy, and smart healthcare, where technical knowledge acquired during initial training can become partially outdated within a few years. Currently, highly skilled workers account for roughly 28% of China's skilled workforce, and the gap continues to widen.

Digital transformation adds another layer of pressure. Online learning platforms, virtual simulation labs, and AI-assisted teaching tools have moved beyond supplementary resources; they are reshaping how instruction is delivered and assessed. Vocational teachers increasingly need to design blended learning experiences and use learning analytics to identify students who need extra support.

Deepening industry-education integration creates the third pressure point. National policy initiatives have pushed vocational colleges to move beyond superficial enterprise partnerships toward deeper collaboration on curricula, training bases, and technical research. For teachers, the boundary between classroom and workplace is becoming increasingly porous.

2. Key Challenges

2.1. Dual-Qualification Teachers: Quantity versus Quality

The dual-qualification teacher is the most recognized marker of vocational education quality in China. National guidelines require at least 50% of full-time vocational teachers to hold dual-qualification status, with the bar at 60% for Double High-Level institutions. On paper, many colleges have reached these thresholds. The headline numbers, however, obscure a more complicated picture.

Recognition standards vary considerably across institutions. In some places, the bar is set low—a short training course, a certificate exam, or even conference attendance can count toward dual-qualification classification. Wang (2022) noted that uneven certification stringency makes national comparisons unreliable and inflates perceived workforce quality.

Certification also does not always translate into better teaching practice. Some teachers with formal vocational qualifications have spent little time in enterprise environments. Their practical knowledge derives from textbooks and short workshops rather than sustained engagement with production processes, which leaves their supervision feeling formulaic and disconnected from workplace realities.

Structural imbalances compound the problem. Shortages are most acute in emerging fields such as artificial intelligence, big data, new energy vehicles, and intelligent manufacturing—precisely where enrollment is expanding fastest. Teachers in longer-established specialties often find it difficult to transition, creating surplus in declining fields and deficit in growing ones.

2.2. Enterprise-Based Practice: Form over Substance

National regulations require vocational college subject teachers to spend at least one month per year, and no less than six months cumulatively every five years, in enterprise or training-base practice. The reasoning is straightforward: teachers cannot effectively prepare students for industry if they themselves are unfamiliar with current production technologies and workflows.

Implementation falls short for several reasons. Time is the most cited barrier. Vocational teachers typically carry heavy teaching loads—often 12 to 16 class hours per week—on top of class adviser duties, administration, research, and social services. The window for enterprise practice gets squeezed into winter and summer breaks, and even then, competing commitments can fragment the experience.

The quality of practice experience varies enormously. In the best cases, teachers are embedded in technical teams and participate in product development or equipment maintenance. More commonly, their role is observational—site visits, factory tours, and informal discussions. Enterprises, concerned about production disruptions and proprietary information, are often reluctant to grant deep access, which reduces practice to a box-ticking exercise.

Weak incentives reinforce these patterns. Practice outcomes are difficult to quantify, and their connection to promotion, performance pay, and title review is tenuous. Teachers who invest time in enterprise practice may see little professional reward, particularly where research publications still dominate evaluation criteria.

2.3. Evaluation and Incentive Misalignment

Faculty evaluation systems shape what teachers value and where they direct their effort. In many Chinese vocational colleges, evaluation criteria still bear the imprint of conventional universities: research publications, grants, and patents carry significant weight in promotion, while teaching quality, practical instruction effectiveness, technical services, and student employability—the core business of vocational education—receive less recognition.

This misalignment produces predictable consequences. Ambitious teachers channel energy toward research at the expense of teaching and practical engagement. Those who genuinely enjoy classroom instruction and workshop supervision may find their career trajectories limited, as the promotion pathway rewards publications above all else. Over time, this dynamic can hollow out the practical strength of the teaching workforce.

The incentive system also struggles to attract and retain high-level talent. Compared with comprehensive universities, vocational colleges offer smaller research budgets, less developed infrastructure, and fewer doctoral supervision opportunities. For top candidates with strong research records, the trade-offs can be unappealing.

3. Pathways for Improvement

3.1. Refined Certification and Tiered Training

If dual-qualification status is to carry real meaning, the certification process needs tightening. Standards should move beyond formal certificates and short courses to emphasize substantive indicators: years of relevant industry experience, demonstrated practical teaching ability, technical service track records, and student outcomes in skills competitions. A tiered system—junior, intermediate, and senior—with regular renewal creates a developmental pathway rather than a one-time designation.

Training programs should be differentiated by career stage. Early-career teachers need intensive induction covering vocational pedagogy, instructional design, and basic practical skills, ideally through a dual-mentorship model. Mid-career teachers benefit from opportunities to deepen subject expertise, develop new curricula, and lead teaching research. Senior teachers and program leaders require support for strategic thinking and major reform projects.

Teaching innovation teams offer an organizational vehicle for this tiered development. Built along specialty cluster lines rather than individual disciplines, these teams bring together teachers with different expertise—theoretical, practical, pedagogical, and industry-connected—to co-design curricula and develop practical projects.

3.2. Bidirectional Faculty-Industry Mobility

Industry-education integration cannot work if it remains only conceptual. It needs institutionalized mechanisms that allow people, knowledge, and resources to flow between colleges and enterprises. The current model—occasional teacher visits and occasional part-time instructor campus visits—does not generate enough contact to drive meaningful change.

Strengthening the outward flow of teachers to enterprises requires making practice both mandatory and meaningful. Enterprise experience should be treated as a hard requirement for title promotion and career advancement, not as a discretionary activity. Programs such as visiting engineer and enterprise specialist schemes, where teachers enter firms with defined technical tasks and work alongside enterprise staff, have shown better outcomes than unfunded, unstructured visits.

Strengthening the inward flow means expanding and professionalizing the part-time instructor workforce. A more systematic approach would include formal recruitment processes, competitive compensation, pedagogical training for industry instructors, and clear expectations for curriculum contribution. When paired with reciprocal appointment arrangements, both sides gain practical value and the relationship becomes sustainable.

3.3. Classified Evaluation and Targeted Incentives

Evaluation reform must begin with classification. A single set of criteria applied

uniformly cannot do justice to the diversity of roles within a vocational college. Classroom instructors, research-focused faculty, and practical training specialists each need different benchmarks.

For teaching-focused teachers, primary indicators should be instructional quality, student learning outcomes, pedagogical innovation, and curriculum contributions. For research-service-oriented teachers, the emphasis shifts toward technological innovation, industry-university collaboration, and measurable social service impacts. For practice-instruction teachers, practical teaching effectiveness, skills competition coaching, and employment quality carry the most weight.

Title review processes need corresponding reform. Technical service achievements, teaching reform outcomes, and skills competition results should all count meaningfully toward promotion. Green channels should be available for teachers with long frontline teaching records and consistently strong student evaluations. For experienced enterprise specialists recruited into teaching, direct title recognition based on industry experience can substantially improve recruitment outcomes.

Performance-based pay systems should reflect these differentiated roles. compensation should be tied to position responsibilities and demonstrated performance, with clear tilt toward frontline teaching and high-demand specialties.

3.4. Institutional Infrastructure for Professional Growth

Teacher development cannot depend on individual initiative alone; it requires institutional infrastructure. Well-functioning faculty development centers serve as coordination hubs, bringing together training programs, teaching consultation services, educational research support, and professional development resources.

Individual development portfolios—tracking each teacher's training history, teaching evaluations, research outputs, and industry engagement—enable personalized guidance and long-term career planning. Applied research and technical service platforms, such as technology innovation centers and master craftsman studios built around regional industrial needs, give teachers spaces to engage in applied R&D and problem-solving for local enterprises.

Digital capacity building deserves attention in its own right. Many vocational teachers have not yet fully integrated digital tools into their teaching, and the digital divide among staff can be wide. Targeted training programs on AI-assisted instruction, virtual simulation platforms, and digital assessment tools help close this gap.

4. Evidence from Practice: Two Cases

4.1. Tiered Mentorship for Early-Career Teachers

In vocational colleges with a rapidly growing faculty, early-career teachers can represent a substantial share of the workforce. How well these teachers develop in

their first few years shapes the institution's long-term capacity. One Double High-Level institution in eastern China has addressed this challenge through a structured mentorship program, locally referred to as the Blue-Blue Project.

Each new teacher is paired with three mentors: one for pedagogy and classroom management, one for disciplinary and curriculum development, and one for practical skill development and industry connections. The three-mentor structure reflects the reality that early-career development in vocational education spans multiple dimensions. Mentors receive formal recognition, and their mentoring work counts toward performance evaluation. Mentees are assessed annually on teaching improvement, practical skill acquisition, and curriculum contribution.

After several years, the institution has recorded measurable gains. Young teachers have won multiple national teaching competition awards, and student satisfaction scores for newer faculty have risen. Three factors underpin the model's success: clearly defined objectives with structured evaluation criteria, multi-mentor coverage bridging theory and practice, and the integration of mentor performance into institutional appraisal.

4.2. Industry College Co-Construction

A second case involves a vocational college in southern China that partnered with a leading technology enterprise to establish a jointly operated industry college. The partnership goes well beyond the typical donation-of-equipment or guest-lecture model. Instead, the college and enterprise co-manage specialty programs, co-develop curricula, co-build training facilities, and co-evaluate student outcomes.

At the faculty level, the partnership operates through a dual-program-director system, with one director appointed by the college and another by the enterprise. Full-time teachers from the college spend regular periods at the enterprise's research and development facilities, participating in real projects. Enterprise technicians and engineers, in turn, teach specialized courses and supervise practical training on campus.

The outcomes speak for themselves. The proportion of dual-qualification teachers in the relevant specialty programs has risen above 85%, well above the national average. College faculty working through the industry college now resolve several dozen technical problems for the enterprise each year, generating both service revenue and practical teaching material. Student employment quality has also improved, with more graduates taking technical roles in the partner enterprise and related companies.

The model's strength lies in deep binding—both institutionally and financially—between college and enterprise. Rather than relying on goodwill or intermittent collaboration, the partnership is built on shared investment, shared decision-making, and shared benefits. For colleges considering similar partnerships, the key lesson is that superficial agreements produce superficial results; genuine

co-construction requires commitment on both sides and patience to build working relationships over time.

5. Conclusion

Faculty development is a long-term, systemic undertaking that shapes vocational education's overall trajectory. The analysis points to three interrelated bottlenecks that need simultaneous attention: the uneven quality of dual-qualification certification, limited depth of enterprise-based practice, and misaligned evaluation incentives. None can be resolved in isolation—reform in one area stalls without corresponding changes in the others.

The four pathways outlined—refined certification and tiered training, bidirectional faculty-industry mobility, classified evaluation and targeted incentives, and strengthened institutional infrastructure—together offer a coherent framework for action. The two institutional cases demonstrate that these pathways are not merely theoretical; they have been implemented, with encouraging results, in colleges at different levels of resource endowment.

Transferability is not automatic, however. Models that thrive in well-resourced Double High-Level institutions with strong industry partnerships may need adaptive redesign for regional colleges with fewer connections, smaller budgets, and less experienced administrative teams. Local context—the structure of the regional economy, the availability of partner enterprises, the history of the institution—shapes what is feasible. Successful adaptation typically starts with one or two priority areas, builds evidence of impact, and then expands incrementally.

For policymakers, the implication is that standards and guidelines are necessary but insufficient. What matters equally is whether institutions have the resources, flexibility, and incentives to implement them meaningfully. For institutional leaders, the challenge is one of sequencing—deciding where to invest first, how to build internal momentum, and how to sustain reform through leadership transitions and budget cycles. When these conditions align, the teaching workforce becomes not just a policy priority but a genuine engine of quality improvement across the sector.

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