

THE IMPACT OF CULTURAL AND SOCIAL CAPITAL ON EMPLOYABILITY DEVELOPMENT AMONG CHINESE VOCATIONAL COLLEGE GRADUATES

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Abstract: At present, China has positioned vocational education as an important component of its strategy for economic development and the cultivation of skilled professionals. However, differences in employability development among higher vocational college graduates have attracted increasing academic attention, particularly regarding employment opportunities, career development, and the recognition of vocational competencies. This study argues that employability outcomes cannot be fully explained by individual skills and educational attainment alone. Drawing on capital theory, this study examines how the acquisition, recognition, and transformation of cultural capital and social capital influence the employability development of vocational college graduates in China. This study first reviews existing theoretical perspectives on employability and highlights that, compared with traditional human capital theory, capital theory provides a broader analytical framework by considering the influence of social resources, institutional recognition, and contextual factors. Based on this perspective, this study analyzes the mechanisms through which cultural capital and social capital contribute to employability development. Although vocational graduates generally possess practical skills and professional experience, differences in cultural capital acquisition and recognition may affect their ability to demonstrate professional advantages in employment contexts. Meanwhile, access to social capital resources, especially professional networks and industry connections, plays an important role in facilitating the transformation of individual competencies into employment opportunities. Building on the above analysis, this study proposes a workshop-based intervention program designed to help students accumulate bridging social capital, enhance their ability to recognize and articulate their cultural capital, and facilitate the effective conversion of both types of capital into stable and quality employment outcomes. This study demonstrates that improving the employability of higher vocational college graduates in China requires moving beyond a narrow focus on skills training alone. Achieving equitable employment outcomes necessitates enhancing the social recognition of vocational education, improving recognition of vocational education in recruitment and job-seeking, broadening graduates' access to industry resources and professional networks, and establishing an supportive environment that promotes broader recognition and effective conversion of various forms of capital into employment competitiveness and opportunities.

Keywords: Employability; Vocational education; Cultural capital; Social capital

1 INTRODUCTION

In recent years, China has made vocational education a core strategy for promoting industrial upgrading, economic transformation, and skilled talent development. Policies explicitly equate vocational with general education and charge it with supporting modern industrial systems [1]. However, despite strong policy support, vocational graduates still face low pay, limited promotion, and long-term employment disadvantages, experiencing different employment outcomes compared with general university graduates [2]. This highlights a key challenge in China's vocational education reform: the state emphasizes skill value, yet the labor market and society still prioritize academic credentials [3].

For enterprises, an overemphasis on academic credentials leads to skill mismatch and technical labor shortages. For vocational colleges, poor graduate employment further weakens institutional reputation and resource acquisition [3]. For students and families, employability differences hinders social mobility and influences differences in career development opportunities [4].

At the macro level, the degree-oriented social environment and degree-oriented market structure are the important influencing factors of employability differences [5]. In this context, college degrees often detach from actual skills and become direct proxies for individual ability, a trend reinforced by the global rise of the knowledge economy and educational competition. At the meso level, employers commonly use degrees as screening criteria, setting degree thresholds in recruitment [6]. Resource allocation among institutions, depth of school-enterprise cooperation, and family support also contribute to unequal employment opportunities [4].

Therefore, this paper argues that employability differences among Chinese vocational college graduates is not merely a matter of skills or degrees. Instead, it stems from differences in access and conversion opportunities in different groups' opportunities to access, use, and convert various forms of capital within a qualification-oriented employment environment. Based on this understanding, this paper first discusses the concept of employability and theories of employability from a capital perspective, with a focus on how cultural and social capital affect vocational graduates' employability. Finally, it designs an intervention to develop social capital and reflects on the school-to-work transition.

2 EMPLOYABILITY AND A CAPITAL-BASED PERSPECTIVE

Employability has no single definition, it is an evolving and evolving concept [7]. Traditional human capital theory equates it with knowledge and skills accumulated through education and training, assuming educational investment directly improves employment outcomes [8]. From this view, employability is a personal attribute gained through learning and skill development [9]. However, more scholars question this equation of employability with skill accumulation. While acknowledging the importance of skills and learning, they argue this view overly trusts that labor markets recognize and reward individual capabilities based on ability [9]. In contrast, the resource-relational perspective holds that employability depends not only on personal resources but also on one's ability to access and mobilize resources within specific social contexts [10].

However, the resource-relational perspective does not fully explain how differences in resource access across social groups are reproduced. Therefore, this study adopts a capital theory perspective, which focuses more on social structures and institutional factors in resource access, social recognition, and opportunity conversion. It argues that employability depends not only on how many resources individuals have, but also on whether those resources are socially recognized and ultimately converted into job opportunities [9]. For Chinese vocational college graduates, even with strong practical skills and vocational knowledge, they may still struggle to obtain desirable jobs due to differences in credential recognition, varying levels of social recognition of vocational education, and lack of professional networks [3]. Thus, capital theory offers a more comprehensive explanation of the mechanisms behind employability differences among Chinese vocational graduates [9].

3 CULTURAL CAPITAL AND EMPLOYABILITY DIFFERENCES

Cultural capital refers to knowledge, educational credentials, behaviors, communication styles, and overall competencies that are valued within specific social contexts [11]. From the perspective of capital theory, differences in employability stem not simply from individual capabilities, but also from variations in opportunities to acquire cultural capital, receive social recognition, and effectively transform capital resources into employment advantages.

3.1 Unequal Access to Cultural Capital

Traditional employability discourse mostly assumes education systems provide students with similar foundations with job-related skills. In reality, cultural capital varies across individuals and groups and is closely tied to family background and social background [9]. From social reproduction theory, education systems are not fully neutral but instead influenced by existing social contexts [12]. Middle-class students more easily access quality educational resources and career opportunities, while students from different socioeconomic backgrounds face challenges from both financial limitations and information barriers [3]. For many vocational students, differences in educational resources and social differences have already limited their development before they enter the labor market [13]. Thus, even with vocational education, these students may not obtain the same opportunities as advantaged groups. Employability gaps are not merely generated in the labor market but are continually shaped and reinforced throughout education.

Of course, structural constraints do not fully determine employment outcomes. Recent vocational education reforms have strongly promoted school-enterprise cooperation and work-study integration, creating new opportunities for students to gain industry knowledge and practical experience [14]. This suggests that while cultural capital acquisition is shaped by macro-social environments, individual agency and institutional support can still alter employability trajectories.

3.2 Recognition and Conversion of Cultural Capital

The value of cultural capital ultimately depends on market recognition [11]. Human capital theory suggests firms reward employees based on ability and output. In reality, firms still prioritize academic credentials over actual professional competence, making it difficult for vocational graduates' practical skills to be effectively recognized. Consequently, employer hiring often reinforces existing evaluation patterns rather than objectively assessing individual ability [12]. In China, a bachelor's degree has long been symbolized as proof of outstanding ability and academic success, receiving greater recognition and returns than a vocational degree. Vocational students often devalue themselves and attribute employment difficulties solely to personal inadequacy, overlooking institutional factors and social evaluation systems [3]. This influence of social perceptions further influences the recognition of vocational education and subtly contributes to employability differences [11].

More importantly, cultural capital conversion typically requires social capital support. Vocational graduates' skills, experience, and certifications do not automatically generate job opportunities; they need social capital channels, such as mentor referrals, school-enterprise platforms, and industry networks, to be seen and recognized by employers [9]. Thus, employability depends not only on how much capital one possesses, but also on one's ability to effectively convert between different forms of capital.

4 SOCIAL CAPITAL AND EMPLOYABILITY DIFFERENCES

If cultural capital determines an individual's workplace value, social capital determines the opportunity to demonstrate that value. Social capital arises from interpersonal relationships and includes job information, networks, and position resources. Differences in access to social capital resources may influence graduates' ability to obtain employment information, connect with professional communities, and transform individual competencies into career opportunities [12].

4.1 Social Capital and the Reproduction of Inequality

Social capital is often seen as a key resource for enhancing employability, yet its variations in access may influence career development. Most vocational students come from rural backgrounds and have highly homogeneous social circles. Their networks of family and friends provide emotional support but lack access to quality industry resources. In contrast, privileged students can obtain internships or inside hiring information through family connections. Thus, while social capital aids employment, it also continuously influences differences in opportunity access [9]. That said, social capital is not the sole determinant of employment outcomes. Some vocational graduates proactively expand their networks through internships, mentorship programs, and industry events, moving beyond their original circles to access new resources [12]. However, opportunities to build such connections are vary across individuals and groups, and individual effort ultimately is influenced by broader social and institutional environments [3].

4.2 Weak Ties, Bridging Social Capital, and Sustainable Employability

Granovetter argues that weak ties—acquaintances and work-related contacts—often bring more information and job opportunities than strong ties like family and close friends [15]. For vocational graduates, expanding weak ties helps expand existing networks and access more industry resources and opportunities [16]. However, weak ties are not without limitations. Against the backdrop of China's relationship-oriented social contexts, strong ties remain an important source of job opportunities. Particularly in small and medium-sized enterprises and local labor markets, kinship ties often provide more direct employment support [4]. Thus, weak ties are not inherently superior to strong ties; both may play different roles in different employment contexts. For vocational graduates, the key is not simply increasing the number of weak ties but effectively integrating both strong and weak ties according to career development needs [16].

Bridging social capital is particularly critical, as it helps individuals connect with networks and resources outside their existing circles [17]. Networks built through hands-on training, industry exchanges, and mentorship can help vocational graduates not only secure initial employment but also support long-term career development [16]. However, employment outcomes are influenced not only by individual social capital but also by the broader employment environment and recognition of vocational competencies. Therefore, improving the employability of vocational graduates requires both individual-level capital development and supportive institutional environments that enhance the recognition and application of vocational skills and experiences [3].

5 INTERVENTION DESIGN: ENHANCING BRIDGING SOCIAL CAPITAL AMONG VOCATIONAL GRADUATES

Based on the above analysis, this workshop focuses on expanding bridging social capital and promoting capital visualization and conversion. Participants include 50 final-year vocational graduates from various majors, 10 corporate representatives, and one outstanding alumnus. The workshop will be held in person over two days, using on-campus facilities and basic teaching materials, with a follow-up online community for ongoing support.

5.1 Workshop Structure and Activities

The workshop follows a two-day progressive design, moving from internal awareness to external networking and finally to actionable planning. Day 1 targets self-reflection and peer-level weak ties. Participants begin by mapping their personal networks to identify homogeneity (Activity 1), followed by a brief theoretical introduction to social capital (Activity 2). Structured cross-major rotations then allow low-risk practice of weak-tie building (Activity 3), with informal lunch extending this interaction. The afternoon shifts to job market translation: participants critically analyse real job advertisements (Activity 4) and apply the STAR framework to convert experiential knowledge into demonstrable competencies (Activity 5). A final reflection consolidates daily takeaways.

Day 2 extends weak-tie building to industry professionals. Students first learn practical communication strategies for engaging with corporate representatives (Activity 6), then participate in speed-networking rotations with multiple practitioners (Activity 7), followed by an informal lunch for continued dialogue. An alumnus sharing session provides real-world context and lessons from actual job-search journeys (Activity 8). The workshop concludes with participants developing a 6-month personal capital-development plan (Activity 9) and committing to next steps through peer sharing and a follow-up WeChat group (Activity 10).

The total contact time is approximately 11.5 hours, balancing conceptual input with hands-on exercises in a carefully scaffolded sequence, see Figure 1.

Time	Activity	Duration	Content
Day 1 morning: Awareness & Understanding			
9:00-9:30	Activity 1: Reflecting on network limitations	30min	Map personal network (core: family/close friends; middle: classmates/teachers/former colleagues; outer: acquaintances). Recognize homogeneity and build motivation for change.
9:30-10:30	Activity 2: Theory: Power of social capital	60min	Teach weak ties and bridging capital: why networks matter and how to build them effectively.
10:30-10:45	Break	15min	
10:45-12:00	Activity 3: Building peer weak tie	75min	Groups of 5; rotate every 10 min. Build initial weak ties across different majors.
12:00-13:30	Lunch	90min	Encourage continued conversation with new lunch companions.
Day 1 afternoon: Job postings & Self-presentation			
13:30-15:00	Activity 4: Critical analysis of job postings	90min	Analyze real job ads together. Discuss degree thresholds; identify roles that truly need skills.
15:00-15:15	Break	15min	
15:15-16:30	Activity 5: Capital visualization: Making skills visible	75min	Use STAR framework to turn practical experience into competency evidence. (Distinct from traditional resume tips)
16:30-17:00	Day 1 Reflection	30min	Record insights, questions, and new connections.
Day 2 morning: Building weak ties with industry			
9:00-10:30	Activity 6: How to communicate & Connect with industry professionals	90min	Learn specific skills: initiating career conversations, writing follow-up emails.
10:30-10:45	Break	15min	
10:45-12:00	Activity 7: Building weak ties with corporate representatives	75min	Groups of 5 students+1 corporate rep; rotate every 10min. Ensure each student talks with multiple reps.
12:00-13:30	Lunch	90min	Feel free to talk with deskmates and corporate reps.
Day 2 afternoon: Role models & Action plan			
13:30-14:30	Activity 8: Outstanding alumnus sharing	60min	Alumnus shares real job-seeking journey: how they found work, who helped, mistakes made.
14:30-14:45	Break	15min	
14:45-16:00	Activity 9: Capital development plan	75min	Create 6-month personal plan: how to increase cultural capital, expand social capital, promote capital conversion.
16:00-16:45	Closing & Commitment	45min	Share plan highlights; create WeChat group for follow-up; commit to next steps.

Figure 1 Two-day Workshop Structure: Sequence of Activities, Duration, and Core Content Focus

5.2 Theoretical Justification of Program Activities

Activity 1: Reflecting on network characteristics

Students map their personal networks to identify homogeneity in social circles. Responds to 4.1: social capital concentrated in homogeneous groups fails to bring quality information [9]. Visualization is the first step toward behavioral change.

Activity 2: Theoretical learning

Plain-language instruction on weak ties and bridging social capital. Responds to 4.2: weak ties connect different circles and bring non-redundant information [15], providing cognitive foundation for subsequent practice.

Activity 3: Building peer weak ties

Value of weak ties lies in connecting different social circles [15]. Rotational peer activities help students practice weak-tie building in low-risk settings, expanding existing networks [16], while building confidence and experience for later interactions with corporate representatives.

Activity 4: Critical analysis of job postings

Responds to 3.2 on capital conversion. Helps students identify differences in evaluation mechanisms and find directions truly suited to them, shifting from self-doubt to competency matching.

Activity 5: Capital visualization

Uses STAR method to establish an “I have capital” mindset. Students learn to convert experiences (internships, part-time work) into competency evidence [18]. Example contrast: “Completed equipment repair” VS “Independently diagnosed and repaired production line faults, reducing downtime by 30%, recognized by training supervisor”.

Activity 6: How to communicate and build connections with industry professionals

Teaches and practices specific skills for initiating professional conversations and writing follow-up emails, including self-introduction, questioning techniques, and relationship maintenance. Responds to 4.2: weak ties alone do not generate value; students need skills to actively maintain and convert them [16]. Prepares students for Activity 7 and reduces social anxiety when interacting with corporate representatives.

Activity 7: Building weak ties with corporate representatives

Responds to 4.2: creates broader opportunities for students with fewer networking resources to build bridging capital [17]. Rotational formats maximize weak tie quantity and reduce social anxiety [3].

Activity 8: Outstanding alumnus sharing

Alumnus shares real job-seeking experiences, mistakes, and lessons. Uses role-model effects to raise career expectations and self-efficacy [4]. Sharing mistakes—not just successes—reduces anxiety and builds realistic expectations [3].

Activity 9: Capital development plan

Six-month plan for enhancing cultural capital, social capital, and conversion goals, with an online community for regular check-ins and progress reports. Responds to the core argument: employability depends on continuous capital acquisition, recognition, and conversion [9]. Action plans translate concepts into behavior; online community provides peer support and accountability [13].

5.3 Program Summary

This program is designed around three core processes—capital acquisition, capital recognition, and capital conversion—to address employability differences. Activities 1–3 help participants identify limitations in their existing social networks and build bridging social capital. Activities 4–5 focus on enhancing the visualization and recognition of personal cultural capital, helping students fully demonstrate their abilities to employers. Activities 6–9 promote the conversion of both cultural and social capital into job opportunities through network expansion, role modeling, and long-term action planning. Rather than focusing solely on skill improvement, this program adopts a more comprehensive approach by integrating individual competency development with social resource expansion and institutional support for vocational graduates' career development.

6 CONCLUSION

This study argues that differences in employability among graduates of vocational colleges in China cannot be fully explained by individual skills or educational qualifications alone. Although vocational education reforms have expanded opportunities for skills development and received continuous policy support, variations in employment outcomes among graduates remain an important research topic. This study suggests that employability development is influenced by not only individual capabilities but also broader social and contextual factors. From the perspective of capital theory, employability development in a qualification-oriented employment environment is closely related to the processes through which individuals acquire, receive recognition for, and transform cultural capital and social capital.

This study demonstrates that the impact of cultural capital on employability is not limited to the knowledge and professional competencies students acquire during schooling, but depends more critically on whether such capital receives social recognition from employers. While vocational college graduates possess practical skills and industry-relevant practical experience, they frequently encounter differences in credential recognition, and their professional qualifications often fail to gain full recognition. Meanwhile, social capital also plays a crucial role in accessing employment opportunities. Most vocational graduates have different levels of access to industry networks, career guidance resources, and industry connection channels, which significantly constrains their ability to translate professional competencies into quality employment outcomes. It is evident that employability is not merely an individual achievement, but a relational process embedded in the broader social environment.

In response to the above issues, this study proposes a workshop-based intervention program designed to help students build bridging social capital while enhancing their capacity to recognize, articulate, and convert their existing cultural capital. The program integrates multiple modules—networking, critical reflection, corporate engagement, and long-term career planning—aimed at creating more equitable conditions for vocational graduates to access employment resources. Although such interventions cannot fundamentally address differences in employment development, they can enhance graduates' ability to adapt to the existing labor market environment and strengthen their employment confidence and subjective initiative in career development.

In summary, improving the employability of vocational college graduates in China cannot focus solely on strengthening students' professional skills. Achieving sustainable improvement also requires enhancing the social recognition of vocational education, improving recognition of vocational education in recruitment, broadening equitable channels for students to access industry resources, and establishing an supportive environment that promotes broader recognition and smooth conversion of various forms of capital into employment advantages. Future research could further explore the interactive effects of policy reforms, corporate recruitment practices, and school-enterprise collaboration mechanisms, and analyze their impact on the long-term employment quality of vocational graduates across different regions and industry contexts.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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