

Reflections on Optimizing China's Career Education System

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Abstract: In recent years, the concept of “career education” has gained increasing prominence within China’s educational framework, particularly in higher education, where it functions as a pivotal element in talent cultivation and as a crucial mechanism for promoting high-quality, comprehensive employment among graduates. A relatively comprehensive career education system has begun to take shape. Against the backdrop of the new college entrance examination reforms, career education has gradually extended from higher education into primary and secondary education. It has become more widely implemented at these foundational levels and has achieved certain successes. However, discrepancies in evaluation systems between higher and foundational education remain. In primary and secondary education, the focus is directed towards improving “admission rates”, with career education emphasizing subject selection and guidance for college applications. In contrast, higher education prioritizes enhancing “employment rates”, with career education concentrating on career awareness, vocational choices, and skills training. This results in a lack of coherence in career education across different educational stages. Additionally, issues persist in higher education, including repetitive teaching content, uniform teaching methods, a lack of targeted instructional design, and a disconnect between career education and major-specific education. To address these challenges, this paper proposes the development of an integrated career education system-spanning primary, secondary, and higher education, alongside a precise and coordinated career education framework. Strengthening the coordinated promotion of career education from multiple levels, including national, societal, and institutional, will further optimize

China’s career education system. This will reinforce the significance of career education, driving high-quality, full employment for graduates and promoting the high-quality development of China’s educational landscape.

Keywords: Career Education; System; Optimization; High-Quality; Development

1. Introduction

In 1971, Dr. Marland, then U.S. Commissioner of Education, formally introduced the concept of “career education”. He linked traditional employment guidance, which focused solely on knowledge, skills, and career pursuits, with education on personal values and career perspectives, thus expanding employment guidance into lifelong career guidance^[1]. In China, “career education” has evolved through various conceptual phases, including vocational guidance, employment guidance, career development guidance, student development guidance, and career planning education^[2]. In 2007, the Ministry of Education issued a *Notice on the Teaching Requirements for Courses Related to Career Development and Employment Guidance for University Students*. In compliance with this directive, most universities now offer courses on “University Career Planning and Employment Guidance”, and have established “Career Counseling Centers” to provide both broad “career education” and personalized “career counseling” for students. Notably, in recent years, the Chinese government has introduced several employment-promoting policies, offering normative guidance and institutional support for the further development of “career education” in universities. This has yielded positive results, with university students becoming more aware of and capable in career planning. However, from the perspective of the completeness and systematization of “career education”, there remain many gaps in China’s approach, which

lacks continuity, specificity, and coordination, and thus requires further refinement.

2. Current Issues in China's Career Education

2.1 Lack of Continuity

Career education is meant to be a lifelong, continuous process that spans all stages of an individual's educational journey. However, in China's current educational evaluation system, there is a significant lack of continuity due to the disconnection between basic education and higher education. This separation leads to fragmented career education^[3]. In primary and secondary education, the "college entrance examination" acts as the dominant guiding force. As a result, both students and schools focus primarily on improving exam scores and school rankings, with little attention given to holistic career development. The long-standing emphasis on "exam scores" and "university admission rates" has overshadowed the need for comprehensive career education at the foundational level. Under recent reforms, most provinces have adopted a "major + university" model for college applications, requiring students to make informed decisions about their future careers and areas of study. This shift has forced schools to implement career education, yet many schools misunderstand its purpose. They often view it solely as a tool to help students select subjects or fill out college applications, ignoring the broader goal of fostering well-rounded development. This lack of clear objectives severely limits the effectiveness of career education at the primary and secondary levels^[4]. The rise of private college application consulting services highlights the gaps in school-based career education. Furthermore, personalized career education should be built on a foundation of students' previous academic achievements, psychological insights, and social context. However, most schools lack the necessary awareness and infrastructure to maintain comprehensive psychological and career development records for students^[3]. This deficiency becomes evident when students enter higher education. Despite universities offering career-related courses, these programs often start from scratch, disconnected from the career guidance (if any) received during earlier education. Consequently, career education at

the university level becomes isolated and lacks integration with prior learning experiences, creating a fragmented and incomplete system.

2.2 Lack of Specificity

In China's current career education system, universities are the primary providers of career guidance. However, the courses offered are predominantly theoretical and overly similar, with little consideration given to the diverse needs of students from different academic levels and disciplines. These courses typically cover broad topics like employment trends, career awareness, self-reflection, occupational insights, and career planning. "In theory, students from different educational backgrounds, academic programs, and institutional levels require distinct approaches to career education, and universities should tailor their programs to address these unique needs" ^[5]. Unfortunately, the existing career education system suffers from a significant disconnect between theoretical learning and practice. The content offered tends to be narrow in scope^[6], focusing more on general principles than on the specific needs of students. Despite the variation in students' academic levels and professional aspirations, universities often deliver the same content across programs, failing to provide the differentiated guidance necessary for diverse student populations. This one-size-fits-all approach leads to a clear mismatch between the career education provided and the actual needs of the students. Moreover, the lack of practical, experiential learning is a major shortcoming in the current system. Students gain most of their knowledge from classroom-based instruction, with limited opportunities to engage in hands-on, real-world experiences that are essential for effective career preparation. As a result, many students find themselves ill-prepared for the realities of job seeking, lacking essential skills such as interviewing techniques and effective job-search strategies.

2.3 Lack of Coordination

Career education is a comprehensive and systematic endeavor that requires deep integration with major-specific education to achieve its full potential. The primary goal of career education is to enhance students' awareness and ability in career planning, while

major-specific education focuses on equipping students with in-depth knowledge and skills in their chosen fields, fostering professional competence and laying a solid foundation for future careers. Although both share the common objective of preparing students for their professional futures, the pathways to achieving these goals are not effectively aligned. When career education emphasizes the importance of career planning without embedding major-specific content, it becomes an abstract concept, disconnected from practical application. Conversely, if major-specific education is not integrated with career education, students may develop a limited understanding of their discipline's professional landscape and future career opportunities. This disconnect leaves students adrift, uncertain about their future directions. In practice, career education courses in universities are often managed by employment services or specific departments, while major-specific education is provided by academic faculties. This division leads to fragmented management, with each operating in isolation. Consequently, there is a lack of coherence in the educational content, and in some cases, contradictory approaches may emerge, severely undermining the effectiveness of career education.

3. Ways to Optimize China's Career Education System

3.1 Establishing an Integrated Career Education System Across Primary, Secondary, and Higher Education

The primary challenge in constructing an effective career education system is to solve the problem of fragmentation and inadequate resource integration^[3]. To address this, national education authorities should establish a unified National Career Education Guidance Committee. This body would oversee two subdivisions: one focused on higher education and the other on basic education, ensuring that resources are integrated and a cohesive development plan is formulated for career education from primary school through university. This would serve as a fundamental blueprint for implementing career education across different educational stages. Local governments, following national guidelines, should create region-specific career education

strategies that align with local contexts and requirements. Career education should become a mandatory part of the basic education curriculum. Schools at all levels should establish individual career portfolios for students, which would follow them throughout their academic journey. Upon high school graduation, these portfolios would be incorporated into the students' comprehensive records and transferred to universities, forming a critical basis for further career guidance. To further improve career education, national and regional expert committees should be created, consisting of educators from higher education institutions and industry professionals. These experts would actively engage in career education initiatives for primary and secondary schools. Programs such as "University Professors in Secondary Schools" and "Industry Experts in Secondary Schools" should be broadly promoted to enhance students' understanding of various industries and career options, fostering better career awareness and planning from an early age. Central to this effort is the development of a robust career education curriculum that serves as the foundation for integrating career education across all educational levels. Career education is a complex undertaking that requires the involvement of the society as a whole, with the government playing a crucial role in driving and supporting its development. By elevating career education to the level of national strategy, the government can establish a comprehensive support system that guides schools in effectively implementing career education through top-down initiatives^[7].

3.2 Establishing a Targeted Career Education System

Career planning education for university students is a comprehensive, goal-oriented, and dynamic system designed to meet diverse and individualized needs^[8]. The "targeted" aspect of career education lies in the effective categorization of students based on their academic levels, disciplines, and year of study. By centering the guidance around students and tailoring it to their specific categories, this approach not only enhances their competitiveness, decision-making, and adaptability, but also broadens the reach and precision of employment services^[9]. From an academic perspective, the distinct needs of

students at various educational levels—graduate, undergraduate, and vocational—should be carefully considered, with appropriate adjustments made to the content and methods of instruction. A one-size-fits-all approach should not be applied to students across these different levels. Career education must also be closely aligned with students' fields of study. The high rate of students switching majors in some disciplines can be attributed to their lack of a clear understanding of the future prospects of their chosen fields and the uncertainty that accompanies it. Therefore, it is crucial to consider the specific development trajectories and employment opportunities of different disciplines, guiding students to align their career goals with their field of study and plan their career paths more effectively. Furthermore, career education should reflect the characteristics of each year level. For first-year students, it is essential to provide guidance on adjusting to university life and career orientation based on their high school experience, helping them understand the career paths associated with their chosen major. In the second year, the focus should shift to helping students deepen their self-awareness and knowledge of various career options, enabling them to establish career goals and action plans based on their interests, passions, and values. By the third year, it becomes important to evaluate and provide feedback on their action plans, ensuring timely adjustments to guarantee successful execution. Finally, in the fourth year, career education should target specific career paths, such as employment, entrepreneurship, further studies, or studying abroad, bringing together resources to offer group guidance and personalized counseling, fully supporting students in achieving their career goals. In addition, targeted career education must be responsive to students' needs, addressing the gap in practical skills by enhancing the practical aspects of career education. A "theory + practice" model should be adopted, combining theoretical instruction with hands-on career education, including training in the specific skills required by industries, enterprises, and positions relevant to students' disciplines, with the ultimate goal of improving their employability.

3.3 Establishing a Coordinated Career

Education System

Career education is an educational practice aimed at fostering the comprehensive, coordinated, and sustainable development of individuals throughout their careers. This nature necessitates that the entire process of career education be built on the foundation of multi-element collaboration^[10]. From a macro-social perspective, career education serves as an essential basis for the scientific and effective allocation of human resources across society, requiring the involvement of various societal stakeholders in the career planning efforts for university students^[11]. A tripartite system of "government, enterprises, and universities" should be established to drive career education for students. Universities, as the central pillar, should cultivate a team of specialized career education instructors and establish career planning departments that connect different societal stakeholders^[12]. In terms of content, topics such as employment trends, industry dynamics, and corporate needs should be incorporated into university career education courses, aligning career education closely with the realities of economic and social development. As for the format, enterprises should be actively integrated into the career education system, with initiatives like inviting corporate HR representatives to participate in classroom sessions, hosting career lectures, alumni salons, and workplace experience activities. These initiatives help spark students' career interests and enhance their adaptability to the professional world. From the micro-university level, internal coordination should be strengthened to achieve a deep integration between career education and major-specific education. Within career education, a major-specific education monitoring system centered on enhancing students' sense of professional identity should be established, laying the groundwork for helping students define their career paths and make informed career choices^[13]. Based on the overall university career education syllabus, specialized career education groups should be formed within each academic discipline, involving counselors, full-time faculty, and graduate supervisors in a collaborative approach to course planning. By incorporating discipline-specific characteristics into the curriculum, career education can be tailored to reflect the distinct nature of each field of study.

An online platform for sharing teaching resources related to both “professional and career education” should also be established, enabling the sharing of course materials. Throughout key academic stages such as classroom instruction, internships, and graduation projects, career education content should be embedded to highlight the future development prospects of the discipline, shifts in labor market demands, and the student’s personal career trajectory. In this way, career education becomes seamlessly integrated into discipline-based education, playing a subtle yet powerful role in shaping students’ growth. Ultimately, a comprehensive, universal, systematic, and specialized career education system will be established.

4. Conclusion

Through an analysis of the current status of career education in China, this paper posits that career education is a systematic endeavor. At the national level, the government should strengthen top-level planning and provide institutional guarantees for the development of career education. As for the primary entities responsible for its implementation, educational institutions play the most pivotal role. In the process of delivering career education, they should focus on constructing a continuous and targeted system that addresses the varying needs of students at different educational stages. The aim should be to help learners not only improve their academic performance and professional skills but also gain a deeper understanding of the connections between self-awareness, academics, disciplines, and career paths, thereby enabling them to make informed and rational decisions about their future careers.

In China’s educational evaluation system, primary and secondary schools predominantly rely on “admission rates” as the primary, and often sole, criterion for assessment. In contrast, universities prioritize “employment rates” as a key indicator of the success of their talent development programs. Given that the objectives of career education align more closely with university evaluation criteria, higher education institutions place significantly greater emphasis on career education compared to primary and secondary schools. To resolve the lack of specificity and coordination in university career education,

this paper proposes a student-centered approach. By tailoring career education to academic disciplines, grade levels, and the individual needs of students, universities can more effectively support high-quality, comprehensive employment outcomes. Continuous, targeted career education serves as a viable method for universities to deliver “precision” career education. Furthermore, career education, as an essential means of enhancing students’ professional awareness, must remain closely integrated with academic education. It is crucial to capitalize on the advantages of both, ensuring shared resources between career and academic education, and fostering a complementary relationship. This will ultimately lead to the full integration of career education into the entire academic and talent development process.

This paper, based on the issues facing China’s career education system, offers several recommendations on further optimizing the system, which are of practical significance. However, the study also presents some limitations. Primarily adopting a macro perspective, it proposes suggestions for improving the national career education system but lacks in-depth research at the micro level. For instance, it falls short in addressing the development of career education systems at different stages of primary and secondary education, as well as in providing specific measures to enhance university career education. These areas require further exploration and refinement by the academic community.

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