

Paradigm Reconstruction and Value Shift in Vocational Education Evaluation

Yuan Fang

School of Foreign Languages and International Trade, Guangdong Polytechnic of Science and Trade, Guangzhou, Guangdong, China

Abstract: The reform of vocational education evaluation stands at a critical stage of abandoning the "five-only" evaluation criteria and establishing new standards. Adopting Kuhn's paradigm theory as an analytical framework, this study examines the internal evolutionary logic of vocational education evaluation and identifies an ongoing paradigm shift from instrumental rationality to value rationality. The old paradigm of vocational education evaluation, typically characterized by standardized tests and result-oriented assessment, tends to fall into the predicament of alienation induced by instrumental rationality. To construct the new paradigm, this study upholds value rationality centered on students' lifelong well-being and advance systematic reform of all evaluation elements. Paradigm reconstruction and value shift are in fact two sides of the same process: the former focuses on institutional reform of the evaluation system, whereas the latter emphasizes the reshaping of the value foundation of evaluation practices. Only by accomplishing this dual transformation through a dynamic balance of breaking down the old and building up the new can vocational education evaluation give full play to its inherent value in advancing the development of an education powerhouse.

Keywords: vocational education evaluation; paradigm reconstruction; value shift; instrumental rationality; type-specific education

1. Introduction

Educational evaluation reform is a crucial component in education reform. In 2020, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council issued the Overall Plan for Deepening the Reform of Education Evaluation in the New Era, which explicitly calls for reversing the unscientific orientation of educational evaluation and resolutely eliminating the stubborn malady of overemphasizing scores, enrollment rates, diplomas, papers, and academic titles. Currently, abandoning the "five-only" evaluation criteria has become a nationwide consensus, and the focus of educational evaluation reform is shifting from breaking outdated rules to establishing new standards, entering a new stage that combines breaking and establishing with an emphasis on the latter. However, vocational education evaluation has long been profoundly influenced by the general education paradigm. It has relied on standardized tests, written examinations, and result-oriented evaluation methods, and has failed to fully embody the distinctive type attributes of industry-education integration, school-enterprise collaboration, and work-study combination [1]. This study takes Kuhn's paradigm theory as an analytical tool to investigate vocational education evaluation under the epistemological framework of philosophy of science, so as to fully comprehend the orientation of China's reform on vocational education evaluation.

2. Limitations of the Traditional Paradigm

Over the years, China's vocational education evaluation has largely followed the evaluation framework of general education, constructing an evaluation model centered on instrumental rationality. In the initial stages of vocational education development, this model did play an important role in standardizing school-running behaviors. However, as vocational education has been officially defined as a type-specific education, its inherent limitations and inadaptability have become increasingly prominent.

First, there is a path dependence in the evaluation philosophy. Vocational education evaluation has failed to fully manifest its essential attributes as a type-specific education, showing a strong reliance on the general education model in terms of evaluation objectives, content, and methods. Vocational education evaluation tends to emphasize the assessment of general academic knowledge while relatively neglecting the comprehensive assessment of skills training, professional literacy, and practical ability, resulting in a disconnect between its vocational and nurturing attributes. Second, the evaluation prioritizes proving over improvement. Traditional evaluation is often used as an administrative management instrument, primarily aimed at appraising, ranking, or grading school-running performance—what Stufflebeam referred to as "to prove" [2]. In order to cope with evaluation assessments, schools often end up drowning in paperwork, and the developmental function

that evaluation ought to fulfill in teaching optimization and student development cannot be fully unleashed. The evaluation itself may even degenerate into a rigid ranking contest centered on quantitative indicators. Third, the subjects of evaluation are overly unitary. The government and its educational administrative departments occupy a dominant position in evaluation, while the participation of multiple stakeholders such as industries, enterprises, social organizations, teachers, students, and parents is notably insufficient [3]. Evaluation standards are mostly formulated based on administrative instructions, failing to fully incorporate cutting-edge technical standards of various industries, job competency requirements, and learners' personalized growth needs. Fourth, evaluation methods focus more on quantifiable hard indicators, such as employment rates, vocational certificate acquisition rates, and the total value of equipment assets, while paying insufficient attention to more in-depth effectiveness indicators like students' career well-being, career development competence, skill transferability, and the depth of industry-education integration.

3. Core characteristics of the New Paradigm

The paradigm reconstruction of vocational education evaluation in the new era aims to construct a multi-dimensional evaluation system that can guide the high-quality development of vocational education, return to the essence of talent cultivation, and highlight its type-specific characteristics. This new paradigm is characterized by several prominent core characteristics.

3.1 From Instrumental Rationality to Value Rationality

The new paradigm transcends the instrumental rationality that reduces evaluation to a tool for proving performance, instead emphasizing intrinsic educational value. Its core lies in the shift from serving external management accountability to promoting students' lifelong well-being and sustainable career development [4]. This means that evaluation needs to focus on students' holistic growth as individuals and value their ability to gain dignity and experience well-being in creative labor. The ultimate purpose of evaluation is not to prove the superiority or inferiority of schools or students, but to diagnose problems, improve processes, and tap their potential, achieving what Stufflebeam advocated as "to improve." This shift requires the evaluation system to be deeply integrated into the educational process and become an organic part of mutual reinforcement of teaching and learning.

3.2 From Passive Adaptation to Forward-Looking Guidance

Traditional evaluation often lags behind industrial changes, playing the role of a "follower". The new paradigm emphasizes that evaluation should possess strategic foresight and take the lead in industrial upgrading. The evaluation system needs to keenly identify the new requirements for talent competency structures brought by new technologies, new industries, and new business formats. By defining forward-looking skill standards and development paradigms, it can reversibly drive the innovation of specialty settings, curriculum content, and teaching methods [5]. In this way, evaluation becomes a key hub for aligning the vocational education system with economic and social development, driving the entire education system to carry out comprehensive systemic reform from the inside out and realize coordinated resonance between vocational education and socioeconomic development.

3.3 From Administrative Dominance to Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration

A collaborative evaluation framework with the joint participation of government, schools, teachers, students, industries, enterprises, and social organizations constitutes the structural characteristic of the new paradigm. This is not simply about de-administration, but embodies the dialectical unity of de-administration and professionalization. The role of the government shifts from a direct evaluation executor to a rule-maker, provider of necessary conditions, and supervisor. Industries and enterprises, leveraging their mastery of professional standards and technological frontiers, engage deeply in the development of specialty evaluation and skill certification standards. Schools gain greater professional autonomy, while third-party professional organizations, relying on their independence and expertise, assume more evaluation functions. Each stakeholder has clear rights and responsibilities with well-defined boundaries, building evaluation consensus through communication and negotiation, and constructing a new type of collaborative co-governance.

3.4 From Separating Skills and Competence to Cultivating Comprehensive Competence

The content system of evaluation needs to break the dichotomy that emphasizes operational skills over comprehensive competencies. Drawing on valuable experience from international assessment programs such as PISA-VET, a "two-dimensional, three-pillar" framework should be constructed, giving equal weight to general employability skills and field-specific professional competencies [6]. While focusing on the proficiency in professional skills, it also places high value on cross-disciplinary competencies such as literacy, critical thinking, complex problem solving, collaboration and

communication, career resilience, and innovative awareness. This means that evaluation needs to run through the entire cycle from pre-service training to in-service development, integrating occupation-specific expertise with transferable foundational capabilities, thereby achieving a multi-dimensional evaluation capturing the spiral progression of students' comprehensive competence and professional skills.

3.5 From Separation of Vocational and General Education to Type-Based Integration

As a type-specific education, vocational education must ensure that its evaluation adheres to its own characteristics, breaks free from the path dependence on general education evaluation, and establishes evaluation standards centered on skill levels and practical competencies. At the same time, the evaluation system needs to build channels for equivalence and mutual recognition between vocational education and general education. This requires balancing "baseline evaluation" for all students with "top-line evaluation" that encourages excellence. Furthermore, through the National Qualifications Framework and credit banks, a mechanism for the recognition, accumulation, and transfer of learning outcomes should be constructed, enabling learning outcomes from vocational and general education to be rigorously compared and converted on an equivalent basis, effectively broadening students' pathways to growth and success.

4. Multi-Dimensional Presentation of the Value Shift

Evaluation aims at better improvement and needs to focus on students' well-being, adaptability, and development potential. It needs to reflect the inherent attributes of industry–education integration and craftsmanship spirit, and simultaneously requires multi-stakeholder collaboration. Figure 1 presents a multi-dimensional depiction of the value shift in vocational education.

4.1 From Social Benefits to Student-Centeredness

The meta-value of evaluation lies in serving students' lifelong development and career well-being. Overemphasis on indicators such as initial employment rate and starting salary should be weakened, shifting focus instead to students' professional identity, job adaptability, career development potential, cross-domain transferability, and the sense of meaning and well-being derived from labor [7]. It guides students to transform from being "vocational persons" who merely master survival skills into "life persons" who pursue life value and dignity through creative work.

4.2 From Hierarchical Subordination to Distinctive Features

Vocational education is a type of education on an equal footing with general education, and its evaluation must abandon the value presupposition that treats it as an appendage to general education or a lower tier of education. The value of evaluation lies in highlighting the irreplaceable categorical attributes of vocational education, such as the solid promotion of school–enterprise cooperation, industry–education integration, and work–study combination. Evaluation standards should deeply align with professional standards, industry norms, and authentic enterprise production processes, taking the construction of "dual-qualified" teaching staff, the effectiveness of training bases, technological innovation and transformation, and contributions to serving industry as key value indicators. Through evaluation, vocational education reinforces its unique mission and social value in cultivating great national artisans and skilled craftsmen.

4.3 From Outcome Judgment to Process Improvement

The value of evaluation is not only embodied in the final grade or conclusion issued but also in the entire process of promoting the continuous optimization of education and teaching [8]. Evaluation should serve as an important foundation for schools to construct internal quality assurance systems and carry out teaching diagnosis and improvement. Relying on evaluation feedback, schools can accurately identify bottlenecks encountered in specialty construction, curriculum implementation, teacher development, as well as internship and practical training, thereby stimulating their endogenous motivation for reform. For teachers, evaluation should focus on their ability to translate enterprise practical experience into teaching, their contributions to technological innovation, and their effectiveness in providing personalized guidance to students, rather than merely valuing the quantitative output of papers and research projects. The evaluation process itself should become a value-creating process where all stakeholders engage in dialogue, reflection, negotiation, and joint growth.

4.4 From Administrative Governance to Collaborative Empowerment

The functional value of evaluation should shift from a top-down administrative governance tool into a key lever for activating the vitality of multiple stakeholders and optimizing the educational governance system. By constructing a multi-stakeholder collaborative evaluation mechanism, it can help foster a closer community with a shared future among the government, schools, industries, and enterprises. Evaluation results should serve as important references for resource

allocation, policy adjustment, and project approval, guiding educational resources toward areas with significant outcomes in industry-education integration and high compatibility in talent cultivation. At the same time, through data disclosure and the application of results, evaluation invites social supervision, improves the social transparency and credibility of vocational education, and thus creates a policy environment and social atmosphere conducive to the growth of technical and skilled talents.

4.5 From Auxiliary Means to Innovation Engine

The rapid development of digital technology is redefining the overall landscape of educational evaluation. The successive emergence of new technological means such as intelligent evaluation platforms, big data dynamic monitoring, and virtual simulation assessment has made it possible to realize educational evaluation with greater coverage, higher personalization, and deeper contextual immersion, expanding both the extension and connotation of evaluation to an unprecedented extent. The involvement of technological means makes the evaluation process more scientific and objective, and through data insights, it can uncover the patterns of educational operation and the interrelationships among complex elements that traditional evaluation methods struggle to detect [9]. Of course, the application of technology must guard against data constraints and ethical risks, ensuring that technology always serves the fundamental goal of talent cultivation.

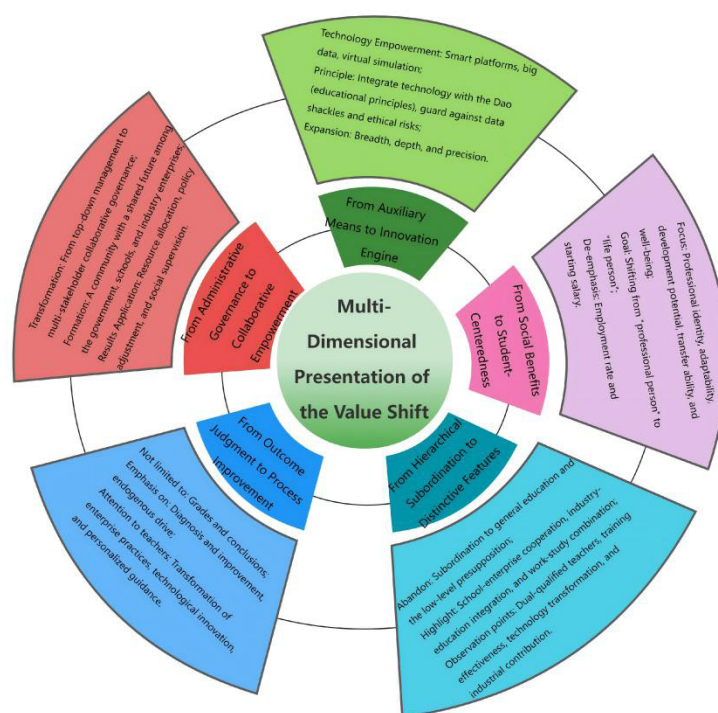


Figure 1. Multi-dimensional presentation of the value shift in vocational education evaluation

5. Systematic Pathways for Practical Implementation

Translating paradigm concepts into normalized mechanisms requires coordinated efforts across four dimensions—standard reconstruction, collaborative governance, technology empowerment, and results application—to form a practicable reform framework.

5.1 Consolidating the Evaluation Orientation of Type-Specific Education Through Standard Reconstruction

At the national level, a specific guideline for the quality evaluation of vocational education should be issued, compressing scale-centered and quantitative indicators. Meanwhile, value-added indices that reflect the extent of students' lifelong development, enterprises' teaching investment that reflects the depth of industry-education integration, and technological service contributions should be adopted as core observation indicators. Leveraging industry vocational education teaching

guidance committees, competency assessment standards aligned with new technologies and new business formats can be formulated for each specialty category. Simultaneously, a regular system of industrial research and standard iteration should be built, ensuring evaluation stays ahead of specialty construction. Furthermore, the legislative process for the National Qualifications Framework should be accelerated, clarifying at the institutional level the rules for equivalent mutual recognition between advanced skill certificates and corresponding academic degrees. This will provide a legal benchmark for the integration of vocational and general education, and fundamentally break the ingrained mindset that regards vocational education as a subordinate educational tier.

5.2 Establishing a Multi-Stakeholder Co-Governance Structure with Clear Rights and Responsibilities

Local education administrative departments need to step back from the role of directly participating in scoring and ranking, and shift toward rule formulation, guarantee provision and meta-evaluation, guiding schools to build an evidence-based closed-loop system for internal quality diagnosis and continuous improvement. It is essential to strengthen the professional authority of industry organizations. In key processes such as skill spot checks and modern apprenticeship assessments, the evaluation weight of enterprise experts should be elevated to the same level as that of on-campus teachers. In fields where conditions permit, these experts can be granted independent scoring authority. Procedures for joint consultation and arbitration of evaluation standards should be established, so that when the evaluated entities have reasonable objections to the results, a third-party re-evaluation can be initiated through appeal and review mechanisms, thus safeguarding the fairness and credibility of evaluation.

5.3 Utilizing Digital Technology to Achieve Accompanying Evaluation and Value-Added Analysis

At the school level, data from systems such as academic management, internship training, and employment tracking can be integrated to build a school-based intelligent evaluation platform. In strict compliance with data ethics and personal privacy protection, the platform automatically collects data on teamwork, skill demonstrations, and on-the-job practice to generate dynamic competency profiles of students. Schools should prioritize the development of value-added evaluation algorithms and learning diagnosis tools to measure the net improvement of students' core competencies. Such outcomes should serve as the main basis for assessing school-running effectiveness rather than merely focusing on terminal academic scores. Diagnostic results should be directly fed back to front-line teachers to identify skill deficiencies of the class and individual growth bottlenecks, providing empirical support for targeted tutoring and refined curriculum adjustment.

5.4 Strengthening the Developmental Application and Social Incentives of Evaluation Results

Student evaluation should evolve from a single score-based assessment to a comprehensive development report that incorporates career competency maps, typical portfolio records, and self-reflective narratives, providing credible credentials for students' lifelong learning and career mobility. School evaluation outcomes should be rigidly linked to performance-based funding, eligibility for key project approval, and teachers' professional title evaluation and appointment, thereby forming a resource allocation pattern centered on talent cultivation effectiveness. Policies ensuring equal treatment of technical and skilled talents in civil service recruitment, public institution employment, and state-owned enterprise position and salary grading should be implemented on a larger scale. Combined with the systematic dissemination of exemplary stories of skilled talents pursuing personal development and serving the country via mainstream media, the optimized evaluation orientation can ultimately translate into tangible enhancements in the social dignity and career prospects of technical and skilled talents.

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