

Research on an Integrated General–Professional Curriculum System in Chinese Higher Vocational Colleges under the Belt and Road Initiative

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ABSTRACT

Integrating general education (GE) and professional education (PE) is essential for higher vocational colleges (HVCs) in China to cultivate globally competent applied talent and to align with national reforms and the demands of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). However, achieving seamless integration remains a significant challenge. This study examines the key barriers to developing an integrated curriculum system within the BRI context, such as inadequate internationalization of course content, insufficient resources and faculty expertise, and misalignment with practical needs. It then proposes targeted pathways for HVCs, including optimizing curriculum structures to blend knowledge domains, strengthening industry-education partnerships for enhanced practical skills, and fostering international collaboration. Implementing these strategies will equip students with interdisciplinary expertise, cross-cultural capabilities, and an innovative mindset necessary to contribute effectively to BRI projects and global sustainable development.

Keywords: *Integration of general and professional education, Curriculum system, Higher vocational education, Belt and Road Initiative.*

1. INTRODUCTION

With the advancement of the Belt and Road Initiative and the implementation of the “Vocational Education Going Global” policy, the internationalization of higher vocational education has become a vital component of China’s national strategy. As primary institutions for cultivating technical and skilled personnel, vocational colleges bear significant responsibilities in serving national strategies and supporting the socioeconomic development of countries along the Belt and Road routes. However, the internationalization of vocational education is not merely a process of educational export; more importantly, it represents an innovation in curriculum systems, teaching models, and talent development mechanisms. In this context, developing globally competitive technical and skilled professionals through an integrated curriculum system combining general and professional competencies is a critical challenge for higher vocational colleges.

The curriculum system integrating general and professional education emphasizes the organic fusion of liberal arts and professional studies, aiming to cultivate students’ well-rounded qualities and professional competencies. This concept is particularly crucial in the internationalization of vocational higher education. On one hand, internationalization requires students to possess cross-cultural communication skills, a global perspective, and innovative capabilities—attributes fostered by general education. On the other hand, the core objective of vocational higher education is to cultivate technical and skilled talent, which necessitates the deepening of professional education. Therefore, how to construct an integrated curriculum system within an international context and achieve the synergistic development of general and professional education remains a central question in the internationalization reform of vocational colleges.

However, the development of a general-professional integrated curriculum system in higher vocational colleges still faces numerous challenges

during the process of internationalization. For instance, course content is misaligned with global demands and lacks international elements; curriculum design inadequately addresses students' individualized needs and career development; and teaching methodologies and evaluation systems do not meet international standards. These issues not only compromise the quality of international vocational education but also constrain the global competitiveness of technical and skilled professionals.

Under these circumstances, this paper explores innovative approaches and practical pathways for general-professional integrated curricula in the international education of higher vocational colleges, drawing upon the Belt and Road Initiative and the "Vocational Education Going Global" policy. It aims to offer theoretical support and practical references for advancing the internationalization of higher vocational education.

2. DEFINITIONS AND SCOPE OF BASIC CONCEPTS

2.1 The Concept and Connotation of the Integration of General and Professional Education (GPI)

The integration of general and professional education refers to an educational model that combines general education with professional education. Its core lies in delivering professional education upon a foundation of general education, with the aim of holistically enhancing students' comprehensive qualities and professional competencies. This integration represents not only an innovation in educational philosophy but also a crucial direction in educational practice. It seeks to cultivate talent with broad perspectives and profound expertise by aligning the resources and objectives of both general and professional education.

The goal of this integration is to develop students' comprehensive qualities and professional abilities. Through general education, students acquire interdisciplinary knowledge and modes of thinking, while professional education enables in-depth learning within specific fields. This equips students with both a broad vision and solid professional skills. In terms of implementation, the integration requires adjustments across multiple dimensions, such as curriculum design, teaching methodologies, and resource allocation. Examples

include offering interdisciplinary courses, strengthening the connection between general and specialized curricula, and incorporating innovative pedagogical approaches. Furthermore, interconnected learning spaces serve as vital support for integration. By creating open learning environments, interaction and collaboration among students and faculty are promoted. Within these environments, the integration emphasizes the free flow of information and resource sharing. Virtual learning spaces, enabled by technology, integrate and share learning resources, thereby providing students with more flexible and efficient learning experiences.

The integration not only helps students gain extensive knowledge and comprehensive qualities through general education but also enables them to deepen their professional knowledge and skills through professional education. This prepares them with greater adaptability and innovative capability for future career development. Moreover, it bridges the traditional divide between general and professional education. By integrating resources and optimizing curriculum structures, it offers students a more holistic and enriched educational experience, driving innovation in educational models. Such reform not only helps cultivate globally competitive interdisciplinary talent but also provides essential support for advancing educational modernization and building high-quality education systems.

2.2 The Concept and Connotation of Curriculum Systems

Etymologically, the term “课程” (kèchéng) has different interpretations in Chinese and Western contexts. In China, “课” (kè) refers to teaching subjects, while “程” (chéng) denotes progress or level; thus, “课程” signifies the arrangement of teaching subjects and their progression. In English, “curriculum” originates from the Latin word “currere,” meaning “racecourse,” primarily referring to the course of study. Synthesizing these views, the essence of curriculum encompasses the arrangement of teaching content and its progression, involving aspects such as the knowledge system, content scope, sequence, and the design of teaching methods and techniques.

A curriculum system represents the division of labor and coordination among different courses. It includes the composition, structure, objectives, tasks, and interrelationships of courses. Its scientific design is based on the disciplinary

knowledge system and students' competencies, as reflected in the proportional relationships among public foundation courses, occupation-oriented foundation courses, occupational skill courses, and occupational extension courses. It also emphasizes the integrity of educational objectives, course structure and function, and curriculum implementation. Moreover, a curriculum system is an integrated whole composed of interrelated courses. This interrelatedness manifests in the inherent connections among courses concerning the cultivation of knowledge, abilities, and competencies. During its development, attention must focus on curriculum integration features, including holism, interdisciplinarity, and practicality, which encompass integrating disciplines, connecting knowledge with social life, and aligning teaching and learning approaches. Furthermore, building a curriculum system also requires consideration of curriculum institutional mechanisms, including the value principles and norms governing activities like curriculum planning, development, implementation, management, evaluation, and school-based teaching research. A curriculum system characterized by the integration of general and professional education emphasizes the organic unity of professional education and general education, aiming to cultivate students' comprehensive qualities and professional competencies.

The current curriculum system lacks sufficient internationalization. First, course content is disconnected from the practical needs of countries along the Belt and Road. For instance, many colleges prioritize domestic market demands, neglecting in-depth research on the economic, cultural, and legal contexts of these nations. This gap impedes the cultivation of internationally competent talent. Second, courses lack modules on multicultural education and international regulations, hindering the development of students' global perspectives and cross-cultural communication skills.

Under the Belt and Road Initiative, the development of a general-professional integrated curriculum system in higher vocational colleges faces multiple challenges. These issues are primarily reflected in curriculum design, internationalization level, resource support, quality assurance, and practical application. The following analysis outlines these problems in light of relevant literature.

3. INTEGRATION OF GENERAL AND PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION FOR INTERNATIONAL COMPETITIVENESS AND PRACTICAL SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

3.1 National Policy Imperatives: Driving Integration of General and Professional Education and Internationalization in Talent Cultivation

Chinese national policy over the past two decades has consistently emphasized the cultivation of well-rounded, innovative talent with strong moral grounding and professional competence. This policy direction has crystallized into two critical, interlinked demands on higher vocational education (HVE): deepening the integration of general and professional education, and accelerating internationalization. Understanding the specific requirements and practical implications of these policy directives is crucial for institutions, particularly Sino-foreign cooperative programs.

Since 1999, the Chinese government has consistently prioritized quality-oriented education, emphasizing the cultivation of high-quality, innovative talent with strong moral character and professional competence. In 2014, the State Council highlighted the importance of integrating professional ethics and humanistic literacy into vocational education, while the Ministry of Education further promoted the integration of general and professional education in 2015. The 2016 national 13th Five-Year Plan Outline formally defined the modern university system as incorporating both general and professional education, and in 2017, the State Council called for exploring talent cultivation methods that combine these two approaches. The 2018 National Education Congress underscored the importance of vocational education reform, setting the stage for the 2019 National Implementation Plan for Vocational Education Reform, which provided a roadmap for advancing vocational education in the new era.

Entering 2020, China's vocational education entered a new phase of high-quality development, driven by a series of policy initiatives. The Vocational Education Quality Enhancement Action Plan (2020–2023) emphasized promoting the integration of vocational and general education,

building a modern vocational education system with vertical articulation and horizontal integration. In 2021, the Opinions on Promoting the High-Quality Development of Modern Vocational Education further stressed deepening industry-education integration, aligning vocational education with industrial needs, and advancing its internationalization, particularly through collaboration with Belt and Road countries. By 2022, the Opinions on Deepening the Reform of the Modern Vocational Education System called for the establishment of high-level vocational schools and majors, fostering connections between vocational education, general education, and continuing education, and constructing a lifelong learning system for all citizens. These policies collectively mark a significant shift toward a more integrated, industry-aligned, and globally oriented vocational education system in China.

Regarding “Integration of General and Professional Education”: The state requires vocational colleges to organically combine general education with professional education, focus on cultivating students’ humanistic literacy, scientific literacy, and professional competence, and build a comprehensive cultivation system for moral, intellectual, physical, aesthetic, and labor education. Specifically, vocational colleges should optimize curricula by integrating ideological and political education, humanistic literacy, innovation, and entrepreneurship education into the professional curriculum system, achieving a seamless unity of knowledge impartation and skill development. Simultaneously, they must promote the deep integration of information technology with education and teaching, develop high-quality digital course resources, and enhance the quality and efficiency of education and teaching.

Regarding “Internationalization of Higher Vocational Education”: The state encourages vocational colleges to actively participate in international exchanges and cooperation, promoting the “going global” of vocational education standards, curricula, faculty, and teaching materials. In 2022, the 14th Five-Year Plan for International Cooperation and Exchange in Vocational Education explicitly called for building internationally influential vocational education brands, supporting joint programs between vocational colleges and high-level foreign universities/enterprises to cultivate technical skills talent with international perspectives and cross-cultural communication abilities. It also emphasized active participation in setting international vocational education standards

to enhance China’s discourse power in global vocational education.

3.2 The Integration of General and Professional Education Model Aligns with International Talent Cultivation Standards

Against the backdrop of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the innovation and practice of integrated liberal and professional education courses in higher vocational colleges represent not only a crucial direction for educational reform but also a key means of meeting the demand for internationalized talent. By organically combining liberal education with professional education, the integrated model aims to cultivate versatile professionals with global perspectives, cross-cultural communication skills, professional competencies, and innovative capabilities. This closely aligns with the talent requirements of BRI development.

The integrated model emphasizes the synergy between comprehensive knowledge and specialized expertise, focusing on cultivating students’ global perspectives and enhancing their cross-cultural abilities. This is consistent with the core requirements of international talent cultivation standards. For instance, such standards typically require students to possess multicultural understanding, language communication skills, professional competencies, and innovative abilities. Through modules such as “Multiculturalism and Global Perspectives” and “Language Science and Verbal Communication,” integrated courses help students master international norms and cross-cultural communication skills, thereby aligning with international talent cultivation standards.

The Belt and Road Initiative spans multiple fields—including economics, trade, infrastructure development, and technological innovation—and demands a large number of versatile professionals with foreign language proficiency, multidisciplinary knowledge, and a global outlook. The integrated model, via its “Foreign Language Plus” approach to cultivating interdisciplinary talent, has produced multilingual professionals equipped with language skills, professional expertise, and international engagement abilities. This effectively addresses the linguistic talent needs of BRI construction. Simultaneously, the model emphasizes integrating students’ professional skills with international rules. For example, higher vocational colleges can incorporate courses

covering BRI cooperation mechanisms, rules, and standards, helping students understand the cultures, legal systems, and social institutions of countries along the Belt and Road, thereby better adapting to the BRI's international requirements.

By organically integrating liberal and professional education, the integrated model not only conforms to international talent cultivation standards but also effectively meets the BRI's demand for versatile, internationalized talent. Higher vocational colleges should further deepen the innovation and practice of integrated courses, optimize top-level design, and enhance the quality of talent cultivation. This will provide high-quality talent support for the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative and advance the building of a community with a shared future for mankind.

4. PROBLEMS IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE GENERAL-PROFESSIONAL INTEGRATED CURRICULUM SYSTEM IN CHINA'S HIGHER VOCATIONAL COLLEGES UNDER THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

4.1 Insufficient Internationalization and Curricular Alignment

Currently, there are significant gaps in the internationalization of the integrated general and professional education curriculum system at higher vocational colleges.

First, the course content is disconnected from the practical needs of countries along the Belt and Road routes. For example, the curriculum design in many higher vocational institutions remains predominantly driven by domestic market demands. It lacks in-depth research into the economic, cultural, legal, and other contextual backgrounds of Belt and Road countries, resulting in curricula that fail to meet the requirements for cultivating internationally competent talent.

Second, the international dimension of integrated general-and-professional education courses is underdeveloped. The curriculum lacks modules on multicultural education and international regulatory awareness, hindering the development of students' global perspectives and cross-cultural communication skills.

4.2 Constrained Resources and Limited Faculty International Competence

Weaknesses in resource support and faculty capacity stand out in constructing integrated general-professional education curricula in vocational colleges.

According to a 2023 survey by China Education Online, less than 20% of vocational colleges in China have established deep cooperative partnerships with universities in countries along the Belt and Road. Furthermore, the proportion collaborating with enterprises to develop international educational resources is even lower, at only 15%. This situation severely restricts access to high-quality international educational resources, hindering the introduction of advanced educational philosophies, curriculum standards, and teaching materials.

Meanwhile, the lack of international teaching competency among faculty is equally prominent. Statistics from the Ministry of Education (MOE) in 2022 show that less than 15% of vocational college teachers possess an international educational background or relevant experience. Among these, very few are equipped to deliver cross-cultural teaching or interpret international rules and standards. The survey revealed that over 60% of vocational college teachers have not received systematic international teaching training, and fewer than 20% have participated in relevant programs. This reality directly undermines the teaching quality of integrated general-professional curricula, resulting in significant shortcomings—especially in critical areas such as cross-cultural teaching and international rule interpretation—and fails to meet the demands of cultivating internationally competent talent.

4.3 Imperfect Quality Assurance and Curriculum Management

The imperfect quality assurance and management mechanisms for the integrated general-professional curriculum system are a significant challenge currently facing vocational colleges.

First, the curriculum quality evaluation system is underdeveloped. Many vocational colleges lack scientific curriculum evaluation standards, making it difficult to effectively assess the teaching outcomes of integrated general-professional courses. For instance, some institutions place excessive

emphasis on theoretical teaching components during evaluation while neglecting the monitoring of practical teaching components, resulting in one-sided evaluation outcomes. Furthermore, the evaluation process fails to effectively engage industry and enterprise personnel, and a quality evaluation system aligned with the characteristics of vocational education has yet to be established.

Secondly, the curriculum management mechanism is inadequate. The integrated general-professional curriculum involves the deep integration of general education and professional education. However, many vocational colleges lack comprehensive planning in curriculum management, leading to issues like course duplication and resource wastage. For example, during curriculum integration, some institutions fail to effectively consolidate course categories and unify teaching content, causing the integration process to stall and textbook integration to lag behind. Additionally, the teaching management systems in some colleges have not been revised to align with the credit system and flexible learning pathways, resulting in a lack of robust management systems for course management, student status management, and credit recognition.

Finally, the implementation of quality assurance and management mechanisms is insufficient. In building their teaching quality assurance systems, some vocational colleges exhibit problems such as ill-defined strategic modules for teaching quality, inadequate management systems, and arbitrary quality monitoring in faculty development. For example, during curriculum quality monitoring, some institutions fail to effectively focus on cultivating teachers' practical abilities or assessing students' comprehensive professional competencies, resulting in an overly narrow scope for quality monitoring.

In conclusion, the imperfect quality assurance and management mechanisms for the integrated general-professional curriculum system have become a major bottleneck hindering the development of curriculum systems in vocational colleges.

4.4 Theory-Practice Gap and Supply-Demand Mismatch

The integrated general and specialized curriculum system still faces issues of supply-demand mismatch in practical application, mainly manifested in two aspects: a disconnect between

course content and industry needs, and insufficient practical components.

The disconnect between course content and industry needs is particularly acute. Many higher vocational colleges fail to conduct in-depth research into the actual talent demands of enterprises in countries along the Belt and Road when designing their curricula. This results in graduates who struggle to meet corporate requirements for skilled personnel. For example, according to statistics from the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, the social demand for intermediate-level skilled workers continues to rise, with an even stronger demand for high-quality, versatile technical workers. However, curriculum design in higher vocational institutions often overemphasizes theoretical knowledge while neglecting practical skills development, leaving graduates ill-prepared for the actual demands of corporate positions. Furthermore, the slow pace of updating course content does not keep pace with advancements in industry technology, further exacerbating the supply-demand mismatch.

Secondly, the insufficiency of practical components also hinders the improvement of students' professional skills and international competitiveness. Within the integrated curriculum system, practical teaching elements are often superficial, lacking systematic design and targeted relevance. For instance, one higher vocational college's "Advertising Design and Production" program offered 36 courses over two years, with only 9 being general education courses. The majority were vocational foundation courses and technical certification courses, resulting in a low proportion of practical courses. This curriculum model leaves students with significant deficiencies in practical operational abilities and international perspectives, making them ill-equipped to handle the complex demands of enterprises in Belt and Road countries. Additionally, while some colleges reduce cultural literacy courses, they fail to effectively integrate practical course content, leading to inadequate depth and breadth in practical teaching.

In summary, the integrated general and specialized curriculum system suffers from problems such as a disconnect between course content and industry needs and insufficient practical components in its practical application. These issues seriously impact the employment competitiveness of higher vocational graduates and the alignment with corporate talent demands.

4.5 Deficits in Global Perspective and Innovation Cultivation

A critical deficiency lies in the curriculum's insufficient cultivation of global perspectives and innovative capacities. Specifically: (1) Modules addressing essential international frameworks relevant to BRI operations (e.g., transnational trade regulations, investment laws in key partner countries, cross-cultural negotiation practices) are often absent or superficial. (2) Systematic training in innovation methodologies (e.g., design thinking) and entrepreneurship skills, crucial for adapting to diverse BRI environments and identifying opportunities, is typically lacking or relegated to elective courses with limited reach. This gap stems partly from curriculum designers' limited exposure to BRI-specific global challenges and a traditional emphasis on standardized technical skills over adaptive, creative competencies. Consequently, graduates may possess technical proficiency but lack the broader understanding and innovative capacity needed to navigate complex international projects and contribute to high-value BRI endeavors.

5. PATHWAYS FOR CONSTRUCTING AN INTEGRATED GENERAL-PROFESSIONAL CURRICULUM SYSTEM IN HIGHER VOCATIONAL EDUCATION UNDER THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

5.1 Optimizing Curriculum Structure to Achieve GE-PE Integration

To overcome persistent structural fragmentation and insufficient internationalization, higher vocational colleges must fundamentally redesign their approach. This involves moving beyond isolated subjects and actively merging general education components with professional training into a cohesive "knowledge-student-practice" system (a framework linking knowledge acquisition, student engagement, and practice). Concrete steps include developing interdisciplinary courses that naturally blend these elements, such as courses on the cultures and languages of Belt and Road countries. Furthermore, embedding a global perspective is essential; this can be achieved by integrating dedicated courses on BRI regional studies and cross-cultural communication skills

across relevant programs. Crucially, this structural optimization must also prioritize holistic student development, seamlessly weaving ideological education and professional ethics into the fabric of learning through engaging case studies and project-based teaching methodologies, ensuring graduates possess both technical competence and strong values.

5.2 Deepening Industry-Education Integration to Enhance Practical Competence

Addressing the critical misalignment between theoretical training and practical application demands requires a profound commitment to industry-education integration, specifically attuned to BRI contexts. The most direct path involves collaborative curriculum development with enterprises actively engaged in BRI projects, ensuring course content directly reflects real-world demands and global operational environments. This collaboration should extend into the practical realm through field-based projects with a global focus and internships facilitated by partner enterprises. Simultaneously, institutions must bridge the theory-practice gap within the curriculum itself by implementing multi-level innovation and entrepreneurship programs that challenge students to apply their knowledge creatively. Expanding structured industry mentorship programs further solidifies this connection, providing students with invaluable guidance and hands-on skill development directly relevant to BRI-related careers.

5.3 Strengthening Faculty Development to Elevate Teaching Quality

Overcoming limitations in resources and faculty expertise is paramount for delivering the envisioned integrated and internationally relevant curriculum. A multi-pronged strategy is necessary. First, targeted recruitment should prioritize teachers with demonstrable international experience, particularly in disciplines crucial to the BRI mission. For existing faculty, comprehensive training programs must be launched, focusing on three key areas: mastering integrated teaching pedagogies like cross-disciplinary co-teaching, deepening understanding of BRI contexts and intercultural dynamics, and effectively utilizing technology to facilitate global collaboration. Complementing internal development, integrating industry-academia experts as adjunct faculty brings essential

practical insights and real-world BRI application knowledge directly into the classroom. Finally, establishing robust BRI faculty exchange programs will enable direct collaboration with overseas partner institutions, fostering curriculum co-development and mutual learning.

5.4 Refining Quality Assurance Systems to Improve Curriculum Standards

Ensuring the effectiveness and relevance of the integrated curriculum requires robust and continuous quality assurance mechanisms to address previous inadequacies. Beyond internal reviews, structured third-party evaluation mechanisms are crucial for providing objective feedback and driving continuous improvement. Equally important is establishing systematic channels for capturing detailed student feedback on their learning experiences, satisfaction levels, and the perceived relevance of the curriculum to their future careers within the BRI landscape. Furthermore, the assessment framework itself needs alignment with recognized international competency benchmarks, ensuring graduates meet globally competitive standards and that the curriculum's quality is verifiable against external references.

5.5 Promoting Internationalization to Boost Global Competitiveness

Cultivating the global vision and innovation capabilities essential for competitiveness under the BRI necessitates proactive internationalization and innovation strategies embedded within the curriculum. Building strong academic partnerships with institutions in BRI partner countries forms the bedrock, facilitating vital student and faculty exchanges, collaborative research, and shared learning. Within the institution, creating dedicated, globally oriented innovation labs provides tangible spaces where students can engage directly with solving real-world challenges faced in BRI regions. To systematically instill an innovative and globally minded mindset, "Global Innovation" modules should be integrated into core curricula across disciplines, covering essential topics like cross-cultural design thinking and entrepreneurship tailored to BRI markets. Finally, mandating international virtual collaboration projects within all major programs ensures every student gains practical experience in navigating cross-cultural teamwork and global problem-solving.

6. CONCLUSION

Against the strategic backdrop of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the imperative for high-quality international development of higher vocational education (HVE), this research has examined the critical challenge of constructing an effective integrated curriculum system that harmonizes general and professional education within China's Higher Vocational Colleges (HVCs). The study identifies persistent barriers hindering the seamless integration and internationalization of such curricula, including misaligned course content with BRI practical demands, insufficient internationalization and innovation cultivation, weak resource support and faculty capacity, imperfect quality assurance mechanisms, and a significant disconnect between practical application and industry needs.

The successful construction of this integrated curriculum system is not merely an academic exercise but a fundamental driver for HVCs to fulfill their mission in the BRI era. Through innovative curricular design, deep global engagement, and robust industry-education synergy, HVCs can systematically cultivate a new generation of versatile technical and skilled talent. These graduates will possess essential interdisciplinary expertise, profound cross-cultural competencies, familiarity with international rules and standards, strong practical skills suited to global contexts, and an innovative mindset. Ultimately, this transformation empowers HVC graduates to thrive in the complex international environment, contribute effectively to BRI projects and the sustainable development of partner nations, and significantly bolster China's vocational education influence globally. This endeavor is crucial not only for advancing the goals of the Belt and Road Initiative but also for contributing meaningfully to building a community with a shared future for mankind. Future research should focus on the empirical evaluation of the proposed pathways' effectiveness and the long-term tracking of graduate outcomes within BRI contexts.

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