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# Establishing a Lifelong Learning System by developing Higher Vocational Education: A case of China

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Keywords: higher vocational education, higher education, lifelong learning system, vertical integration

**Abstract:** This paper reveals that higher vocational education (HVE) is playing a key role for establishing a lifelong learning system in China. Discussions are based on the theory that higher education is at the core to build a lifelong learning system with a focus on the concept of vertical integration.

## Introduction

Lifelong education was introduced to China in the late 1970s via a series of UNESCO reports. It was firstly adopted in Chinese education policies in 1993, *The Outline for Educational Reform and Development*. Then in 1995, *Law of Education* outlined the goal to establish a lifelong education system in the statement that the state shall encourage the development of adult education in various forms and make sure that citizens receive proper forms of education in politics, economy, culture, science, technology, profession and whole life [lifelong] education as well (MOE, 1995). Since then, building a lifelong education/learning system has been reiterated in various educational policies by Chinese government. In 1996 *The Ninth Five-Year Plan for China's Educational Development and the Development Outline in 2010*, articulates that a modern education system for lifelong learning will be finally established in which degree education and non-degree education are attached to equal importance, education at different levels could be transferred smoothly, and vocational and regular education will be integrated (MOE, 1996). In 1999, it was articulated in *Action Plan for Promoting Education for 21st Century* that a basic framework of lifelong learning system will try to be established in 2010. In 2001, a flexible schedule was adopted in *The Tenth Five-Year Plan for China's Educational Development and the Development Outline in 2015*, which articulates that a basic framework of lifelong learning system will try to be established in the following 5 or more years (CHINA.ORG, 2002). All these show that building a lifelong learning system is one of the most important tasks in the process of educational reforms.

How to set up such a lifelong learning system? Through a detailed analysis of the current structural reform in higher education, this paper explores that vertical integration is the first problem needs to be solved in the system of education and a transferable HVE is the key to establish a lifelong learning system in China. With the schooling lasting 2 years, HVE mainly enrolls graduates from regular senior high schools and secondary vocational schools. "The proportion of graduates from secondary vocational schools has been increased in recent years" (Tom, 2002). Secondary vocational education and higher education have been connected by HVE gradually. Aiming at fostering high-level skilled manpower demanded by the rapid growth of economy, HVE focuses on the training of practice-oriented talents. Currently, institutions providing HVE are divided into five categories with a general name—vocational and technical college. Some are named with polytechnics as well. The first category is composed by all independent 2-year vocational and technical colleges and polytechnics; the second contains 5-

year higher vocational classes provided in qualified secondary professional schools; the third is made up of schools of vocational education in some universities; the fourth comprises some four-year colleges; more and more emerging private colleges consist of the last category. HVE does not belong to degree education.

It is well known that a system of lifelong learning would encompass not only learning in a formal setting, but also learning in an informal setting (Knapper & Cropley, 2000). In this research, the emphasis of discussions will be put on a formal education setting – school education system because “schooling has been regarded as the main method to transmit useful knowledge and skills that can eventually be applied more or less directly in life” (Knapper & Cropley, 2000, p. 62). This paper is composed of three parts. Part One is the theoretical framework, which is based on Knapper and Cropley’s (2000) major theory that higher education is at the core to build a lifelong learning system and focuses on vertical integration of the system. In Part Two, the problem of vertical integration of the system of education in China are explored as two gaps at different levels of education, and it argues that terminal HVE is the main obstacle of implementing vertical integration in current education system. Then it discusses in Part Three that by leading to a lifelong higher education system, the transformation of HVE from terminal to transferable is critical to establish a lifelong learning system in China.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Knapper and Cropley (2000) refer that “the first and the most obvious principle of lifelong education system is that it must facilitate learning throughout people’s entire life span” (Knapper & Cropley, 2000, p. 35). It means that various levels of education need to be integrated with each other, which is called “vertical integration” (Knapper & Cropley, 2000, p. 35). “Vertical integration can be generalized to all aspects of education that are traditionally separated vertically, such as school and higher education...” (Knapper & Cropley, 2000, p. 36). With such a concept, continuity of education is assured, which is argued by Paul Lengrand (1975) as “the most fundamental principle of lifelong education/learning” (p. 72).

Meanwhile, lifelong higher education is generally regarded as the core of a lifelong learning system (Knapper, & Cropley, 2000). “This importance derives from the prestige and influence of higher education within the educational systems of most countries and from its role in developing theory and conducting research” (Knapper, & Cropley, 2000, p. 3). Higher education is the ‘springboard’ for entering the world of work (Knapper, & Cropley, 2000, p. 4). “It educates the people who will later shape the development of society” (Knapper, & Cropley, 2000, p. 3).

“Many nations have established alternative institutions with a specific mandate to serve vocational training needs that the universities, presumably, were not meeting satisfactorily” (Knapper, & Cropley, 2000, p. 41). Like “alternative institutions founded during the time of great expansion in the late 1960s and early 1970s” (Knapper & Cropley, 2000, p. 124), such as the British polytechnics, HVE is created to “offer the prospect of a different approach to teaching that might better fulfill the goals of lifelong learning” (Knapper, & Cropley, 2000, p. 123).

By criticizing the viewpoint that “lifelong higher education is solely a matter of catering to mature students” (Knapper & Cropley, 2000, p. 56), Knapper and Cropley (2000) point out that “it ignores the fact that a major clientele for higher education will continue to be the traditional full-time student entering college or university directly from secondary school” (p. 56). The implication is that the system of lifelong higher education must meet the basic needs [of vertical mobility] of those full-time students.

### **Vertical Integration and Chinese Education System**

For most people, “education means school” (Lengrand, 1975, p. 60). “Education can be viewed as a coherent structure of which each part is dependent upon the others and only has significance in relation to those others” (Lengrand, 1975, p. 72). But the system of education in China has not become coherent because vertical integration at various levels of education is poor. There have been two major gaps in formal education system since the educational reform in the early 1980s.

The first one is the gap between secondary vocational education and higher education, which was connected after 1996, when HVE was formally established. Before that time, students in secondary vocational schools were all prepared for work, which include secondary professional schools, technical schools, and vocational senior high schools. They did not have the opportunity to move to higher education institutions via the formal education system. According to official statistics by Ministry of Education of China (MOE) (MOE, 2005), from 1990 to 1996, the average number of students in secondary vocational schools for each year was 7.90 million. That means millions of students in secondary vocational schools lose their vertical mobility to move to universities and colleges every year. Emergence of HVE has started to change their fate.

An important governmental policy in 1999, *The Decision on Deepening Education Reform and Promoting Quality Education (The Decision)* (MOE, 2001), articulates that vocational and technical colleges can recruit graduates both from regular senior high schools and from secondary vocational schools. With documents I have got so far, it is the first one that opens higher education completely to graduates from secondary vocational schools. There is an echo for this that general enrollment rate of higher education has increased drastically since 1999, and which directly facilitates the transformation of Chinese higher education from an elite higher education system to a mass system in 2002, when general enrollment rate of higher education reached 15%.

This is a milestone of Chinese (higher) education, which indicates secondary vocational education is being connected with higher education by HVE. A historical gap has been connected, which has hampered the vertical mobility of students in secondary vocational education for a very long time. In this sense, we can say developing HVE has facilitated vertical integration between secondary education and higher education.

Nevertheless, the second gap comes from HVE because it is terminal currently, not transferable. Although it is also mentioned in *The Decision* that graduates from vocational and technical colleges can move to higher level degree studies at universities by selections. For some specific reasons in current China, application of this policy actually goes very slowly. The first reason is the limited higher education resource. As a developing country, China has a population which is a quarter of the total in the world. Compared to such a tremendous number, higher education institutions are too few. In 2004, there are 1,731 higher education institutions, which include 684 universities and 1,047 vocational and technical colleges (MOE, 2005). Lengrand (1975) reveals that “it is particularly true of developing countries that the relative scarcity of resources compels selection and sacrifice” (p. 72), which is the main obstacle for those countries to build a lifelong learning system. Second, graduates from vocational and technical colleges are targeted workforce. In order to meet the urgent demand of high-level skilled manpower, graduates from vocational and technical colleges are only prepared for the market of work. Third, HVE is new to China. From the government to researchers, and educational practitioners,

there is not a clear thought on how to develop HVE. Every step in developing HVE is treated as a test. Therefore, selecting graduates from vocational and technical colleges could not be the main theme in early stage of HVE. Nonetheless, a few certain regions have started to test a transferable HVE in recent years. In other words, it is a test to realize the vertical integration between the level of junior college and the level of university. With such a test, vertical separation of the system of education will be avoided eventually.

### **Transferable HVE and a Lifelong Higher Education System**

According to Knapper and Cropley's (2000), the core of lifelong learning system lies in higher education. I would argue that lifelong higher education system is the prerequisite for building a lifelong learning system in Chinese society. In such a system, people have more flexibility to get access to education at different levels and in different systems. There should be "no boundaries exist for any 'deliberate learning'" (Knapper, & Cropley, 2000, p. 1). In reality, terminal HVE is a major boundary in current Chinese higher education system. Making HVE transferable is critical for China to establish a lifelong higher education system.

With the basic requirement of lifelong learning that education system should assure the continuity of education at different levels, transferable HVE mainly refers that graduates from HVE institutions have access to university education for degrees. Seemingly, transferable HVE has been in test since 2001 in China. An examination called "*zhuan sheng ben*", which means upgrading, has been adopted in various regions to select students studying in HVE institutions to study in universities for degrees. I am afraid I would not agree with that because it cannot resolve the problem of vertical separation in higher education system. Such an examination might not be helpful for transforming HVE from terminal to transferable. There are two main reasons. Firstly, the selection through examination is looked as a serious obstacle for development of lifelong learning because "failure and success are thus institutionalized in a manner which is generally irrevocable" (Lengrand, 1975, p. 55). Secondly, the examination of upgrading enhances the ideology to pursue high level credentials. It is harmful for development of HVE. Since its emergence, HVE has been confronting people's misunderstanding and rejection with such an ideology (Xiong, 2005, p. 456).

How to transform HVE from terminal to transferable? I think a basic principle should like what Knapper and Cropley (2000, p. 36) say as the following:

It would be necessary for education to be organized in such a way that a particular learner could move backwards or forwards. It should also be possible for different people to enter the same level of the system (eg tertiary education) at different ages.

It reinforces that the examination for selection is not good. Admittedly, such a principle is not realistic at the early stage of HVE because examination is still the main method of recruitment of Chinese higher education. But from the perspective of building a lifelong learning system, it should be the goal we must follow.

### **Conclusion**

Obviously, with the test of transferable HVE, China is speeding up to build a lifelong learning system to face the challenge of globalization. Transferable HVE enhances vertical mobility of the student. It makes it possible to set up a basic framework of lifelong learning system in China because assuring the continuity of education is the basic requirement of a lifelong learning system. However, vertical mobility partly reflects the implementation of

vertical integration. Knapper and Cropley (2000) has argued that “the implementation of vertical integration would have implications for all aspects of an educational system” (p. 39).

On the other hand, adjusting HVE to be transferable will be a remarkable achievement in Chinese higher education reform in the following five to more years. In this process, more efforts must be made to improve capabilities of HVE to compete with traditional universities in recruitment and employment because “hierarchical stratification of higher education systems will make students seek to avoid lower-ranking institutions if they can” (King, 2004, p. 122).

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