

Constructing a Career Guidance Model for Higher Vocational Colleges from the Perspective of Social Learning Theory—A Case Study of Shenzhen Polytechnic University

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Abstract—Students in higher vocational colleges face challenges in career development, including vague occupational awareness, strong dependence in decision-making, and insufficient efficacy in career-related action. Traditional career guidance, which primarily emphasizes information transmission and skills instruction, is insufficient to address their deeper developmental needs. Using Bandura's social learning theory as its analytical framework, this study elucidates the practical value of observational learning, vicarious reinforcement, and self-efficacy, and draws on the case of Shenzhen Polytechnic University to develop an integrated career guidance model comprising role-model leadership, curriculum-based empowerment, and intensive support. Through a multi-level role-model system, a three-year action-oriented career curriculum, and targeted individual counseling, the model creates a social learning environment conducive to observation, imitation, practice, and reflection, facilitating students' transition from passively receiving guidance to actively constructing their careers. Practice indicates positive effects on deepening occupational awareness, improving career decision-making, and strengthening career-related action; employment-quality indicators have also shown steady improvement. The model may offer practical insights for career guidance in higher vocational institutions.

Keywords—social learning theory, higher vocational colleges, career guidance, self-efficacy, career education

I. INTRODUCTION

As China's economy enters a stage of high-quality development, industrial upgrading and technological iteration are accelerating, and demand for highly skilled technical personnel continues to grow, highlighting the strategic importance of vocational education. The Opinions on Promoting the High-Quality Development of Modern Vocational Education, issued by the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council, clarifies the categorical

positioning of vocational education [1]. In September 2024, the Opinions on Implementing the Employment-First Strategy to Promote High-Quality and Full Employment, issued by the CPC Central Committee and the State Council, identified employment as the most fundamental livelihood issue, established high-quality and full employment as a priority for socioeconomic development, called for coordinated efforts in education, training, and employment, and explicitly proposed integrating career education throughout the entire process of university talent cultivation [2]. Accordingly, the career-development quality of higher vocational graduates is closely related to both talent-cultivation outcomes and students' lifelong development.

Nevertheless, years of frontline career-guidance practice indicate that, although higher vocational institutions have generally established relatively comprehensive employment-support systems, some students continue to exhibit typical problems in career choice, including vague awareness, decision-making dependence, and insufficient initiative. Traditional approaches centered on information provision and skills instruction are therefore facing challenges. Bandura's social learning theory emphasizes that learning results from the ongoing interaction of individuals, behavior, and environment; observational learning, vicarious experience, and self-efficacy play central roles in behavioral acquisition and change. This perspective closely aligns with the process of career exploration. Accordingly, this study adopts social learning theory as its analytical framework and, through a case study of Shenzhen Polytechnic University, examines the formative logic, operational mechanisms, and practical implications of an integrated career guidance model based on role-model leadership, curriculum-based empowerment, and intensive support.

II. CAREER GUIDANCE CHALLENGES IN HIGHER VOCATIONAL COLLEGES

A. *Insufficiently Concrete Occupational Awareness*

Previous studies have identified a lack of concrete understanding of the occupational world among students in higher vocational colleges. Zhang [3] notes that many students lack a clear understanding of the occupational groups associated with their majors and of corresponding career pathways; their career goals are often vague, and their awareness of planning is limited. This limitation stems not only from students' limited social experience but also from the provision of guidance. Traditional career guidance relies primarily on centralized instruction and the dissemination of employment information; course content tends to emphasize theoretical explanation and psychometric assessment, with insufficient immersion in authentic workplace contexts. University–industry collaboration often remains superficial, taking the form of agreement signing, visits, and observation tours. Students consequently have few opportunities for sustained interaction with working professionals. Their occupational understanding is pieced together from fragmented online information, making it difficult to establish meaningful connections between academic learning and future employment [4].

B. *Limited Student Agency in Career Decision-Making*

Higher vocational students often lack clarity regarding employment directions and rely heavily on external opinions when making career decisions, rather than exercising independent judgment grounded in their interests, abilities, and values. Research indicates that career-decision difficulties among these students fall into distinct categories—mild, low, moderate, and high—and vary by gender and year of study. A considerable proportion of these difficulties arise from “lack of preparation” rather than information deficits alone, suggesting that the intrinsic motivation and autonomy required for career decision-making have not yet been fully established. Family factors play a complex role. Parental expectations are significantly associated with university students' career-decision difficulties; excessively high or misdirected expectations may exacerbate such difficulties. Parental career interference may impose parents' preferences on their children, whereas parental absence from career guidance may deprive students of effective support. Both can undermine the development of independent judgment [5]. When “popular” career destinations are repeatedly highlighted, while students cannot assess their fit with their own characteristics, conformity-based decisions may become commonplace.

C. *Weak Self-Efficacy in Career-Related Action*

Low career self-efficacy is a direct psychological source of insufficient action. Zhong and Chen [6] found that career decision-making self-efficacy among higher vocational students was relatively low overall and differed significantly by place of origin. Individuals with stronger achievement motivation tend to be more willing

to take action and may therefore demonstrate higher career decision-making self-efficacy. Moreover, when students receive greater social support from teachers and peers during their studies, they have more opportunities for reflection and active learning; their career confidence, perceived career value, and career autonomy can be strengthened, thereby fostering career decision-making self-efficacy. Career decision-making self-efficacy also influences career adaptability through mediating mechanisms such as career exploration [7]. Once established, efficacy beliefs make students more willing to set goals, gather information, and participate in practical activities, accumulating successful experiences through action. Conversely, inadequate efficacy not only directly inhibits job-search behavior but may also exert cumulative effects along the pathway of “self-efficacy—planning—exploration—adaptability”.

III. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR CONSTRUCTING A CAREER GUIDANCE MODEL FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY

A. *Observational Learning: Enhancing the Accessibility and Demonstrative Value of Career Role Models*

Social learning theory was systematically advanced by American psychologist Albert Bandura during the 1960s and 1970s and subsequently developed into social cognitive theory, encompassing observational learning, self-regulation, and self-efficacy. It moves beyond the behaviorist stimulus–response framework by emphasizing the mediating role of cognition in learning. Bandura argued that most human behaviors are not acquired through direct trial and error, but through observing others' models and the consequences of their actions. In career guidance, this means that students' occupational awareness is associated with the quality and diversity of the career role models to whom they have access. Traditional guidance commonly provides abstract job descriptions and statistical data, while offering few embodied, imitable examples of action. Social learning theory suggests that career guidance should systematically provide authentic, vivid, and diverse role models—including successful alumni, industry experts, and peer exemplars. By presenting their developmental trajectories, professional practices, and problem-solving strategies, abstract occupational information can be transformed into comprehensible personal narratives, deepening career understanding and stimulating intrinsic motivation to learn and emulate [8].

B. *Vicarious Reinforcement: Clarifying the Relationship between Career Behaviors and Outcomes*

The effectiveness of observational learning depends not only on the presentation of role models but also on the observability of the consequences of their behavior. When students observe that specific career-related behaviors—such as actively participating in project-based practice or independently obtaining industry certifications—can lead to positive outcomes, such as securing desirable positions or achieving rapid professional growth, they may come to believe that

similar actions could produce comparable results. This process is known as vicarious reinforcement. Compared with one-way, preach-like guidance, such indirect experience grounded in authentic observation may more effectively motivate students to take initiative in job seeking and career development. Career guidance should deliberately design and present clear behavior–outcome relationships, enabling students to understand not only how to act but also the underlying rationale and value of such actions.

C. Self-Efficacy: Establishing the Confidence Required for Career Action

Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their capacity to successfully perform a specific task; it directly affects the effort and persistence they demonstrate when facing challenges [9]. Empirical studies have shown that career decision-making self-efficacy is significantly associated with university students' career-decision difficulties, positively affects the employability of higher vocational students [10], and influences career adaptability through mediating mechanisms such as career exploration [7]. It is therefore an important psychological variable shaping their career development. Bandura's four sources of efficacy information provide concrete intervention pathways for career guidance. First, mastery experiences can be cultivated through graduated practical tasks that allow attainable success, helping students develop direct experiences of "I can do it." Second, vicarious experiences can be fostered by presenting successful cases of people with similar backgrounds, building the positive expectation that "if they can do it, so can I". Third, verbal persuasion involves positive, specific, and credible feedback and encouragement from teachers, mentors, and peers. Fourth, physiological and emotional states can be regulated by helping students manage job-search anxiety and approach challenges with greater composure and positivity. Career guidance should move beyond one-way counseling and foster a supportive career-learning ecosystem, breaking the cycle of "low efficacy—avoidance—lack of feedback" and promoting a positive spiral of "constructive cognition—effective action—positive feedback—enhanced efficacy".

IV. CONSTRUCTION AND PRACTICE OF THE INTEGRATED CAREER GUIDANCE MODEL

A. Role-Model Leadership: Building a Diverse Observational Learning System

Based on the preceding theoretical analysis and examination of practical challenges, Shenzhen Polytechnic University has gradually developed an integrated career guidance model comprising role-model leadership, curriculum-based empowerment, and intensive support. These three components correspond, respectively, to the mechanisms of observational learning, behavioral practice, and efficacy enhancement in social learning theory.

To maximize the effects of observational learning and vicarious reinforcement, the university has developed a

multi-level, comprehensive network of role models covering students throughout their academic journey. First, the "Peer Navigator" initiative selects senior students with outstanding achievements in high-level skills competitions, internships at leading enterprises, and high-quality employment to form a peer-mentor team. Through experience-sharing sessions, study-group tutoring, and one-to-one consultations, these mentors provide practical guidance closely aligned with students' needs. Because peer exemplars share similar experiences and backgrounds with their mentees, their modeling can be more approachable and persuasive. Research indicates that peer groups influence university students' career planning through role modeling, informational support, and emotional identification [11]. Second, the university has strengthened its "industry mentor" system. In conjunction with the development of industry colleges, technical specialists and human-resources experts from partner enterprises are appointed as class-based industry mentors. They introduce authentic job requirements and talent standards into the classroom while directly connecting students with internship positions and employment resources. Third, the university has developed "workplace observation classrooms," regularly inviting experienced professionals from leading Greater Bay Area companies—including Huawei, BYD, and China Merchants Bank—as well as successful alumni, to return to campus for thematic lectures and practice-oriented educational workshops. In this way, the classroom becomes a vivid setting for occupational observation and experience.

B. Curriculum-Based Empowerment: Implementing Full-Cycle, Action-Oriented Career Education

The university has systematically reformed its course "Career Planning and Employment Guidance for University Students", establishing a progressive curriculum spanning the first through third years, with core action tasks embedded at each stage. The first-year exploration stage emphasizes introductory awareness and the awakening of career consciousness. It features the "Five Career Activities": reading a career-development classic in depth, completing a career assessment, attending a job fair as an observer, preparing a career-development report, and conducting an informational interview with a person in a career of interest. The career interview is a compulsory practical component, supported by interview guidelines and specialized training to encourage students to move beyond their comfort zones.

The second-year focusing stage shifts toward identifying strengths and narrowing career directions. Project-based teaching is adopted, with the university student career-planning competition serving as the principal practical platform. Students integrate the outcomes of their earlier exploration and complete the entire process—from self-assessment and occupational research to drafting and defending a career plan. Their in-depth participation thus becomes a process of self-dialogue and career rehearsal.

The third-year decision-making stage focuses on job-search practice and workplace adaptation. Course modules cover employment assessment, salary negotiation, and the protection of labor rights. Authentic corporate cases are widely used, while high-quality professional internships and “micro-internships” at leading companies are incorporated into practical learning. These experiences enable students to test and enhance their career competencies in authentic contexts and accumulate mastery experiences.

C. Intensive Support: Establishing a Targeted Individual Intervention System

To address the limitations of group guidance in providing depth, the university has established the “Qihang Career Counseling Center”, which provides individualized, in-depth support differentiated by student needs. It primarily serves students experiencing career-decision difficulties, setbacks in job seeking, unclear goals, or pronounced irrational beliefs. Cognitive restructuring techniques are used to help students identify and revise irrational beliefs such as “I will only accept a job at a leading company” and “academic qualifications matter more than skills”. Tools such as comparative analysis of industry positions and simulations of career-development pathways support rational decision-making. Counselors and students then jointly formulate individualized action plans and establish mechanisms for ongoing follow-up.

Operationally, the center maintains an electronic “one record per student” file, dynamically documenting each student’s counseling topics, decision-making progress, and implementation of action plans to create a traceable developmental record. Case supervision is conducted regularly to ensure professional counseling quality. End-of-semester outcome tracking is used to assess intervention effects and inform improvements in educational practice.

Practice-based outcomes at Shenzhen Polytechnic University indicate that students’ willingness to participate in career-development activities and the quality of their participation have increased. The quality of practical components, including career interviews and career-planning competitions, has improved year by year, while the precision of résumé submissions and interview success rates have continued to rise. Graduate follow-up feedback suggests that students demonstrate greater initiative in problem-solving and stronger workplace adaptability after entering employment. Employers commonly report that graduates “adapt quickly, remain in their positions, and demonstrate strong growth potential”. Meanwhile, a collaborative ecosystem for career education is gradually taking shape. The role-model resource pool, progressive curriculum, and individual counseling mechanism reinforce one another. Career guidance is consequently shifting from an activity concentrated around the employment season to a systematic educational component embedded throughout the entire talent-cultivation process and serving all students.

V. CONCLUSION

Against the backdrop of high-quality development in vocational education, career guidance in higher vocational colleges needs to undergo a paradigm shift from administrative service provision to educational empowerment. Grounded in social learning theory, the integrated model systematically cultivates a social learning environment rich in role models, practical opportunities, and positive feedback, embedding observational learning, vicarious reinforcement, and self-efficacy development throughout the guidance process. It has helped activate students’ intrinsic motivation for career development and strengthen their confidence and capabilities in career decision-making and action. The practice suggests that profound transformation in career guidance lies not merely in updating guidance techniques, but in aligning with the way students learn about careers: autonomous career construction truly takes place only when students can observe, practice, and reflect through authentic social interaction. This exploration offers a reference for theoretical development and practical innovation in career guidance at comparable institutions.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Yanling Liu conceived the study, conducted the case analysis, and drafted the manuscript; Xiaolin Zhu revised the manuscript. All authors had approved the final version.

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