

# Internationalization Practices of Private Higher Vocational Schools of Shandong Province from the Perspective of the Belt and Road Initiative: A Review

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*Abstract: The implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative has significantly propelled the internationalization of higher education in China and countries along the BRI route. The growing demand in the international market for highly technical skills has compelled Chinese Higher Vocational Schools to engage with the global community through internationalization initiatives and programs. However, less attention is given to exploring the situation of private higher vocational schools in China, which have limited resources compared to state-managed vocational schools. This review aims to determine the current state of internationalization practices of private higher vocational schools in Shandong Province, China, from the perspective of the Belt and Road Initiative. By employing literature review, it aims to describe future research perspectives for the internationalization of private higher vocational schools in China. The review revealed a lack of literature describing the implementation of internationalization programs in vocational schools and a dearth of discussion on best practices that other universities can adopt in their internationalization programs. The results of the study establish a baseline for future researchers wishing to explore internationalization practices in the field of higher vocational education.*

*Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative; Higher Vocational Education; TVET Internationalization; Internationalization Practices; Internationalization*

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## INTRODUCTION

To align with the thrust of globalization, it is crucial to prepare graduates to be competitive not only in the local market but also on a global scale. This is particularly important for vocational graduates who will pursue careers in steadily growing industries, both locally and globally. Therefore, to equip students with the necessary knowledge and skills, it is essential to design a curriculum with a global perspective that exposes students to the international context during their schooling. Undoubtedly, various factors may influence the internationalization of the school curriculum. Most often, vocational school curricula are demand-driven and depend primarily on the current and projected market demands. In the Chinese context, the projected demand for vocational graduates is contingent upon the expansion of Chinese companies abroad. One of the potential considerations for Chinese industries to expand abroad is the national policy for internationalization, which notably includes the Belt and Road Initiative.

Belt and Road Initiative is viewed as an international economic policy with greatest involvement accounting for 64% of world population and 30% of world's GDP (Huang, 2016). Since the establishment of the China's Belt and Road Initiative in 2013, 185 countries and international organizations have joined hands to implement 3,000 collaborative projects (Belt & Road Portal, 2023). The Belt and Road Initiative allowed China and the countries along the established Belt and Road route to cooperate in five (5) core priorities including people-to-people connectivity, policy coordination, financial integration, facilities connectivity, and unimpeded trade. Under the guidance of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has pursued peaceful development, entered economic partnerships with other countries, and built a community of shared interests, shared future, and shared responsibilities, highlighting political mutual

trust, economic integration and cultural inclusiveness. Within the BRI's five core priorities, education has an essential and overarching role to play (Hollings, 2020; Peters, 2019).

In support to establishing a stronger people-to-people connectivity, China and other countries have gradually reached consensus on bilateral and multilateral cooperation and deepened cooperation in various fields, including the field of higher education. The internationalization of higher education is of great importance to countries that aim to educate and nurture young talents, leading to the generation of world-class scientific achievements (Wen, 2018). This supports Zhang and Chen (2018) which asserted that social and economic development of the BRI countries is intertwined with the development of higher education; thus, BRI paves the way for the transformation of higher education's internationalization. This is in harmony with Jiang and Shi (2019) which asserted that higher education is an important factor of both social and cultural exchanges as it enables the establishment of a knowledge economy. This concurred with Zhang and Liu (2019) who observed the increasingly growing and diversifying scope of international higher education cooperation under the implementation of BRI. The same was reflected in Chen (2018) who emphasized that BRI's implementation provides higher educational institutions in ethnic areas to expedite the process of internationalization to address the growing demand for talents. This concurred with Meng (2020) who asserted that among the impacts of BRI is the strengthening of international cooperations and the increasing demand for internationalized skilled talents. It is worth mentioning that as early as 2016, 73 BRI countries have cooperated with China to promote popularization of higher education (Liu et al., 2016).

The BRI's implementation has brought a substantial push for the internationalization of higher education in China and countries along the BRI route. As mentioned by Chiang (2015), China has become the preferred destination of foreign students. However, discussions in the previous studies have been generalized to higher education, without considering that the higher education in China comprises of higher vocational education, undergraduate education, and postgraduate education. Considering the huge difference in the three types of higher education in China, the strategies and practices for internationalization also differs. Among the mentioned types of China's higher education, the higher vocational education (HVE) is less attractive compare to academic education (undergraduate education) (Guo & Wang, 2020). Furthermore, Altinok (2012) observed that students who choose to pursue HVE tend not to possess a favorable academic background or often from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. Thus, Velde (2008) emphasized that employers have a low expectations to the skills of the of HVE graduates. Since HVE is comparatively shorter than the regular undergraduate degree, families with limited financial resources opt to send their children to HVE, so that they can finish studies sooner and be work-ready. However, despite these preconceived notions and biased towards the HVE, it is growing rapidly in China (Hansen & Woronov, 2013). In fact, Durden and Yang (2006) claimed that HVE system has made a small and yet significant positive impact on the provincial economy's growth and progress over a period of time. Furthermore, Zhou (2022) argued that because higher vocational education is connected to the country's future economic reform, its capacity to promote social and economic growth is of national and governmental concern. Therefore, it is important to look into Higher Vocational Education (HVE), especially with regard to how the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has affected the HVE schools' internationalization practices.

According to Stewart (2015), many nations have prioritized the expansion of higher education to larger sections of the age group, neglecting vocational education and training, often linked to an older industrial era. In contrast with the context of the Chinese Higher Vocational Education, there is a substantial literature exploring the development, challenges, opportunities and policy making in Higher Vocational Education cooperations between China and foreign countries (Huang, 2016; Liang, 2017; Zhang, 2017; Li, 2019; Zeng & Lu, 2019; Zhang, 2019; Li, 2020; Wang 2020), further confirming the existence of collaborative partnerships between Chinese and foreign universities in the field of higher vocational education. The internationalization of Higher Vocational Education in China can be attributed to the government-initiated policies, such that of the BRI. This is further supported by Fan (2020) who asserted that the development of Higher Vocational Education in China is basically driven by national policies. Therefore, it is of great significance to investigate how the implementation of the China's popular national development policy, the BRI, influences the private higher vocational schools, specifically their internationalization practices.

Under the background of the Belt and Road Initiative, this review paper seeks to investigate the current state of the internationalization of Chinese higher vocational schools. By conducting a thorough analysis of the compiled studies, the study aims to identify the future research prospects associated with

the implementation of internationalization initiatives within private Chinese higher vocational schools in China.

## LITERATURE REVIEW PROCEDURE

This review paper consolidated the relevant studies through the use of open-access databases such as Chinese National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) and Google Scholar. Using the keywords “Belt & Road Initiative,” “Internationalization,” “Higher Vocational Schools,” and “Higher Vocational Education,” this study analyzed papers associated with the Internationalization programs of Higher Vocational Schools in China from the perspective of the Belt and Road Initiative.

## REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

### 3.1 Relevant Chinese Laws and Policies on Vocational Education, Internationalization, and Belt and Road Initiative

#### 3.1.1 *Vocational Education Law of the People's Republic of China*

Guided by the goals of promoting the high-quality development of vocational education, improving the quality and technical skills of workers, fostering employment and entrepreneurship, building a strong foundation in education, human resources, and a skills-based society, and advancing socialist modernization, the Vocational Education Law of the People's Republic of China was crafted in accordance with the Constitution. The Vocational Education Law of the People's Republic of China was adopted at the 19th meeting of the Standing Committee of the Eighth National People's Congress on May 15, 1996, and amended at the 34th meeting of the Standing Committee of the 13th National People's Congress on April 20, 2022. This Law shall come into force as of May 1, 2022.

The law clearly stipulates that vocational education refers to the education implemented in order to train high-quality technical and skilled personnel, so that the educates can have professional ethics, scientific culture and professional knowledge, technical skills and other professional comprehensive quality and action ability required for engaging in a certain occupation or realizing professional development. According to the Ministry of Education (2022), the law stipulates that the state encourages foreign exchanges and cooperation in the field of vocational education, supports the introduction of high-quality overseas resources to develop vocational education, encourages qualified vocational education institutions to run schools abroad, and supports the development of various forms of mutual recognition of vocational education learning results. Guided by this provision of the law, the vocational schools are mandated to promote internationalization in its programs, teachers, and students.

#### 3.1.2 *China's Education Modernization 2035*

The China's Education Modernization 2035, issued by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and The State Council on February 23, 2019, is the country's long-term plan that aims to address issues on education as well as implement strategies to open Chinese education to the world. Among the aims of the Education Modernization 2035 is enhancing international exchanges and cooperation, facilitating mutual recognition of degrees, standards, and sharing experiences between China and other nations. To achieve the goal of opening the Chinese education to the world, the Chinese government will collaborate closely with UNESCO and other international educational or professional bodies. Among the strategic goals of the Education Modernization 2035 is to enhance the quality of international educational partnerships, optimize study abroad services, and implement the Study in China plan. To realize these goals, the government shall support people-to-people and cultural exchanges through the expansion of Confucius Institutes and classrooms, development of overseas schools with Chinese characteristics, and promotion of vocational colleges to establish "Luban Workshops" abroad.

The Luban Workshop, named after the ancient woodcraft master, Lu Ban, is a Chinese vocational training program that shares China's vocational education systems with other countries, resulting to the cultivation of highly skillful, professional and innovative talents. Since the establishment of the first "Luban Workshop" in Thailand in 2016, up to October 2023, Chinese universities and colleges, along with universities in over 20 collaborating nations across Asia, Africa, and Europe, have collaborated to establish numerous Luban Workshops (Li, 2023). The inclusion of the Luban Workshop in the Education Modernization 2035 is a manifestation of the government's strong support in the internationalization of the country's vocational education. According to Li & Xue (2022), Luban Workshop serve as an exemplar model for Internationalization of Chinese vocational education.

Considering that Luban Workshop, a well-developed partnership model for Chinese vocational schools and foreign educational institutions has been implemented by several schools, there is also a possibility that other partnership models for the internationalization of vocational education are being implemented. Thus, it is essential to explore the internationalization practices of Chinese vocational schools.

### **3.1.3 Belt & Road Initiative**

The Belt and Road (BRI) is the abbreviation for the "Silk Road Economic Belt" and the "21st-Century Maritime Silk Road." In September and October 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed the construction of the "New Silk Road Economic Belt" and the "21st-Century Maritime Silk Road" respectively. Relying on the existing bilateral and multilateral mechanisms between China and relevant countries, and leveraging existing effective regional cooperation platforms, the Belt and Road initiative aims to use the historical symbol of the ancient Silk Road, uphold the banner of peaceful development, actively develop economic cooperation relationships with partners, and jointly build a community of shared interests, shared destiny, and shared responsibilities characterized by political mutual trust, economic integration, and cultural inclusiveness. As of June 2023, China has signed more than 230 cooperation documents for jointly building the "Belt and Road" with over 150 countries and more than 30 international organizations. Among the priority programs of the BRI is the promotion of people-to-people bond, which include programs for cultural and educational exchanges.

According to Dang (2019), in order to implement programs for the Belt & Road Initiative, there is a need to address the demand for vocational skills and talents, thus the Ministry of Education (2016) issued "Directory of Vocational Education (Associate Degree) Majors in Regular Higher Education Institutions" in 2016 to establish 13 vocational courses that are needed for the BRI projects. This concurred with Zhu (2017) who mentioned that top-level strategic plan at the national level, including the BRI, not only profoundly influences economic development but also impacts various aspects of society, including vocational education. Along the Belt and Road regions, Chinese vocational education is expected to undergo internationalization. Considering the growing needs for vocational talents for the implementation of BRI projects, the internationalization of Vocational Education is needed.

## **3.2 Belt and Road Initiative and Education Cooperation**

Education is the foundation for national prosperity and people's happiness, and plays a fundamental and leading role in jointly building the Belt and Road. Educational exchanges build Bridges for people-to-people exchanges among countries along the Belt and Road, and personnel training provides support for policy communication, infrastructure connectivity, unimpeded trade and financial integration among countries along the Belt and Road (Ministry of Education, 2019). The implementation of BRI projects necessitates the cultivation of talents both locally and internationally, and this can be achieved through education cooperation.

In the past 10 years, the Belt and Road Initiative has become a popular international public good and a platform for international cooperation. The implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative has greatly improved the breadth and depth of opening-up, including education (Zhang, 2023). China-ASEAN education cooperation is one of the most successful cases of China's education opening up in the first decade of the Belt and Road Initiative (Yang et al., 2023). China's higher education cooperation with the "Belt and Road" cooperation countries and those along the regional routes has been deepening, but problems such as imbalance in the pattern and superposition of cooperation obstacles are still evident. Higher education cooperation leads the economic and trade development between countries through institutional and non-institutional arrangements, accumulation and flow of human capital, accumulation and promotion of scientific and technological innovation, and deepening the connotation and function of international exchanges. China should improve the management system and operation mechanism of higher education cooperation with the "Belt and Road" countries, realize the quantitative and qualitative transformation of cooperation, give play to the leading role of cooperation in economic and trade development, and realize the win-win development of higher education cooperation and economic and trade mutual promotion (Li & Bao, 2023).

At present, under the "Belt and Road" initiative, the international exchanges and cooperation between China and ASEAN vocational education have been further promoted, and a government-led international cooperation model for vocational education has been formed, a cross-border flow cooperation model for vocational education personnel, a "going out" Luban workshop model for vocational education cooperation with enterprises, a Sino-foreign school-school cooperation model for vocational education, and a model for school-enterprise cooperation to build overseas vocational skills

training centers type and other major modes. China-ASEAN international cooperation in vocational education should be further promoted from the aspects of establishing and improving the cross-border flow system and mechanism of vocational education elements, the information sharing mechanism of international cooperation in vocational education, the multi-subject coordination mechanism of international cooperation in vocational education, the quality assurance mechanism of international cooperation in vocational education, and the international cooperation coordination mechanism in vocational education (Zhang, 2020). The "Belt and Road Initiative" has brought new opportunities for China-Asean vocational education cooperation, which can help to identify partners, develop training programs, innovate training methods, optimize teacher teams and other cooperation strategies for China-ASEAN vocational college cooperation training, and enhance China-Asean vocational college cooperation from the aspects of the basis of cooperative training, the positioning of both partners, and the mechanism of cooperation.

### **3.3 Higher Vocational Education in China**

The so-called higher vocational education is a concept with Chinese characteristics. Through consulting the relevant information of foreign vocational education, it can be seen that there is no specific expression of the concept of "higher vocational education" in foreign countries. According to the Encyclopedia of Chinese Education, higher vocational education belongs to the category of higher education, and its goal is to cultivate students' practical technical ability, train advanced applied talents and skilled workers, and serve the development of various sectors of the national economy (Zhang, 1990). The Dictionary of Education points out that higher vocational education belongs to the third level of vocational and technical education, including pre-service vocational and technical education and post-service-related continuing education (Gu, 1986). According to the International Standard Classification of Education, vocational education is divided into seven levels and three categories: A, B and C (UNESCO, 1976). Higher vocational education is taught according to specific occupations and is oriented towards practical course content, aiming to equip students with practical skills and knowledge, with skills in a certain type or a certain industry or profession, and with the abilities and qualifications required to enter the labor market after graduation. It is a vocational education for grassroots, production, service and management front-line positions to train practical and skilled professionals with certain theoretical knowledge and strong practical ability, and is an advanced stage of vocational education. As an important support for local economy, higher vocational education plays an irreplaceable role in promoting economic development (Fu, 2023).

### **3.4 Internationalization of Higher Vocational Education**

The internationalization of higher vocational education is a process in which the education departments and higher vocational colleges of different countries (regions) exchange and cooperate in the content, method and mode of training technical talents in order to adapt to the economic globalization. Under the situation of economic globalization and education internationalization, the latter is the inevitable choice of Chinese higher vocational colleges and majors. Its purpose is to train international skilled talents, promote China's economic and social development, and promote the improvement of international competitiveness. The internationalization of vocational education requires higher vocational education to integrate into the world vocational education development trend, strengthen the exchange and cooperation with different countries (regions) vocational education, and promote the development and sharing of educational resources. On the basis of studying the value dimension of higher vocational education cooperation under the framework of "Lancang-Mekong Cooperation", some scholars deeply analyzed the current situation and existing problems of international cooperation in China's higher vocational education, and proposed promotion strategies from the three levels of the state, enterprises and higher vocational colleges. The state should strengthen top-level design and macro planning, accelerate the mutual recognition of academic degrees and qualification certificates, increase financial support and input, and promote cultural and people-to-people exchanges in the Lancang-Mekong region. Enterprises should strengthen the investment in hardware and participate in the whole process of international education while vocational colleges should build a diversified cooperation and exchange platform, build a deep integration of production and education, optimize the talent training mechanism according to local conditions, promote the interconnection of vocational standards, and enhance the internationalization level of vocational education services (Zhao, 2023). With the development of economic globalization, the internationalization of higher vocational education in the new era has become an important way for higher vocational education to serve the national development strategy, and also an inevitable trend of the reform

and development of higher vocational education. The internationalization evaluation of higher vocational education is an important guarantee for the high-quality development of higher vocational education internationalization, and is of great significance for promoting the construction of modern vocational education system and realizing the modern management of higher vocational education.

At present, the internationalization evaluation of higher vocational education in China still has some problems to be solved in the evaluation concept, evaluation standard, classification management, continuous improvement and so on. However in the new era, the internationalization evaluation of higher vocational education should break the path dependence of the internationalization evaluation of higher education, reshape the evaluation concept, clarify the evaluation criteria, scientifically design the evaluation index system, innovate the evaluation means and methods, and perfect the evaluation mechanism, so as to continuously improve the scientific, professional and effective evaluation of the internationalization evaluation of higher vocational education (Yu & Wu, 2023). Some scholars took Singapore as an example to study its experience in the internationalization development of higher vocational education, and proposed to further promote international exchanges and cooperation and build a global community with a shared future for vocational education (Xu & Wang, 2023). In fact, some studies believe that the internationalization of higher vocational education has made certain progress (de Paor, 2018; Li & Pilz, 2021). However, in the process of internationalization of higher vocational education, there are still a series of problems, such as unclear connotation of quality, lack of characteristics of vocational education, challenges in sustainable development and blind spots in educational equity (Lao, Zhu, & He, 2023). In order to achieve high-quality development, the internationalization of higher vocational education needs to coordinate the effective improvement of quality and reasonable growth of quantity, highlight the characteristics of vocational education, adopt the action strategy of sustainable development, pay attention to educational equity, and improve the quality of education (Luo et al., 2023).

Previous researchers believe that modern vocational education has entered a new historical stage of high-quality development, China's education has entered a new development period of accelerating and expanding the opening up to the outside world and actively participates in global education governance (Fan, 2020; Huang, 2023; Wang & Gedviliene, 2021). Higher vocational education should make good use of "internationalization" as an enabling means, adapt to the overall situation of the times, improve the connotation of running a school, and find the path of internationalization practice. Internationalization has become the development strategy of most higher vocational colleges, but due to various factors, the imbalance of international development among regions and colleges and the different levels of running schools have brought certain limitations and challenges to the international development of higher vocational colleges. Therefore, under the new situation, higher vocational colleges should develop educational internationalization from the aspects of strategic planning and system construction, self-supporting and resource integration, combination of docking strategy and characteristic development, synchronization of intelligence introduction and resource output, and mutual promotion of open school running and party building (Wang, 2023). Some scholars put forward the concept and elements of the internationalization of higher vocational education in combination with the stage characteristics of the development of higher vocational education in China, and form an analytical framework for the internationalization of higher vocational education (Ling, Chung, & Wang, 2021). At present, China's higher vocational colleges pay more attention to internationalization, but the support and guarantee need to be further strengthened. The connotation of internationalization needs to be further deepened while its characteristics should be clarified. Likewise, the internationalization of education needs to be strengthened while the level of education and international influence need to be improved (Kang, 2023).

To sum up, the internationalization of higher vocational education refers to the process of adapting to economic globalization, responding to the "Belt and Road" initiative, cultivating international professional and technical talents, and integrating transnational, cross-cultural and cross-population globalization concepts into domestic higher vocational education teaching practice. Through the "introduction" and "going out" of teachers and students, vocational education resources and standards, the internationalization of higher vocational education can improve the level of national higher vocational education and international influence. The same was reflected in Gide, Wu, and Wang (2010) who mentioned that internationalization of China's higher education not only influence the local educational system, but also impacts on that of other countries, thereby producing an open market that is likely to be shared with international education providers. However, there is concern with regards to access with internationalization among schools. This was concurred with Guo et al. (2022) who revealed that among

the dilemmas of internationalization among higher educational institutions in China is the unequal access to internationalization.

## LIMITATION AND EXPECTATION

### 4.1 Objectivity

The study consolidated internationalization data of Chinese higher vocational schools from only two databases, other databases were not included in the review process.

### 4.2 Generalizability

The concept of Internationalization in this study is within the context of the Chinese higher vocational school and from the perspective of Belt & Road Initiative. The study acknowledges that its findings cannot be generalized or applied to other population. Further exploration is needed to further support the findings of this study.

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