



*Edge Grant Research*

***What is the gap between China and the UK's  
Higher Vocational Education And Training (HVET)  
students' post-college transition after Covid-19?***

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**Abstract:** Higher vocational education and training (HVET) students are experiencing more complex and high-risk transitions than previous generations in the context of the impact of COVID-19 in many countries. This article reports on the experiences of 20 HVET students from four colleges in China regarding their post-college transitions, comparing them to the UK situation to explore the gap between the two countries. A qualitative research approach of semi-structured follow-up interviews was used to collect primary data from students from China. The UK context was explored through a literature review, subsequently interpreted using the conceptual framework of transition theory. The main findings include that the socioeconomic background and curriculum are crucial for affecting HVET students' transition in both countries. In terms of the differences, China's students are experiencing more challenges from the social stigmatisation on the HVET identity, and broader barriers which are reflected in several aspects posed by the COVID-19. By contrast, the racism in the UK society continues to produce serious structural issues and inequalities for non-White HVET students during their transitions (Lessard-Phillips et al, 2014; Hooley et al, 2023).

**Key Words:** Transition; Higher Vocational Education and Training; China; UK; COVID-19

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## Introduction

Higher Vocational Education and Training (HVET) and university education are ideally complementary, yet often clash in terms of policy, public opinion, and student preferences. This issue is prevalent globally, particularly in China, where a significant and persistent gap exists between vocational and higher education in terms of educational quality, employment opportunities, and societal recognition. Regarding the development of the nation, China is currently undergoing a process of structural adjustment and transformation. However, the current HVET system fails to meet industry needs for highly skilled personnel, resulting in labour shortages across various sectors (Velde, 2009; Schmidtke & Chen, 2012; Morgan et al, 2017; Fan, 2020; Wiemann, 2021; Ling et al, 2021). This situation is similar to the UK's context, where Further Education<sup>1</sup> (FE) plays a vital role in the UK's national development, especially in providing a key contribution to economic development and enhancing the country's international competitiveness (Wolf, 2011; Fuller & Unwin, 2017). Nevertheless, the UK's FE has not fully kept pace with technological advances and changes in market demand, resulting in an insufficient supply of qualified skilled workers in a number of industries (Richmond, 2018; Social Market Foundation, 2019).

Additionally, the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (MoE, 2023) reports a substantial enrolment in China's HVET, with nearly 17 million students by 2022. By contrast, according to the UK's Department for Education (2023), FE enrolment also remains significant, nearing 3 million students. Figure 1 shows the student number changes from 2017 to 2022 in both countries, the size of HVET students in China has maintained growth in recent years, and the recent number in the UK is recovered to pre-2020 levels after dipping in 2020 and 2021. Therefore, without a deeper understanding and greater emphasis on the current situation of the HVET student group, China's and the UK's economic development may face significant hindrances in the future.

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<sup>1</sup> Further Education: Because the differences in education systems between China and the UK, the role of Further Education in the UK is similar to the Higher Vocational Education and Training in China (OECD, 2010).

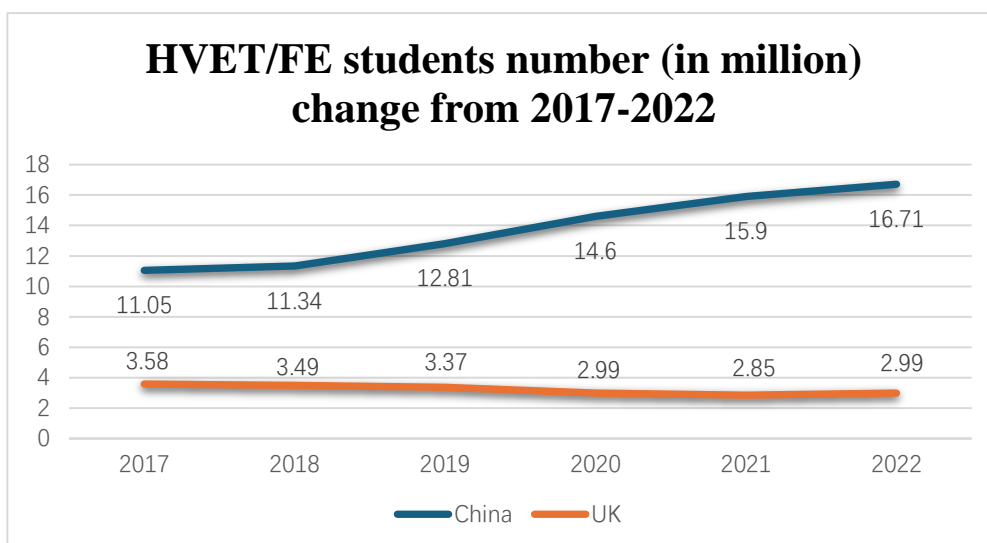


Figure 1. HVET students number change in China and the UK from 2017-2022  
(MoE, 2018-2023; DfE, 2023)

Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic is recognised universally as a major public health crisis, impacting the vast majority of nations globally (Zhang et al, 2022; Zou & Han, 2023). The pandemic has exerted diverse and complex effects across social, economic, political, and educational spheres in numerous nations (Li et al, 2023). Coupled with the unprecedented social and economic changes following COVID-19, this situation directly influences the developmental trajectories that HVET graduates choose post-graduation. Furthermore, students pursuing HVET in both China and the UK often possess lower-valued educational qualifications and are more likely to come from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds (Birdwell et al, 2011; Wang & Guo, 2019; Social Mobility Commission, 2021). Therefore, due to the impact of COVID-19, vulnerability and uncertainty have inevitably increased in the personal futures of current HVET graduates.

Given HVET's crucial role in economic progress, examining the factors influencing HVET students' transition experiences under the current complex circumstances is essential. This study explores the experiences and perspectives of future workers, aiming to investigate the post-college transition experiences of HVET students amid severe social crises. It seeks to identify and comprehend the critical factors influencing their transitions by applying the theoretical framework of *transition theory* (1981) to analyse the data. Importantly, a comparative analysis of the transition experiences of HVET students in China and the UK will enhance understanding of post-graduation transitions' significance and the practical differences in addressing students' career development and societal needs. This study is expected to offer valuable insights for enhancing HVET quality and fostering social and economic development in both countries.

## Literature Review

### *The Post-College Transition*

HVET graduates typically pursue one of two paths: seeking employment or further academic studies. Firstly, the school-to-work (SWT) transition. Previous studies have broadly defined the concept of SWT. A critical aspect is that SWT should be viewed as a continuous and lifelong process; it is non-linear and reversible, allowing young people to transition from education to productive and decent work (Nilsson, 2018; UNICEF, 2019; Schoon, 2020). Furthermore, SWT depends on whether individuals possess the talents required by the labour market and can obtain work opportunities that utilise their abilities (UNICEF, 2019). Generally, in SWT, the completion of full-time education and securing a full-time job signify a successful transition from school to work (Ashton & Ashton, 2016; Schoon, 2020).

Transitioning from school to the labour market is a critical and complex life stage for young people (Raiu, 2019; Siembab & Stawarz, 2017; Schoon & Heckhausen, 2019). In addition, during SWT, individuals must adjust to new tasks, roles, and responsibilities (Havighurst, 1972). SWT marks a tense period in life, significantly influencing future life trajectories. It is a make-or-break stage for individuals, considerably correlated with later life outcomes (Buchmann & Kriesi, 2011; Schulenberg & Schoon, 2012; Raiu, 2019). In terms of HVET students, SWT seems to have become a phase of life full of pressure due to the current economic and social changes.

The second trajectory in the post-college transition is the transition to higher education (TtH). Transition to higher education refers to the process through which students move from secondary education or vocational education to higher education institutions (Briggs et al, 2012). Notably, Griffen (2014) states that transitioning from vocational to university education necessitates social, financial, and emotional adjustments, a process further complicated for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Particularly, during this transition, it is essential for students to adapt to new learning styles, academic requirements, and assessment criteria, and to integrate into new social environments, forming friendships and building support networks (Gale & Parker, 2014). This adaptation is critical for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, who must acclimatise to the new university culture to manage academic, social, and emotional challenges (Katartzi & Hayward, 2020). In addition, regarding HVET students, their identity is challenged by new expectations and experiences in this transition, and if there is a clear mismatch between expectations and reality, then personal development is likely to be severely impaired (Krause & Coates, 2008).

### ***The current HVET in China and the UK***

This section will highlight the important contextual characteristics of the HVET in two different nations. HVET faces complex challenges in China, where it is negatively perceived by society. Social awareness is low, and there are strong prejudices and disapproval among families, with vocational institutions often seen as a last resort (Velde, 2009; Ling et al, 2021; Jaeger, 2014; Wang & Guo, 2019). This is primarily due to the influence of Confucianism, which has historically emphasised the inferiority of vocational education compared to academic education; Moreover, the substantial expansion of higher education in China and the selection mechanisms that favour academic education over vocational education have further entrenched this belief in society (Velde, 2009; Ling, 2015; Morgan et al, 2017; Wang & Guo, 2019).

Furthermore, the quality of HVET education remains unsatisfactory, with institutions lagging behind universities in curriculum, faculty quality, and teaching methods, and the disparity is widening (Ling, 2015; Hao & Zhang, 2020). Currently, HVET teaching staff face significant challenges due to inadequate financial resources and negative societal perceptions. These challenges include limited appeal for teachers, lower faculty quality compared to universities, and lack of specialised pedagogical training. Colleges also lack resources for teacher training and continuing education, limiting professional development. Consequently, higher vocational teachers face considerable challenges in teaching skills, academic credentials, working conditions, and knowledge levels (Wang, 2017). Moreover, the alignment between the HVET curriculum and industry needs in China is markedly weak as well (Velde, 2009; Schmidtke & Chen, 2012; Morgan et al, 2017; Hao & Zhang, 2020; Ling et al, 2021).

Significantly, over 70% of Chinese HVET students hail from rural areas, where academic performance is generally weak (Wang et al, 2014; MoE, 2021). Consequently, the post-college transition experiences for Chinese HVET students are likely to be adverse, regardless of their chosen trajectory, further exacerbating their cumulative disadvantages and diminishing their future prospects.

By contrast, the situation in the UK shares some similarities with China, including insufficient funding, low social recognition of vocational education, and limited employment opportunities (Wolf, 2011; Hodgson & Spours, 2018). However, several critical differences merit attention. Firstly, the UK's FE system is tightly integrated with industry accreditation and qualifications.

FE students can earn certificates or qualifications from industry organizations or professional bodies through FE colleges, which are highly valued for employment within relevant industries, thus boosting employability—a key advantage not provided by China's HVET (Nie et al, 2018). Additionally, the highly practice-oriented curriculum system and close integration with the industry in UK means FE could provide an improved quality and suitable education for students compared with China's HVET (ibid). More importantly, although vocational education in the UK has long been subject to a degree of social stigma, there have been important changes in recent years (Atkins & Flint, 2015; British Council, 2018). The government, educational institutions, and industry organizations actively advocate for the importance of vocational education, promote the value of skills training and vocational qualifications, and strive to reshape social perceptions and attitudes towards vocational education, thus continually enhancing its image in UK society (Atkins & Flint, 2015; British Council, 2018). Consequently, FE students in the UK may experience less social stigma than their counterparts in China.

Significantly, the COVID-19 pandemic has created an unprecedented learning environment for HVET students. Since spring 2020, online learning has emerged as the predominant educational method for nearly 23 million higher education students in China (The State Council, PRC, 2020). It is noteworthy that almost all HVET colleges were compelled to reorganise their teaching schedules rapidly to accommodate online courses. However, the limited time allocated for this transition led to numerous challenges (Han et al, 2020). According to a survey by Han et al (2020) involving 767 college leaders, 1709 HVET teachers, and 211,143 HVET students across various Chinese provinces, it is clear that relying exclusively on online learning for HVET's goal of occupational skill development presents significant challenges. More importantly, China's strict COVID-19 control measures, often referred to as the 'zero-COVID' policy, lasted for nearly three years from 2020 to 2022, which included extensive quarantines and lockdowns that could extend for months (Frontiers in Public Health, 2022; Wang et al, 2023; Cui, 2022), severely compromising the educational quality received by HVET students. Particularly, post-graduation employment prospects for HVET students are closely tied to their occupational skill levels. Yet, the dominance of online teaching as the main educational model significantly impedes these skills' development.

By contrast, during the COVID-19 pandemic, online teaching in the UK was implemented for a significant duration, with schools and colleges switching to remote learning in March 2020. Due to low engagement, a blended learning model was adopted by autumn 2020 (ONS, 2021). Although FE teaching in the UK shifted to online, the full online teaching mode was short-lived, with negative impacts on students' skills development persisting for only



around two months (Spours et al, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic has had a more detrimental impact on the occupational skills development of Chinese HVET students compared to their UK counterparts.

### ***Factors in Influencing the Post-College Transition***

#### *Quality of the HVET*

The quality of education is widely recognised as a determinant of success in both the SWT and TtH transitions (Schoon, 2020). Education can provide opportunities for students to acquire the necessary cognitive and non-cognitive abilities, significantly impacting their transition outcomes (Glewwe et al, 2017; Schoon & Heckhausen, 2019; Schoon, 2020). In detail, Glewwe et al (2017) define cognitive ability as the sum of previously acquired knowledge and the capacity to acquire new knowledge, which is highly dependent on one's educational experience. Conversely, Schoon & Heckhausen (2019) contend that, depending on the challenges of specific life course transitions, certain non-cognitive abilities may be more crucial than others. Non-cognitive competency encompasses a broad spectrum of abilities, including decision-making, self-regulation, problem-solving, creative thinking, effective communication, interpersonal skills, self-awareness, and stress management (Schoon & Heckhausen, 2019; Raiu, 2019). These abilities, crucial for successful transitions, are determined by the quality of education received.

#### *Qualification*

Currently, younger students require more education to qualify for certain jobs than was necessary in the past, a trend known as credentialism (Raiu, 2019). According to Schoon (2020), young people now require higher educational qualifications to compete in a dynamic labour market, with diverse qualifications increasingly necessary to secure higher incomes. In a risky society, various qualifications are becoming increasingly vital to maintain a position in the labour market (Bynner & Parsons, 2002). In this case, the qualification plays a critical signal for individuals in their job seeking, and indicates whether someone is qualified to do a particular job, especially for new graduates (Kong, 2017; Nilsson, 2018). Those who do not possess these required qualifications may face more difficulties not only in obtaining jobs, but also in maintaining any kind of occupation (Bynner & Parsons, 2002; Schoon, 2020). In terms of the value of qualifications in the labour market, previous research indicates that qualifications from a reputable university are the most valuable, followed by other universities, and vocational colleges at the bottom, this is reflected in graduates' job opportunities and income level (Kong & Jiang, 2011; Kong, 2017).

### *Identity*

In social science, identity is viewed as more collective, with a person's identity closely related to their role behaviour or the collection of group memberships that define them (Burke, 2020). In terms of the post-college transition, identity can play a key role in affecting individuals' experiences. Firstly, identity is strongly linked to social inequalities, such as racism and sexism, potentially complicating the transition for young people (Defloor et al, 2015). Furthermore, individual self-esteem levels, influenced by identity, can significantly impact personal agency and potentially offset negative experiences (Rosenberg, 1979; Judge et al, 2005; Siembab & Stawarz, 2017). Therefore, considering the role of identity, it may directly influence the challenges individuals face during transitions due to inherent identity characteristics or indirectly affect the transition experience by reducing self-esteem linked to identity issues.

### *Socioeconomic Background*

Socioeconomic background has always been a key consideration in previous studies on transition. This is because social-economic background may determine the foundation of one's survival in the process of growing up, which have a lasting and profound impact on an individual's future. Furthermore, social stratification continues to restrict individual experiences today (Breen & Goldthorpe, 2001). According to Boudou (2006), social stratification vertically segregates individuals based on material wealth, power, and reputation. This indicates significant variations in socioeconomic backgrounds among individuals. It is worth noticing that not only is the socioeconomic background of young people crucial in determining the outcome of the post-college transition, but its influence will persist throughout the life course.

Regarding post-college transitions, both SWT and TtH, are significantly influenced by opportunities and limitations in education and employment dictated by socioeconomic conditions, evident in family status indicators like parental education, employment, income, and social position (Yoshikawa et al, 2012; Ng-Knight & Schoon, 2017; Schoon & Heckhausen, 2019). The disparity in SWT experiences between the wealthy and the poor is widening, with many young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds struggling to navigate the SWT (Raiu, 2019). The need for personal capital places additional pressure on those from disadvantaged backgrounds, who are more likely to encounter obstacles during the transition process (Bynner & Parsons, 2002; Ng-Knight & Schoon, 2017). Compared to their privileged peers, they face greater challenges in securing employment and adapting to new university environments (Archer et al, 2003; Furlong & Cartmel, 2007; Furstenberg, 2008; Lui et al, 2014).

### ***Labour Market Situation after the COVID-19***

For HVET students in both countries, employment commonly represents a major post-college trajectory. This means the current labour market situation is significant for the transition experience for HVET graduates.

Since 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly affected China's economy, leading to a substantial economic downturn (Guerrieri et al, 2020; Tan et al, 2022; Zou & Han, 2023). The country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) contracted by 6.8% (Zou & Han, 2023). Furthermore, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) revised its 2022 economic growth forecast for China downwards by 1.1 percent. This adjustment brings the prediction to the lowest level observed in over four decades (Wu et al., 2022). It is important to mention that 2023 is the first year since China lifted stringent lockdown policies, potentially heralding a favourable economic trend. In 2023, China's GDP grew by 5.5% in the first half of the year, indicating a favourable trend, according to the National Bureau of Statistics of China (NBSC-a, 2023). However, while the tertiary sector grew by 6.4%, the secondary sector—closely linked to HVET—grew only 4.3%, below the average (NBSC-b, 2023).

Moreover, indirect losses must be considered when assessing the social and economic impacts of disasters (Carrera et al, 2015). The COVID-19 outbreak led to significant indirect economic losses, including output stoppages, disruptions in industrial linkages, and declines in investment premiums (Rose, 2004; Rose et al, 2007). COVID-19 caused substantial damage to many industries in China. For instance, the tourism industry's decline in 2020 resulted in a production loss of \$921 billion along the supply chain, accounting for approximately 7% of China's GDP in 2019 (Lee et al, 2024). Indirect economic losses have a substantial impact on the overall scale of losses, spreading across the economy and posing a significant obstacle to economic recovery (Tan et al, 2022).

The COVID-19 outbreak has had a substantial and negative impact on the global labour market. A sudden increase in business challenges led to widespread unemployment and a general decline in earnings (Wu et al, 2022). Research by Mongey et al (2020), Hoehn-Velasco et al (2021), and Hoshi et al (2022) confirms that unemployment rates in the United States, Mexico, and Japan have worsened due to socioeconomic fluctuations caused by the pandemic. A common pattern among the unemployed includes individuals with low levels of education, younger ages, and females. Recent studies in China have revealed similar characteristics among the unemployed.

For instance, in a longitudinal study of nearly half a million individuals aged over 25 in

Guangdong province, Li et al (2023) noted a 72% increase in unemployment after the onset of COVID-19, compared to the pre-pandemic period. This surge in unemployment also resulted in a 57% increase in applications for unemployment benefits (ibid). In particular, Guangdong province's unemployment rate has increased from 2.26% in 2019 to 5.3% in 2022 (Li et al, 2023; People's Government of Guangdong Province, 2023). Notably, Feng et al. (2017) have noted that there is widespread scepticism about the reliability of China's official unemployment rates, with a common belief that the actual rates are much higher than reported. Moreover, the characteristics of China's unemployed groups also match those of studies in other countries, with low educational attainment being the most obvious common denominator (Che et al, 2020; Zhang et al, 2022). Overall, the COVID-19 caused a significant adverse effect on China's labour market, resulting in an increasing unemployment rate (Zhang et al, 2022; Zou & Han, 2023).

Remarkably, with the reopening of China since December 2022, with most of the COVID-19 control measures having been cancelled, it seems probable that there will be a resurgence in the job market after the epidemic, however, disappointingly, China's labour market remained persistently stagnant throughout 2023 (Li et al, 2023). Globally, the rates of unemployment among young individuals tend to surpass the overall average level of unemployment (Pilz, 2017). In 2022, the global youth unemployment rate rose to 14.9%, significantly higher than the overall average of 5.77% (ILO: International Labour Organization, 2023). In particular, the persistent upward trajectory of China's youth (16-25 years old) unemployment, seen since the onset of the COVID-19, has persisted into 2023, culminating in a surge to an alarming rate of 21.3% in the month of June 2023, which is much higher than the global average level of 10.9% (NBSC-c, 2023; OECD, 2023). Notably, after June 2023, the Chinese government ceased public reporting of the youth unemployment rate.

By contrast, the COVID-19 pandemic caused a severe economic downturn in the UK, with an unprecedented drop in GDP during the first national lockdown in 2020 (Gupta et al, 2023). Especially, the UK's economic change has also had to consider the additive effects of Brexit in recent years. According to Bissoondeal et al (2023), the UK's economy has been disrupted to a large extent by the interplay between Brexit and COVID-19, causing a sharp increase in uncertainty and turbulence for businesses and individuals. Specifically, the UK's economy declined for two quarters during COVID-19 and post-Brexit before beginning to rise again in 2021 (ibid). Additionally, according to Springford's (2022) calculations, the UK's GDP is 5.2% lower than it would have been if Brexit had not occurred. The Bank of England (2021) has predicted a potential decline of approximately 3.25% in GDP, and they anticipate that the majority of the impact on GDP will occur during the following three years. However, Zhao et al (2023) note that government support programmes helped avert a potentially

tricky economic situation following Brexit and COVID-19, with the UK's economy performing better than expected under the shock of Brexit and the COVID-19 and has avoided a serious recession. In 2023, the UK's GDP grew by 0.1%, following a 4.3% increase in 2022. In Q1 2024, the GDP rose by 0.6% from the previous quarter, reaching 1.7% above its pre-pandemic level (Q4 2019) (ONS, 2023; HCL: House of Commons Library, 2024).

Notably, the UK's unemployment rate did not experience a sharp rise due to the pandemic and Brexit but rather saw brief fluctuations before stabilizing at a modest level. Regarding the unemployment rate among young people, it fluctuated slightly since 2020 but remained at 11.9% in 2023 (House of Commons Library, 2024), indicating a more favourable employment situation for current HVET graduates compared to their counterparts in China. Figure 2 illustrates the comparison of young people's unemployment rates from 2020 to 2023 between the two countries. Initially, the difference in unemployment rates between the two countries was only 0.7%. However, over time, these rates diverged significantly. China's unemployment rate has been rising and reached a peak of 21.3% in June 2023, meaning the difference has expanded to almost 10% compared to the UK. Clearly, China's HVET students face more severe challenges during their SWT compared to UK students.

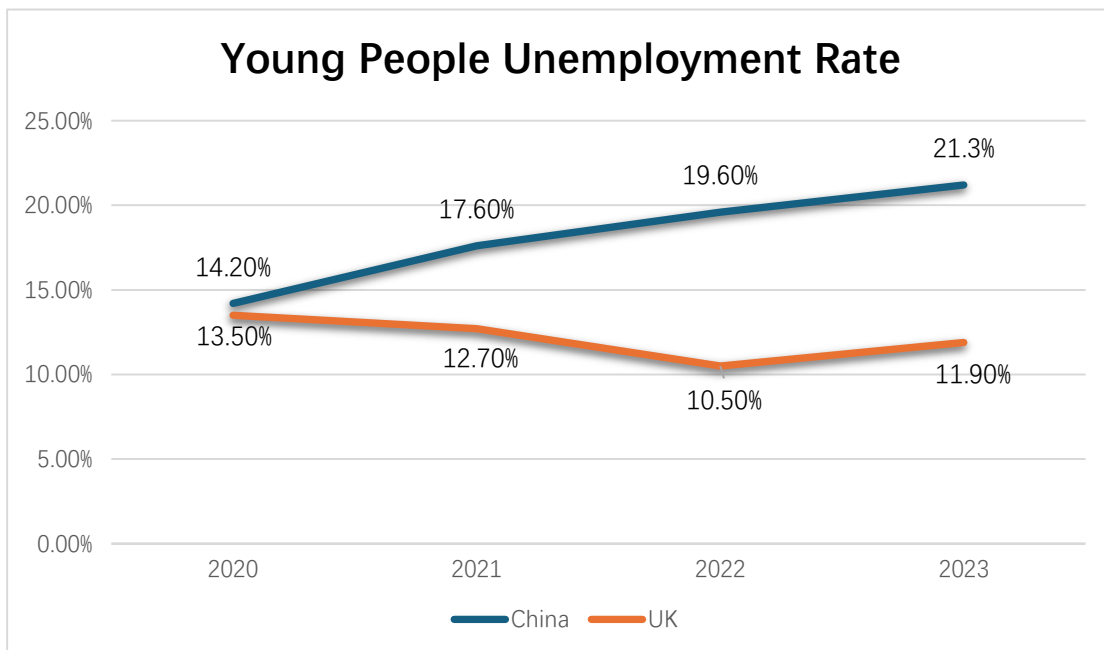


Figure 2. Young people unemployment rate in China and the UK from 2020-2023 (NBSC-c, 2023; Statista, 2024; HCL, 2024)

## Conceptual Framework

This study utilises Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1981) as its conceptual framework. This is mainly because this conception aims to provide a tool for understanding the differences in experience between individuals undergoing a particular transition, and has been used to study transitions in a variety of scenarios (Gray et al, 2022). Schlossberg first proposed this notion from the paper 'A model for analysing human adaptation to transition' in 1981. This theory can be used to analyse and understand a wide variety of individual transitions, emphasising the psychological and social adjustments that individuals undergo during the transition process, thereby providing the contribution for the development of possible interventions.

Schlossberg (1981) divided 'transitions' into three categories: anticipated (such as graduation), unanticipated (such as sudden unemployment), and non-events (such as an expected promotion is unsuccessful). In this study, HVET students' post-college transition could be identified as the anticipated transition type. Furthermore, beyond the type of transition, it is essential to consider the context and its impact on the transition. Here, 'context' refers to the relationship between the individual and both the transition and the environment (Schlossberg et al, 1995; Evans et al, 1998). An individual's interpretation of a transition is shaped by their context, as they navigate various life stages and encounter both anticipated and unexpected events.

In this transition theory, three primary dimensions influence an individual's experience and adaptation: their perception of the transition, environmental characteristics before and after the transition, and personal attributes (Schlossberg, 1981). Specifically, Schlossberg (1981) pointed out that the experience of the transition is dominated by the interplay of individual factors (like socioeconomic background), environmental factors (such as social culture), and the nature of the transition (like the degree of role change). Additionally, Gary et al (2022) emphasise that understanding an individual's transition experience requires consideration of key personal characteristics including identity, life trajectory, and family background. For the HVET group, the important features like the social stigma on HVET identity and weak socioeconomic status could particularly influence their transition experience.

More importantly, the perception of the transition is more important than the actual transition (Schlossberg, 1981), because it is the person experiencing the transition who can define and determine the meaning of the transition (Flowers et al, 2014). Particularly, the complexity of transition stems from its impact on all areas of life, it is reflected in the degree to which it alters one's relationships, daily lives, and roles (Schlossberg et al, 1995; Flowers et al, 2014). Individual transitions play a crucial role in shaping interpretations of the past,

future expectations, and strategies for action. Thus, the transition theory could provide an effective theoretical tool for understanding HVET students' post-college transition and capturing critical factors in influencing their transition experience.

## Methodology

This study employs an exploratory qualitative design involving both primary and secondary data collection. The primary data is gathered in China by utilising interview methodologies to acquire domain-specific understandings of the subjective human experience of HVET students in Xi'an city, Shaanxi province, China (Cohen et al., 2018). Specifically, the research explores the post-college transition experiences of new HVET graduates and identifies the key internal and external factors influencing these experiences. The central research question investigates how Chinese HVET students perceive and understand the factors influencing their post-college transitions. A follow-up semi-structured interview method is used to gather participants' 'life experiences' and 'personal perceptions' in order to analyse their transition process. This approach enables participants to offer detailed explanations, respond to questions, and describe their experiences, yielding comprehensive data (Trainor & Graue, 2012).

The primary data for this study was collected from 20 HVET students from four HVET colleges in Xi'an city. The study employed both snowball and purposive sampling methods to ensure sample inclusivity and heterogeneity (Punch, 2014). Data collection occurred in two stages: the first from August to October 2023, and the second from December 2023 to January 2024, comprising a total of 40 online interviews with all 20 participants. Interviews were audio-recorded, each lasting an average of 40 minutes. Interview data were transcribed and translated verbatim using transcription services or a combination of natural language processing software and manual verification. An individual approach was used rather than group interviews or surveys, to recognise the personal and potentially emotional nature of the research, which attempts to draw a picture of the student's transition. In terms of establishing the UK context data for the comparison to Chinese context, a secondary study approach is used by adopting a broader literature review. However, there has been little research on the post-college transition of HVET students with the UK context for a long time, especially in the post COVID-19 period. The literature review was expanded to include a broader range of student groups, aiming to capture potential similarities with the HVET population. Official reports were also analysed in order to address this challenge.

Subsequently, thematic analysis was employed to examine both the primary and secondary data collected (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher used thematic analysis to create codes and arrange codes into themes then iterate on themes by merging and rearranging them to establish the relation to the transition theory framework. Data collection was conducted on a voluntary basis, with all participants required to provide written informed consent before participating.



Five pilot interviews were conducted to verify the accuracy and suitability of the interview schedule; however, these were not included in the final analysis. The study sample comprised 20 participants, including nine males and eleven females, with 13 participants from rural areas and seven from urban areas. Participants details are demonstrated in Table 1 and Table 2.

*Table 1. Overview of sample demographics*

<b>Classification</b>	<b>Participants Numbers</b>
<b>Gender</b>	
Male	9
Female	11
<b>Institution</b>	
<b>Major</b>	
English language teaching	4
Electric locomotive operation and maintenance	3
Preschool education	6
Finance management	4
Animation production	2
Film & Multimedia	1
<b>Family Background</b>	
City	7
Rural	13
<b>Siblings</b>	
0	5
≥1	15
<b>Living Expenses (CNY)/Month</b>	
500-999	1
1000-1499	11
1500-2000	6
≥2000	2
<b>Total Participants</b>	<b>20</b>

Table 2. Details of sample information

Number	Name (anonymity)	Gender	Destination
1	Qiaohui	Female	University
2	Jingyu	Female	Work
3	Moli	Female	University
4	Tianran	Female	University
5	Xing	Male	Work
6	Hongjin	Male	Work
7	Yong	Male	Work
8	Luyao	Male	Work
9	Zhaokun	Male	University
10	Huanfeng	Male	University
11	Yizhuo	Female	University
12	Lei	Male	University
13	Tongnan	Male	University
14	Fugui	Male	University
15	Yuwei	Female	University
16	Wanting	Female	Work
17	Keer	Female	Work
18	Jiaran	Female	Work
19	Ziyi	Female	University
20	Nianxin	Female	University

## Findings

I discuss the findings in relation to four overarching themes. First, I examine the identity stigma as the main external factor for influencing the tensions between China's current society and the HVET student's transition. Secondly, individual factors such as occupational skills and financial pressures are explored in the context of personal transitions. Thirdly, the impact of the employment market and educational curricula in both colleges and universities on participants' transition experiences is analysed. Finally, the discussion highlights the principal disparities between the Chinese and UK contexts concerning the critical factors affecting HVET students' post-college transitions. Besides, illustrative quotes are given along with pseudonyms for the participants.

### ***HVET Identity Stigma***

During the initial interviews, all participants reported experiencing significant societal discrimination and prejudice in the past due to their HVET identity. When discussing this particular identity, participants exhibited a general lack of confidence and acceptance towards it. Specifically, Participants also commonly anticipated ongoing discrimination and prejudice related to their HVET identity after graduation. Participants were able to identify scenarios of discrimination across different transition paths, with some expressing a degree of resignation and even acceptance of this inequality. Moli expressed concerns about potential prejudice from university teachers in the future:

*I think most universities have significant discrimination against college-to-university students, especially from university teachers. (Moli, First Interview)*

Lei asserted that facing employment discrimination from various enterprises and employers is inevitable for HVET students entering the labour market:

*There is no doubt that we will encounter employment discrimination in the future. Employers will definitely discriminate against us, both in terms of recruitment and salary. (Lei, First Interview)*

In particular, Ziyi believed that the stigma of the HVET identity is already ingrained in China's society, so it is understandable that she might be discriminated against anywhere in the future:

*I think in China, as long as a person has attended a college, then no matter where he goes in the future, he will definitely be discriminated against, whether it is in the*

*university or in the society, the others and public will think that this person is not a good person. (Ziyi, First Interview)*

It is clear that after the values of HVET students are adjusted by the social environment, they possess a clear understanding of the disparities that this identity may encounter in Chinese society. Crucially, Chinese HVET students must contend with serious and inevitable identity-based inequalities throughout their transition period. Notably, all participants who progressed to university confirmed that college-to-university students are systematically segregated within these institutions:

*The university established a separate vocational education institute for us. All college-to-university students, regardless of major, are grouped to study in this specific building, isolated from undergraduates. This deliberate segregation fosters significant resentment among us, as we perceive it as profound discrimination. (Huanfeng, Second Interview)*

Besides, there are a number of other types of identity inequalities occurred against CU students. For instance, Qiaohui reported further information:

*This university is full of discrimination against those of us from college. From the university management, teachers, and undergraduate students, they have all openly discriminated against us personally. We were not only subjected to mocking but also excluded from all university activities. In academic competitions, our spots are often taken away and given to undergraduates by university managers. When we protested, we were not only treated unfairly but also faced unexpected humiliation. I now live with daily anger and pain. (Qiaohui, Second Interview)*

It can be observed that there is a widespread severe identity discrimination and prejudice against CU students by the university. Geographically, CU students are deliberately confined to a 'concentration cage', making their HVET identity more conspicuous. In other words, this segregation not only thwarts CU students' hopes of shedding their HVET identity but also significantly increases their exposure to discrimination and prejudice. Importantly, there are no official documents, such as government policies and university regulations that explicitly dictate the educational management manner that universities should employ for CU students. However, all universities use this specific segregation mode coincidentally for CU students without clarifying the purpose of adopting it for students. Notably, without a clear explanation, CU students perceive this segregation as overt discrimination, adversely affecting their university experience.

Based on the findings, other types of inequalities on the HVET identity are also commonly happening in different scenarios in the university. This situation demonstrates clear social exclusion, likely stemming from the historical stigma attached to HVET. Notably, this situation is closely related to previous studies which pointed out that the current social exclusion on campus showed that the traditional expressions of a strategy to remove 'bad' students from school have been substituted with a lack of respect, restrictions on rights, and diminished opportunities (Wright et al, 2000; Macrae et al, 2003). Participants did not report any effective strategies to deal with the current negative situation, but could only quietly suffer the various inequalities brought on by the university.

In terms of participants entering the employment trajectory, they generally encountered employment discrimination scenarios consistent with their predictions. Luyao reported that he was often discriminated against by employers during his job search experience:

*Job interview order is frequently based on educational background, with HVET students typically scheduled among the last. Each time I begin an interview, the recruiter becomes impatient and scornful, quickly dismissing me after asking only a few questions. (Luyao, Second Interview)*

In addition, Young resented the discrimination from his colleagues:

*Some colleagues often assert that their undergraduate degrees make them superior to me, as I am just a college graduate. They also frequently suggest that I must have used disagreeable methods to get hired because I am from a college. I was very angry and had conflicts with them. (Young, Second Interview)*

Furthermore, Keer expressed her dissatisfaction with the fact that the job position and content are the same, but the salary is different because of the educational background:

*Despite identical job positions, work content, and experience, a colleague with a bachelor's degree earns 200 CNY more per month than I do. Isn't this blatant discrimination? (Keer, Second Interview)*

The SW (School to Work) group reacted less intensely to identity discrimination in employment compared to the CU group, possibly because their discrimination occurred in more random, personal scenarios rather than through formal, systemic means. However, the SW group does not accept this inequality situation without protest and remain

dissatisfied with the discrimination they faced.

Crucially, regardless of their post-college path, students continue to face discrimination based on their HVET identity, both during and after their college careers. In other words, the adverse consequences of the HVET identity are adhered to in students' personal life transitions. Despite the HVET students having a certain degree of psychological preparation for this situation before the transition began, it still seems to be far underestimated than the level of social exclusion of the HVET identity in China's society.

### ***Occupational Skills and Socioeconomic Background***

#### *Occupational Skills*

The main objective of the HVET is to offer students instruction in cultivating certain occupational skills. Particularly when HVET students join the job market, they typically have to depend on the occupational skills they acquired in college to navigate the market. However, since the COVID-19 pandemic started, the emergency transition of learning from traditional classroom-based instruction to online platforms has presented significant challenges in terms of HVET students' acquisition of occupational skills. Participants were generally extremely dissatisfied with the efficacy and quality of both imparting and receiving occupational skills through online instruction. For example, Luyao conducted a comparison between online education and in-person teaching and found that the former was insufficient and inefficient in developing students' specific occupational skills, therefore not meeting the students' demands:

*I prefer in-person classes because the teacher can observe my operations and immediately assist with any questions. Online classes, however, are terrible—they don't allow for timely or practical guidance for each student. (Luyao, First Interview)*

Furthermore, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, certain face-to-face professional courses, competitions, and internships were also cancelled, systematically depriving students from accessing learning opportunities to improve their occupational skills. Wanting was frustrated that she was not getting enough learning opportunities, and knew that this meant the potential skills gap between her and older competitors in the labour market would continue to widen:

*Now we can only record our practice then send to the teacher to see, the learning outcome is much worse than in-person teaching. Besides, many competitions we could have participated in were cancelled due to the pandemic, making it difficult to*

*measure up to students from previous years and hindering any chance to develop our occupational skills. (Wanting, First Interview)*

In addition, during the process of the SWT, especially when participants first enter the labour market, the lack of occupational skills makes them encounter great challenges in seeking jobs. Xing reported the dilemma which he experienced many times:

*Finding a job is really difficult now. My inadequate job skills have led to repeated failures in interviews. Many companies do not provide skills training, leaving me uncertain about how to proceed. (Xing, Second Interview)*

Notably, even if some participants did find jobs, it was difficult to meet the job requirements because they are not equipped with sufficient occupational skills. Under this circumstance, they not only needed to spend extra time and energy, but also needed to find feasible ways by themselves to improve personal skills level for maintaining their employment stability. Like Jingyu highlighted:

*My teaching skills are very inadequate, which makes me anxious daily, fearing potential layoffs. Now I'm trying to learn teaching methods from experienced teachers and then go online to find some teaching videos to watch. (Jingyu, Second Interview)*

As can be seen from the participants' experiences, the absence of adequate occupational skills poses significant challenges to them at all stages of the transition into the SWT. HVET students are convinced that the most important reason for their inadequate skills is that online teaching has replaced traditional classroom teaching for their practical courses during the pandemic.

### *Socioeconomic Background*

The socioeconomic backgrounds of HVET students, as highlighted in this study, corroborate findings from previous research, which indicate that these students predominantly come from disadvantaged socioeconomic sectors. Specifically, 65% (13 out of 20) of the participants hail from rural areas, while fewer than 20% are from major urban districts. Furthermore, the geographic distribution of participants' family locations reflects a stratification consistent with various social classes.

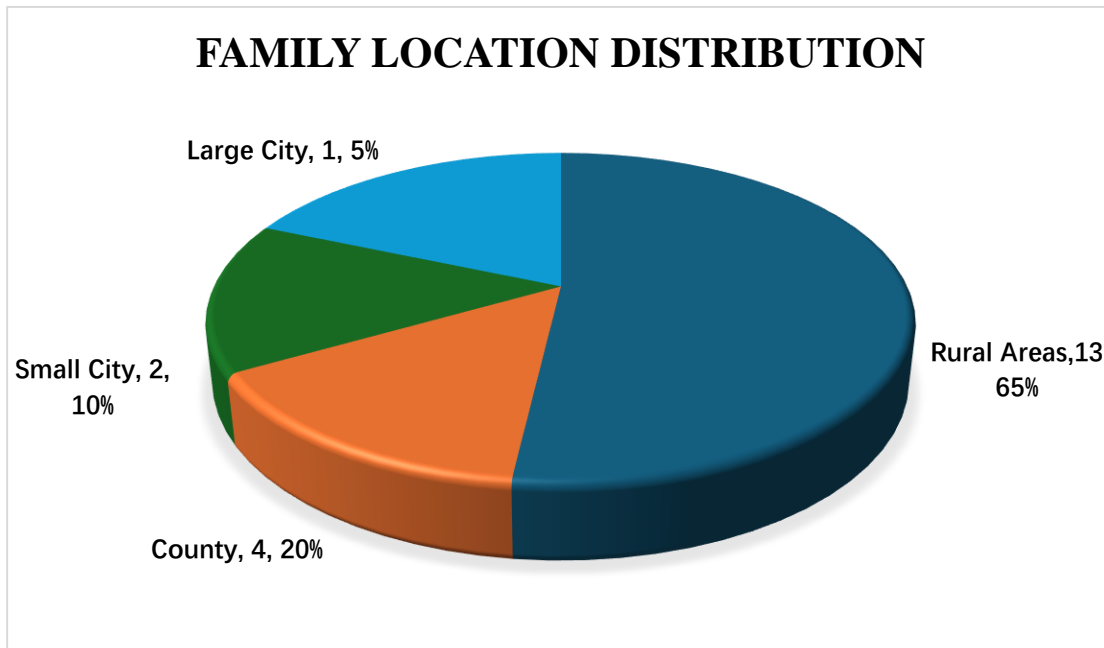


Figure 3. Family location distribution of participants

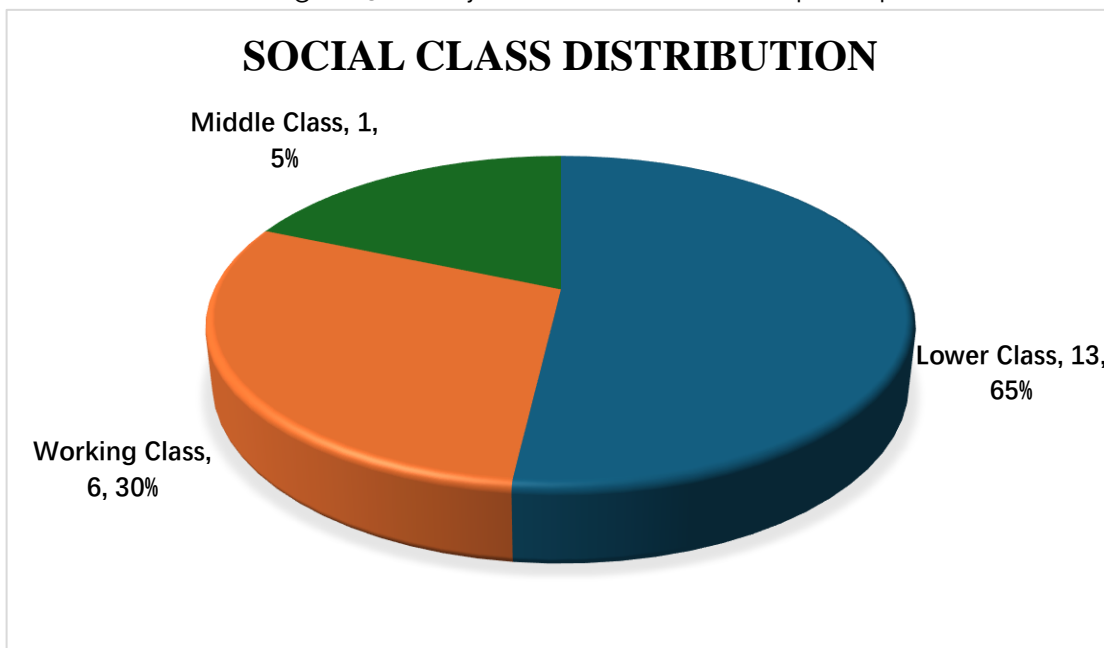


Figure 4. Social class distribution of participants

The average monthly living expenses for Chinese adult students varies depending on their location. According to previous surveys of China's higher education student consumption (Statista, 2023), the average monthly living cost for students in large cities has reached about 2,000 CNY. However, only two participants' living expenses are over the average level in this study, and the rest of participants are all below the average level. Furthermore, more than a half of the participants are far from the average. In other words, the HVET students' economic position is generally weak due to the financial constraints imposed by their disadvantaged familial background. In this study, not surprisingly, all participants who from



rural areas said the only support they had from their families, whether they chose to go to work or university, was only very limited financial support. In other words, their family cannot offer any useful cultural or social capital<sup>2</sup> for them to enhance their experience of the SWT or TtH (see details in Bourdieu, 1986).

The significant financial pressure affected Jingyu who had to change her post-college trajectory from TtH to the SWT:

*I passed the university entrance exam, but the tuition was too expensive for my family, forcing me to seek employment instead. (Jingyu, First Interview)*

Wanting who is from a rural area wanted to stay in the city to find a job, but the cost of daily living was overwhelming, and her family not only cannot help her, but also expected her to be able to provide financial support for the family. She described her current situation:

*Now I can only share a poor apartment with six other girls, not only is the transportation not convenient, but the geographical location is also very remote. But I can only choose here because the price is cheap, the current accommodation only costs 500 CNY a month, while those slightly better places are more than 1000 CNY or even 2000 CNY. I also have a younger brother in school, my parents hope I can share the financial burden of the family, I am in a bad mood every day, I think I have been depressed. (Wanting, First Interview)*

In addition, Jiaran, who has worked in the city for some time, thought it was difficult to survive in the city on one's own without any financial support from their family.

*I am extremely unsatisfied with my current life, my work intensity is very high, and I work more than 60 hours a week, but my salary is less than 3000 CNY a month. I'm sure you know what kind of quality of life such a low wage can provide. My family is not rich and has no money to support me now. I feel it's so hard every day. I think I can't go on anymore soon. (Jiaran, Second Interview)*

It can be observed that the current high level of financial stress experienced by HVET students stems from the prevailing weak socioeconomic background of their families which creates a significant barrier to their transition experience. Regarding the participants, the financial pressure is more likely to affect the SWT group rather than the TtH group. This

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<sup>2</sup> Bourdieu's capital theory: it argues that different capitals owned by individuals can determine their positions in the social stratification structure, and further influence the pattern of social behaviors. More specifically, there are three forms of capital, namely economic, social, and cultural capital.

may be mainly due to the fact that participants in university not only receive more family support, but their daily costs are generally lower than those of currently employed individuals. This is not to say that financial stress has little impact on the transition experience of the TtH group, but in the personal scenario of the SWT group, the relationship between financial pressure and their personal lives is already extremely strained.

More importantly, although in the transition theory, occupational skills and socioeconomic background are both important individual factors that affect the transition experience, both two factors exhibit significant homogeneity among the participants in this study, particularly in terms of low-level occupational skills. This reminds us to examine these factors cautiously and not simply attribute them to individual traits.

### ***The Employment Market and The Curriculum***

#### *The Employment Market*

China's macroeconomy has been experiencing a significant downturn since 2018 due to the confluence of several factors, including the global economic slump, the impact of the pandemic, and the ongoing financial tensions between China and the United States. Notably, all participants exhibit a great lack of understanding on the prevailing economic change in China. This observation further suggests that students may encounter difficulties in establishing links between information at the national level and their own life experiences, thereby resulting in a limited and insensitive awareness of broader personal developments. However, despite their limited understanding of China's macroeconomic changes, the participants possessed a certain level of perception of the contraction of China's current labour market resulting from national economic changes from their transition experience.

Since 2020, the sharp rise in the youth unemployment rate has further exacerbated the challenges faced by HVET students in their pursuit of suitable employment opportunities. In this study, participants prevalently considered their employment prospects as becoming increasingly pessimistic. In particular, Wanting and Luyao highlighted the recruitment change in the labour market:

*My friends and I are finding it very difficult to find a job now, there are very few available jobs on the market, and we feel there are almost 80% fewer suitable jobs this year compared to last year. (Wanting, First Interview)*

Furthermore, Luyao observed the recruitment thresholds have been rising:

*In the past, the recruitment requirement for the same job position was friendly, but now they require three years of work experience or a minimum bachelor's degree. This is a disaster for me. (Luyao, First Interview)*

In particular, although they may not fully understand the specific causes and consequences of economic fluctuations, they possess the capacity to discern the pervasive insecurity that permeates the labour market. Keer provided detailed information about the pervasive issue of salary reductions:

*Our basic salary as a formal kindergarten teacher has dropped from 2000 CNY to 800 CNY, and even then no one wants to quit because other schools are laying off staff for a period. It's so hard to find a job currently, and having a job, even at a low salary, is much better than no job at all. (Keer, Second Interview)*

In terms of the SWT students, they are currently in an insecure and high-risk labour market. As a result of the declining labour market, HVET students are at a great disadvantage throughout the process of SWT, having to accept an increase in the difficulty of obtaining employment, a decrease in income, and a more unpredictable work situation.

### *The Curriculum*

In this study, the proportion of participants who reported satisfaction with the college curriculum remained low. Specifically, the primary source of discontent among participants over the present curriculum pertains to the excessive emphasis on theoretical courses and the increasing demand for a greater inclusion of practical courses. In contrast, a mere five participants indicated a preference for requiring more theoretical courses. Most participants shared a similar perspective like Huanfeng:

*I am dissatisfied with the college curriculum, there are too many theoretical courses, and I would like to have more practical courses. I need to learn practical skills rather than theoretical knowledge, and I think such vocational education curriculum is ineffective for us. (Huanfeng, First Interview)*

HVET students' need for effective development of their occupational skills through the curriculum is obvious. However, the current college curriculum is inadequate in meeting the tangible learning outcomes students need. This scenario may explain the current problem encountered by students without occupational skills. Some participants blamed

the college for SWT failure and were unsatisfied with the curriculum. Such as Hongjin mentioned:

*For my employment, the college is of no use except to offer me a diploma. The curriculum played little role in my ability development. (Hongjin, Second Interview)*

The curriculum of the HVET often diverges significantly from other educational programmes due to distinct educational objectives. Institutions must exercise considerable deliberation in determining the optimal ratio balance between theoretical and practical courses, particularly with regard to fostering students' knowledge construction and occupational skills. Furthermore, the curriculum must also take into careful consideration the general characteristics of the HVET student population, particularly when they have encountered numerous setbacks in their K12 education. Their previous academic failures may serve as evidence of the potential mismatch between this group of students and a curriculum with a high emphasis on theoretical courses.

Participants who entered the university frequently reported struggling to adapt to the new curriculum system. In the TtH group, only one out of 12 participants felt she can adapt well to the university curriculum and the rest of the participants felt considerably stressed about the new curriculum. Moli's words are typical:

*The university curriculum is full of theoretical courses, which are not only boring but also very difficult. I can't understand these courses well since the beginning of my university studies, which brings me lots of pressure. I think it is difficult to adapt to the university curriculum, and so do my surrounding classmates. (Moli, Second Interview)*

Plausibly, the theoretical nature of the university curriculum and the insufficient academic ability of the HVET students have become a difficult contradiction to reconcile in the transition process of this group. With the additive influence of the systemic exclusion from the institutional level, further exacerbates the challenges faced by HVET students who already lack support in dealing with their existing academic issues. Importantly, the impact of the curriculum on HVET students' post-college transition operates on two levels: the college curriculum fails to meet students' learning needs, negatively affecting their SWT, while the university curriculum creates serious challenges for their TtH.

### ***Where Is the Gap?***

Initially, the post-college transition for the UK students is similarly not optimistic. According to Katartzi and Hayward (2020), the UK's VET programmes offer low labour market returns,

exacerbating the marginalisation of this group. Generally, in their post-college transition, many of these young people can find neither secure employment nor career options that enhance their employability, and as a result experience high levels of employment and learning 'turbulence', often moving between employment, unemployment and education (Thompson, 2017). Compared with China's situation, there are several similarities in the critical factors affecting the HVET group's transition experience.

Firstly, the *socioeconomic background* plays a vital role in affecting UK students' transition. Green (2017) asserts that parental resources determine an individual's post-16-years-old transition experience. Bradley and Waller (2017) also claim that social class has been observed to be important in determining an individual's employment outcomes after graduation. Particularly, Macmillan et al (2015) highlight that students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds have access to more social capital to support their personal transition and career building. More importantly, when HVET students fail to gain access to personal development opportunities, it is less likely to be the result of any individual or family failure or lack of ambition, and more likely to be the result of an unequal competitive environment that places objective and subjective barriers in the way of meaningful opportunities for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds (Gewirtz et al, 2024).

For example, an information gap may exist, where disadvantaged individuals lack information about available opportunities and how to access them. Institutions and communities in disadvantaged areas may lack access to information about scholarships, internships, or developmental programs compared to affluent areas. According to Hodkinson et al. (1996), the decision-making of young individuals is significantly constrained by their 'horizons for action'. These horizons are shaped by quality education, training, and employment opportunities, and are reflected in an individual's perception of risk, needs, and personal effectiveness (Ball, 2000; Gewirtz et al., 2024). Compared to disadvantaged groups, "secure" individuals are less likely to feel their horizons are limited and are more likely to have access to better development opportunities (Ball, 2000). From a subjective perspective, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds may feel powerless in the face of competition due to prolonged disadvantage (Bandura, 1997). This psychological barrier is particularly pronounced when facing unfair competition. In general, low socioeconomic groups lacked confidence in finding good jobs during the pandemic, which aligns with extensive study findings (Hooley et al., 2023).

Secondly, the *university curriculum* makes the TtH for vocational students more complicated and challenging. In Katartzi and Hayward's (2020) study, which focused on the transition to higher education for students with a vocational background, participants

commonly expressed that university courses excessively prioritising theoretical knowledge hindered their successful transition, causing them to feel conflicted and anxious, presenting substantial academic challenges, and increasing the likelihood of dropping out.

Finally, regarding the impact of social stigma on TVET identity and its effect on students' transition, very little research focuses on this phenomenon in the UK context. Specifically, TVET is partly constructed as a career option for those of lower social status, and TVET graduates may feel that their occupations are being devalued in the UK's society (Ellis-Sloan, 2014; Ryan & Lőrinc, 2018). However, it is worth noticing that the recent image of TVET has been improving in the UK. For example, according to Atkins and Flint's (2015) study, they gathered qualitative data from two UK colleges and found that although all participants still viewed TVET had lower societal esteem, the picture began to brighten. Furthermore, the UK Department for Education has implemented several initiatives to boost the image of TVET. These include the introduction of T-Levels, a new technical qualification designed to be on par with A-Levels, and the publication of the 'Skills for Jobs' white paper, which shows the government's strategy and determination for improving TVET (Relly, 2022). Besides, over the last decade, the Edge Foundation worked to transform public perceptions of TVET as a way of supporting the UK government's target to improve the TVET image (British Council, 2018). This evidence clearly demonstrates that the social stigma surrounding TVET in the UK is diminishing.

In terms of the differences between China and the UK, it is evident that the social stigma associated with HVET and the COVID-19 pandemic have had more severe impacts on China's HVET students' post-college transition experiences. This is reflected in the UK's lighter social stigma on TVET, the hybrid teaching methods for UK students during the COVID-19 pandemic which allowed them to access and practice their occupational skills, and the youth unemployment rate in the UK being almost 10% lower than in China. Therefore, the situation regarding societal stigmatisation of HVET, occupational skills development, and youth unemployment is substantially more favourable for UK students compared to Chinese HVET students in their transition experiences. Nevertheless, there is a pivotal factor that should be considered in the specific UK context: *race*.

In particular, according to Zwysen and Longhi (2016), there are significant differences in the transition to the labour market for black and minority ethnic graduates compared to white graduates in the UK. Hooley et al (2023) interpreted that most of these differences are the product of social and educational inequalities, rather than occurring spontaneously during the graduate transition. Especially, Lessard-Phillips et al's (2014) research demonstrated that even when ethnic minorities make it to elite universities, race can affect graduate

employment outcomes. In terms of the post-COVID era, this phenomenon has not been alleviated. For instance, both university and college graduates belonging to ethnic minority groups had the lowest likelihood of securing ongoing employment, with a sustained employment rate of 44% which was 31% points lower than that of white graduates, who had a sustained employment rate of 75% (DfE, 2023). Notably, White's (2020) study of black working-class young people in the London area powerfully describes the different sorts of violence and trauma from the society which they are experiencing. This violence is systemic, rooted in the UK's economy, law, and social structures, leading to the recurrence of inequalities in distribution, recognition, and participation, closely linking racism and poverty (Gewirtz et al, 2024).

Furthermore, Hooley et al's (2023) study analysed recent secondary data from 1969 university graduates with different ethnicities in the UK. The research found that white respondents had greater trust in the fairness of recruitment processes compared to non-white graduates, who were less likely to trust employers to treat them fairly (ibid). Besides, Bermingham et al (2020) found in their decade-long longitudinal study that non-white university graduates typically reported lower levels of employment satisfaction. Although past research has not focused much on the HVET group, studies of university graduates suggest that the HVET group is likely to face a similar situation. In other words, race shapes the UK's young people's perceptions of the relationship between values and careers, their confidence in participating in the recruitment process, and their confidence in being able to get a fair and decent job (Hooley et al, 2023).

## Discussion and Conclusion

In China, the current post-college transition for HVET students is more than just not optimistic but more severe and complicated than in the past. A major factor contributing to this tendency is the enormous impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Chinese society. Specifically, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused significant and fundamental changes in the way HVET colleges teach, with online education becoming the dominant teaching method. Online instruction has replaced traditional in-person teaching, undermining their ability to properly cultivate occupational skills and disrupting the foundation and coherence necessary for skill development. In addition, the absence of occupational skills greatly hinders their chances of successfully entering the employment market. Besides, due to the stimulus of the epidemic, China's economic development has faced great challenges since 2020. The deterioration of the national economy is reflected in the ongoing dispirited labour market with an over 21% unemployment rate for young people. In other words, the COVID-19 not only undermines students' ability to secure employment opportunities in the labour market, but also causes job opportunities to be reduced from the supply side. This situation has significant negative implications especially for HVET students who want to make a smooth transition into the labour market.

By contrast, whether it is the change of teaching mode or the labour market, the adverse impact of the pandemic in the UK is significantly less severe compared to that in China. After a brief period of fully online teaching in 2020, the UK's educational institutions quickly launched hybrid teaching mode in the autumn to deal with the challenges posed by online teaching. Regarding the labour market, it only experienced a slight rise in the young unemployment rate at the early stage of the COVID-19. After the introduction of a series of policies, the overall labour market in the UK became more stable and safer for young people, and the unemployment rate began to fall to a low level continuously.

In addition, based on numerous previous studies, HVET has been seriously stigmatised in many societies for a long time (Virolainen & Stenström, 2014), but the situation in China is even worse (Ling et al, 2021). Presently, HVET students face inherent disadvantages while engaging in the discourse with the society and are subjected to various forms of discrimination and prejudice. The negative image of vocational education is historical and embedded in China's society for thousands of years. According to Morgan et al (2017), HVET is commonly perceived as inferior due to the impact of Confucianism. With the significant expansion of higher education in China in recent years, this perception has become more entrenched in society.

Moreover, Wang & Guo (2019) emphasise that China's selection method leads to vocational



education being perceived as having inferior prestige and standing compared to academic education. China's Higher Education Entrance Examination system selects the most academically successful students for admission to universities, while students with lesser academic performance are directed towards HVET colleges, resulting in a significantly lower enrolment threshold for HVET colleges compared to universities (Ling, 2015; Wang & Guo, 2019). This negative selection of the HVET made by the system inevitably creates a stereotype that HVET colleges are inferior to universities (Wang & Guo, 2019). The HVET colleges are seen as the last resort for academic failures and usually chosen by academic low achievers, therefore fuelling the social prejudice and stereotypes against the HVET students (Ling, 2015; Velde, 2009).

This study observes that the social stigmatisation of the HVET identity has created significant obstacles for HVET students in both types of transition trajectories, seriously deteriorating their transition experience. Particularly, it is still impossible to understand the real purpose of using a segregated management manner under the current unclear circumstance, and CU students are confused as well. Compared with China, the UK's society indeed has the stigma on the HVET as well but the level of it is much lower than China's situation. In other words, the UK society provides a more friendly environment than China for HVET students during their transition.

Furthermore, it is worth noticing that in China, not only do a large proportion of individuals in HVET students come from rural areas, but even families from cities are more likely to hold low-level jobs (Woronov, 2011; Wang et al, 2014; Ling, 2015). This means HVET students commonly lack adequate cultural, economic and social capital (see details in Bourdieu, 1986), which can offer crucial support to enhance their transition. For the majority of HVET students, the helpful family financial burden, the lack of social networks, coupled with a family's desire to require financial contributions from them, serve as intangible obstacles that hinder students from exploring successful personal transition. The post-college transition difficulties for students caused by the family socio-economic background were similar in the two countries and no significant difference was found.

The influence of the curriculum on students' transitions was discovered in both contexts. In particular, students in both countries have to encounter difficulties in adapting to the university curriculum which is theory-oriented. This situation necessitates taking into account the group's past experiences of academic failure, which significantly contributed to their decision to pursue vocational education. In terms of experiencing a smooth transition to university, not only do students need to be well prepared, but also the university should provide effective support for them when considering this group's

characteristics. However, China's students showed an unsatisfactory attitude towards the curriculum at the college. The current curriculum system provides a disproportionate number of theoretical courses, which cannot develop students' occupational skills effectively.

However, the issue of racism remains an important challenge that FE students have to face in their post-college transition in the current UK context. East Asian countries, including China, Japan, South Korea, and North Korea, are often described as ethnically homogeneous compared to many other regions (Kang, 2021). China, while predominantly Han Chinese, has a greater degree of ethnic diversity compared to its East Asian neighbours, due to its larger geographic size and historical integration of various ethnic groups (Koji, 2019), but the racial issues in society are far less common and serious than the UK. The current structural challenges faced by ethnic minorities in the UK remain significant, especially for disadvantaged groups, and are clearly reflected in the series of difficulties non-White students face in their transitions (Zwysen & Longhi, 2016; Hooley et al, 2023; Gewirtz et al, 2024).

In conclusion, this study primarily examines the experience of 20 Chinese HVET students' post-college transition in the post-COVID-19 era, and compares the gap with the UK context by reviewing secondary data. The data was examined and revealed the critical factors that affected HVET students' transition experience via utilising the transition theory. HVET students in China have historically been in a disadvantaged position within society. Now, three years after experiencing the effects of COVID-19, these students are confronted with an even more challenging post-college transition predicament. The HVET plays a crucial role in the UK and China's economic progress, and this study enhances comprehension of the deep critical factors that may affect HVET students' current post-college transition at a broader and detailed level. This study specifically examines a short period of the students' post-college transition; future research could examine the critical aspects influencing their transition over a longer period to determine if these results hold true. This will help identify effective strategies to improve and support the post-college transition experiences of HVET students in both the UK and China.

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