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**The Development of Vocational and Professional Education and Training
in Hong Kong**

A Case Study of Technological and Higher Education Institute of Hong Kong

Anthony Chi Lek Chow

A dissertation submitted to the University of Bristol in accordance with the

requirements for award of the Degree of

Master of Philosophy

in the Faculty of Social Sciences and Law

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Abstract

The Hong Kong Government has long advocated for the expansion of vocational education and training to include a professional aspect. The Technological and Higher Education Institute of Hong Kong (THEi) was established in 2012 as the region's first specialized institution for Vocational and Professional Education and Training (VPET). This research aims to understand the evolution of VPET through THEi, including its achievements and challenges during its initial operational cycle.

To accomplish this, the study conducts a comprehensive evaluation of previous literature and incorporates research on vocational and professional education into a theoretical framework inspired by new vocationalism and human capital theory. Previous research has suggested that while traditional vocational methods are beneficial in vocational education and training (VET), they may have limitations in nurturing graduates as future human capital. On the other hand, the ideology of new vocationalism promotes strong institute-industry relations and views education as an investment in human capital development. This study seeks to enhance our understanding of the potential and limitations of VPET in preparing individuals for the modern workforce by evaluating THEi's experiences.

The current study adopts a qualitative case study approach, involving in-depth interviews with a diverse range of individuals from THEi, including leadership, administration, teaching staff, and students. These interviews were conducted between 2015 and 2016. Additionally, the researcher reviewed a selection of non-confidential internal documents and drew upon observations made during their time at THEi to gain a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter.

Four aspects of VPET development are discussed: 1) students, 2) staff, 3) institute, and 4) industry. The study's conclusions indicate that all respondents appreciated this new VPET policy advancement. Students perceive themselves as being more competitive in the labour market due to the education they receive. However, staff respondents assert that maintaining the advantage of VPET is challenging due to inconsistent positioning of the institute, the need to update practical skills, and the acquisition and maintenance of industry networks.

The research findings align with the existing literature on new vocationalism and, moreover, provide new insights to the research and policy literature by highlighting the unique contributions of VPET staff to the success of VPET development.

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This study would not have been possible without the incredible support of my former colleagues at the Vocational Training Council and the Technological and Higher Education Institute of Hong Kong.

I am extremely grateful to my supervisors, Dr. Lucy Kelly, Dr. Gemma Derrick, Emeritus Professor Sheila Trahar, and Emeritus Professor Michael Crossley, for their guidance and constructive feedback throughout the duration of my research project, as well as their encouragement and support during challenging times.

Lastly, I would like to express my appreciation to my parents for their unwavering support, and to my wife, Carol, and daughter, Karlie, for their understanding and patience throughout the many hours and weekends I dedicated to working on my dissertation.

Declaration

I hereby certify that this dissertation has been completed in accordance with the University's Regulations and Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes, and that it has not been submitted for consideration for any other academic award. The work presented in this dissertation is my own, unless otherwise indicated by proper referencing within the text. Any work that has been completed in collaboration with or with the assistance of others has been appropriately acknowledged. The views expressed in this dissertation are solely my own and do not reflect the views of any other individuals or organisations.

Signed

Date: 4 January 2023

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to provide background and context for the current study, including the rationale, research aims, research questions, and the relevance of the study to the field of vocational and professional education in Hong Kong. It will also examine the various factors that have contributed to the growing importance of vocational and professional education in Hong Kong. The guiding concept and methodological approach of the study will be briefly outlined, and the chapter will conclude with a summary of the dissertation's structure. As a researcher, I will explore these issues in detail throughout the course of the study.

Background and Context

The relative value of conventional academic higher education and vocational education in society has long been a subject of debate. Employers and policymakers argue that graduates from traditional higher education programs are not adequately prepared for the workforce, while vocationally trained graduates are often seen as lacking the analytical skills necessary for their specialized trades (McArthur et al., 2017). Therefore, the aim of this qualitative research is to explore the history and evolution of tertiary vocational and professional education and training (VPET), with a particular focus on its development and challenges in Hong Kong. Furthermore, this

research seeks to investigate the potential of VPET in addressing the shortage of high-level vocational skills. It is worth noting that traditional vocational education and training (VET) is typically offered at the post-secondary level.

In many cultures, traditional vocational education has been perceived as a lower level of postsecondary education, possibly due to the emphasis placed on university-level academic education (Yau et al., 2018). The purpose of higher education has long been a topic of controversy, historically centred on knowledge development and transmission (Van Vught, 2008). In recent decades, there has been an increasing expectation for universities to contribute to economic growth and social advancement in knowledge-based societies (Pinheiro et al., 2015). After World War II, higher education witnessed a significant expansion in high-income countries, with enrolment rates rising from approximately 15% to 50% (Gao, 2018). This increase was driven by the need for a larger and more skilled workforce to support economic growth during that period (Gao, 2018). The development of human capital became a crucial objective for the education sector. Human capital, as described by Kraay (2018) in his World Bank research report, encompasses knowledge, skills, and health, enabling individuals to become productive members of society. A VPET education system aims to acquire professional knowledge and enhance vocational skills, thereby contributing to the development of individuals and society as a whole.

Higher education participation has experienced a steady increase, a phenomenon referred to as "massification" by higher education professor Martin Trow (Trow et al., 1972). In my experience of teaching and administering international degree programs in Hong Kong, this transformation seems to be driven by economic restructuring, a growing number of school leavers, and reduced government funding. Similar patterns of higher education expansion can be observed in numerous advanced economies across various cultures, aligning with the observations I have made (Wu & Tang, 2020).

During the twentieth century, the economic structure of many higher-income countries underwent a shift from manufacturing to product and service innovation. As a result, businesses and government organisations began to demand employees with higher-level professional skills and intellectual abilities. In response, many colleges and polytechnics restructured their programs to include more theoretical content alongside technical training, aiming to enhance students' understanding of their specialization (Lei & Jiang, 2005). This transformation often led to these institutions acquiring university status. However, the accreditation requirements for a bachelor's degree program necessitated a reduction in practical skills training, with more emphasis placed on theories and models (Knight & Yorke, 2003). Consequently,

some of these programs became more theory-driven and struggled to produce graduates who were readily employable.

At the same time, universities in Hong Kong have increasingly offered professional degrees in addition to traditional academic degrees. Professional degrees in tertiary education combine specialized academic study with industry-specific competencies. Graduates of these programs meet the registration requirements set by professional bodies or the government and can immediately apply their newly acquired skills in the workplace. Common disciplines that offer professional degrees at both the undergraduate and postgraduate levels include medicine, engineering, law, veterinary medicine, architecture, psychology, and education. In these professions, practitioners are typically required by law to register with a self- or government-regulated body, distinguishing them from other unregulated professions such as public relations, design, or advertising.

The higher education landscape in Hong Kong has undergone significant transformations. Traditionally, vocational-oriented higher education diplomas were offered by full universities, polytechnics, and technical institutes. However, with the relocation of many manufacturing-intensive companies to Mainland China in the 1980s, accompanied by lower land rental and labour costs, Hong Kong's industrial

industry shifted towards becoming financially- and innovation-intensive enterprises, leading to business upgrading (Lang et al., 2001).

The purpose of traditional university education has been called into question in recent generations. An academic university degree is often seen as a means to develop critical thinking skills and pursue knowledge across a wide range of subjects or academic fields (Tsui, 2002). Academic degrees are not necessarily designed with a specific career orientation. However, Hoachlander (1999) argued that the academic skills taught in lecture halls aim to help students develop a broad skill set that can be applied across various fields. Higher education institutions, primarily universities, that offer programs with a significant applied component have faced criticism for deviating from the purpose and mission of a university, as such subjects are seen as more suitable for the vocational education and training (VET) sector (Marginson, 2007; Scott, 2006). On the other hand, proponents of applied programs, such as Baruch et al. (2005), argue that the knowledge mastered by graduates of these programs goes beyond vocational training; it is underpinned by academic research and is of a higher level compared to VET.

In the local context of Hong Kong, VPET programs occupy an overlapping segment between traditional university education and vocational-oriented VET. Programs with

a strong applied focus are referred to as professional disciplines, professional degrees, or vocational degrees (Wang et al., 2019). In other countries, there are tertiary education institutions that aim to provide professional and career-oriented degrees, commonly known as universities of applied sciences or universities of technology (Baars et al., 2015). However, it was not until 2012 that a dedicated higher education institution with a specific career-oriented mission focusing on VPET was established in Hong Kong.

In Hong Kong's Confucian-heritage culture, education holds a high status, and academic study is highly valued, while applied learning has traditionally been considered a secondary choice. Students typically perceive traditional higher education institutions as the primary option for higher education, regardless of their abilities and career goals. However, the number of available places was limited for many years, leading to intense competition where only academically capable students could enter prestigious programs.

This situation persisted until 2010 when various industries raised concerns about the lack of vocationally skilled talent in the market and the employability of university graduates. There was also a mismatch in the expectation that bridging to a full degree qualification at a local institution would guarantee employment. Recognizing the need

for VPET in the tertiary sector to support Hong Kong's long-term growth, the government officially adopted this term, with the letter "P" referring to professional, encompassing tertiary degree-level programs (i.e., vocational degrees). This policy move was influenced by the education systems of European countries, with knowledge exchange through trips and meetings. To avoid confusion, this study uses the term "vocational degree" to refer to degree programs offered under the VPET system.

Vocational degrees are characterized by a focused and specific curriculum that develops skills in a specialized area. Their purpose is to equip graduates with the necessary competencies for employment. A significant amount of academic time is dedicated to practical training, internships, and apprenticeships. Vocational degrees aim to bridge the gap between the academic and professional worlds. It is common for these programs to include mandatory work placements, such as internships in industry or apprenticeships, as part of the curriculum and assessment. The integration of knowledge and theory into practice is crucial. Vocational degrees, unlike academic degrees, have a greater emphasis on specific trades and are industry-focused from the beginning of the program. Research studies have referred to this approach as a modern apprenticeship (Bravenboer, 2016).

The Vocational Training Council (VTC) is a quasi-governmental organisation in Hong Kong that is responsible for providing professional training aligned with the needs of the local sector. It comprises approximately 13 member institutions, offering a wide range of programs ranging from training courses and certificates to undergraduate and graduate degrees. In 2012, the VTC established the Technological and Higher Education Institute of Hong Kong (THEi), which serves as the leading career-oriented higher education institution in Hong Kong. THEi offers government-accredited and recognized vocational degrees aimed at meeting the growth objectives of Hong Kong.

Despite these efforts, the objective of developing VPET to meet the demand for a highly skilled workforce has yet to be fully realized. Both government officials and educational researchers focused on human resources supply have highlighted the importance of developing VPET programs. It is against this backdrop that the rationale for the present study is established. The study adopts a holistic approach that incorporates thematic analysis, critical reflection on practical and professional experiences, and substantial empirical research activities. This methodology enables the analysis of various professional and cultural settings in Hong Kong and on a global scale, leading to a comprehensive understanding of the research topic. By employing multiple research approaches, such as data triangulation and synthesizing

ideas from different perspectives, the study aims to enhance the validity and reliability of its findings.

The Researcher

My interest in VPET was sparked during my postgraduate study, where I completed a professional master's degree in marketing in Australia. It was during this program that I noticed a significant presence of industry professionals among the teaching staff, which influenced my perspective on higher education. Following my graduation, I secured a position in higher education administration with a U.S.-listed education company, thanks to their recognition of my practical knowledge. Over the course of more than two decades, I have been involved in various roles within education and training, including program development, institute accreditation, classroom teaching, and executive coaching. Throughout this time, I have witnessed the increasing emphasis on practical aspects in educational curricula, broadening my understanding beyond local institutions and businesses. Hong Kong's popularity as a hub for offshore programs has also allowed me to work as a part-time lecturer for international universities from the UK and Ireland.

I have been fortunate to hold a part-time teaching position at Hong Kong Polytechnic University while simultaneously maintaining a full-time job. For over 10 years, I have

been teaching part-time, with a focus on evening classes that typically attract students with working experience. While the curriculum and assessment remain consistent regardless of class mode, the importance of teaching delivery and the lecturer's industry experience are significantly emphasized for these students. This further highlights the absence of applied university degree programs in Hong Kong and similar cultural contexts.

Additionally, I work as an executive coach, providing specialized marketing training to management trainees in listed and private companies in Hong Kong and Macau.

Human resources directors from my client companies frequently express that their trainees possess theoretical knowledge but lack practical skills and mindsets. Similar feedback has been received from students enrolled in the executive or postgraduate certificate programs that I teach. The demand for both academic knowledge and practical skills is evident, with employers and students calling for a bridge to be built between the two.

I am deeply passionate about studying the interconnection between traditional higher education and modern VPET, particularly focusing on how newly developed vocational degrees can bridge the gap between the two. Given my professional background and extensive experience in these overlapping areas, I believe that my

insider-outsider perspective will provide valuable insights for this study. The insider perspective acknowledges the importance of understanding social reality through the subjective meanings attributed by the individuals involved (Smith, 2018). Crossley et al. (2015) affirm that this insider-outsider position can be advantageous. It is worth noting that this study is the first of its kind in Hong Kong.

I recognize and appreciate that the same experiences that provide valuable insights may be perceived as a disadvantage by those who adhere to positivist or post-positivist philosophies, which may prioritize objectivity in research. To address this, I commit to ongoing critical self-reflection through journaling and engaging in dialogue with professional colleagues, students, graduates, employers, policy advisors, and other relevant stakeholders. Furthermore, I will explicitly disclose my assumptions and theoretical orientation at the start of the study. To address subjectivity and enhance the trustworthiness of the research, I will employ a range of procedural safeguards, including method triangulation and inter-rater reliability tests with other specialists.

Rationale and Goal of the Study

The goal of this qualitative study is to examine the growth and evolution of Vocational and Professional Education and Training (VPET) in Hong Kong, with a

particular emphasis on its development, challenges, and potential in addressing the shortage of high-level applied skills. The research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the origins and evolution of VPET, with the intention of influencing policy and practice in the field. By delving into the historical context and examining the current state of VPET, this study seeks to contribute to the knowledge base and inform decision-making processes for the improvement and advancement of VPET in Hong Kong.

Academic Rationale. Tertiary education and postsecondary vocational education have been extensively researched and reported on an international scale. Tertiary vocational education has also garnered significant attention from researchers, particularly in European countries. However, most of the studies focus either on the policy level (Geel & Backes-Gellner, 2011) or on the program level (Hippach-Schneider et al., 2017). These studies primarily examine how universities extend their models to incorporate new vocational provisions and operate within an academic framework. There are limited studies that explore the development of tertiary vocational education beyond the traditional VET system. This study argues that a successful VPET model in Hong Kong should extend beyond the postsecondary VET system and not simply expand the traditional higher education system, as these systems have fundamental differences.

According to human capital theory (Navruz-Zoda & Shomiev, 2017), investing in people's knowledge and experience leads to higher productivity and, consequently, a stronger economy. The case findings clearly highlight the distinctive differences between VPET and traditional higher education. For instance, extended internships, support from employers and industry experts, and the resources brought in by vocational professors offer unparalleled advantages over traditional higher education when employability is the priority. This study is also the first to employ qualitative approaches to extract meaningful insights and understand the emergence of a VPET model in Hong Kong or the broader Asian context.

General Rationale. Vocational universities and career-oriented degrees have reached a mature stage in Europe, but it is essential to adapt and tailor the models developed overseas to suit the specific context of Hong Kong. Currently, there is limited research and analysis on the impact of VPET, particularly in terms of its professional aspects, in Hong Kong. Therefore, this study represents one of the first comprehensive research endeavours in this field conducted within the Hong Kong context. By exploring the unique characteristics and challenges of VPET in Hong Kong, this study aims to contribute to the knowledge base and provide valuable insights for the development and enhancement of VPET in the region.

Contextual Rationale. Considering international trends, conducting VPET research in Hong Kong holds significant importance. The advancement of VPET in the region aligns with broader global issues, such as redefining the relationship between academia and industry, granting vocational higher education institutions greater autonomy in academic, financial, and operational aspects, developing strategies to enable institutions to respond effectively to economic and labour market changes, and addressing potential conflicts between academically oriented traditions and competitiveness. Consequently, this research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the global and local development of VPET, while highlighting the interaction between a service-dominated context and the global phenomenon of vocationalism. By exploring these aspects, the study seeks to shed light on the unique challenges and opportunities in VPET within the Hong Kong context and provide valuable insights that can inform policy and practice in the field.

Personal Rationale. With nearly over two decades of experience in VPET, your interest in studying the nature and evolution of this field is driven by personal curiosity and the desire for professional advancement. Undertaking this study allows you to delve deeper into the subject matter, expanding your knowledge and contributing to your professional growth. Your motivation for pursuing this research stems from your active engagement in education in Hong Kong, and you believe that

it will provide valuable insights and prospects for your future career in other countries. By conducting this study, you aim to gain a deeper understanding of VPET, make meaningful contributions to the field, and pave the way for new opportunities and professional development.

Aim, Objectives, and Research Questions

Research Aim. This research examines the development of higher vocational education in Hong Kong, with a focus on THEi as the first VPET institution, to address the shortage of high-level applied skills graduates.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this study are as follows:

1. Conduct a comprehensive review of the international literature on VPET development.
2. Conduct a comprehensive, empirically supported qualitative case study on the emergence of THEi in Hong Kong.
3. Investigate the study's implications for future VPET policy and practice in Hong Kong.

4. Consider the study's implications for relevant international and theoretical literature on VPET, and propose research objectives for the future.

Research Questions. In order to attain these objectives, the following research questions will be explored in this study:

1. How has THEi developed in the Hong Kong VPET context?
2. What are the current achievements and challenges related to VPET in Hong Kong?
3. What are the current challenges facing VPET in Hong Kong?

Conceptual Framework: An Overview

This study will draw upon research from three key fields, namely human capital theory, new vocationalism, and vocational education, to examine the expansion of the VPET sector in Hong Kong. Chapter 2 will critically review and evaluate the main theoretical foundations of VPET, defining VPET and reviewing the international literature on vocationalism from a functionalist perspective, new vocationalism from a neoliberal perspective, human capital theory, and various global VPET models. A guiding framework incorporating these theories will be constructed (see Figure 1).

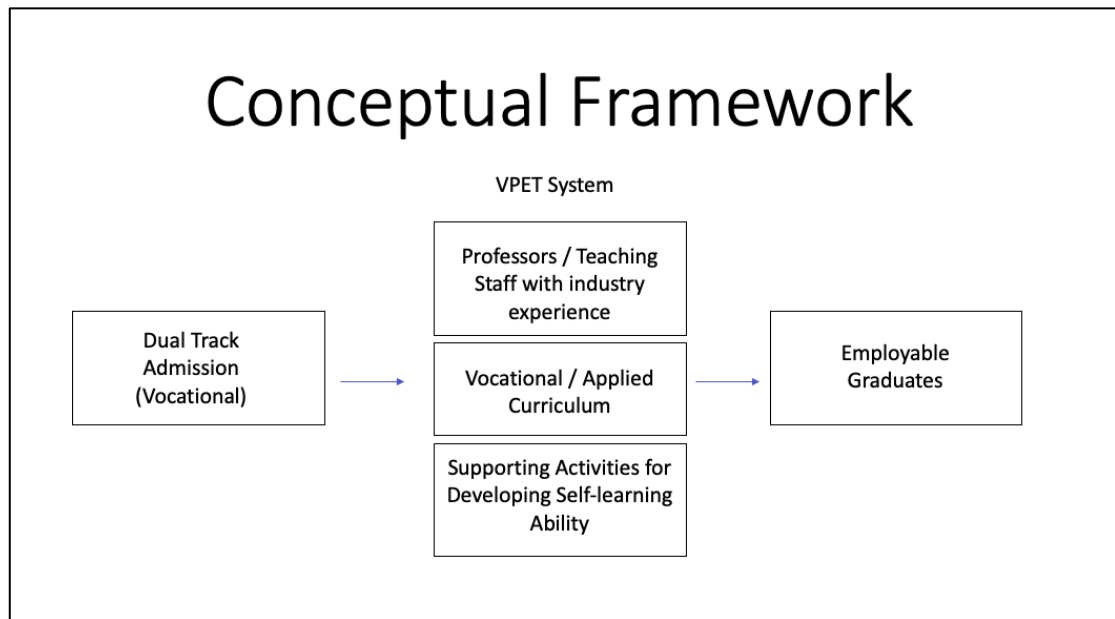


Figure 1: Conceptual framework underpinning this research study.

Research Design: An Overview

To investigate the emergence of VPET in Hong Kong, a qualitative research method guided by interpretivism was employed, as it allowed for a detailed and nuanced exploration of the subject. This approach was used to examine the impact of international and local forces on policy changes and to document the origins, nature, and evolution of THEi through an empirically informed case study.

The research involved a systematic review of relevant government and agency documents, policy statements, articles, and statistics, as well as qualitative interviews with key individuals. These methods were used to gather comprehensive information on the growth of the VPET sector and the development of THEi in Hong Kong. The

case study component of the research involved observing the daily operations of THEi, including its internal policies, program structure, teaching practices, and student feedback, drawing upon the researcher's professional experience in the broader VPET sector. This phase of the research was conducted in two parts. The initial policy analysis helped explain the influence of shifting policy contexts and documented the origins, nature, and development of THEi in its early stages. In the second part, qualitative interviews were conducted with eight participants representing various roles within THEi, including leadership, management, teaching, and student perspectives. These interviews provided insights into the achievements and challenges faced by the newly established institute during its initial operational cycle. Further details on the research methodology and methods can be found in Chapter 3.

Dissertation Structure

The following chapters are organized as follows.

Chapter 2: The second chapter establishes the Hong Kong context by analysing and assessing relevant international literature, setting the theoretical framework for the study.

Chapter 3: The third chapter details the methodological approach, explaining the rationale for combining a qualitative design with an in-depth organizational case study. It covers data collection techniques, data analysis procedures, and ethical considerations.

Chapter 4: The fourth chapter presents a comprehensive case study of THEi, encompassing its origins, characteristics, and evolution. Primary materials such as news and archive sources, internal documents, key informant interviews, and observations at THEi are utilized. This chapter also presents the findings derived from the extensive case study of THEi, focusing on its achievements and challenges within the framework influenced by new vocationalism and human capital theory.

Chapter 5: The fifth chapter discusses the implications of the study, firstly for the continued development of THEi, and then for future VPET policy and practice in Hong Kong. It also explores the implications for international and theoretical literature on VPET, and examines how the research contributes to, expands upon, or challenges existing knowledge.

Chapter 6: The conclusion acknowledges the limitations of the study and proposes future research recommendations.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review and the Context of Hong Kong

This chapter commences with an exploration of literature surrounding Vocational and Professional Education and Training (VPET) before providing an overview of its application within the Hong Kong context. An elucidation of the history and definition of VPET, drawing from human capital theory and the ideology of new vocationalism, is provided. The chapter concludes with an investigation of the emergence of VPET through the lens of international literature, followed by an analysis of various VPET models.

Background Context

A resurgence of interest in VPET, positioned as a distinct path parallel to traditional, academically-oriented higher education, has been observed of late (Baethge & Wolter, 2015; Jüttler et al., 2021; Wolter & Kerst, 2015). Numerous national-level studies, including those in Germany (Scholten & Tieben, 2017), the UK (Keep, 2019), the US (Fuller & Raman, 2017), and Australia (Hodge et al., 2022), have contributed to this growing discourse.

Since 1997, the Hong Kong government has embarked on a reassessment of the efficacy of traditional higher education models adopted from other nations,

simultaneously scrutinising the scope and purpose of university education (Wong et al., 2016). It becomes apparent that the government is striving towards bolstering enrolment in tertiary education (Jung & Postiglione, 2015), aiming to churn out a larger pool of job-ready graduates for the knowledge economy (Aliakbarlou et al., 2020; McArthur et al., 2017). Evidence of this commitment is reflected in the government's initiatives to amplify student participation in tertiary education.

In 2014, the Chief Executive of Hong Kong underscored the necessity of integrating vocational education back into the school system to aid the younger generation in navigating professional pathways (Young, 2008). Consequently, a task force was established with a mandate to promote vocational education, conduct research, and provide officials with strategic recommendations to enhance public cognizance of vocational education in the region (Ng et al., 2020).

According to the Task Force on Promotion of Vocational Education HKSAR's (2014) report, the term vocational education in Hong Kong should transition to VPET, and traditional VET, typically resulting in postsecondary credentials, should be expanded to encompass bachelor's degrees. Their research suggests that vocational degrees should contain a substantial proportion of specialist technical skills or expert knowledge to equip VPET learners with a holistic comprehension of "practical skills,

attitude, and knowledge" (p. 87).

VPET, a burgeoning subsector within tertiary education, has taken centre stage in education reform efforts in Hong Kong since 2012. Within academic and research circles, this mode of education is often referred to as higher vocational education (Abdullah, 2021; Hidayat et al., 2019; Kuijpers & Meijers, 2012).

According to UNESCO's (2012) International Standard Classification of Education, VPET programmes in Hong Kong are classified as either Level 5 (i.e., higher education programmes of at least two years of duration) or Level 6 (i.e., Bachelor's or comparable degree programmes of three to four years of duration). Abdullah (2021) argues the purpose of these programmes is to equip students with practical occupational skills and prepare them for the job.

Categorised under UNESCO's (2012) International Standard Classification of Education, VPET programmes in Hong Kong fall either under Level 5 (higher education programmes lasting at least two years) or Level 6 (Bachelor's degree or equivalent programmes spanning three to four years). Abdullah (2021) posits that the crux of these programmes is to equip students with practical occupational skills and prepare them for the workplace. At Level 5, VPET programmes are defined as

vocational, while those at Level 6 or above are denoted as professional by UNESCO.

Both terms fundamentally indicate vocational proficiency.

UNESCO's (2012) differentiates general education and vocational education as academic and professional education at the postsecondary level. Vocational education embodies programmes designed to assist learners in acquiring the knowledge, skills, and competencies specific to a particular profession, trade, or group of vocations or trades (Moodie, 2002). Vocational programmes often incorporate work-based components like apprenticeships or dual-system education. Upon successful completion, learners earn labour market-relevant vocational qualifications acknowledged as occupationally-oriented by national authorities or the labour market (Stephens, 2015).

As per the Task Force on Promotion of Vocational Education HKSAR's (2014) recommendation report, the aim to provide the market with high-level skilled human capital has transformed VET into VPET to include Qualifications Framework (QF) Level 5 degree level career-oriented programmes in Hong Kong. The past two decades have seen significant strides in advancing the sector from postsecondary VET to tertiary VPET, although numerous challenges have also surfaced. The substantial increase in self-funded institutions and student enrolment since 2000 has directly

contributed to this sector's expansion. The table below presents significant events in

the development of VPET in Hong Kong:

Year	Event
1863	Vocational education initially offered training in a limited range of trades, including carpentry, tailoring, shoemaking, and printing.
1907	The first vocational institution introduced basic training in shorthand, building construction, and field surveying.
1937	The first government post-secondary technical institution was established.
1965, 1973	In order to expand the accessibility of vocational education for young individuals, the Hong Kong Training Council and the Industrial Training Advisory Committee were established in 1973 and 1965, respectively. These developments marked the initiation of the first phase of the proliferation of vocational education in the 1970s. In response, the government constructed five technical institutes, thereby ensuring the availability of vocational education across various levels, ranging from craft to technician.
1982	The establishment of the Council for Vocational Training (VTC) brought forth a permanent regulatory agency responsible for offering a comprehensive system of Vocational Education and Training (VET) in Hong Kong, operating in accordance with VTC regulations. This significant development marked the onset of the second phase of vocational education growth in the region. Consequently, three additional technical institutes were established in 1986 and 1987. As of 2018, the VTC Group consisted of thirteen member colleges. It is worth noting that the VTC holds the distinction of being the largest and sole quasi-governmental agency in Hong Kong entrusted with the responsibility of VPET development.
2000	A steering group was formed to promote Vocational and Professional Education and Training (VPET) and the Qualifications Framework (QF).
2012	The VTC established the Technological and Higher Education Institute of Hong Kong (THEi) with a specific focus on offering career-focused bachelor's degree programs in vocational education. As the first higher education institution in Hong Kong to provide

	self-financed vocational degrees (QF Level 5) under Cap. 1130 VTC Ordinance (1982), THEi has played a pioneering role in this area.
2014	In 2014, the government took proactive measures by establishing a task force dedicated to the promotion of vocational education, aiming to raise awareness of its significance.
2016	The first cohort of students from THEi successfully graduated.
2021	A pilot initiative has selected four bachelor's degree programmes to establish vocational degree programmes.
2022	In the academic year 2022-23, institutions launched four pilot vocational degree programmes.

Table 1: A Brief History of VPET in Hong Kong

Established in 1932, the Junior Technical School on Caroline Hill marked the initiation of vocational education in Hong Kong, boasting a history exceeding 80 years. Despite this, it was only in 1982 that Hong Kong developed a dedicated agency for the progression of Vocational and Professional Education and Training (VPET). According to government records, approximately 60,000 students were enrolled in full-time vocational education programmes in the 2017-2018 academic year, constituting roughly one-tenth of the total number of full-time students enrolled in Hong Kong at the upper secondary and tertiary levels. Among these, 3,391 students were enrolled in THEi's vocational degree programmes, signifying a 13.4% increase from the previous year. Leading the charge in vocational degree programmes, THEi continues to make strides in Hong Kong's VPET landscape.

Post-Compulsory Education in Hong Kong: A Brief Overview

In May 2008, the government launched the Qualifications Framework (QF) to promote continuous learning and enhance the competitiveness of the working population (Young, 2008). The QF fosters the growth of academic and further education as well as vocational education in Hong Kong. It outlines a seven-level hierarchy, orchestrating a network of learning pathways, facilitating diverse qualifications, and smoothing the integration of academic, vocational, and continuing education.

However, the government acknowledges that traditional academic activities still hold sway among certain sections of the community. Due to the local school system's excessive focus on academic achievement, the legislative council noted in the minutes of a meeting that the emphasis on scholastic excellence was overly pronounced (University Grants Committee, 2010). There were concerns that the system did not offer a diverse range of pathways and options catering to the varying needs and aspirations of school leavers at the tertiary (i.e. bachelor's degree) level. These minutes remain relevant even in 2022 when the Hong Kong government introduced four new vocational degrees through higher education institutions. The council

members concurred that the government should collaborate with other stakeholders and proactively promote vocational education as a viable and desirable choice.

Developing Vocational and Professional Education and Training in Hong Kong

With the evolution of the academic environment, the expansion of postsecondary education opportunities and the transition to a knowledge-based economy have significantly influenced VPET. The emergence of new generations of graduates and practitioners with diverse value systems and perspectives has also greatly impacted the VPET's offering, positioning, and image (Hoekstra et al., 2018).

Historically, the vocational education model has provided students with opportunities to acquire practical skills and secure promising employment prospects in their chosen vocations (McGrath et al., 2019). However, parents and secondary school students traditionally favour academic pursuits over VET, leading to the perception of VET as a less desirable or inferior alternative. This view persists despite the inclusion of degree-level qualifications within the VET model, which is now part of the broader VPET framework (Ling, 2015).

VPET is critical for blending classroom instruction with work experiences and for providing flexible and diversified pathways for school leavers and working

individuals with diverse skillsets and goals (Ismail & Abiddin, 2014). Moreover, it has fostered the human resources needed for Hong Kong's economic growth (Task Force on Promotion of Vocational Education HKSAR, 2014). Personal conversations with parents and teachers during recruitment days suggest that despite the government's and other parties' efforts to tout the merits of VPET, existing endeavours fall short of shifting public perception. It suggests a need for more effective publicity measures.

In his 2014 policy speech, the Chief Executive (CE) of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (Hong Kong SAR) emphasized that since each individual possesses unique skills and talents, mainstream education does not cater to every young person's needs and interests. The government needs to reassess the position of vocational education within the educational system and help the younger generation in choosing their professional paths.

In line with this thinking, several initiatives were taken to promote vocational education, such as the establishment of a leadership group to advance vocational education and training and QF in 2000 and a workgroup on promoting professional and vocational education in 2014 (Task Force on Promotion of Vocational Education HKSAR, 2014). In his 2015 policy speech, the Chief Executive of the Hong Kong

Special Administrative Region underscored that "adequate and quality human resources are key to our sustainable socio-economic growth" (Hong Kong SAR Government, 2015, p. 41). To address the challenges posed by demographic transitions, the Chief Executive's strategy involves fostering local human resources through creating diversified employment opportunities and providing learning, training, and development opportunities. The Vocational Training Council (VTC) is tasked with implementing the policy objectives outlined in the policy speech.

In addition to the Technological and Higher Education Institute of Hong Kong (THEi), an increasing number of tertiary institutions in Hong Kong, including Tung Wah College, Chu Hai College of Higher Education, and Caritas Institute of Higher Education, offer QF Level 5 undergraduate degree programs focused on practical skills and vocations, such as landscape architecture, engineering, testing and certification, health science, and occupational therapy. According to information on their websites, sub-degree graduates may be able to transition into senior year places in government-funded undergraduate programs or complete a top-up degree in a self-financing program via these options.

Commencing from the 2012-2013 academic year, the Vocational Training Council's Institute of Higher Education (THEi) has been offering undergraduate degrees that

emphasise vocational learning in areas like design, engineering, hospitality, and healthcare. The enrolment figures from THEi indicate a strong preference for these subjects among high school graduates.

Progression of Vocational and Professional Education and Training

In this literature review, "VPET" denotes degree-level, career-focused higher education (the professional aspect of VPET) offered at an institution with a vocational emphasis. This is in contrast to traditional post-secondary vocational education (for instance, higher diplomas) or professional degree programmes leading to professional registration (such as Bachelor of Education) offered at academically inclined universities. This review begins with an examination of the evolution of VPET, drawing upon interdisciplinary literature. It proceeds to evaluate VPET models using contemporary research studies for support. Finally, the review presents an in-depth analysis of the potential catalysts, accomplishments, and challenges of these models.

The upgraded vocational education, which now includes the professional element, are crucial in producing talent to an economy. They provide graduates with technical skills and applied knowledge, which are highly sought after by industries (Jones, 2016). In recent years, the focus on VPET is on its professional element, which is degree-level education (Köpsén, 2020; Scholten & Tieben, 2017). The history of

VPET must be traced back to its earlier form, VET, which focuses on the secondary (i.e. technical schools) to post-secondary levels (i.e. vocational higher diploma; (Wolf, 2017). Depending on the country and setting, vocational education and training may take many various forms with different names. Jørgensen et al. (2018) argues VPET is the least unified style of learning in the education sector, and it encompasses classroom instruction, industry cooperation projects, internships, and apprenticeships. Vocational training, similar to higher education, is one of the education disciplines with the oldest history. According to Pambudi and Harjanto (2020), vocational training serves workplace and community requirements while also providing educational possibilities that other educational sectors do not provide. According to Ryan et al. (2017), VET provides the flexibility to engage the greatest spectrum of learners in education programmes in the contemporary world.

VET is difficult to describe as a singular entity since it is impacted by the particular institutional and historical processes of each nation. Some definitions, such as Moodie (2002), McInnis et al. (2000), and Mulder et al. (2007), of VET take this variability into consideration and avoid expressly referring to levels or kinds of provisions.

European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop), a European hub for the promotion of vocational education, is also an excellent example of such a description (Van den Berghe, 1997). The European Commission defines VET as

education that aims to equip individuals with the knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary for specific jobs or the overall job market (Allincks et al., 2018; Scholten & Tieben, 2017). However, other nations describe VET as the last level of secondary school, with the sole purpose of preparing students for work (as represented in certain elements of the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) 1997 classification; (Townsend, 2001). Nonetheless, the idea of a "final road" has become outmoded owing to the increasingly prominent paradigm of lifelong learning (Tam, 2012, 2018).

Simultaneously, Vocational Education and Training (VET) programmes have become an integral part of the bachelor's degree curriculum in Hong Kong's university education sector. Local tertiary institutions, such as Caritas Institute of Higher Education, Chu Hai College of Higher Education, and Tung Wah College, have incorporated vocational or career components into their existing degree programmes.

To enhance the competitiveness of traditional VET programmes and better address societal needs, the Hong Kong government's advisory board on Vocational and Professional Education and Training (VPET) and Qualifications Framework (QF) promotion has suggested reframing degree-level vocational training as professional education. This is in contrast to the traditional perception of it as a lower-tier

vocational training. To denote this shift, the Chief Executive of Hong Kong adopted the term VPET in the 2017 policy speech (Hong Kong SAR Government, 2017).

The QFs for lifelong learning now recognise VPET, which had been previously classified at lower and medium levels. In some European countries, traditional VET up to the postsecondary level emphasises an occupational focus (Greinert, 2002).

Several of these programmes primarily aim to prepare school leavers for careers and to provide broader educational goals, such as sustaining individuals' employability throughout their professional lives. Additionally, these VET programmes frequently collaborate with educational institutions and workplaces on curriculum design, forming the basis of modern VPET institutions.

Building on the viewpoint above, Markowitsch and Bjørnåvold (2022) argues that VPET comprises a range of educational programmes provided by various institutions in the education system, in addition to traditional informal skills training. However, this perspective is somewhat limited as other scholars, such as Detgen et al. (2021), argue that vocational training or career-readiness should be integrated into traditional higher education rather than treated as a standalone pathway. Both perspectives have their merits, and many countries implement both systems concurrently before the government decides on a unified approach. In the context of Hong Kong, running two

systems simultaneously has caused issues, which will be examined empirically in Chapters 4 and 5.

Vocationalism and New Vocationalism

To understand new vocationalism, it's crucial to first comprehend its precursor, vocationalism. Traditional vocationalism, an educational philosophy rooted in functionalism, advocates for curriculum content to be guided by its pragmatic utility in the workplace (James, 2017). It asserts that formal education should foster a skilled workforce tailored for both regional and global markets (Marginson, 2019; Navruz-Zoda & Shomiev, 2017). In Europe, traditional VET was mainly conducted at the secondary and post-secondary levels, encompassing two distinct forms: apprenticeships and technical schools. While it's debatable that the primary purpose of higher education isn't necessarily to produce job-ready graduates (Culkin & Mallick, 2011), the fact remains that many students, institutions, and quality assurance organisations prioritise career preparation (Jackson, 2018; Lapan et al., 2017).

The vocationalism concept illuminates the evolution of VPET education since the Second World War. Moore and Hickox (1994) suggest that for a nation to be competitive in the global economy and to produce high-value, creative goods, it needs a well-educated and talented populace. Furthermore, Brown and Lauder (2006)

emphasise that we are currently embedded in a global knowledge economy, fuelled by the advent of new technologies and the reduction of barriers to international trade and investment. This shift has hastened the progression from a low-skilled to a high-skilled economy. Lincovil Belmar (2022) labels this as the era of human capital, where the success of individuals and countries hinges not on a select few as was the case in the 20th-century industrial capitalism, but on the talents, knowledge, and initiative of everyone.

Traditional postsecondary VET extends beyond mere career-readiness education.

Vocationalism posits that graduate students should possess the appropriate technical and ethical skills to address future challenges in their respective professions. At first glance, the expansion of VET in the 1980s appears to corroborate the functionalist view of education. From a vocationalism perspective, VET is concerned with preparing individuals for work and enabling them to perform their designated roles more effectively. However, Brown and Lauder (2006) point out that this narrow perspective of vocationalism doesn't wholly cater to the necessity of building human capital for a high-skills economy. As such, we move beyond the functionalist viewpoint to explore new vocationalism from a neoliberal perspective.

New vocationalism, in contrast, is a notion extensively explored in the U.K. since the 1980s within a neoliberal philosophical framework (Brown, 2018; Grubb, 1996). It refers to the institutional initiatives supporting lifelong learning, with Starr-Glass (2017) emphasising that the capacity and inclination to engage in self-directed learning are crucial for lifelong success. It is paramount to foster the skills instrumental for university admission among high school graduates and to nurture this attribute further.

New vocationalism accentuates high standards for more specialised skills in the workplace (Bragg, 2001). This ideology stemmed from educational reform efforts in the 1980s, inspired by John Dewey's philosophy. Proponents of Dewey's theories believed that enhanced vocational education would elevate training quality, enabling individuals to contribute effectively to their employment and actively participate in public life.

Present-day vocational education evolves in two dimensions. Firstly, traditional VET employs vocationalism as its philosophical foundation, training students to master a set of fundamental technical skills. This concept has been widely embraced by post-secondary vocational institutions aiming to equip students with work-ready skills (Grubb & Lazerson, 2005). As an example, in Hong Kong's VTC, these programmes

usually span two years, culminating in a diploma or higher diploma. Secondly, there is a focus on professionals, reflected in the term VPET. New vocationalism, adopted by VPET, aims to prepare students for more specialised skills for advanced employment. This concept is prevalent in European countries, where VPET programmes often extend to the undergraduate degree level or higher.

Though this newer concept challenges higher education institutions to reassess their mission and purpose, and importantly, to provide the relevant skills for students to enter the job market, it also attracts criticism for overlooking industry feedback (Moore & Hickox, 1994). Norton Grubb (2006) argues that while this might appear to solve the unemployment issue, it engenders other problems in the education-to-career pipeline. These problems and critiques of new vocationalism warrant further exploration: a cheap labour source, lack of jobs, streaming, and relevance.

Inexpensive labour source. Finn (1987) posits that the education system shouldn't have to train employees for businesses. This aligns with the functionalist vocationalism where students are trained for specific jobs. Traditional VET students are trained for a certain job with particular skills, leading to reduced flexibility in the face of rapid economic shifts. However, under the neoliberal perspective, new vocationalism fosters competition and entrepreneurship and educates students in skills

and principles to align their talent with ever-evolving employer demands. It advocates that students should be viewed as societal assets and should possess lifelong learning abilities to acquire new skills. Various studies (Cheong et al., 2019; Gao et al., 2011; Gillum & Gray Davies, 2003) compare the earning power of VET (higher diploma) versus VPET (vocational degree) graduates, and results vary depending on the institute's perspective (i.e. vocationalism versus new vocationalism).

Lack of Jobs. Finn (1987) also argues that youth unemployment results from a dearth of employment opportunities and vocational training. This is illuminated by the contrast between traditional and new vocationalism. In a modern economy, the functionalist approach restricts vocational students to performing specific activities proficiently, but they may struggle to adapt if their skills become obsolete or are replaced by artificial intelligence (Li, 2022). Conversely, new vocationalism views vocational students as societal assets or human capital, cultivates them with the latest technical and soft skills, integrates them into the industry network, and promotes a lifelong learning mindset (Taylor, 2019). Countries like Australia and Canada lead this trend by offering career-focused postgraduate certificate and diploma programmes to individuals, allowing them to update their skills at any life stage.

Streaming. Dale (2001) notes that students from lower-income households tend to opt for vocational programmes, while those from higher-income families are more likely to pursue academic programmes. This educational stratification aligns with the functionalist viewpoint, suggesting that students from different socioeconomic backgrounds are channelled into specific educational pathways. This has a tacit link to the inferior perception of vocational education in many developed economies, such as Hong Kong (Yau et al., 2018). This viewpoint limits the autonomy of students and the industry in a free market. In contrast, new vocationalism fosters competition and allows students to choose their preferred education pathway and compete for jobs upon graduation (Cheung, 2016). As education and training are not pre-defined or pre-allocated, vocational graduates are treated as industry assets (i.e., human capital) for sustainable growth, rather than mere tools to fulfil job requirements.

Relevance. Iannelli and Raffe's (2007) study results indicate that few people secure full-time employment based on the skills acquired through vocational education. This uncovers an issue with traditional vocationalism where the industry has minimal or no input into curriculums, leading to a disjointed pathway when the industry requires new skills not acquired by vocational graduates. Under the lens of new vocationalism (Grubb, 1996), education institutes and industries collaborate to cultivate better human capital through direct involvement in setting curriculums, assessing projects,

and offering modern apprenticeships, ensuring graduates are relevant to, and competent within, their industry.

Human Capital Theory

Becker's (1962) and Rosen's (1976) human capital theory proposes that individuals possess innate talents and abilities that can be nurtured and enhanced through education and training. This hypothesis argues that a person's level of education significantly influences their marginal productivity in the labour market and, consequently, their earning potential.

According to the human capital theory, investing in education and training is crucial for a nation to enhance productivity and maintain competitiveness. In this context, education encompasses the knowledge and skills acquired through formal schooling, training programs, and on-the-job experience. It is believed that investing in education improves an individual's productivity and earning capacity, which in turn contributes to economic growth and prosperity for both individuals and societies. Policymakers and educators are therefore urged to prioritize investments in education and training to enhance the skills and talents of the workforce. Human capital theory asserts that education influences labour's marginal productivity, which, in turn, affects income (Marginson, 2019). Another important factor is experience, which refers to the

knowledge and skills gained through work experience and on-the-job training.

Investing in experience, such as through training and professional development programs, can enhance an individual's earning potential and productivity. The theory also emphasizes the significance of adequate training and education to enhance a country's productivity and competitiveness in the knowledge economy. Existing literature generally concurs with this definition and presents various approaches to human capital formation (Navruz-Zoda & Shomiev, 2017). However, while all studies acknowledge the role of education in human capital formation, quantitative research often adopts a single theoretical lens for modelling and fails to acknowledge the intricate relationship between education and productivity (Marginson, 2019).

Despite criticisms that human capital theory overstates the impact of education on employment, Livingstone (1999) acknowledges the characteristics of a knowledge-based economy, where knowledge is a vital component of production. Having a higher education degree is advantageous for employment, as there is a growing demand for a professional and technical workforce that requires a diverse range of skills to effectively carry out their tasks.

Vocationalism, on the other hand, emphasizes the notion that education should prioritize preparing students for specific occupations, professions, or vocations. It

emphasizes the practical application of knowledge and skills to real-world situations and often incorporates hands-on, experiential learning (Neuhouser et al., 2022). The objective of vocationalism is to equip students with the necessary skills and knowledge to enter the workforce and succeed in a particular career. Hickox (1995) highlights the significant role played by states, particularly the United States, in promoting vocationalism in various countries. New vocationalism is a contemporary approach to education that builds upon the concept of vocationalism but places additional emphasis on equipping students to compete in the global market. It emphasizes the development of skills that align with the needs of employers and the demands of the modern economy, often giving greater importance to entrepreneurial thinking and creativity. New vocationalism aims to teach students flexibility, adaptability, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills in a constantly changing society. According to Grubb and Lazerson (2005), the United States has a longer history of new vocationalism than any other country. The enactment of the Morrill Act in 1862 significantly influenced the impact of vocationalism on higher education in the United States during the twentieth century. Over the last two decades, the government has placed increasing emphasis on the value of skills (Grubb, 1996), leading to an extreme form of vocationalism. The oil crises of the 1970s further intensified the focus on vocationalism and resulted in the development of various

vocational learning opportunities and qualifications at the upper secondary and tertiary levels of education systems worldwide. As a result, the twentieth century has been referred to as the century of vocationalism, professionalization, or human capital (Grubb & Lazerson, 2005, p. 300). The global pandemic that began in 2020 has heightened the importance of employability for students when choosing their higher education path, and Vocational and Professional Education and Training (VPET) institutions have emerged as distinct advantages over traditional higher education institutions in this regard (Avis et al., 2021).

The significance of understanding the role of vocationalism within the framework of human capital theory cannot be overstated. Grubb and Lazerson (2005) provide four different definitions of vocationalism, highlighting its various interpretations. Firstly, vocationalism can be understood as the perception that the objective of a school or university is to train students for specific careers. Secondly, it can refer to an educational approach where the curriculum is clearly focused on vocational goals, commonly known as an "occupational curriculum." The third notion of vocationalism is the relationship between education and employment, often termed as "related employment". Lastly, vocationalism can also be seen as "mandatory schooling," where certain types of learning are required for entry into specific occupations, such

as medical school for physicians, Ph.D. programs for professors, or pre-baccalaureate licenses for aircraft mechanics.

Ryan et al. (2017) introduce three distinct perspectives on vocationalism: economic, educational, and social. These perspectives have evolved over time and laid the foundation for what is now recognized as new vocationalism.

From an economic perspective, vocationalism is believed to offer several advantages to students (Neuhouser et al., 2022). It is argued that an education system that emphasizes the acquisition of employment skills can contribute more to economic success compared to one that focuses solely on theoretical knowledge. This is because such a system equips students with the knowledge and skills necessary for success in the labour market, thereby enhancing their employability and future prospects.

Moreover, vocationalism has been recognized in the educational community for its potential to enhance student learning and retention (Driscoll, 2014). When learning is contextualized within a realistic environment, students are more likely to retain and apply what they have learned. This is because students are more engaged in their studies when the material is presented in a manner that is relevant to their lives and future careers. Vocationalism has also been promoted as a social strategy to enhance overall educational performance and reduce disparities in educational outcomes

(Sedunary, 1996). By equipping students with the knowledge and skills required for success in the labour market, vocationalism can foster competition and ensure that every student has the opportunity to thrive and reach their full potential.

However, vocationalism is not without criticism, which can be examined from economic, educational, and social perspectives. One economic concern is that vocational education tends to be more expensive than academic education, despite the potential for higher future earnings for vocational graduates (Tsang, 1997). This means that students who pursue vocational education may incur higher costs without necessarily experiencing the anticipated economic benefits.

From an educational standpoint, Yang (2015) argues that vocationalism has faced criticism for its perceived failure to develop students' critical thinking skills. This may lead to a situation where students accept jobs without questioning workplace hierarchies and injustices, potentially limiting their ability to contribute to societal progress.

Vocationalism has been criticized for its association with curricular differentiation, early screening based on success, and the reinforcement of educational and social inequality (Sevilla & Polesel, 2022). This is because vocational education, as opposed to a more comprehensive and general education, often focuses on developing

specialized skills and knowledge relevant to specific occupations. Consequently, this can lead to the early tracking of students into specific career pathways based on perceived aptitude and skills, perpetuating socioeconomic disparities.

According to Ryan et al. (2017), vocationalism has had economic, educational, and social implications for higher education. Firstly, vocationalism has increased the emphasis on preparing students for employment in higher education. As a result, higher education institutions have become more focused on equipping students with the skills and knowledge necessary for success in the labour market.

Secondly, vocationalism has contributed to the expansion of higher education through the establishment of various non-university institutions linked to vocational and professional education and training (VPET) programs tailored to the needs of specific industries and professions (Neuhouser et al., 2022).

Lastly, vocationalism has raised concerns about equity in higher education. The tendency of vocational education to track students into specific career paths based on perceived aptitude and competence can perpetuate social and economic inequities (Esmond & Atkins, 2022). Consequently, vocationalism has had a significant impact on VPET in Hong Kong, influencing workforce preparation, the development of higher education, and issues related to equality.

Workforce preparation. In today's era of global competition, the higher education institutions of many nations have placed a strong emphasis on serving national interests within the global economy. These institutions recognize the practical and technical value of higher education and its significance in preparing individuals for the evolving demands of the global job market (Currie et al., 2009). In this context, the vocationalising of higher education emerges as a promising strategy for enhancing human resource development, as it equips the workforce with the necessary productivity and flexibility to thrive in the dynamic global marketplace. A vocationalise workforce is better positioned to adapt and retrain for emerging sectors as outdated ones become obsolete, thus promoting economic development and competitiveness amidst continuous change (Bloom et al., 2004).

An excellent illustration of this trend can be found in the rise of vocational and professional education and training (VPET) in Hong Kong. Recognizing the urgent need for skilled labour to support economic development, Hong Kong has made substantial efforts to create a pool of highly skilled human resources through VPET initiatives (Pilz, 2017). This strategic focus on VPET aligns with the recognition that many of the challenges faced by policymakers can be traced back to deficiencies in human skills (Bloom et al., 2004). Hong Kong authorities have long been concerned with the availability of highly trained individuals, dating back to the period of

economic reform and development in the late 1970s. Consequently, the development of VPET is regarded as an effective approach to meet the demand for a highly skilled workforce.

Higher Education Expansion. The increase in student enrolment is partly a result of vocationalism (Macfarlane, 2015). According to Johnstone et al. (1998), a key element of higher education reform has been the extension of higher education. The demands of a rising and upwardly mobile population, as well as the expectations of a more competitive and technologically advanced economy, drive this expansion.

Trow (1972, 2007) proposed a model for understanding the stages of university education based on variations in the gross enrolment ratio, which refers to the proportion of a particular age group enrolled in postsecondary institutions. This paradigm suggests that there are three degrees of higher education. The first stage, referred to as elite higher education, occurs when enrolment falls below 15% of the age group. The intermediate stage occurs when the gross enrolment ratio is greater than 15 percent but less than 50 percent. When the gross enrolment ratio reaches 50 percent, the third stage, known as universal higher education, is achieved. It is important to note that this model was developed within the specific cultural and

policy context of the United States and may not be immediately applicable to other cultural or policy environments.

The development of higher education generally involves the establishment of diverse institutions, including lower-cost, short-cycle schools that have different objectives and functions compared to traditional universities (Grubb, 1996; Trow, 2007). One example of this is the role of community colleges in the restructuring of higher education in the United States. In China, vocational and professional education and training institutes serve a similar purpose as short-term colleges.

According to Trow (1996), the United States was the first country to transition from elite to mass higher education, and then to universal higher education. This transition began in other Western nations in 1964 and was completed by the 1980s in industrialized countries (Reiko, 2001). Trow's theory of mass higher education, which originated in the United States, has been widely applied to higher education policies and practices in various countries, including China (Reiko, 2001; Scott, 2006). Wu and Tang (2020) argue that China's higher education system reached mass higher education status in 2002, with a gross enrolment rate of 15%. Higher education in China and Hong Kong is becoming more widespread, with the number of higher education institutions in Hong Kong increasing from eight in 2000 to 21 by 2021.

Hong Kong's higher education growth aligns with global trends, and issues that have been highlighted in similar contexts may also be relevant to the city.

The vocational and professional education and training (VPET) system has undergone significant modifications in recent years (Rosina et al., 2021). Historically, traditional, academically focused colleges offered undergraduate degree programs, while vocationally oriented schools could only offer diploma-level programs (Hyslop-Margison, 2001). According to human capital theory, officials assumed that the massification of academic higher education would improve their nations' efficiency and competitiveness (Mok & Jiang, 2018). However, several studies, such as Hernández-March et al. (2009) and García-Aracil and Van der Velden (2008), have argued that the skills acquired through higher education (both soft and technical skills) may not always be relevant to society's demands (Small et al., 2018).

Several factors are contributing to the evolution of vocational and professional education and training (VPET). One of the primary drivers is the industry's demand for graduates with practical, vocational skills. This need was emphasized in Jackson's (2018) study, which revealed that many of the skills sought by employers are not taught in traditional higher education settings. Consequently, there is a need for a new educational approach that focuses on meeting the demands of the business sector.

Student access is another factor that influences the changes in VPET. Some scholars, such as Altbach (2015), have argued that blindly adopting higher education systems from other countries may result in limited access for certain students. Globalization may be contributing to this trend.

The separation of teaching and research is a third factor driving the reform of VPET. Some proponents of traditional higher education, such as Bellaera et al. (2021) and Hart et al. (2021), argue that acquiring transferable skills, such as critical thinking, is more important than academic programs. However, this perspective is not supported by skill-based industries (Scott, 2019). This ongoing debate reflects opposing beliefs about the role and function of higher education, with each side advocating for their preferred approach.

While supported by statistical evidence, the conclusions regarding access to higher education and graduate employment are limited due to their reliance on government data. As Bryman (2012) points out, this type of data collection has its limitations. For instance, the sample used for statistical analysis may not adequately represent the entire research population, requiring caution in interpreting the results. Additionally, Bastedo and Gumport (2003) conducted qualitative case studies that demonstrated students' growing awareness that traditional higher education programs do not

adequately prepare them for the job market. Consequently, students are becoming more selective in choosing degree programs that would enhance their employment prospects after graduation, particularly as most Hong Kong students are obligated to repay their tuition expenses (Wong & Kwan, 2019).

The government should prioritize ensuring universal access to higher education, particularly higher education that contributes to human resource development, as it would benefit the country in the long run (Marginson, 2019). However, blindly adopting education systems from other countries without carefully considering their suitability for the local context may result in a waste of resources. According to Crossley and Watson (2009), thoughtless policy transfer can have severe detrimental implications. Therefore, in order to enhance graduates' employability in the labour market, the government should explore alternative forms of access to higher education (Haasler, 2020). When assessing access to higher education and the specific types of education relevant to a country, it is crucial to evaluate the historical and social context of that country. However, current research lacks an understanding of why a particular model of higher education is embraced in a specific nation. Future studies should strive to investigate the factors that contributed to the establishment of a particular higher education model in order to provide a more comprehensive assessment of its effectiveness.

Within the academic realm, there is a debate regarding the distinctions between teaching academic skills and vocational skills in a university context (Bailey & Belfield, 2019). While traditional higher education emphasizes analytical and research abilities, vocational and professional education and training (VPET) focuses on practical, specialized skills that can be directly applied in the workplace and applied research. This distinction is widely recognized. However, due to the country's elitist higher education system and Confucian cultural background, VPET is often perceived as less prestigious and valuable compared to higher education in Hong Kong. In many Asian societies, there is a belief that traditional higher education is necessary for social status, as Confucian culture views academic education as a means to achieve a higher quality of life. However, this notion contradicts the premise of human capital theory, which suggests that society requires a diverse set of skills to compete effectively.

Some studies, such as Zawacki-Richter et al. (2019) and Iglesias-Pradas et al. (2021), have adopted a positivist approach to higher education, utilizing quantitative methods to examine the achievements and challenges of different countries. However, this approach overlooks the fact that higher education serves diverse purposes in different nations, and relying solely on statistics may lead to inaccurate conclusions. Taking into account a country's unique cultural and historical context, rather than solely

relying on data analysis, can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the current state of higher education. Employing a qualitative and historical perspective can enable us to comprehend how and why the current situation has developed. This study utilizes a historical approach to gain a deeper understanding of the higher education landscape in Hong Kong and to address the existing knowledge gap on the subject.

The legislative council in Hong Kong deliberated whether to maintain its unitary higher education system or transition to a binary system (Task Force on Promotion of Vocational Education HKSAR, 2014). The government has established a task group to promote the expansion of Vocational and Professional Education and Training (VPET) institutions while also supporting the establishment of self-funded, academically-focused schools. Under the VTC legislation, only one institution, THEi, is designated as a VPET institution (Cap. 1130). In a unitary system like the current one in Hong Kong, academic research universities are excluded, whereas a binary system encompasses both academically and vocationally focused institutions (van Houten, 2018). The United States strongly advocates for a unified system where all vocational education is delivered within the higher education context. However, concerns have been raised about the proliferation of vocational degrees that were traditionally offered at the diploma level but have now been elevated to the doctoral

level, leading to worries of over-education in the business sector. In response to this situation, Méhaut (2007) introduced the concept of de-qualification, suggesting that higher education is more closely linked to an individual's economic and social status than to the substance of their employment, although this hypothesis lacks empirical support from the industry. While a unitary system may be more administratively and financially manageable, various studies have demonstrated that it can have diverse societal impacts (Boldrini et al., 2019).

According to mainstream academic journal databases, the majority of VPET research studies (excluding post-secondary vocational training) are conducted by academics in higher education, which means that the perspectives of VPET practitioners and industry leaders are often not included. It is crucial to incorporate these insider viewpoints to ensure that policy-oriented interpretations are reliable and influenced by individuals with direct experience. Nakata (2015) argues that insider knowledge and information can have a significant impact on current understanding.

Higher education cannot fully replicate the unique characteristics and benefits of VPET, which plays a crucial role in the development of a country's human capital.

Doern (2008) identifies three main areas in which VPET differs from higher education: access, quality, and accountability or governance; innovation, research and

development, and human capital development; and student pathways and mobility.

While higher education is important, the underlying assumptions of a unitary system have led scholars, such as Brooks (2003), to explore the possibility of establishing VPET as a parallel pathway to higher education, aiming to provide both human capital and human talent.

Current Achievements of Vocational and Professional Education and Training

In certain countries, such as Germany and Taiwan, VPET is highly esteemed and considered to offer better employability prospects compared to higher education, which is often perceived as more elitist. Certain fields, such as tourism and hospitality, are better acquired through practical experience rather than theoretical classroom instruction and are therefore not suitable for traditional higher education settings (Chang et al., 2013). This aligns with my own experience as a marketing instructor, as students often learn more effectively through hands-on practice in practical courses. Barone and Ortiz (2011) suggest that cultures with unified higher education institutions are more prone to overeducating their population. Additionally, Olazaran et al. (2019) emphasize the importance of VPET institutes establishing strong industry relations to provide students with apprenticeship opportunities.

With the increasing number of higher education institutions, university graduates have encountered greater difficulty in obtaining white-collar positions, while vocational degrees from VPET are seen as offering more reliable career pathways (Lopez & Phillips, 2019). VPET has now gained the same level of recognition as higher education, demonstrating its ability to develop human capital. However, one limitation in these studies, in my opinion, is that they tend to generalize the issue without considering the unique histories and accomplishments of each country. When evaluating a country's achievements, it is crucial to consider its historical context.

Current Challenges of Vocational and Professional Education and Training

VPET is not without its challenges. One major concern is that global league tables, which heavily prioritize academic research and publishing, continue to favour higher education over VPET (Gessler & Siemer, 2020). This is particularly evident in the emphasis placed on the ratio of foreign students, despite VPET's focus on meeting local needs and potential difficulties in attracting international students. These metrics do not adequately reflect the principles and objectives of VPET, giving stakeholders a false impression that VPET is of lower quality compared to higher education (Collins & Stockton, 2018; Li, 2022). It is crucial to emphasize that VPET is not intended to replace higher education but rather serves a distinct social purpose. Technicians today

require higher-level knowledge and skills to fulfil their responsibilities due to the increasing use of computers in fundamental technical activities. Unlike their professional counterparts, VPET graduates are not trained to be strategic, but rather to master the skills required for their chosen trade at a high level (Scott, 2019).

VPET institutions often engage in collaborations with businesses and actively participate in competitions and initiatives. Instead of relying on university rankings, they compete with higher education institutions based on the career-oriented design of their programs (Brown, 2018). Another challenge faced by VPET institutes is funding. Unlike higher education, which typically receives government research funding, vocational institutions often depend on income from cooperative business initiatives rather than academic research (Gao, 2018). The popularity of VPET programs can also be influenced by the economic cycle, as vocational and professional training programs tend to be more in demand during economic downturns due to the better employability of their graduates (Van den Berghe, 1997).

Another significant issue for VPET is the lack of agreement on the division of labour with higher education (Béduwé et al., 2009). The distinction between VPET and higher education can be ambiguous and confusing for the audience. For instance, higher education programs may incorporate extensive internship components, while

VPET programs may require students to submit academically-oriented dissertations.

Motivating learners is another challenge in VPET. Students are believed to perform better when they are interested in the subject matter. According to research conducted in Japan and Romania (Duta et al., 2015; Tanaka, 2017), students who prefer a hands-on, learning-by-doing approach may lose enthusiasm due to traditional teaching techniques and unrealistic content. The discussion chapter will delve deeper into these difficulties and challenges.

The Prospects of Vocational and Professional Education and Training

There is significant potential for vocational and professional education (VPET) to coexist with traditional higher education. Current research often applies VPET measurement criteria based on those used in higher education, highlighting the importance of this form of education. VPET emphasizes practical knowledge and abilities and is often influenced by academic research conducted by higher education institutions (Ramsay & Brua, 2017). Additionally, professional doctorate programs have produced a substantial number of talented scholar-practitioners in recent years. These individuals possess expertise in their respective disciplines and have a solid understanding of applied research.

Certain vocational courses require a hands-on learning style known as apprenticeship pedagogy. Instructors for such courses need to have real-world industry experience and contacts. These instructors, referred to as professors of practice, are well-suited for delivering VPET courses (Ramsay & Brua, 2017). In countries with well-developed VPET systems like Germany's university of applied sciences (UAS) system, VPET can function as a separate higher education system, provided there is an adequate number of professors of practice, a focus on applied research and consulting, strong employer networks, and motivated students.

World Models of Vocational and Professional Education and Training

Vocational and professional education (VPET) has the potential to complement traditional higher education. Research frequently employs evaluation standards for VPET that are comparable to those used in higher education. VPET itself emphasizes practical knowledge and abilities, often drawing on academic research from higher education institutions. Furthermore, professional doctorate programs have contributed to the development of many highly competent scholar-practitioners who possess expertise in applied research and are skilled professionals in their fields.

Certain vocational disciplines, such as bakery management and paramedicine, require hands-on learning through apprenticeship pedagogy. This approach necessitates

instructors with relevant industry expertise and contacts. These instructors, known as professors of practice, are well-suited to deliver VPET classes. In countries with well-established VPET systems, like Germany's university of applied sciences (UAS) system, VPET can function as a separate higher education system, given the presence of an adequate number of professors of practice, a focus on applied research and consulting, strong employer networks, and motivated students.

The U.S. Model. In the United States, the vocational and professional education (VPET) paradigm involves integrating it within the traditional higher education structure (Bragg, 2002). Under this model, colleges incorporate vocational components into their academic programs, such as internships, practical workshops, and case studies, to establish a meaningful connection between theory and practice. This approach allows universities to offer both standard Ph.D. programs and professional practice-based doctorates, such as a Doctorate in Nursing Practice. Policymakers argue that this strategy is the most effective means of ensuring that all professional activities are grounded in academic research and theory.

The U.K. Model. Vocational and professional education (VPET) refers to educational programs designed to prepare students for specific jobs or professions. VPET programs often place a strong emphasis on practical skills and knowledge, and may

include components such as internships, practical workshops, and case studies to bridge the gap between theory and practice (Korber, 2019). In some countries, like the United Kingdom, VPET is offered by private institutions with the authority to grant degrees. In other countries, such as the United States, VPET is integrated into the traditional higher education system and can be provided by universities and colleges. VPET distinguishes itself from regular higher education by its tendency to be more theoretically oriented and its focus on preparing students for a diverse range of professional opportunities. Professional doctorate programs, which train highly skilled scholar-practitioners, serve as an example of the intersection between traditional higher education and VPET.

The approach commonly employed to investigate VPET is often qualitative and interpretative in nature. This approach aims to comprehend the meaning of a situation as perceived by individuals involved in it, while also considering the social context in which interactions occur (Ng et al., 2020). This methodology is particularly well-suited for analysing the development of a country's higher education system and can yield meaningful results when utilized in conjunction with appropriate analytical tools.

The German Model. In the German model, traditional higher education and VPET are distinct entities that are separated by the establishment of a specialized form of higher education institution called a University of Applied Sciences and Technology (UAS). According to Fuller and Unwin (2014), UASs offer VPET degrees up to the master's level, which represents the highest academic level within this model.

Irrespective of the VPET degree level, apprenticeship requirements are commonly mandatory and commence during the first year of study. The duration of an apprenticeship can range from one to three years, while internships typically last from one to three months. Backes-Gellner et al. (2020) emphasize that apprentices participating in VPET programs are often required to follow a structured training plan that focuses on acquiring the skills necessary to fulfil a specific job within an organisation. This approach offers numerous advantages by integrating practical work experience with a degree qualification.

The Australian Model. The Australian model of VPET adopts a distinct approach. Similarly to other countries, Australia permits its Technical and Further Education Institutes (TAFEs) to offer undergraduate vocational degrees, typically spanning three years (Hodge et al., 2022). The TAFE system has been in place for over 130 years, and the industry is well acquainted with national training packages, which encompass vocational programs. This is essentially akin to the UAS concept in Germany, with

the distinction that it does not encompass an applied research component and concludes at the undergraduate level. After completing secondary school, students have the option to pursue an advanced diploma and eventually a vocational degree. Moreover, TAFEs provide executive and professional certificates and diplomas to university graduates. Government officials aim to foster the connection between TAFE and industry, encouraging higher education graduates to pursue further studies at TAFE, thereby acquiring applied knowledge in a specific field. Dr Christina Hong, Chief Academic Officer of TAFE Queensland, highlighted in a vocational education forum hosted by the VTC Hong Kong in 2015 that TAFE can serve as a mid-point for graduates of traditional higher education, rather than being exclusively considered as the starting point for VPET. According to Sinclair and Webb (2020), Australian universities also employ a significant number of practitioners, professors of practice, or visiting lecturers to teach evening courses (typically catering to part-time students) to ensure the relevance of subjects to the workplace.

While all models remain subject to ongoing debates, it is important to recognize that a VPET program has a distinct mission and should be viewed as a complementary educational option or a means of completing a well-rounded education suitable for the 21st century, as exemplified by the Australian model. In contrast to higher education, vocational and professional training does not compete with or replace it.

Types of Undergraduate Vocational Degrees

Within the framework of vocationalism, undergraduate degrees can be categorized into three types, each offering varying levels of practical or career-oriented components in the major VPET models discussed. These include: 1) traditional academic degrees with the option of an internship element, 2) professional degrees incorporating a short-term internship, and 3) vocational degrees featuring a long-term apprenticeship. To illustrate the distinctions and commonalities between these degree types, the following tables draw upon information gathered from university websites. A comparative analysis of vocational degrees will provide a comprehensive understanding of their differentiation, as well as shed light on the overall development of the VPET system.

	Traditional Academic Degrees	Professional Degrees	Vocational or Applied Degrees
Commonly offered at	Universities or accredited higher education institutes	Universities or accredited higher education institutes	VPET institutes or University of Applied Sciences (UAS)
Academic levels	Bachelor's to academic doctoral degrees (i.e. Ph.D.)	Specialist Bachelor's (i.e. Bachelor of Law) to professional doctorate	Usually at Bachelor's degree level but can up to Master's level in certain VPET systems

		(i.e. EdD, EngD, PsyD, and DBA) depend on the legal or professional registration requirements	
Orientation	Academic research-oriented	Professional-oriented (fulfilling professional registration requirements)	Career-oriented (training work-ready graduates with sufficient understanding of the theories behind the practice)
Programme length	3 to 4 years	2 to 6 years	3 to 4 years
Highest academic position	Professor, research professor	Professor, clinical professor	Professor of practice
Assessed work placement requirements	Usually little to no work placement requirements (or optional)	Usually, work placement is required towards the end of the programme and formally assessed by the subject lecturer	Usually, work placement is a major requirement and arranged throughout the programme; students are continuously assessed by employers or industry professionals; comparable to a modern apprenticeship
Number of placements required	N/A	Usually one; total hours depend on the registration requirement	Usually multiple; total hours depend on the programme setting

Common disciplines	All disciplines	Medicine, engineering, law, pharmacy, veterinary medicine, architecture, psychology, and education	Advertising, horticulture, design, built environment, sports therapy, hospitality, and engineering
Teaching methodology	Traditional lectures with optional consultation	Internship	Morden apprenticeship

Table 2.2. Differences and Similarities Between Traditional, Professional, and Vocational Degrees

Traditional academic degrees often prioritize strategy, focusing on what to do, while providing limited guidance on how to do it (Wong & Hoskins, 2022). In contrast, vocational and professional education and training (VPET) programs embody the vocationalism ideology, emphasizing the mastery of trade skills and the development of higher-level judgment abilities (Korber & Oesch, 2019). Unlike academic higher education, where internal assessments are predominant, VPET programs frequently involve industry partners in assessing students' competencies through formal modern apprenticeships. The curriculum content in VPET programs may vary among

professors, as the emphasis is on sharing commonly accepted knowledge and industry experience, prioritizing professional and technical skills over theoretical knowledge. Additionally, VPET students engage in working with fee-paying clients, following the earn-and-learn model (Tsui et al., 2019). Collaborating with paying clients on real-world projects provides students with valuable commercial experience, and their work may even be selected for production. To safeguard students' work and enhance their understanding of the projects' commercial value, all paid projects are conducted with student agreements. This unique aspect is a distinguishing feature of VPET vocational degrees.

Previous Research Methodology in VPET

Many studies on vocational and professional education (VPET), such as the works of Hassan and Shamsudin (2019) and Mutohhari et al. (2021), have been conducted within the positivistic paradigm, which emphasizes generalizations while disregarding diversity and heterogeneity. These studies primarily target academic audiences rather than practitioners and often focus on designing vocational curricula and training instructors. While the positivistic approach may offer a broad perspective and yield transferable knowledge, it can also oversimplify complex situations and prioritize deducing causal relationships from factual data. Moreover, it may fail to acknowledge

the distinctive purposes and aspirations of educators in different countries and overlook the intricate connection between the VPET system and these objectives.

The interpretive technique offers an alternative approach that aims to understand the meaning of a situation as experienced by individuals within it, taking into account the social context in which interactions occur. This technique holds the potential to provide fresh perspectives on the VPET system, and its effectiveness can be enhanced through the use of a purposive selection strategy to choose examples that offer significant insights into the study subject. In contrast, many mainstream research studies on VPET primarily focus on the national level, overlooking the understanding of VPET development at the institutional level and disregarding the perspectives of small groups or minorities. By acknowledging and considering the voices of marginalized groups within these contexts, new perspectives and ideas can emerge, contributing to the development of theory in the field.

Conceptual Framework

To conduct this research study, I developed a guiding framework that draws upon the concepts of new vocationalism and human capital theory.

Conceptual Framework

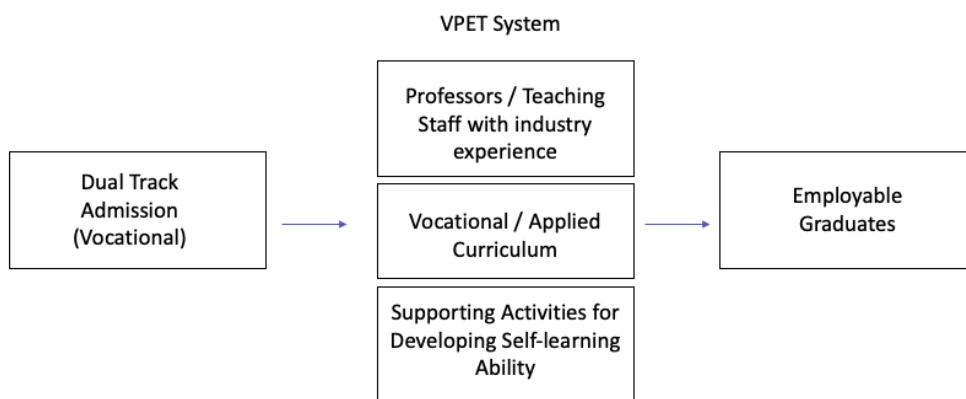


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Upon reviewing the existing literature on VPET, a conceptual framework is proposed for this study. Conceptual frameworks serve as networks or planes of interrelated concepts that provide a comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon. Each concept within the framework plays a crucial role, and it is important to note that the framework is not merely a collection of concepts (Jabareen, 2009). As both a lecturer and administrator in professional education, my experience in these roles has helped shape the conceptual framework for this study.

Chapter Summary

Human capital theory is a branch of research that emphasizes the importance of investing in a society's human resources, both academically and professionally, in order to cultivate a diverse and skilled workforce. This is often achieved through education and training programs that help individuals acquire the necessary skills and knowledge to thrive in the workforce. Vocational and professional education and training (VPET) programs can serve as a means to realize human capital theory.

VPET programs offer individuals the opportunity to learn practical skills and gain hands-on experience in specific sectors or occupations. These programs can be particularly beneficial for individuals who do not intend to pursue a traditional four-year college degree but still seek to acquire the skills and knowledge necessary for success in the workforce. VPET programs also play a crucial role in providing industries and enterprises with competent human resources, as they equip individuals with the specialized skills and training required to fill specific positions within a company.

However, the establishment and implementation of VPET programs are not without challenges. Different governments may have varying agendas and may not have thoroughly evaluated the approaches they have adopted from other countries. This can

result in ambiguous assumptions, problematic findings, and misinterpretations in VPET research. To fully understand the value and potential of VPET in fulfilling human capital theory, it is essential to analyse the perspectives of VPET stakeholders, such as VPET deans, academics, human resources consultants, and industrial employers.

Chapter 3 - Research Design

The aim of this chapter is to present a thorough overview of the objectives, methodologies, research procedures, and scope of the dissertation. We will start by outlining the overarching objectives and concepts of the research, and subsequently delve into more detailed information regarding the methods, planning, and process of the study. As mentioned earlier in Chapter 1, the study is guided by three research questions that form the basis of our investigation. The subsequent sections will offer additional details on these questions and the approaches we have employed to address them.

The research questions are:

1. How has THEi developed in the Hong Kong VPET context?
2. What are the current achievements and challenges related to VPET in Hong Kong?
3. What are the current challenges facing VPET in Hong Kong?

Philosophical Positioning: Interpretivist-Hermeneutic

Establishing the epistemological and ontological standpoint is crucial for demonstrating the validity and legitimacy of one's contribution to knowledge, as emphasised by Hirschman and Holbrook (1986) and Vogl et al. (2019). Sociologists may adopt various research paradigms based on their ontological and epistemological assumptions, each paradigm comprising a set of concepts and a chosen research approach (Bassey, 1999). However, Burton et al. (2014) suggest that research tools and methods can be adaptable as long as they are appropriate and suitable for the specific topic. In certain cases, social researchers may adopt a mixed methodological approach if it aligns with the research topic (Badley, 2003; Creswell, 1999).

A research paradigm, as defined by Kuhn (1970), represents a coherent collection of underlying assumptions derived from the ontology, epistemology, and methodology employed in a single work or series of works.

Interpretivism aims to comprehend phenomena by exploring their underlying meanings. Rooted in the social sciences, interpretivism proponents argue that the positivistic framework is ill-suited for studying social phenomena (e.g., Usher, 1996).

Interpretive researchers strive to understand the diverse interpretations of human interactions. The interpretive framework operates on the premise that all human interactions are significant and must be evaluated within the broader social context to

grasp their meanings (McChesney & Aldridge, 2019). Human behaviour is influenced by interactions, and conversely, interactions are shaped by behaviour. To enhance their understanding of research, scholars must endeavour to comprehend behaviour in the context of interactions (Usher, 1996).

The interpretivist perspective considers reality as subjective, socially constructed, and multiple. Interpretive research methods emphasise the comprehension of social events within their specific contextual occurrences. This involves examining the particular location, individuals involved, and the historical and cultural backdrop of the era. By investigating social events in this manner, interpretive scholars can provide more nuanced and comprehensive explanations and enable comparisons across diverse settings. This emphasis on contextual understanding distinguishes interpretive research from other paradigms.

Educational inquiry is rooted in the concept of paradigms, which determine how we select and define problems for investigation and how we approach and evaluate them in theoretical and methodological terms (Husén, 1988). Paradigms, or frameworks, consist of ideas that identify significant problems or issues within a scientific community and offer specific theories, explanations, methods, and techniques to address these concerns (Usher, 1996, p. 15). Within the scientific community, the

term "paradigm" refers to the common ideas, attitudes, and practices shared by its members (Kuhn, 1970, p. 75). As researchers interpret the world through the lens of axiology, epistemology, ontology, and methodology, their actions are guided by this set of beliefs (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Paradigms are considered philosophical positions that underlie all fields of knowledge and disciplines.

Habermas (1971) outlines three social scientific research paradigms or frameworks: empirical-analytic, interpretive-hermeneutic, and critical-theoretical orientations.

Each of these paradigms presupposes a specific cognitive orientation in social science research. The empirical-analytic paradigm places emphasis on instrumental values and the technical manipulation and management of phenomena. In contrast, the interpretive-hermeneutic paradigm is based on the principles of open communication and the free exchange of ideas (Carr, 1985; Titchen et al., 2017). The 20th century witnessed significant conflicts between the empirical-analytic paradigm and the interpretive-hermeneutic paradigm employed in educational research (Lather, 2006; Yvonne Feilzer, 2010). While the positivist and empiricist views dominated much of Western social research for several decades, the interpretive-hermeneutic and more critical approaches have gained prominence in the past two decades. However, the evidence-based policy movement has led to a recent resurgence of quantitative and positivistic approaches worldwide.

Historically, there has been a strong emphasis on quantification in science (Ary et al., 2018). The empirical-analytic paradigm is based on empirical observations that are quantitative and can be analysed using mathematical tools (Husén, 1988, p. 17). In this paradigm, intellectual and technical work serves as a means of connecting individuals to the world around them (Queirós et al., 2017). Positivism aims to achieve personal intellectual and technical control over the world, emphasizing efficiency, certainty, and predictability (Habermas, 1971). Individuals are perceived to be separate from their environment. This type of research is most effective when the study's objectives are well-defined and can be divided into groups for controlled observation. Positivist paradigms assume the existence of an objective world that is stable and unchanging (Cohen et al., 2002). There is a strong emphasis on control, validity, and the ability to make accurate generalizations (Queirós et al., 2017).

However, positivism has faced criticism for its ontological assumptions about the nature of the world (Usher, 1996, p. 14). A positivist view sees the world as ordered, lawful, and predictable. Despite its dominance in educational research, some researchers, such as Queirós et al. (2017) and Smith (2018), argue that the empirical-analytical paradigm has limitations in its practical application. Education is a social process, involving subjective educators and individuals who are constantly growing. Researchers often find that their questions extend beyond mere fact-finding and

qualification, delving into complex areas of human interaction (Rutberg & Bouikidis, 2018). Consequently, the empirical-analytic paradigm is considered limited in its ability to explain the complexity of human interactions. Statistics alone do not provide the qualitative information necessary to understand why something has occurred.

There has been a growing support for research approaches that acknowledge individuals' capacity to interpret social events and attribute personal meaning to their surroundings (Queirós et al., 2017).

Phenomenology serves as the philosophical foundation for the interpretive-hermeneutic paradigm. Originating from the humanities, this paradigm emphasizes a holistic and qualitative approach, as well as interpretive understanding (Husén, 1988, p. 17). Interpretive scholars argue that the social world cannot be fully understood by identifying universal generalizations and causal relationships. Instead, the objective of interpretive social research is to explain and illuminate social phenomena (Usher, 1996). This research rejects the idea of uniformity in nature and recognizes that individuals may respond differently to the same or similar situations based on their interpretations of the world (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). Human actions can only be interpreted within the hermeneutic circle (Usher, 1996, p. 20). A key aspect of the interpretive paradigm is the understanding that the lifeworld consists of countless worlds associated with individuals' infinite range of perspectives (Pidgeon, 2019).

Communication serves as the fundamental activity that connects individuals to their social environment, as noted by Khaldi (2017).

Hermeneutics, in this context, is not concerned with the theoretical control of a particular objective domain; rather, it focuses on enhancing understanding through dialogue about shared concerns of human existence. Intersubjective understanding involves the exchange of information between two individuals who are assumed to share similar worldviews. This form of understanding seeks to go beyond surface appearances of events and engage directly with them (Pidgeon, 2019). Social researchers are not neutral observers, explainers, or predictors, as some mistakenly believe; they are active participants in a dialogue. Collins and Stockton (2018) assert that one's interpretive framework cannot be separated from their historical and cultural context. Ultimately, hermeneutic understanding involves a dialogue between researchers and what they are seeking to understand (Usher, 1996, p. 22). Regardless of the methodology employed, educational research should explore the relationship between the educational practices and ideals it seeks to understand and the values it supports and promotes (Carr, 1995, p. 99).

A systematic, critical, and self-critical approach is crucial for advancing knowledge in both the empirical-analytic and interpretive-hermeneutic paradigms (Farghaly, 2018).

The positivist method adheres to scientific research standards, while the interpretive approach seeks to comprehend social reality through culturally and historically informed interpretation (Crotty, 1998, p. 67).

The traditional scientific paradigm is not well-suited for studying education as it requires a holistic approach (Schratz, 2020). In the field of education, working within the positivist paradigm does not make sense since its assumptions are based on an objective reality and disregard the human element (O'Donoghue & Punch, 2003).

Therefore, an interpretive-hermeneutic research approach aligns better with studying VPET in Hong Kong for several reasons. A comprehensive approach was necessary to truly understand the evolution of VPET. As part of this approach, the historical aspect of VPET was investigated. Given its emphasis on the immediate significance of action, the interpretive method, which emphasizes understanding the subjective experiences and perspectives of the individuals involved, is also appropriate for this research (Erickson, 1986). Additionally, the information required to answer the research questions is uncertain, making the interpretive method suitable.

Research Methodology

Methodologies serve as frameworks that provide theoretical guidance and guidelines for conducting research within a specific paradigm (Silverman, 2020). Within the

interpretivist theoretical perspective, there are various methodological approaches.

One suitable research method for this situation is the case study. The case study approach allows for a comprehensive examination of an event from multiple perspectives and facilitates the exploration and understanding of various aspects of the event (Anthony & Jack, 2009). The case study method is particularly appropriate for this study due to the specific characteristics of the key informants and the context-dependent nature of vocational and professional education in higher education. As Yin (2017, pp. 8-9) suggests, case studies are valuable in investigating contemporary issues. In an evolving environment, the methodology should be process-oriented, adaptable, and flexible in response to changing circumstances (Hyett et al., 2014). Such situations often warrant the use of the case study methodology as it encompasses a wide range of methods within a single study.

A case study provides a unique opportunity to study everyday, cultural, and interactional phenomena in their naturalistic context and on their own terms (Rashid et al., 2019). This method of inquiry is well-suited to the specific nature of the study.

A case study examines contemporary events within their real-life context, utilizes multiple sources of evidence, and does not attempt to control the events (Yin, 2017).

It is crucial to establish a clear boundary for a case study. This is evident in the history and development of VPET in Hong Kong, a region with a distinct cultural background

and experiencing rapid growth in VPET. A case study has a defined focus, core, and boundary that is often indeterminate, delineating the area that is not under study (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 25). Case studies have their own dynamics, and as one delves into them, sub-questions often emerge. The nature of case studies lends itself to a focused investigation of the issue at hand (Carlone, 2012), and my examination specifically focused on the issue, as well as the experiences associated with establishing, leading, managing, teaching, and studying at a VPET institute.

In a case study, there are two levels of questions that can be asked: those directed towards specific individuals through interviews or questionnaires, and those focusing on the case itself to understand how and why things are occurring. Given its emphasis on connections, a case study was the optimal research approach for my study. Case studies allow for the collection and analysis of ongoing data as the context and events unfold over time. The purpose of this study was to analyse the first cycle of operation for THEi, and several unexpected events occurred. This presented an opportunity to use a case study to construct a compelling narrative and establish a robust chain of evidence. Effective case studies incorporate multiple data sources, seek evidence that supports consistent findings from diverse perspectives, employ triangulation to interpret converging evidence, and draw conclusions based on multiple data sources. These characteristics of case studies enable more robust and persuasive conclusions

than could be derived from a single source of research alone (Anderson et al., 2005; Yin, 2017).

One of the primary advantages of case studies is their capacity to identify patterns. Various occurrences and phenomena emerged during the inquiry that required explanation and description. By identifying patterns in one case and correlating them with another, it becomes possible to anticipate emerging relationship patterns (Yin, 2017). Comparing interaction patterns can enhance the validity of an analysis (Almutairi et al., 2014). This study may reveal patterns in how key informants interpret their experiences in VPET settings, as well as similarities and differences between VPET and traditional higher education. There may also be patterns between the data from documents and the data from individual interviews, or between the information gathered from daily observations and the reflections of informants.

Case studies allow researchers to delve into a specific incident, conduct an in-depth investigation of a single occurrence, or examine a sequence of interconnected events over a defined period of time. The objective is to construct a narrative of a particular aspect of social behaviour within a specific context and identify the factors that influence the situation. Themes, subjects, and phenomena can be identified and analysed (Harrison et al., 2017). In this study, a case study was employed to provide a

comprehensive account of the research setting, particularly focusing on the experiences of key informants in the VPET scenario. Case studies offer a detailed and vivid depiction of the events within the case, a chronological narrative, and the opportunity to engage in a dialogue between the presentation of events and their interpretation. A case study can be generic or specialized, examining the case from the perspective of specific individuals or groups, the contextual background of events, the researchers' involvement in the case, and various ways of presenting the case to convey the complexity of the issue (Yin, 2017).

Case studies are a type of study that focuses on a specific and defined circumstance or scenario. They are particularly valuable for investigating and explaining unique or complex occurrences. However, it may be challenging to generalize the findings of a case study to different contexts or situations. This is because case studies often have a narrow focus, rather than seeking to uncover broader trends or patterns that may be applicable more generally.

In this particular case study, the focus is on examining the history and evolution of the VPET institution in Hong Kong. By concentrating on this specific and well-defined setting, the research aims to provide a comprehensive and coherent understanding of the VPET industry within this context. The purpose of this study is not to generalize

the findings to other VPET situations, but rather to offer an in-depth understanding of the VPET sector in this particular environment.

The aim of this research is to contribute to the knowledge and application of VPET in other countries and regions by documenting the successes and challenges of the VPET industry. Through exploring the unique setting of the VPET institution in Hong Kong, this study seeks to provide valuable insights and knowledge for other scholars and practitioners working in the field of VPET in different contexts.

Case studies involve the collection and analysis of data from a specific event or environment. The goal of a case study is to investigate and describe in detail a singular or complex event. To accomplish this effectively, a researcher must gather sufficient data to analyse the findings, examine the relevant aspects of the case, interpret the findings in a logical manner, evaluate the credibility of these interpretations, and construct an argument or narrative based on the evidence.

This argument or narrative should be connected to relevant literature in the field and presented convincingly to the audience. By providing an audit trail of the data and methods used in the study, other researchers can verify or question the conclusions and develop alternative arguments using the same data.

Overall, the effectiveness of a case study relies on the quality and quantity of the data collected, as well as the researcher's ability to assess and interpret the data in order to present a persuasive and plausible argument or narrative about the case under investigation. By following these stages and establishing a clear and transparent audit trail, case studies can be a valuable tool for examining and documenting unique or complex occurrences (Bassegy, 1999). The next section provides an overview of the data collection techniques employed, including individual interviews and journaling, to address some of the aforementioned challenges.

Data Collection

Based on the research design, I employed specific techniques and procedures to gather and analyse data for this study. The term "methods" refers to the instruments and procedures researchers utilize to obtain empirical evidence and interpret data (Sarantakos, 2012). For this study, data was collected through a combination of three methods: (1) in-depth interviews with key informants, (2) document analysis, and (3) observation. Interviews were conducted between November 2016 and February 2017, while data collection took place from September 2014 to April 2017.

In-depth Key Informant Interviews

Interviews are an effective method for gathering information about the experiences of interviewees. Research interviews involve two-person conversations initiated by the interviewer with the purpose of obtaining information and focusing on subject matter relevant to the research objectives of systematic description, prediction, or explanation (Davies & Dodd, 2002). They are often the primary method of data collection in case studies (Noor, 2008).

According to Patton (1990), there are three fundamental techniques for collecting qualitative data through open-ended interviews: (1) casual conversational interviews, (2) the general interview guide approach or semi-structured interview approach, and (3) standardized open-ended interviews (Patton, 1990, p. 280). Conversational interviews can encourage deeper dialogue, but collecting and analysing rigorous data requires more time. On the other hand, a structured open-ended interview can help reduce the interviewer's subjectivity in judgment during the interview, but it has limited flexibility in eliciting thoughts and ideas outside of a predetermined interview schedule.

The semi-structured interview provides a framework for the interviewer to formulate questions, sequence those questions, and determine which areas to explore in more

depth (Patton, 1990, p. 284). For this study, an interview guide was prepared based on the research questions, and a pilot interview was conducted to verify its validity and applicability. The pilot interview involved a member of the institute's full-time teaching staff who joined in 2012. Following the pilot interview, the interview guide was reviewed and revised for future use. The interviews were conducted in a private room on the institute's campus and lasted approximately sixty minutes. The pilot interview revealed that students are more open in sharing feedback, while management staff tend to be more formal and conservative in their responses. As explained by Hyett et al. (2014), this is common as respondents may be cautious about commenting on their official job titles. To create a more comfortable environment for the interviewees, I adjusted my questioning approach, tone of voice, and word choice. The following characteristics of the semi-structured interview, as outlined by Edwards and Holland (2013), apply to this form of interview: there should not be a rigid set of predetermined questions or an excessive amount of pre-planned details. Most of the inquiries should arise from the subject's responses. The objective is to comprehend the phenomena as they are experienced and explore their various aspects in a comprehensive and collaborative manner.

The purpose of this interview was to gain the perspectives, experiences, and insights of the selected informants regarding the institution and the development of VPET in

Hong Kong. This purpose aligns well with the overall objectives of the study. When conducting an interview, it is crucial for the interviewer to understand the phenomena from the informant's perspective. This can be achieved by asking semi-structured, open-ended questions that allow the informant to reflect on their experiences and clarify their understanding. Providing examples to explain the informant's intentions and terminology can be helpful (Bruce, 1994). As the interviewer, it is important to consider the participant's perceptions, experiences, and thoughts about the phenomena.

The interview continues until the key informant's thoughts on the subject have been exhausted. According to Trigwell (2000), exhaustion occurs when the informant has recounted every event in detail and clarified the meaning of every key phrase. In this case, conducting the interview in the interviewees' native language was advantageous as it allowed for greater accuracy in the words used and the ability to explain any hidden or nuanced meanings that may be necessary. This approach enabled me to gather the most significant and contextually relevant information.

The interviews for this study were conducted in Cantonese, recorded, and transcribed verbatim. All audio files were transcribed faithfully, including pauses, non-verbal comments, such as " "ummm," throat clearing, laughter, and even silence. The

transcription process was carried out by a professional transcriber, and I cross-checked all transcripts against the recordings to ensure the accuracy of the key informants' original expressions.

A summary of all data analysis and illustrative transcripts is included in the dissertation. The transcripts were also translated into English, and each informant reviewed and approved the citations. To eliminate any discrepancies in meaning due to cultural and language variations and ensure the accuracy of the translations, the transcripts were translated based on their intended meaning rather than word-for-word. Although some nuances may be lost in translation, a native speaker would be able to understand the original meaning from the audio throughout the translation process (Esfehani & Walters, 2018).

As part of the interview process, I confirmed with the informants the exact wording and context of their statements. I asked follow-up questions to clarify their responses as needed. I took notes and recorded the interview on two mobile devices (such as an iPhone and an iPad) to prevent technological issues and preserve the authenticity of the conversation during the transcription process. The recordings were then sent to a stenographer for verbatim transcription. The transcript was double-checked to ensure that the interviewee's facial expressions were accurately captured. The complete set of

questions for the semi-structured interview can be found in Appendix V of the interview guide.

Documentary Content Analysis

Documentary content analysis, which involves evaluating written records, is an essential component of educational research and can be conducted in conjunction with interviews and observations (Punch, 2013). Various materials, such as diaries, letters, essays, personal notes, memoirs, autobiographies, institutional memoranda and reports, as well as official statements and processes, can be analysed through this method (Sapsford & Jupp, 2006).

For this study, a range of documents were examined, including government pronouncements, official papers and transcripts from the Legislative Council of Hong Kong, institutional and program accreditation documents related to THEi from HKCAAVQ, and internal minutes and reports from THEi. Additionally, public papers from other organisations, such as journals, publications, and speeches, were examined. Official student enrolment numbers were also utilized as documentary evidence.

To fully understand the historical evolution of VPET and the factors driving its growth in Hong Kong's education system, it is necessary to analyse documentary content data at the institutional, national, and international levels, as suggested by Drisko and Maschi (2016). In this study, I analysed papers related to VPET at the institutional level to determine how VPET is utilized and implemented. At the national level, I examined changes in government policies to assess if national policy changes have contributed to reforms in the VPET sector. Additionally, at this level, the interaction between economic transformation and educational reorganization was investigated to understand the extent to which the former has influenced the latter. The report of the task force on VPET was a crucial source for this study, as it examined the impact of vocationalism on higher education worldwide, with a particular focus on the growth of VPET in Hong Kong.

Experiential Knowledge and Informal Observations

Observation is an additional method of data collection that was employed in this study. It was possible to utilize this method because of my professional involvement from September 2014 to April 2017 in a front-line teaching position, which allowed me to observe and document the development of VPET in Hong Kong. During this time, I had access to various non-confidential internal documents related to the

implementation of VPET at the institutional level. Furthermore, I had 12 years of prior experience working in the VPET sector in Hong Kong and Shanghai, which provided me with knowledge about the issues and trends in the VPET field.

Additionally, I had the opportunity to witness the establishment and the first teaching cycle of THEi, the first VPET institution in Hong Kong, from admission to graduation. This resolved the practical issue of gaining access to various internal sources and documents.

Informal observation, which involves observing a situation or environment in a natural and open-ended manner, focusing on broader behavioural patterns holistically and macroscopically, was used in this study (Punch, 2013). By informally observing THEi's office and classroom staff, I gained a better understanding of the key differences between traditional higher education and VPET. These observations were conducted throughout my tenure at THEi.

Selection of Informants

In this study, a combination of purposive sampling and snowball sampling methods was used to recruit staff and students as informants. Purposive sampling involves selecting individuals based on their relevance and representativeness (Ames et al., 2019), while snowball sampling involves obtaining referrals from initial participants

to identify additional participants (Babbie, 2008; Given, 2012). Due to my affiliation with the institute, I primarily relied on purposive sampling. Snowball sampling was considered as an alternative if additional sources were needed.

Non-probability sampling is a method that does not adhere to the principles of probability theory. It involves selecting participants based on specific criteria, rather than random selection (Babbie, 2008). In this study, key informants were selected based on predetermined criteria, such as their active engagement with THEi from its inception to the first graduation, their involvement in leadership or management roles, or their participation in THEi's academic programs.

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select key informants from different levels of the institution, including the leadership team, faculty, and program levels, as well as the first cohort of students. Purposive sampling is suitable for this research, considering the newness of THEi and the limited availability of primary data sources.

The approach ensures that the selected informants possess relevant knowledge and experiences related to the study (Bakkalbasioglu, 2020).

A total of eight individual interviews were conducted to gather opinions from different segments with varying degrees of institutional experience. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes. The key informants had first-hand experience and

insights into the development process of the institution, making their input crucial for this study. Taylor and Blake (2015) identified several advantages of using key informant interviews, including the direct access to knowledgeable individuals, the provision of unique information and insights, and the availability of first-hand information not accessible through other means. These advantages align with our study, where the informants have direct involvement and access to information that may not be easily obtainable by an external researcher.

Of the 15 key informants who were invited to participate in the study, eight agreed to be interviewed in-depth. To ensure the reliability and quality of the information provided, the key informants had to meet specific criteria. They had to be either teaching or administrative staff members who had been affiliated with the institute since its establishment in 2012 up until the time of the interview. In the case of students, those with broader exposure and participation within the institution were purposefully selected. Please refer to Table 3.1 for further details on the selected key informants.

Key Informant	Role within the Institute or VPET	Perspective
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Informant C	Senior management team member, government VPET committee member	Institute leadership, government policy direction
Informant E	Department head, acting dean, professorial faculty	Faculty-level management leadership
Informant S	Programme leader, teaching staff	Programme-level management leader
Informant K	Professorial faculty, programme leader, industry specialist	Programme-level management leader, industry specialist viewpoint
Informant L	Teaching staff, industry specialist	Programme-level management leader, industry specialist viewpoint
Informant I	Teaching staff, industry specialist	Programme-level management leader, industry specialist viewpoint
Informant J	First cohort of students, programme ambassador, award-winning student	Student perspective

Informant Z	First cohort of students, programme ambassador, award-winning student	Student perspective
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Table 3.1 Key Informant Profiles

Other individuals who met the selection criteria were also invited to participate in the study. However, due to various reasons, such as scheduling conflicts or a desire to maintain anonymity, they were unable or unwilling to attend the interview or have their comments included in the dissertation, despite the protective measures in place. These individuals included the founding president of the institute, external examiners, employers, and faculty-level management staff. Although the institute's then-president could not be interviewed directly, he provided a video of a previous interview on a similar topic, which has been included in the study.

For further details, please refer to Appendix III for the sample interview protocol, Appendix IV for the invitation letter, and Appendix V for the consent form.

Data Analysis

In order to comprehend and derive meaning from the study's findings, data analysis involves organizing the information obtained through observation, interviews, and

document analysis. This process includes categorizing the data, synthesizing it, identifying patterns, and analysing the collected information. The data is presented and organized in a coherent manner during data analysis. Throughout the study, the researcher explores and analyses their thoughts and intuitions, rather than waiting until after the data has been collected (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992).

During data analysis, the phenomena under investigation serves as a guide, and a comprehensive account of the experiences and observations is emphasized. Equal attention is given to all descriptions and experiences. Genuine and iterative interpretation is crucial in this process (Ashworth & Lucas, 1998, 2000). To gain a deeper understanding of the transcripts without prematurely drawing conclusions, it is important for researchers to carefully analyse and reread the data multiple times (Trigwell, 2000). The interview data can be categorized into descriptive categories or concepts (Marton, 1981). In this research, all experiences shared by the key informants were examined, and based on commonalities and subcategories, responses from multiple key informants were organized using a guiding framework (Minichiello et al., 2008).

After the completion of data collection, the audio recordings were transcribed into written text documents. The data was then analysed by breaking it down into

meaningful analytical units. As I identified significant segments of data, I assigned individual codes to them (Elliott, 2018). Coding is the process of labelling data segments with symbols, descriptive words, or category names. During the coding process, a master list of initial codes was created and applied to relevant data segments as they were identified. To organize and manage the collected data, the framework for thematic network analysis developed by Attride-Stirling (2001) was used.

Attride-Stirling's (2001) framework was chosen for its systematic and structured approach to analysing semi-structured interview data, which facilitated the management and organisation of the information. It also allowed for the modification or rearrangement of data as new insights emerged. The Attride-Stirling (2001) method consists of six steps organized into three stages of analysis.

In this study, codes and categories were developed based on each line, phrase, and paragraph in the transcript to summarize the experiences and views expressed by the informants. The data was presented using a coding system that ensured the confidentiality of the participants. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant, and codes were used to identify the type of data source (interview, public document, non-confidential internal document) and the date of data collection. By using this coding

system, specific comments could be referenced without revealing the identity of the participants.

Thematic networks were developed by identifying primary codes that represented fundamental topics in the data and grouping them to describe more abstract ideas (secondary codes or organizing themes). The secondary themes were adjusted and refined as more information was gathered from conversations with informants and additional data sources. The underlying meanings and connections of these organizing themes were then examined. This process allowed for the construction of a comprehensive network of topics, which required considerable time to accomplish.

It is important to note that thematic networks may not provide a complete understanding of the arguments being made but rather serve as a way to isolate material and identify its explicit logic and implicit significance (Terry et al., 2017). To ensure the accuracy and consistency of the results, the themes derived from the data analysis were cross-referenced with input from several key informants, thereby triangulating the information.

Throughout the data analysis process, I maintained an open and objective stance towards the qualitative data obtained from interviews and other documentary sources.

I avoided allowing the original research question to limit my ability to identify

categories or themes. This approach, known as open coding, requires researchers to keep an open mind throughout the analysis process (Esterberg, 2002). While the informants may not have provided identical responses, I believe that the information they provided was authentic and accurate. The findings of this research provide a detailed understanding of the development of VPET in Hong Kong based on a synthesis of the collected data.

Ethical Issues

Every research study should acknowledge and address the potential influence of the researcher's subjectivity and biases on data collection, interpretation, and reporting (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Recognizing and embracing subjectivity can be advantageous in qualitative research, as noted by Norum (2000). Subjectivity can help researchers identify significant narratives and histories that deserve documentation, as well as assist in defining the starting and ending points. Additionally, it can offer diverse ideas and perspectives (Norum, 2000).

According to Babbie (2008), ethical values play a crucial role in social research. In my research, three ethical considerations are particularly relevant: (1) ensuring voluntary participation, (2) safeguarding the well-being of key informants, and (3) maintaining the confidentiality and identity of participants.

Voluntary Participation. In adherence to ethical research principles, participation in this study was based on voluntary choice, and no coercion was applied to the subjects. Prior to data collection, approval was obtained from the relevant institution and university where the research was conducted. The purpose, duration, and requirements of the study, along with the potential benefits of participation, were clearly communicated to the key informants. Moreover, they were assured of the confidentiality of their participation and informed of their right to withdraw at any time. Prior to data collection, all informants were provided with a consent form to review and sign (see Appendix III).

Protection of Key Informants. Ensuring the well-being of participants is of paramount importance in social research, and this study took specific measures to safeguard the informants. The interview technique employed neutral and positive language, and participants were instructed to focus on the positive aspects of their experience with THEi. Their perspectives and comments were treated with respect and appreciation, and no intrusive or biased questions were asked. This approach was implemented to protect the informants' well-being and prevent any potential harm.

Safeguarding Participant Anonymity. Throughout the study, maintaining participant anonymity was prioritized to protect their identity and well-being. This

means that although the researcher may have identified individual responses, they chose not to disclose them publicly (Babbie, 2008, p. 70). Both the researcher and the participants provided written consent to ensure confidentiality, and a consent form was provided to clarify the study's purpose, scope, and intended use of the collected data. Each participant was assigned a code to maintain anonymity. Consequently, without their explicit permission, it was not possible to identify the participants in the findings and conclusions. Additionally, Bassey (1999, p. 73) emphasizes three fundamental components of ethical research: respect for democracy, commitment to truth, and respect for individuals.

Preservation of Democratic Principles. Although researchers possess certain freedoms, such as the freedom to inquire, share information, express ideas, and publish findings, these freedoms are subject to ethical obligations. Researchers have a responsibility to uphold and promote truth while respecting the rights and dignity of individuals (Niiniluoto, 2007).

Appreciation of Truthfulness. Upholding truthfulness is paramount for researchers throughout the entire study process, encompassing data collection to reporting (Haydn, 2017). It is crucial to maintain credibility and avoid any form of dishonesty.

In this investigation, meticulous measures were taken to ensure accurate data

collection, recording, and storage. The results presented in this dissertation are accurate and reliable. There was no intentional misinterpretation or manipulation of the data.

Appreciating the Inherent Value of Individuals. When collecting data from individuals, it is crucial for researchers to recognize that the participants are the primary owners of the data and should be treated with respect and dignity (Bassey, 1999, p. 74). In this study, in-depth interviews were conducted to gather substantial data from the informants and to uncover previously undisclosed meanings. From the beginning of the study, clear criteria were established in collaboration with the informants to ensure the preservation of respect and appreciation for individuals, as well as to secure their active participation in data provision. Obtaining informed consent, protecting privacy rights, and preventing harm are the three fundamental ethical considerations in research.

A number of steps were implemented to ensure the ethical conduct of the study:

1. Prior to the commencement of the study, potential informants were provided with a consent form that clearly outlined the objectives, duration, and conditions of the study.

2. Informants were informed that they would have the opportunity to review and revise the interview transcript to ensure that it accurately represented their ideas and intentions.

Role of Researcher

At the beginning of the present study, I had accumulated nearly 10 years of experience in various roles within the VPET (Vocational and Professional Education and Training) or related sectors. These roles encompassed entrepreneurial, managerial, administrative, and teaching positions. In 2014, I worked as a teaching fellow in the School of Design and Environment at THEi (The Hong Kong Institute of Vocational Education) and later assumed the role of acting program leader for the Bachelor of Art (Honours) in Advertising program in 2017. During my tenure, I also served as a key member of the institute's marketing board committee and actively participated in quality assurance and accreditation exercises. Through my involvement in VPET and teaching professional subjects at the undergraduate level, I have gained valuable insights and knowledge regarding the development of this tertiary education subsector. This broad and deep understanding has allowed me to approach VPET from a comprehensive and nuanced perspective.

Subsequently, upon the conclusion of my contract with THEi, I transitioned to a new role in executive and corporate training in 2017. All interviews for this study were conducted during my employment with THEi. As a result, my research position shifted from an insider to an outsider. This change in perspective enabled me to examine the collected data with some degree of detachment and from both an insider and outsider viewpoint (Britton, 2020). It is important for me to interpret and analyse the data in light of my personal experiences and passion for the field of VPET. Consequently, my observations, comments, and ideas pertaining to the research topic, along with the gathered data, have been incorporated into the database, thereby contributing to the validity of the qualitative analysis conducted in this study (Golafshani, 2003; Patton, 2005, p. 513).

Legitimation

The degree to which the conclusions of a research study accurately reflect the reality of the subject under investigation is referred to as legitimacy. Reality cannot be reduced to a singular, fixed, or objective entity that can be easily observed, seen, or measured, as it is multifaceted, multidimensional, and continually evolving (Merriam, 1998, p. 167). Creswell and Miller (2000, p. 124) suggest that the credibility of research can be assessed by evaluating how closely the narrative aligns with the social

phenomena as perceived by key informants and how credible it appears to them.

However, some scholars have raised concerns about dependability and validity in case study methodology (Bassey, 1999).

The quality of a research study is determined by its validity. Many researchers argue that traditional validity assessments place excessive emphasis on data objectivity and generalizability, which are not suitable for qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Maxwell, 2012). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), qualitative research must closely capture the perspectives of the key informants in order to be credible.

They also identified four interrelated factors that contribute to trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, auditability, and confirmability. The strategies employed in this research to enhance its quality will be discussed in the following section.

Credibility. Credibility, or the alignment of a study's results with the perspectives of its main informants, is a critical aspect in establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research (Drisko & Maschi, 2016). Glaser and Strauss (1966) emphasize that qualitative interpretations must be truthful and genuine, accurately representing the descriptions provided by the key informants. Managing the risks of research reactivity (the potential influence of the researcher or study processes on the informants and the study's outcomes) and subjectivity is essential to ensure credibility (Padgett, 2016).

To mitigate the risk of research reactivity, the researcher can practice reflexivity and cultivate self-awareness regarding their role in the study process (Drisko, 1997). A reflective researcher acknowledges that their actions and judgments inevitably shape the meaning and context of the investigated event (Horsburgh, 2003, p. 308). This can be achieved through introspective writing and engaging in dialogue with others (Johnson & Waterfield, 2004). In this research, I assumed the role of a "listener" during key informant interviews and carefully examined the data to ensure that my presence did not influence the informants' perspectives.

Having been a former member of THEi personnel, I possessed knowledge and insights relevant to the subject of investigation. I believe that effective data interpretation requires contextual understanding rather than mere event description (Stake, 2000, p. 21) concurs, stating that "explanation is a component of propositional knowledge, whereas understanding is a tacit interpretation requiring contextual awareness." During my time at the institute, I had extensive interactions with the informants, gaining a comprehensive understanding of the institution's internal context, culture, and environment. To mitigate subjectivity, I assumed the role of an outsider during the data collection process, maintaining a certain level of detachment while still possessing a basic awareness of the development of THEi and the VPET sector.

Other strategies to enhance trustworthiness include triangulation, member verification, and providing detailed descriptions. Triangulation, a concept from navigational science, involves using multiple sources to obtain a comprehensive understanding of a given point of reference (Padgett, 2016). By gathering data from different sources (data triangulation) or employing multiple analysts to analyse the data (observer triangulation), a qualitative researcher can obtain a more complete response to the research question (Drisko, 1997). In this study, data triangulation was achieved through the utilization of various data sources, including interviews, documentary information, and key informant observations.

To ensure the authenticity of the collected material, I summarized and reiterated it during the interviews and asked the informants to confirm its accuracy. This process, known as member checking, contributes to the validation of informants and enhances the correctness, trustworthiness, validity, and transferability of the research (Hoffart, 1991). Written transcripts of the interviews were provided to the informants for their review and confirmation after the interviews were conducted.

Auditability. Auditability refers to the ability to document research procedures in a manner that enables external individuals to comprehend and evaluate the research process (Padgett, 2016). While quantitative research necessitates strict adherence to

predetermined procedures, qualitative research allows for more flexibility. Many experts argue that high-quality qualitative projects should follow an iterative process that evolves over time (Davies & Dodd, 2002; Morse et al., 2002; Sandelowski, 1986).

Maintaining an audit trail and engaging in peer debriefings are two approaches to enhance auditability. An audit trail is a record of the research process that includes a description of the activities undertaken and demonstrates reflexivity. Some qualitative researchers advocate for the use of an audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994). In this study, I established an audit trail by providing comprehensive documentation of the conceptual development. The study extensively describes the conceptual framework, research topics, and data collection and analysis procedures, enabling readers to comprehend how the results were generated. This facilitates reader confidence in the study's findings and recommendations.

Confirmability. Confirmability refers to the ability of others to verify or support a research finding (Drisko, 1997; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Shenton (2004) suggests that measures should be taken to ensure that the study findings accurately reflect the experiences and perspectives of the informants rather than the researcher's biases or preferences. To establish confirmability, a clear link between the conclusions and the

data must be demonstrated. Researchers can employ various strategies to enhance the confirmability of their study, such as peer debriefings and audit trails, both of which were utilized in the present study to ensure its validity.

Transferability.

Transferability refers to the extent to which the findings of a study can be applied to other situations or contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It is determined by the degree of relevance and meaningfulness of the results beyond the specific research context.

Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research projects do not employ probability sampling and therefore cannot be generalized based on quantitative criteria. Instead, they often utilize purposive sampling to select specific key informants who have experienced the phenomenon under investigation, as in this study. Some interpretivist scholars question the significance of generalizability in qualitative research, arguing that focusing on generalization overlooks the contextual factors that contribute to the study's credibility (Padgett, 2016, p. 182). Instead, qualitative researchers aim for transferability, meaning that the findings can be transferred to different situations, ideas, practices, or future research. Transferability requires similar contextual settings, and it is the researcher's responsibility to identify significant characteristics of the

research context and assess their applicability to other situations (Devers, 1999, p. 1165).

Given that the focus of this research was on a specific and unique context, the conclusions of this case study should not be automatically assumed to be transferable to other educational institutions. The aim of the study was to examine the development of vocational and professional education and training (VPET) within this particular organisation, rather than to generalize the findings to other contexts. While transferability is an important consideration in qualitative research, the emphasis in this case was on providing a comprehensive and contextualized understanding of the issue (Stake, 2000). The findings may be valuable to those with similar instrumental interests or a specific focus on understanding a particular subject or theory, as they provide a thorough description of the research setting. However, it should not be expected that the findings can be directly applied to other situations or circumstances.

Insider-Outsider Position

This study employed a unique approach by combining an analysis of existing VPET policy documents, scholarly resources, and publicly available materials with an examination of previously undisclosed documents that were only accessible to individuals involved in the establishment of the VPET institution and its employees.

This comprehensive approach enabled a deeper understanding of the circumstances and challenges faced during the development of the VPET sector. The researcher's involvement as an academic staff member and active participant in various committees provided unprecedented opportunities to engage with local policymakers, government officials, industry experts, and international VPET policy researchers.

These engagements took the form of meetings, workshops, formal and informal conversations, as well as electronic communications such as emails, instant messenger chats, and document sharing. Throughout this process, the researcher maintained research notes documenting observations, reflections, and thoughts. This insider perspective and direct involvement would not have been possible for an outsider.

In social and behavioural research, it is increasingly important for researchers to acknowledge their own motives, particularly when employing qualitative approaches that require reflexivity (Crossley et al., 2015; McNess et al., 2015). Researchers often position themselves as either insiders or outsiders to the field of study to define their role in the research (Bonner & Tolhurst, 2002). Insider research tends to focus on groups to which the researcher belongs, while outsider research does not focus on such groups.

There has been an extensive debate among sociologists and qualitative researchers regarding the advantages of researchers being insiders or outsiders to the communities they study. In this study, the researcher's positionality was significant as they worked at THEi during the data collection period, providing both an insider and outsider perspective. The qualitative approach recognizes the researcher's subjectivity, and in this case, the researcher's position as an employee and a key informant within the institute under investigation influenced the study. While the insider-outsider approach may not be preferred by quantitative researchers seeking absolute objectivity (Britton, 2020), it offered unparalleled insights into policy implementation, internal dynamics, classroom environment, staff, and students that shaped the treatment of VPET in Hong Kong. These internal dynamics, including debates and discussions, are often not accessible to outsiders. The interpretation of these unseen internal dynamics can provide educational research with new insights and understandings.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, the research design and strategy employed to explore the perspectives of selected staff and student members from THEi on the development of VPET in Hong Kong are outlined. A qualitative methodology with an interpretative paradigm was utilized to capture the individual participants' thoughts, emotions, and viewpoints.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight individuals associated with the Technological and Higher Education Institute of Hong Kong.

The data analysis process involved the use of coding techniques to ensure the reliability of the findings, which is crucial for the overall credibility of the study.

Ethical considerations were given priority to safeguard the well-being of the research participants and maintain the integrity of the data. Personal reflection during the research process and engagement in peer debriefing activities contributed to enhancing the credibility of the study. Providing a detailed account of events within their context was also intended to increase the potential transferability of the research findings to other situations sharing similar characteristics. The subsequent chapter will present the research findings as derived from the data analysis.

Chapter 4 – Findings

This chapter presents the findings of a qualitative research study conducted with teaching staff and students at the Technological and Higher Education Institute of Hong Kong (THEi). The aim of this study was to gain insights into the evolution and current state of vocational and professional education and training (VPET) in Hong Kong, focusing on the informants' perspectives. By analysing their comments, we aimed to identify the successes and challenges faced by THEi as the first VPET institute in the region. The results presented in this chapter are based on eight in-depth interviews conducted between November 2015 and August 2016, as well as documents obtained from THEi.

The chapter begins by providing an introduction to the backgrounds of the interview respondents, which include individuals from THEi leadership, administration, professorial staff, teaching staff, and students. Subsequently, it presents their perspectives on THEi and VPET in general, highlighting both the achievements and the issues faced by THEi.

Background of the Data Collected

The objectives of this chapter, as well as the subsequent chapters, are to address the following research questions:

1. How has THEi developed in the Hong Kong VPET context?

2. What are the current achievements and challenges related to VPET in Hong Kong?
3. What are the current challenges facing VPET in Hong Kong?

All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The data obtained from the interviews was analysed using a coding process to extract information that is pertinent to the study's third research question.

Each interview had an average duration of approximately 60 minutes and focused on three main thematic areas, which serve as the primary themes of this study. The following are examples of interview prompts used during the interviews.

1. Purpose and understanding of VPET and THEi

- What does VPET mean to you, and what does it mean to THEi?
- What do you think is the aim or purpose of THEi? What are they meant to do? How do they differ from other research universities?
- In your opinion, how do THEi differ from postsecondary VET institutions (i.e. Hong Kong Institute of Vocational Education (IVE))?

2. Development of THEi

- In your opinion, is there a necessity for VPET degrees?
- What sets THEi's curriculum apart from other academic degree programs?

- Could you describe the typical background of THEi's teaching staff? Is practical experience considered more significant than academic qualifications?

3. **Current achievements and challenges faced by THEi**

- From your perspective, is THEi effectively fulfilling its mission?
- What do you consider as THEi's most significant accomplishment to date?
- In your opinion, what are the primary challenges currently faced by THEi? Why do you believe these challenges exist?

In addition to the interviews, institute documents were collected and analysed for supplementary information (refer to Section 5.3). Thematic analysis, as described by Joffe (2012), was employed to identify patterns of meaning and extract information relevant to the study's third research question. This involved thoroughly reading through the dataset and coding the responses of the main informants using the framework derived from the literature review and contextual information provided in Chapter 2. My analysis was informed by my professional expertise in the field and my direct involvement and engagement with the institute. To support the analysis, I selected relevant statements from the interviewees' responses based on representativeness and majority opinion criteria (O'Dwyer, 2020).

Brief Description of Informants

This study involved the selection of informants through a meticulous sampling approach outlined in Chapter 3. Alongside the VPET context discussed in Chapter 2, their biographies and concise descriptions provide the necessary context for comprehending their individual perspectives. To ensure the confidentiality of the informants, predetermined codes were assigned to them for data presentation. A randomly assigned letter, such as "P," signifies the informant whose viewpoint is being presented in the research design chapter.

Leadership Rank Staff Member

Informant F, who held the position of registrar at THEi during the study period, possessed a wealth of experience in the Vocational and Technical Education (VTE) system. With over 17 years of service in various leadership positions within the system, including deputy president in administration and membership on the VTC's VPET committee, Informant F brought extensive expertise. Furthermore, they have previously held leadership roles in educational institutions spanning vocational certifications to professional degrees.

Professorial Rank Staff with Managerial Responsibilities

Informant E, the acting dean of one of THEi's faculties, is a highly accomplished professional with an impressive track record in higher education teaching and management spanning over 20 years. With extensive teaching experience at various tertiary institutions and universities in Hong Kong, Informant E is widely recognized as one of the world's top 100 specialists in their field. Additionally, Informant E played a pivotal role as a founding member of the institution.

Informant S held the position of programme leader within the design faculty. Prior to joining academia, she accumulated over 10 years of experience as a creative director in the industry. Informant S also has previous teaching experience in sub-degree level VPET programmes (i.e., diploma and higher diploma) before assuming her current role at THEi.

Teaching Rank Staff

Informant K, an assistant professor originally from the United Kingdom, brings with him over 25 years of professional experience gained from working and training in both the United Kingdom and Hong Kong. With his extensive teaching background and exposure in the UK, Informant K offers a unique perspective on VPET teaching practices from a UK-versus-Hong Kong standpoint.

Informant C, a senior teaching fellow hailing from Australia, similarly possesses over 15 years of professional working and teaching experience in both Australia and Hong Kong. Informant C provides an additional perspective, comparing VPET teaching practices between Australia and Hong Kong.

Informant L, a senior teaching fellow, is internationally recognized as a leading expert in their specific area of practice. With over 25 years of industry experience in China, Informant L previously taught vocational sub-degree programs before transitioning to VPET degrees. Their expertise has been acknowledged through numerous international awards in their specialized field.

Final Year Undergraduate Students

Informants Z and J were among the pioneer group of full-time final year undergraduate students enrolled in a VPET degree program (Hong Kong QF Level 5) offered by THEi. They both embarked on their studies at the institute when it was established in 2012 and successfully completed their degrees in 2016. Throughout their academic journey, both Informants Z and J actively participated in various activities both within and outside the classroom. Informant Z notably represented the institute as a student ambassador in numerous promotional events, while Informant J played a significant role in establishing the first student society.

To ensure the avoidance of potential bias, interviews with Informants Z and J were conducted after the release and confirmation of all academic results in August 2016.

This approach aimed to maintain the integrity of the research findings by eliminating any potential influence of academic outcomes on their responses.

Setting and Context

Regarding the relationship between the gender of the informants and the responses they provided, no notable differences were observed during the interviews, as well as in the subsequent processes of transcription and coding. The major coding themes identified encompassed aspects such as the industry connection, perceptions of VPET, and practical working experience.

Regarding the rank of the informants, a balanced distribution was observed across different levels. Two informants held leadership positions (i.e., registrar and dean level), two were in management roles (i.e., programme leaders), two held teaching-focused positions (i.e., teaching fellows), and two were full-time final year students.

The list of informants is as follows:

Name (code)	Role within THEi or VPET	Perspective	Years involved in VPET	Representative group
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Informant F	Senior management team member, government VPET committee member	Institute leadership, government policy direction	17	Leadership and Managerial staff
Informant E	Department head, acting dean, professorial faculty	Faculty-level management leadership	20	Leadership and Managerial Staff
Informant S	Programme leader, teaching staff	Programme-level management leader	10	Leadership and Managerial Staff
Informant K	Professorial faculty, programme leader, industry specialist	Programme-level management leader, industry specialist viewpoint	19	Teaching staff, industry specialists
Informant C	Teaching staff, industry specialist	Programme-level management leader, industry specialist viewpoint	15	Teaching staff, industry specialists
Informant L	Teaching staff, industry specialist	Programme-level management leader, industry specialist viewpoint	20	Teaching staff, industry specialists

Informant Z	First batch of students and graduates, programme ambassador, award-winning student; finished high school in the United States before returning to Hong Kong to pursue an applied undergraduate qualification	Student perspective	4	Students
Informant J	First cohort of students, programme ambassador, award-winning student; completed high school in Hong Kong	Student perspective	4	Students

Table 3.2. Informant Profiles

All of the informants joined THEi in 2012 and remained with the institution at the time of the interviews. Given THEi's applied nature, faculty members, except for the registrar, are typically involved in a range of responsibilities including research, teaching, and various academic program-related tasks. These tasks encompass program coordination, curriculum development, participation in academic committees, fostering employer relations, liaising with industries, student services, and marketing within their respective departments. When asked about their duties and

responsibilities at the institution, all faculty members emphasized teaching as their primary obligation, with an increasing focus on research grant applications as a secondary responsibility. Additionally, all participants served on multiple committees, taught a minimum of 20 hours per week, and were engaged in substantial program administration work.

While the informants share these commonalities, there are also notable variations. Staff members in leadership positions primarily make decisions, while managerial and teaching staff members mainly implement those decisions with limited or no involvement in the decision-making process. The hierarchy within the organisation has likely influenced their perspectives on the development of VPET, as well as their perceptions of the achievements and challenges faced by the sector. These aspects will be further explored in subsequent sections and in the discussion chapter.

In terms of their backgrounds, all staff participants possess extensive teaching experience in the traditional postsecondary VET sector, specifically at the higher diploma level or below, both in Hong Kong and overseas. The analysis aims to shed light on how their local or international educational and teaching experiences have shaped their perspectives on vocational education and training.

Brief Description of Documents for Analysis

To gain a comprehensive understanding of THEi's evolution, it is crucial to analyse significant documentation from its initial operational cycle. These documents comprise the Institutional Review (IR) report, Learning Programme Accreditation (LPA) document, and other pertinent internal records. The significance of examining internal documents is underscored by Kezar and Eckel (2002), who emphasize that such documents provide additional insights and reinforce findings through data.

Institutional Review Report (for the Establishment of THEi)

The Institutional Review report holds significant importance as a crucial quality assurance document that outlines the establishment of THEi with approval from the Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ). Through an institutional review, a program provider assesses its organizational competency to effectively manage and allocate resources for the development, delivery, assessment, and quality assurance of its educational or training programs.

Learning Programme Accreditation Documents

The Learning Programme Accreditation (LPA) report serves as a comprehensive evaluation of a learning programme, aimed at determining whether the planned and managed teaching, curriculum, delivery arrangements, and assessment methods are capable of achieving the stated goals and desired learning outcomes. The formal accreditation of a learning programme is conducted by the statutory accrediting body, HKCAAVQ, to ensure that the approved programmes are delivered in accordance with the standards set by the Hong Kong Qualifications Framework (HKQF).

In the context of this study, THEi provided evidence in the LPA report to demonstrate that their vocational degree programmes were delivered at the HKQF Level 5, which corresponds to the bachelor's degree level or its equivalent. This evaluation covers a four-year operating cycle for bachelor's degree programmes. The Learning Programme Accreditation documentation includes important records such as external examiner's reports for each subject, feedback from employers based on internship placements, and the institute's actions taken in response to government concerns.

Vocational Training Council Reports and Documents

In addition to the Institutional Review and Learning Programme Accreditation reports, key institutional reports and publications from the VTC provide valuable information and data for discussion and analysis on VPET matters. These documents include the staff induction programme document and presentation slides, work-integrated learning guidelines, the annual programme review and improvement report for the academic year 2015/16, as well as external examiner's reports.

To facilitate the storage and analysis of these documents, they were imported into the qualitative analysis software NVivo. Following the selective coding procedure outlined by Cohen et al. (2017), the research was conducted. Selective coding involves identifying and abstracting core concepts and formulating empirically based theories during the data analysis process (Given, 2012). In this study, initial categories were established based on the guiding framework and informant interviews. Given the volume of content, initial codes were assigned to each document chapter to build concepts and categories. Additional codes were applied to paragraphs using the keyword search function when necessary.

All interviewees in this research were affiliated with THEi from its establishment in 2012 until the completion of the first four-year degree program in 2016. The

purposeful selection of opinions from these informants and data from institutional reports aimed to capture a comprehensive perspective from stakeholders at all levels within THEi.

About the In-depth Interview Discussion

This section provides an in-depth exploration of the informants' experiences with THEi and the VPET policy formulation processes. The findings from the in-depth interviews are presented and discussed across seven distinct sections, which are presented in sequential order:

- A. Purpose and understanding of THEi
- B. Development of THEi
- C. Achievements of THEi
- D. Challenges of THEi
- E. Support available to and required by THEi
- F. The future
- G. Closing

To ensure that respondents could provide thoughtful and comprehensive answers and recall meaningful experiences, interview prompts were provided to informants in advance. This practice not only facilitated their preparation but also enabled them to

provide the best evidence to illustrate their viewpoints (Whiting, 2008). This approach is considered ethical, as it allows informants to have full knowledge of the interview topics and provide informed consent (McGrath et al., 2019). As outlined in Chapter 3, the objective was to establish a comfortable environment that encouraged informants to share information openly.

Themes were identified and extracted from the interview transcripts, and the following sections present an analysis of these themes and the patterns found in the informants' responses. Table 3.3 provides a comprehensive list of the topics that were highlighted during the interviews.

Themes	Sub-themes
<p>A. Purpose and development of VPET, and mission of THEi</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Differentiation of VPET from VET and traditional academic higher education b. Identity of VPET and higher vocational institute c. Student academic ability d. Future of VPET

<p>B. Achievements of THEi as the first established VPET institution in Hong Kong</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Student support in the VPET environment b. Employability of graduates c. Industry connections
<p>C. Challenges to THEi as the first established VPET institution in Hong Kong</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Staying current with the latest skills and technology b. Financial resources c. Practical limitations

Table 3.3: List of Themes and Sub-themes

Research Question 1: *How has THEi developed in the Hong Kong VPET context?*

The purpose of VPET and the mission of the Technological and Higher Education Institute of Hong Kong (THEI) are central themes addressed in this research. In 2010, the government introduced VPET as a new concept, often perceived as an extended version of traditional VET programmes. While these programmes typically lasted two years and focused primarily on technical and vocational aspects, the emphasis on professional development was often overlooked. To initiate the interviews conducted for this study, participants were asked to share their perceptions and definitions of VPET. Although the programmes offer professional relevance, they are primarily

practice-oriented, in contrast to established professional programmes such as law, pharmacy, and education, which often require professional registration.

Differentiation from Traditional VET and Academic-Oriented Universities

All respondents naturally compare tertiary VPET to postsecondary VET within the vocational pathway, specifically comparing vocational degrees to higher diplomas rather than vocational degrees to academic degrees. Comparisons to academically oriented higher education are rare unless specifically prompted. One of the respondents, Informant E, remarked, "*For higher diploma students, it is difficult to absorb all of the technical knowledge in two years.*" Commonly used terms among the respondents related to traditional VET include training, skills, and demand. This suggests that VPET is deeply rooted in traditional VET and can be viewed as a natural extension. Notably, all staff respondents have prior experience in teaching VET programs before joining THEi. This aspect distinguishes the present research from most studies that predominantly focus on tertiary VPET from a higher education perspective. The following excerpt presents a representative selection of the informants' responses:

"Our program is entirely driven by industry needs. We train students to meet those requirements and provide employers with work-ready graduates. We work closely with the industry, which is our key strength." (Informant F)

A similar pattern of responses is observed among other staff respondents as well. The terms "industry needs" and "industry-driven" frequently appear in their responses, indicating a strong focus on aligning VPET programs with the demands of the industry. Furthermore, respondents naturally tend to compare VPET degrees to VET higher diplomas rather than academic degrees offered by local universities. This comparison highlights the perception of respondents that VPET programs occupy a distinct category separate from traditional academic education. The findings clearly demonstrate that respondents view VPET as a specialized pathway that addresses the specific needs and requirements of the industry, setting it apart from the higher education counterparts.

"We are industry-driven, focusing on equipping students with the skills they need. What sets THEi's professional degree apart from other higher diplomas is our emphasis on soft skills training. This is also a requirement from HKCAAVQ when registering our programs. Soft skills can be quite intangible, but they are crucial. For example, students have the opportunity to practice

problem-solving skills throughout four consecutive years of study, which is difficult to develop in just two years." (Informant E)

Traditional vocational education and training (VET) typically emphasizes skills and competencies, while theory takes centre stage in traditional academic higher education. While respondents may have different interpretations regarding the purpose and definition of Vocational and Professional Education and Training (VPET), the mission of THEi, as stated in the Institutional Review (IR) report, highlights the importance of achieving a fine balance between theory and practical application, which is at the core of VPET.

*"To provide students with a quality education for whole-person development, featuring **a fine balance of theory**, practicable application, general education, and industry collaboration, so as to facilitate the development of caring, creative, and ethical professionals with an international outlook." (Institutional Review Report of THEi, 2012, p. 8–9)*

Perhaps due to the informants' background, they tend to skew towards the practical side of VPET and not to balance it with the theory behind those applications. It is also observed from the document analysis process that the mission statement only appears in the IR report and it cannot be found in any other materials published by THEi.

Compared to staff, students expressed that the programme at THEi is more practical and applied than other university degree programmes, and their affirmation of this increased upon completing their internships. Students see the practical components:

"Hong Kong Polytechnic University, for instance, offers similar programmes, guest lectures, and internships, but the learning primarily takes place in a classroom setting. On the other hand, THEi is known for its hands-on and practical approach. For example, I have taken subjects that require us to submit our projects to international competitions, while other subjects involve real client work. In my second year, there was a course called character design, and the project involved designing a mascot for Ocean Park, which was eventually implemented! At THEi, our focus is on learning for the real world, rather than solely for exams." (Informant J)

The difference in perspective between staff and students can be attributed to the fact that students compared their experiences with those of their friends, whereas staff members spoke based on their own personal experiences. It is important to consider that the student informants expressed their thoughts from the perspective of Vocational and Professional Education and Training (VPET), which adds an additional layer to the existing literature.

THEi's programmes distinguish themselves from traditional academic degrees by incorporating several unique elements. These include compulsory participation in award competitions, guest lectures delivered by industry professionals, real client projects, and extended internship requirements. As evidenced by the latest submission of the Learning Programme Accreditation (LPA) document for one of the degree programmes, THEi arranged 19 compulsory professional guest lectures for final year students in 2016. This initiative not only enhances the final year students' understanding of current industry practices but also provides them with valuable opportunities to establish professional networks. Such efforts contribute to the overall success and development of THEi and the VPET sector as a whole.

Taking the faculty of design's programmes as an example, it is noteworthy that student assignments primarily focus on producing practical outcomes. There is minimal emphasis on discussions or reviews of theories, with the exception of two dissertation modules. The Institutional Review Report of THEi (2012) provides further clarification on the term "professional" (p.9), highlighting its significance as a key differentiator between traditional vocational education and training (VET) and VPET:

"Informed and Professionally Competent Have sound knowledge of area of study or profession and the issues it faces locally and internationally; Competent in applying discipline and professional skills and knowledge to solve complex problems" (Institutional Review Report of THEi, 2012, p. 9).

The inclusion of terms such as "profession," "solve complex problems," and "professional skills" in THEi's programme design signifies a higher level of qualification compared to typical postsecondary vocational education and training (VET) programmes. These descriptors highlight the advanced nature of THEi's programmes, which go beyond traditional VET offerings. The deliberate use of these terms reflects the emphasis placed on developing students' skills and knowledge to tackle complex challenges in their respective professional fields. This distinction sets THEi apart and showcases its commitment to providing a higher level of education and training in line with professional standards.

On the other hand, when informants were asked about the differences between VPET and traditional academically-oriented higher education in interviews, the most frequently mentioned points were upward mobility and soft skills development (Webb et al., 2017). The current VPET system plays a crucial role in bridging this gap. While these elements are deemed important, all informants generally agreed that tertiary

VPET shares similarities with postsecondary vocational education and training (VET) but with a higher academic standard and award qualification. The participants' perspectives seemed to align with employers' viewpoints and emphasized concepts of employability and work readiness. These findings are also reflected in the institute's communication materials, as demonstrated below. However, it is worth noting that the distinction between professional and vocational aspects (i.e., VPET) was not explicitly mentioned by the informants.



Figure 1: External communication materials with slogans "I am work ready" and "A degree that works for you".

According to the learning programme accreditation document, a majority of the subjects within THEi's programmes entail industry-relevant projects. Furthermore,

some of these projects are collaborative commercial endeavours that involve compensation. This emphasis on real-world applications ensures that learners gain practical experience and become familiar with industry practices. The responses from the informants also align with this observation. For instance, Informant E expressed the following thoughts:

"At THEi, most projects are assessed based on practical considerations while still meeting the required academic requirements. For instance, these projects are designed to align with upcoming industry competitions or serve as collaborative ventures with industry partners." (Informant E)

This unique setting truly distinguishes VPET from traditional academic degree programmes. The practical nature of the programme is also observed in other VPET models worldwide, such as Germany, as discussed in Chapter 2, which further validates Hong Kong's adoption of a similar approach.

Informant F, a member of the leadership team, concurred with Informant E regarding the practicality of projects while maintaining the required academic standard. Most responses from the informants revolved around the industry or referenced employers as a point of comparison. Informant E also noted that students often perceive differences, stating that *"many students thought that they do not need to write as much*

(compared to the workload in local universities) or conduct research in a VPET institution. This is not true." The programme document supports Informant E's observation by confirming that the workload is the same, if not higher, but the nature of assignments or projects differs.

Additionally, Informant S provided a critical perspective on the distinctions between VPET and traditional higher education. She expressed the following thoughts:

" Professors working in traditional universities are required to build their publication records, while our staff at THEi must stay updated with the latest knowledge in their respective fields. This is particularly crucial because our students also work as interns in real commercial companies while pursuing their studies. As a result, they can quickly identify if their professors' knowledge is outdated. Unlike subjects such as literature, where changes may occur less frequently, many industries we focus on experience daily transformations (Informant S). Consequently, it can be imagined that keeping our teaching staff well-informed poses a significant challenge." (Informant S)

Informant S highlighted a significant distinction between academic and vocational professors. While both need to stay up-to-date with their specializations, vocational

professors face a greater challenge as they are required to demonstrate the latest industry knowledge in their classes.

It is essential to emphasize the diverse source of VPET students at THEi. In addition to attracting students who have achieved lower scores in public exams, THEi also appeals to prospective students with varied profiles. For instance, Informant Z and some of her classmates have graduated from higher schools overseas, and students like Informant J exhibit a strong interest in a particular area with a portfolio or even awards before entering the programme, such as in the field of design. This finding aligns with the reviewed literature on the dual track admission of VPET. VPET institutes primarily admit students based on their interests and portfolios, while academic institutions generally admit students based on exam results (Ebner et al., 2013).

All informants with teaching responsibilities clearly expressed that they actively engage in research or contribute applied knowledge to the industry through consultation projects. It is important to note that they did not initially plan or intend to pursue academic research, as it became a requirement at the institute starting from the 2016/17 academic year. Informant E stated, "*Our teaching staff is not here to pursue academic research, but they are eager to contribute new applied knowledge to their*

respective industries." This situation gives rise to a conflict between the original mission and the available human resources.

All informants emphasized the presence of hidden collaborative elements within the programme. The programme accreditation report supports this notion, revealing that the majority of subjects incorporate external collaboration, such as participation in international competitions, engagement in real client projects (with remuneration for students), and opportunities for internships. For instance, in the advertising degree programme, a significant portion of students' work is implemented in authentic commercial settings and reaches a wide audience (e.g., animation used to promote travel safety across all railway stations in Hong Kong). This extensive level of student collaboration sets the programme apart from other local academic-oriented universities, leading students to perceive themselves as distinct from their peers studying in similar institutions. The substantial exposure to real-world experiences positively influences graduate employability.

Both student informants, J and Z, raised an intriguing point that highlights the value of THEi's educational approach. They expressed:

" It is not solely about technical skills, as most of those can be learned from platforms like YouTube anyway. What sets THEi apart is the integration of both

soft and technical skills, coupled with the valuable real commercial opportunities it offers to its students." (Informant J and Z)

This aspect holds significant relevance, especially considering the abundance of freely available online tutorials for acquiring technical skills. Nevertheless, the true worth of VPET lies not solely in imparting technical expertise, but in nurturing students to become career-ready and highly employable specialists in their respective fields.

Development of the Technological and Higher Education Institute of Hong Kong

The Technological and Higher Education Institute of Hong Kong (THEi) holds the distinction of being the pioneering and largest VPET institution in Hong Kong, offering recognized vocational degree programs. At the heart of VPET lies its practical nature, complemented by the institute's enduring connections with industry (Olazaran et al., 2018). According to data retrieved from the VTC's website, THEi experienced a remarkable 68% increase in total student enrolment between 2014 and 2016. This upward trajectory persists, surpassing the performance of other recently established higher education institutions that provide similar degree programs.

The most vital asset of the institute is its network of professional staff. The achievements of THEi are intricately linked to the personal networks cultivated by its teaching staff. The feedback from the leadership echelons tends to be cautious and formal, often resembling the content found in annual reports. Informants F and E

specifically mentioned that the growth of THEi stemmed from the reputation of the VTC brand and its historical background, with employers showing support by welcoming THEi interns. In terms of the development of VPET and THEi, the respondents emphasized two key themes.

Industry Networks Brought in by Professors and Teaching Staff

Securing career and internship opportunities for students is a crucial requirement that influences staff recruitment, annual performance reviews, and academic promotions.

During my tenure at the institute, my department mandated that all teaching staff generate a specific number of career or internship opportunities through their personal networks, and the actual count was documented during the annual performance review. According to the LPA report, for instance, the advertising degree programme in 2016 successfully lined up 26 local employers who offered placements to their students and graduates.

However, relying solely on staff's personal connections for acquiring and maintaining industry networks for student employment is not a sustainable approach for the institute's growth. These networks may become outdated over time, as highlighted by Informant K who noted, "*Our professional network may become obsolete as we are no longer directly involved in the industry.*" Furthermore, Informant K explained that

"our network cannot accommodate hundreds of internships every year, yet completing an internship is a graduation requirement." Informant J expressed similar concerns, emphasizing that *"problems arise when professors with their own networks depart from the program."* In my experience working at THEi, this situation occurred in numerous programs where senior staff members and a significant portion of the industry network left.

In instances where students were not assigned internships by their professors, they were required to search for opportunities independently. This is a common practice in the postsecondary VET sector in Hong Kong, as the availability of internship positions can be limited based on the state of the economy. Additionally, from my experience, THEi students who were unable to secure an internship opportunity had to engage in mock-up projects established by volunteer teachers to fulfil the required internship hours. This practice is also observed within the VPET systems of other countries (Akomaning et al., 2011).

Ambiguous Positioning

Ambiguity in positioning can indeed pose potential issues. THEi is categorized as a tertiary institution within Hong Kong, which means its institutional structure, policies, and academic titles for personnel align with those of local universities. However, this

has led to certain challenges since the policies and procedures are primarily designed for research-oriented universities rather than VPET institutes. Informant K, a full-time practice-based professor, shared his perspective on this matter:

"The research projects I previously completed were highly practical in nature, and not as focused on theoretical aspects and the associated stress as they are now. We did not have to write lengthy literature reviews or conduct extensive background research. It seems that there is now an expectation for us to function as academic professors and produce research outputs. However, it's important to recognize that THEi is not a traditional university; it is a vocational institute!"

(Informant K)

A noticeable shift in the responsibilities and expectations of teaching staff is evident.

Informant L shared their perspective on the government's stance:

"I believe the government is contradictory. On one hand, they encourage various groups to provide higher education services and offer degrees to school leavers. They also promote VPET and dual-track education in Hong Kong. However, the funding mechanism remains unchanged, forcing new institutes to compete with universities based on research output. If THEi wants to secure

more resources, they have no choice but to emphasize academic research."

(Informant L)

The VPET model underwent a transition away from its original design and moved towards resembling the academic university setting after three years of operation.

Informant L attributed this change to the funding received from the local government.

He further stated:

"When you realize that all the funding from the government is allocated to academic-oriented institutions, you have to conform to their requirements if you want to secure that funding." (Informant L)

The availability and allocation of funding play a crucial role in driving the development of VPET.

The positioning or definition of VPET is even unclear for companies. Informant E highlighted this issue, stating, "For them (employers), we are just IVE or the university version of IVE." IVE is a sister institute of THEi that offers vocational certificates for higher diploma programs. Informant E further expressed, "I think the public still hasn't recognized the significance of vocational degrees until now." This ambiguity may also be linked to the curriculum design at THEi. According to the

program handbook published in 2016, the initial two years of the degree program prioritize practical, skill-based knowledge. Students who choose to discontinue the program at this stage would be awarded a higher diploma instead of an associate degree, as per THEi's academic regulations in 2016.

All the respondents who have teaching responsibilities expressed experiencing pressure to deviate from their vocational background and engage in academic research, as well as compete for research grants and funding from other local universities. Informant E specifically mentioned being at a crossroads, where senior management encourages them to pursue academic research and compete for grants, which diverges from their initial motivations for joining the institution since its establishment. It is worth noting that all non-student respondents came from vocational education backgrounds, despite some of them having taught classes in academically oriented local universities.

Informant L attributed the change to the influx of new academic staff and management into the institute, a perception shared by many others. According to him:

" Originally, we were a group of experienced vocational educators who wanted to promote higher vocational education, but after a year of establishment, many university academics joined us, and things started to

change. The institute's vision and mission have become more confusing."

(Informant L)

The impact of this change is also felt by the students. Informant Z highlighted the importance of maintaining THEi's advantage as a vocational university, stating, "*I think we should preserve our uniqueness as a vocational university. There are already numerous academically oriented universities in Hong Kong. If THEi becomes one of them, what sets it apart?*" Informant E emphasized the significance of industry recognition for the program and the program's ability to lead to a professional qualification, which is deemed crucial for VPET.

The development of VPET, specifically exemplified by THEi, began as a tertiary vocational degree institution with a strong emphasis on differentiating itself successfully from academic counterparts. The unique composition of the teaching staff played a central role in VPET's core identity. However, over time, the staff structure began to shift towards the academic sphere due to the competitive nature of funding based on academic research and publication. This particular dilemma is not extensively documented in the existing VPET or higher education literature, suggesting that this hybrid institution model may be a distinctive solution for the context of Hong Kong.

Research Question 2: *What are the current achievements and challenges related to VPET in Hong Kong?*

Achievements of Vocational and Professional Education and Training

While the informants expressed varying interpretations of the definition of VPET during the interviews, it is noteworthy that traditional higher education and traditional VET sectors did not achieve significant progress in various aspects within the initial cycle of operation, typically spanning four years. These aspects include intensive industry collaborations through work-integrated learning, the implementation of a dual track of study, the enhanced employability of graduates, and the development of a unique curriculum design.

Industry Collaboration

As mentioned in the previous section, industry collaboration emerges as a key factor for the success of a VPET institute. Without the support of the industry, the institute would struggle to produce graduates who are truly work-ready.

During the interviews, all participants were invited to share their perspectives on the achievements of THEi or the VPET sector as a whole. Interestingly, all informants unanimously agreed that strong industry collaboration stands out as a significant

accomplishment, regardless of their level or role. They expressed pride in the current achievements, consistently emphasizing the success of industry collaboration. This positive sentiment can be attributed to the high rate of industry involvement and the ownership of industry networks, as discussed in the earlier section. Here are some of their responses:

Informant S highlighted the distinction in industry collaboration at THEi compared to local public universities, stating,

"I know many local public universities have incorporated one or two internship modules into their curriculum. However, that only provides students with one or two working experiences throughout their entire university life. At THEi, our goal is to send students out for real commercial projects at least once a year or even every semester. This means they will have at least four to eight jobs or projects to showcase on their CV by the time they graduate. That truly sets us apart." (Informant S)

Both the teaching and administrative staff share concerns about the future employability of students. They recognize that increased exposure to real industry projects not only enhances students' skill levels but also serves as a "prolonged interview" with potential employers, thereby facilitating their transition into their

careers. Informant F, offering insights from a leadership perspective, emphasizes the strategic win-win nature of industry collaboration for both the industry and the institute.

Informant F explains,

"We have invested significant efforts in building trust with the industry and potential employers. On one hand, we promote ourselves, but more importantly, we invite collaborative projects, which involve real commercial projects, for our students. Strategically, when a student engages in such a collaborative project, it means they have already embarked on a prolonged interview with a potential employer, giving them a head start!" (Informant F)

The student population demonstrated excitement upon learning that a director of photography from Pixar would be delivering a guest lecture. They expressed positive feedback regarding the industry collaboration, highlighting it as an area where THEi excelled in comparison to other institutes and universities. The informant emphasized the unique opportunities available at THEi, contrasting them with her peers studying a similar degree program in a traditional university. According to Informant J,

"We are continuously improving. Over the years, we have had more experienced professors, renowned guest lecturers, and speakers. For instance, this year, we have the director of photography from Pixar Inc coming to Hong

Kong to teach us about storytelling! I believe our future students will have even more internship opportunities than us as THEi's brand becomes more renowned." (Informant J)

As mentioned earlier, all VPET programs offered by THEi have established strong and robust connections with industry. These connections manifest in various forms, such as internship employers, guest lecturers, adjunct professors, and appointments of professors of practice. Informant S further elaborated on this aspect, stating:

"We actively invite different industry experts to serve as guest lecturers or even as full-course instructors if their expertise aligns with our program. This approach allows us to maintain and expand a unique network within the local industry, as we integrate them into our program." (Informant S)

Informant S continued, providing an example of close collaboration with the Hong Kong Association of Interactive Marketing (HKAIM). The program team works closely with HKAIM, engaging industry experts who are members of the association in applied research projects and events. This collaboration is mutually beneficial, as THEi provides capable students who are readily available to assist, making THEi a priority partner for HKAIM. This strategic move is seen as highly valuable by students and creates a win-win situation for both parties.

Informant J expressed that their friends who study a similar subject in a local university do not have the same access to expert lecturers, leading them to admire the opportunities available at THEi. The project-based learning pedagogy in VPET plays a crucial role in achieving this. Furthermore, the fact that many full-time teaching staff at THEi received their education overseas is also a contributing factor. Informant S elaborated on this, stating:

"In addition to common student exchange programs, we also offer specialized study trips for our students. They have the opportunity to study and collaborate with VPET students from other parts of the world, exchanging ideas and working on commercial projects for a month. This is made possible through the international networks of our teaching staff. For instance, the program accreditation report highlights that students from various programs such as product design, fashion design, and advertising went to Germany for two consecutive summers to participate in a joint program with VPET students there, fostering idea exchange and skill development." (Informant S)

Informant S also mentioned a conversation with a parent:

"(Name of student) is always seeking work, and all of his assignments and projects are very up-to-date. I even saw his projects being used in the real

commercial world, like the MTR animation project. It brought me immense joy to see my son's name associated with it." (Informant S)

This demonstrates that parents of VPET students also appreciate and value the opportunities and practical experiences provided by THEi.

Dual Track of Admission (Vocational Degrees)

THEi offers a dedicated pathway for producing work-ready graduates through its vocational degree programs. This pathway serves as an alternative track for students who may not be interested in or academically inclined towards the traditional academic route (DualVET, 2015). These students typically make their choice during high school and opt to acquire the necessary industry-relevant skills through four years of academic study.

Engaging in vocationally oriented studies also cultivates a distinct identity among THEi students, as they frequently express feeling "*very different from other university graduates.*" Informant J proudly stated:

"I take pride in being a student at THEi because I will graduate with a professional degree rather than an academic one. Employers recognize that I am prepared for the workforce... The program is highly practical; everything we

do here has a strong applied focus. Every day feels like a work environment. It's completely different from studying at a traditional university. For instance, we worked on an international design competition from week 1 to 14, going through multiple revisions, and in the end, we emerged as winners and commercialized the project! Everything is real, so real." (Informant J)

Informant J's statement exemplifies the hands-on, industry-focused approach of THEi's programs, reinforcing the unique and practical experiences students gain compared to their counterparts in traditional academic institutions.

Informant Z shares a similar sentiment and expands on another perspective, stating:

"I perceive myself as fundamentally different from other university graduates in Hong Kong. All of my projects involve real commercial work. These projects come directly from our professors and their connections in the industry. This close relationship allows us to gain first-hand information, perspectives, and opinions directly from the clients. We not only develop the projects but also enhance our client servicing skills simultaneously. These experiences are truly invaluable." (Informant Z)

The staff informants share similar perspectives regarding their roles as educators in a VPET institution, likening it to conducting apprenticeships. They highlight the distinct nature of their interaction with students, which does not have a fixed time or location. The following comment from an informant exemplifies this:

"We view ourselves differently from academics in the ivory tower. In Hong Kong, students are expected to learn independently, and if they're lucky, they may meet with their professors once after class. However, here at THEi, we maintain an open-door policy, whether it's in our offices or classrooms. Students can approach us at any time with their questions. Many teaching staff even allow students to reach out through platforms like Facebook Messenger or WhatsApp. Frankly, we function more as their mentors, providing on-the-job training akin to an apprenticeship. I don't believe any university can offer that level of learning support." (Informant F)

Informant F highlights the accessibility and availability of teaching staff at THEi, demonstrating their commitment to providing personalized guidance and support to students. The comparison to mentors in an apprenticeship underscores the close

relationship and on-the-job training approach adopted by THEi's teaching staff, fostering a unique learning experience for students.

In a traditional university setting, providing learning support through instant messaging may be challenging due to the nature of the environment and the size of the classes. However, for students engaged in real commercial projects or participating in internships directly connected to their mentors, real-time support and assistance can be essential.

Enhanced Employability of Graduates

Employability, a critical indicator of success as defined by THEi, is the ultimate goal. To meet this requirement, THEi mandates that students complete a minimum of 128 hours of internship in a related profession before graduating. The majority of students fulfil this requirement within the first two years of their study. However, it should be noted that the actual number of internship hours may exceed 500 by the time they graduate, as indicated in the programme accreditation documents.

Feedback from respondents emphasizes that THEi graduates possess the necessary skills and techniques, and notably, they excel in both practical

application and communication:

"Our programme is highly focused on hands-on experience and practical learning. Our graduates not only possess the ability to articulate concepts but also have the competence to bring them to life. While a typical university graduate may excel in discussing design thinking theoretically, they may lack the capability to put it into practice. In contrast, our graduates excel in both aspects." (Informant K)

A similar viewpoint is expressed by Informant S, who serves as the programme leader for one of the degree programmes. She highlights that students are placed in internship positions throughout their years of study. This consistent integration of internships demonstrates a clear positive impact on students' employability when compared to local university programmes that require fewer internship hours as a graduation requirement.

"At the very least, our students engage in internships or industry projects during summer and winter breaks. Many of them work as interns starting from their first year until graduation. In addition, the real client projects we undertake in class further enhance their resumes, surpassing those of their peers studying at traditional universities. The majority of internship and project opportunities are

facilitated through our own teaching staff's extensive network, providing students with exposure to a wide range of experiences." (Informant S)

Furthermore, respondents at the leadership level also emphasize the importance of soft skills in making students employable.

"I believe employers seek graduates who not only possess relevant soft skills but can also perform the job competently. The issue in Hong Kong lies in the fact that university graduates are no longer automatically perceived as elites; they must demonstrate their ability to execute tasks rather than relying solely on their words." (Informant E)

Based on my experience, the term "soft skills" carries a deeper meaning. While traditional universities offer general education classes that provide training in broad soft skills such as negotiation and body language, the soft skills mentioned by the informant encompass profession-specific abilities (e.g., negotiating design work with clients, managing stress and complaints, and maintaining a professional presence).

Through significant involvement in real client projects, competitions, and internships, students acquire, apply, and adapt their soft skills in real workplace settings rather than in classroom role-play scenarios. This encompasses two sub-themes: anticipating future needs and graduate capabilities.

Informant E highlights a critical factor for VPET (Vocational and Professional Education and Training) to achieve success: the programme team's ability to anticipate industry needs. This requires substantial industrial experience and strong local connections, and the forecasts made are based on factual data and conversations with industry stakeholders. Informant S suggests actively building networks within associations, such as in the field of design, and involving top industry experts in programme planning. For instance, in the advertising programme, approximately 50% of the lecturers are current industry practitioners, including the director of photography from Pixel Inc. These practitioner-lecturers not only impart specific industry knowledge to students but also review their resumes and offer advice on potential skill gaps. Additionally, students participate in international study tours to exchange ideas and knowledge with individuals from other countries.

THEi strongly advises students to commence their internships during their first year of study. Informant S explains that teaching staff visit all internship employers during each semester break, providing an opportunity to exchange ideas on student performance and gain insights into the industry's latest developments.

The second factor crucial for success is graduate capability. Informant E emphasizes that for VPET graduates, securing a job goes beyond having a resume that

demonstrates broad exposure and active participation. It also requires the ability to immediately deliver the specific skills required upon joining a company. It is noteworthy that VPET students have access to expensive cutting-edge technology. Informant C explains that students have access to advanced equipment with a significantly low student-to-equipment ratio, a level of access that is rarely achieved in undergraduate university programmes. Informant C, who holds a leadership role, also acknowledges the high cost associated with establishing a successful VPET institute, as it necessitates acquiring the best equipment for teaching purposes.

Informant E further emphasizes:

"Our students are more than apprentices. We teach them problem-solving skills alongside professional competencies. They are not only capable of applying what we teach them but also demonstrating the skills they have developed in the internship workplace from day one. As a result, they are highly job-ready compared to the majority of university graduates in the market." (Informant E)

The extended duration of internships may be one of the reasons why VPET demonstrates higher graduate employability compared to traditional higher education.

VPET Specific Student Support

Students are not only the future human capital of society but also the core focus of VPET. Providing them with sufficient and adequate support is therefore paramount. Given the nature of VPET, students would spend long hours in a learning studio or classroom for their projects if they were not engaged in internships. This offers them dual benefits: access to advanced hardware and software, and the opportunity to tackle challenges collectively as a group.

During interviews with teaching staff, it was revealed that most of the learning studios in their programmes are open 24 hours a day, providing a safe and free working environment. Many programme staff members voluntarily remain in the studio outside of teaching hours to offer real-time support to students. Some staff members even expressed their willingness to stay until 11 p.m. to assist students with competitions or collaborative commercial projects. It is important to note that this is not an official programme arrangement but a voluntary commitment by the staff.

Students greatly appreciate this exceptional level of support, acknowledging that it may not be sustainable as the institute grows. Informant C expressed that :

"It is a luxury if you can talk to your professors twice in a semester at a local university! They are usually busy writing papers. But here, our doors are always open. You can come in anytime with a question or send us a WhatsApp message for quick inquiries. Basically, our students can reach us anytime, 24/7." (Informant C)

This arrangement is commonly observed across various programmes, and student informants have confirmed its veracity. They attest to the fact that this special arrangement is highly beneficial for them.

It is akin to a modern apprenticeship. Informant L expressed,

"Students accumulate real-world experience from year 1. Both real-world collaborative projects and extended internships are at the core of VPET, as they truly enhance our students' competitiveness in the job market. While other academically oriented universities may perceive these activities as 'nice to have,' we prioritize them as an integral part of our pedagogy for student development." (Informant L)

He further added, *"While a traditional university may encourage their students to seek internship opportunities, we take a proactive approach by actively searching for and*

providing high-quality and relevant internships for our students." Informant F also highlights the differentiation of THEi from other institutes in terms of internship hours:

"Our sister institute offers a two-year higher diploma programme that only requires 90 hours of internship to graduate, whereas our four-year VPET degree programmes require 128 to 480 hours of internship. In comparison, traditional university programmes either do not require these hours or set significantly lower requirements." (Informant F)

The research findings demonstrate that the emphasis on extended internships, real-world collaborative projects, and strong support systems at VPET institutes like THEi contribute to enhanced employability, job readiness, and the development of crucial skills among students.

Research Question 3: What are the current challenges facing VPET in Hong Kong?

Minimum Theoretical Subject Content

Although the mission statement of THEi emphasizes the importance of maintaining a balance between theory and practice, the informant's comment suggests that this

balance is currently lacking. Scholars such as James (2017) and Gegenfurtner and Ebner (2019) argue that professionalism requires not only knowledge of rules and principles but also a theoretical understanding that underpins those norms. In other words, students need to comprehend the "why" in addition to the "what."

The mission statement indicates that the VPET curriculum design aims to achieve a balance between theory and practice. However, if THEi aims to offer programmes with a comparable level of theoretical rigor to traditional professional degrees in fields like law, medicine, architecture, and education, it could pose a significant challenge to the VPET sector. Adopting a "degree by experience only" approach would be risky. However, the views of the respondents diverge on this matter. While front-line professors focus on teaching the "how," they may overlook the opportunity to explore the "why." It is akin to teaching a student how to fish without discussing or challenging the commonly accepted approach to fishing.

"We are, in a sense, professional crafters, but the inclusion of additional theories in the curriculum has set us apart from other institutes. We are not in need of individuals who are solely proficient in writing; rather, we require more individuals who can actively apply their skills. This is precisely why THEi was established." (Informant K)

Building upon this, Informant E further emphasizes THEi's commitment to meeting the needs of employers and prioritizing collaborations that yield immediate results. They acknowledge that this focus on real client projects may result in less time dedicated to teaching theories, but they remain confident that students can effectively learn theory through hands-on project experiences.

"To a certain extent, we prioritize the needs of employers. We engage in various collaborations with them, and they expect to see immediate results. Our focus is on providing students with as many real client projects as possible, which occasionally leads to less time dedicated to teaching theories. However, I firmly believe that students can still learn theory effectively through hands-on project experiences." (Informant E).

A common mindset is evident among the informants, as reflected in their responses. They exhibit a strong focus on technical excellence and prioritize employability as a key objective. They firmly believe in the importance of training graduates who are well-prepared for the workforce and meet the industry's requirements. This skill-based perspective, however, can also lead to inflexibility in teaching and learning approaches:

"When a teaching staff member departs from the institute, their network connections also depart with them. For instance, despite working with MTR for two years, we lost this connection when the network owner left. Losing a staff member means losing the associated network, as people tend to connect with individuals rather than the organisation itself. This situation creates a chain effect, necessitating the re-establishment of collaborative projects, re-engagement with internship and work opportunities, and more. We require support from the headquarters, but unfortunately, it seems to be lacking."

(Informant S)

Based on my observations, it can be challenging to find teaching staff members who possess both strong research skills and expertise in the industry. Given the ultimate goal of enhancing employability, it is understandable why the informants hold the perspective they do. Prioritizing the development of practical skills and industry relevance aligns with their focus on preparing graduates for successful careers.

Specialised Knowledge of Teaching Staff May Become Outdated

The success of VPET relies heavily on teaching staff effectively imparting the necessary skills and techniques to students for practical application in the workplace.

However, when individuals transition from industry to academia, there is a risk that

their knowledge and skills may become outdated over time. While hiring adjunct or part-time teaching staff can help mitigate this issue to some extent, it remains a significant challenge for the VPET sector. Front line teaching staff often encounter difficulties in this regard:

"It is concerning that some students have reported that our teaching materials are outdated. This issue has arisen in classes taught by newly hired professors who have been recruited from traditional universities without receiving adequate initial and on-the-job training." (Informant C)

"Our institute prides itself on the 'earn and learn' philosophy, which motivated us to establish it in the first place. Students rely on us to provide comprehensive guidance from start to finish. Fulfilling this expectation entails investing a significant amount of our personal time to stay updated on industry trends and the latest technologies. Regrettably, the institute does not offer any professional development support. As a result, when we exhaust our networks and knowledge, we are left with no choice but to feign familiarity with the latest advancements." (Informant S)

In response to this concern, some departments in THEi took a step towards resolving the issue by increasing its part-time teaching personnel by 40 percent

in 2016, as per my observations. However, it is crucial to address this matter comprehensively in the long term.

The escalating cost of tuition for a VPET degree raises questions among students and their parents about whether the accelerated pathway to employment justifies the investment.

"It may appear favourable on paper, but upon closer examination, I find that there is not a substantial disparity between a two-year higher diploma and a four-year vocational degree. Some of my colleagues may argue that the extended duration of our program allows for greater involvement in projects and internships. However, it is crucial to consider that a higher diploma only costs HK\$62k, whereas a THEi degree carries a price tag of \$386k—a six-fold difference in tuition fees. In the upcoming years, if we fail to convincingly justify this significant fee gap to both parents and students, our enrolment figures may face severe challenges." (Informant C)

Previous research studies have suggested that VPET institutions could benefit from adopting the "professor of practice" model, allowing teaching personnel to maintain relevant external positions to stay abreast of current knowledge. Etzkowitz and Dzisah

(2015) noted that the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) pioneered this approach in the nineteenth century, effectively addressing similar challenges.

Informant E acknowledges the difficulty, noting that as a self-financed institution, investing in staff development becomes challenging when daily operations are not even breaking even. However, it is important to recognize that these challenges have a profound impact on the institute's mission. Informant E further added,

"Students apply what they learn from us in their workplaces. If the teaching is outdated, our students will eventually be unable to meet the industry's high performance expectations. This raises concerns about our competitive advantage over students from traditional universities." (Informant E)

For VPET institutions, it is imperative that teaching staff stay current with their respective specialties for several reasons. Firstly, they need to impart the most up-to-date skill set to their students, enabling them to immediately apply these skills and knowledge during their internships (which commence from year 1). Otherwise, students may quickly identify gaps or deficiencies between the skills they have acquired and those utilized by companies. Furthermore, keeping professional knowledge current or upgrading it demands substantial investments of both time and financial resources. This is especially critical in today's rapidly evolving world.

Funding and Grants

One significant contributing factor is the absence of a distinct funding category for vocational education institutes within the government's framework. As a result, THEi finds itself competing with other self-financed institutions in Hong Kong for funding.

Informant L highlighted that securing funding from various sources often takes precedence over catering to employers' needs. Informant S explained that all staff members engage in consultancy projects outside of their teaching hours to stay updated with industry developments and exchange ideas with other experts in the field. This practice is also tied to their hiring criteria. Informant E, a former department head, expressed a preference for candidates with extensive industry connections and the ability to secure diverse consultancy projects, rather than emphasizing research ability or publication records.

It is customary for university funding to rely on research outputs. However, as a VPET institute with minimal research output, THEi faces significant challenges in securing grants or funds from the university grant committee in Hong Kong. Without industry support, it becomes arduous for THEi to maintain financial sustainability if it exclusively focuses on fulfilling its vocational mission. The respondent noted that THEi is transitioning towards a more traditional university path in order to compete

for government funds and grants. However, based on the comments of the informants, it appears that they may not be adequately prepared for or enthusiastic about this shift.

"I feel that the current leadership's primary focus is solely on securing funding and achieving high rankings through research. For instance, they show a preference for hiring new Ph.D. graduates instead of experienced practitioners. Their emphasis lies on publication counts in academic journals rather than organizing industry summits. Additionally, they encourage us to compete for research grants with traditional universities, overlooking the value of consultancy projects. It appears that they perceive THEi as just another academically oriented higher education institute. This approach does not align with our strengths or students' expectations. We should embrace our role as professors of practice rather than adopting the characteristics of academic professors in a research-focused university." (Informant E).

Another respondent strongly disagrees with the direction that THEi is taking and perceives it as a misguided course.

"The leadership has recently begun emphasizing research from the third year of operation, which has put me under pressure. I have been engaged in applied

or consultancy-based projects since day one, which greatly contributes to my teaching. However, the leadership now expects us to adopt a more academically oriented approach and publish in academic journals. All new hires are Ph.D. holders with a strong academic focus. Some argue that we should follow the path of traditional polytechnics, but I strongly disagree. We possess a unique identity as a vocationally oriented institute. That's why we have the dual track system, similar to Germany. As a vocational institute, we should prioritize hiring scholar-practitioners with professional doctorates who conduct applied research. It is disheartening to see us losing our advantage and letting it slip away." (Informant K).

All teaching staff informants acknowledged that the institute has begun exerting pressure on them to engage in academic research in order to compete for external funding. They observed that a significant number of newly hired teaching staff in the third year primarily come from local universities, holding Ph.D. degrees and boasting a portfolio of academic publications. While they understood that the institute aims to foster a community of researchers who actively seek funding, they emphasized the importance of maintaining a careful balance between academic and professional staff. Failing to strike this balance would result in THEi losing its distinctive

advantage, particularly if students fail to demonstrate the expected skills and competencies.

"I chose the teaching track over the professorial track because my passion lies in teaching. I have not received any research training, but I am recognized as one of the top experts in my subject area locally. However, the school is now pushing for academic research, even making it one of the key performance indicators (KPIs). I find this unfair. We have established a strong foundation in producing students who are ready for the workforce, but suddenly the institute wants us to conform to the academic research norm. That was not my intention for joining this institution." (Informant C)

Informant L's statement highlights that, in certain instances, securing funding takes precedence over prioritizing employers' needs. This focus on funding is a valid reflection of the real-world environment, although it may not be explicitly evident in the policy documents.

THEi is also grappling with the challenges posed by a declining number of learners due to a low birth rate. Informant F, who oversees the institute's finances, noted that THEi did not meet the target enrolment numbers in recent years, except for the initial two years. However, she highlighted that THEi still maintains a higher enrolment

compared to most other self-financed institutes at present. Additionally, she expressed optimism for the future due to the financial support provided by the VTC, the parent organisation of THEi, despite acknowledging the clear challenges ahead.

All teaching staff informants disagreed with the shift towards a more academically focused approach. Nevertheless, THEi has been gradually moving in this direction since its third year of operation, resulting in fewer than 10 founding staff members remaining with THEi in 2016.

Practical Limitations Related to the Industry: Challenges in Hiring

It is reasonable to assume that industry professionals in Hong Kong, who possess knowledge, skills, and qualifications, are currently earning a good level of income in their current roles. Consequently, it would be challenging to attract them to join VPET institutions with fixed-term contracts. Informant C expressed the difficulties in hiring competent teaching staff from the industry, explaining that potential candidates need to have "*extensive industry experience and a network at the required level*", as well as a minimum of a master's qualification and some tertiary teaching experience. Attracting experienced industry professionals who fulfil all these requirements, particularly considering salary constraints resulting from funding issues, proves to be

challenging. Based on my previous hiring experience at THEi, most candidates were only able to meet two out of the three requirements specified.

Chapter Summary

The findings presented in this study revealed several themes that emerged from the interviews, each corresponding to specific research questions. These themes are discussed as follows:

Purpose and understanding of VPET and THEi: None of the informants were able to clearly explain the major differences between traditional VET (Vocational Education and Training) and VPET. However, THEi's mission statement clearly identifies that VPET places equal emphasis on theory and practice. Nevertheless, all informants recognized that the VPET curriculum is career-oriented, focusing on preparing graduates for the workforce.

Development of THEi: The development of THEi was characterized as passive and unsustainable. All industry connections were primarily established through the personal networks of full-time academic staff. However, the viability and longevity of these networks may become compromised over time or when staff members leave the

institute. Additionally, internal policies and procedures borrowed from the traditional higher education sector were found to be incompatible with THEi's unique context.

Achievements and Challenges of THEi: The highest achievement reported by both students and staff is employability. They take pride in the institute's ability to produce graduates who are ready for the workforce. The other notable achievements are the dual track of study (combining theory and practice) and industry collaboration.

However, challenges were also identified, including the perception that the curricula lack theoretical rigor, teaching staff's knowledge being outdated, and the institute's pressure on staff to engage in academic research due to funding and grant mechanisms.

Overall, the study highlights the importance of addressing these challenges while recognizing and capitalizing on THEi's achievements in employability, the dual track approach, and industry collaboration.

Chapter 5 – Discussion

The chapter on the literature review has discussed several fundamental ideas of Vocational and Professional Education and Training (VPET). These theories serve as a basis for evaluating and interpreting the findings presented in this chapter. The guiding framework, informed by new vocationalism and human capital theory, is of particular significance. It aims to elucidate how new vocationalism can contribute to the development of human capital, ultimately leading to enhanced productivity and profitability. The focus of this study in this chapter is to examine how the growth of VPET in Hong Kong aligns with this conceptual framework.

In addition to student interviewees, the informants in the VPET sector have, on average, approximately 17 years of professional experience. Responses were gathered from various perspectives, including those of leadership, programme management, teaching staff, and students, in order to illuminate both commonalities and differences. Furthermore, my personal experience and opinions, along with relevant literature on VPET, are incorporated to provide a comprehensive understanding of the observed phenomena.

The interviews conducted in this study yielded four main topics, which can be categorized into successes and problems experienced by the local VPET institution in Hong Kong. These topics are as follows:

1. VPET student aspects
2. VPET staff aspects
3. Industry and employer aspects
4. Institute and resource aspects

The findings from the interviews shed light on various factors related to each of these topics, highlighting both positive outcomes and challenges encountered by the VPET institution in Hong Kong.

The Study's Original Contribution

The original contribution of this study lies in highlighting the necessity for a vocational and professional education and training (VPET) model in Hong Kong that goes beyond the postsecondary vocational education and training (VET) system, rather than merely extending the existing higher education system. The study recognizes the fundamental incompatibilities between these two systems. Drawing on

human capital theory (Navruz-Zoda & Shomiev, 2017), which emphasizes the investment of knowledge and experience in individuals to enhance productivity and economic outcomes, the findings clearly demonstrate the distinctive differences between VPET and traditional higher education. Notably, the extended duration of internships, support from employers and industry experts, and the resources provided by vocational professors offer unparalleled advantages over traditional higher education, particularly when employability is prioritized. This study is also the first to employ qualitative methods to extract meaningful insights, providing a comprehensive understanding of the emergence of a VPET system in Hong Kong and the wider Asian context.

Specifically, the research reveals that the successful development of a VPET system requires extensive industry support and collaboration at the program level to significantly enhance graduates' employability. The case study conducted at THEi exemplifies this approach by incorporating bi-weekly industry guest lectures, paid commercial projects as assignments, and extended internships spanning four years. This represents a natural progression from the existing postsecondary VET system and poses challenges for academically-oriented universities to match this level of support for all their students.

Securing and maintaining these industry relationships proves challenging without centralized coordination by the government. The study also highlights the important role of teaching staff who bring their personal connections and networks to the program. Consequently, the background and qualifications of each teaching staff member contribute to the success of the VPET model in Hong Kong. While previous studies have explored the personal networks of teachers in postsecondary VET (Messmann et al., 2018), none have investigated the impact of such networks at the tertiary level and their influence on the overall development of the VPET model.

Student Aspects

The demand for dual-track education among students is evident, as conveyed by this study. It highlights that this demand is not solely a result of top-down policies but is also driven by bottom-up demand. Similar to VPET systems in Germany and other countries discussed in Chapter 2, the dual-track approach has proven successful in developing human capital and improving local economies. This is particularly significant for Hong Kong and many other countries and cities as they aim to recover economically from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The findings of this study align with existing literature, with most informants emphasizing the benefits of dual-track education, such as improved work readiness

and the practicality of the curriculum. While the traditional vocationalism perspective emphasizes the pre-allocation of job roles and the development of work-related skills by training institutes (James, 2017), the vocational education at the tertiary level has shifted towards a more neoliberal perspective. This perspective aims to prepare students for the future workplace and provide them and their parents with choices in educational pathways. The dual-track system, which offers both traditional academic education and VPET, is preferred and well-received by parents. From a neoliberalist standpoint, students are ideally empowered to meet their own needs through the free market (Roberts & Peters, 2019). The introduction of VPET education in Hong Kong therefore offers students the opportunity to pursue vocational education at the degree level, which was previously unavailable. Unlike the traditional functionalist perspective, where secondary school leavers either pursue academic degrees in universities or opt for higher diplomas in technical areas at vocational training institutes if they do not immediately enter the workforce, student informants positively comment on the introduction of VPET. They confidently compare themselves to their friends studying academic degrees at local universities and clearly distinguish between higher education and VPET, perceiving the latter as preferable. Traditionally, vocationally oriented students have been regarded as second-tier by employers in Hong Kong, but this perception is changing. In Chinese culture,

including Hong Kong's culture, traditional VET has been seen as designed for students who may be considered less academically capable, and students themselves may hold this perception. However, in this study, student informants express confidence and pride as VPET students. Based on my experience as a VPET lecturer, these students typically come from middle-class families. They may not have outstanding academic results overall, but they often possess talent in one or two specialized areas, such as art and design. They exhibit higher motivation to learn when they can connect the curriculum to tangible outcomes and gain recognition from potential employers. The students' comments clearly reflect this relationship, which echoes the findings of a study by Creten et al. (2001) suggesting that vocational employees are more engaged when they can link their learning to future goals.

As a VPET lecturer, I can relate to the sentiments expressed by Informant J, who stated, "I can talk, I can do, and I can do better than you," when comparing herself to other higher education students. This statement reflects the primary educational goal of future employment, which may differ from the goals of students in traditional universities in Hong Kong. The study life of VPET students also differs from that of other university students. They often stay overnight in campus studios, working on projects or preparing for industrial competitions. The time they invest in learning and

practicing their skills goes beyond the listed class hours, as it is self-initiated and frequently done in teams.

The option for students to switch back to higher education after completing the first two years of study (exiting with a higher diploma), and the fact that most students choose to continue, indicates their belief that a vocational degree from a VPET education institute provides advantages in terms of future employment.

Regarding the advantages of the dual-track system, a similar pattern of comments was found among staff informants, as well as in written reports provided by external examiners and employers in the programme re-accreditation document. All of these comments confirm that the development of VPET offers students more choices for higher-level learning and leads to higher quality graduates within our guiding framework.

Some argue that the VPET pathway is attractive to students with clear career goals (e.g., Pereira & Costa, 2017). However, it is not as flexible as a traditional academic degree, which focuses more on subject knowledge and soft skill development. Many studies demonstrate that the soft skills training received for a chosen trade is perceived as more relevant and useful by both students and employers (e.g., Vaughan, 2017). This is particularly true for VPET students who are cultivated in a specialized

environment and have interactions with industry experts throughout their four-year education. Since they start with a specialized curriculum and are educated for a specific industry, their soft skills may not be easily transferable to every type of workplace. My research findings also indicate that VPET students acquire relevant soft skills through their degree programs and internships, which satisfy their employers.

All informants with teaching duties expressed that they provide extensive after-class support to their students. Student informants also expressed their appreciation for this support. The quality of teaching is closely related to the motivation and after-class support provided by teaching staff, an area that lacks sufficient theoretical and empirical studies in the current literature. Boldrini et al. (2019) interviewed 37 vocational teachers and found that vocational teachers often have to find ways to address vocational students' learning motivation and address emerging instructional challenges in vocational subjects. In the case of this study, many of the teaching staff initially hired were industry experts with exceptional passion for passing on specialized skills and knowledge. Every day, from morning till late at night, several teaching professionals remained in the studio with students, answering questions and sharing their professional expertise. This hidden curriculum, though not formally built into the program, is critically important for vocational students to learn important

"out-of-curriculum" knowledge from subject experts, enhancing their readiness for the workplace. Berg et al. (2017) found that a hidden curriculum in vocational programs helps vocational students successfully transition to the workplace with a more adaptive mindset for problem-solving.

THEi empowers students who seek real-world skills through project and internship opportunities, in addition to textbook theories. This finding enriches our understanding of the formation of high-quality teaching by raising the education standards through the lens of new vocationalism, and it provides a link to better human capital development within the conceptual framework.

Staff Aspects

The role of teaching staff, often overlooked in the literature, is indispensable in ensuring high-quality vocational programs and plays a crucial role in human capital development within our guiding framework. Unlike traditional academic higher education, which primarily focuses on the transmission of specialized knowledge and skills, VPET, under the perspective of new vocationalism, relies heavily on teaching staff to prepare students for the workplace. Through work-integrated learning projects, competitions, and internships, teaching staff contribute to enhancing the

quality of the workforce and effectively matching suitable human capital to the workplace.

Teaching staff is critical at all levels of the education sector and vital to the success of an institute. In the context of VPET, the measure of success in developing valuable human capital also relies on strong relationships with industry partners and employers. While Harris et al. (2001) briefly examined the function of teaching staff in the evolution of VPET, empirical research on this topic is scarce in the literature. Comments provided by informants highlight the critical role of teaching staff as training resources, emphasizing that their professional networks and connections are essential for graduates to integrate their learning into society after graduation. This study provides empirical evidence on how teaching staff contribute to the development of VPET within the framework of new vocationalism, thus better preparing human capital for the industry and society as a whole.

A significant part of the success of VPET programs is attributed to the professional connections and networks of teaching staff, although this empirical finding is seldom reported in mainstream literature. Messmann et al. (2018) conducted a survey of 48 vocational instructors, investigating the characteristics of their personal networks in the workplace. The study revealed that a teacher's professional network can support

the growth of vocational education and enhance student learning when it includes dense interactions with experienced professionals.

In addition to the hidden curriculum identified in the student aspect discussed earlier, the professional networks of teaching staff are also critical. These networks are not random, as expressed by the informants, but are deliberately chosen networks that offer meaningful learning opportunities for students. Teaching staff can ensure dense interactions between students and professionals within these networks due to their personal relationships. This level of connectivity may not be achieved to the same extent if these network professionals were centrally coordinated by the government or vocational institute. This evidence highlights the importance of staff connections and networks in producing high-quality, work-ready graduates and human capital.

Informants stated that these connections bring the latest professional skills, internship opportunities, real-world projects, potential employment opportunities for graduates, and various other opportunities back to the institute. For example, the Re-Learning Programme Accreditation (Re-LPA) document showcases how one of the final year programs examined in this study invited 19 industry experts to deliver guest lectures over a span of 24 weeks. This initiative was designed to equip students with innovative ideas before entering the workforce. According to the principles of new

vocationalism, education should focus on preparing students to be competitive in the workplace and succeed in the free market. This approach has significant implications for the development of VPET in Hong Kong, distinguishing VPET students from those pursuing academic degrees at traditional universities. Similar studies conducted in European countries support our theory and contribute to the existing literature by describing how teaching staff can influence the effective development of VPET and lead to greater human capital for businesses.

While prior research has highlighted the significance of corporate and industry support, this study reveals that the professional networks and connections of teaching staff are crucial in obtaining this support. The Re-LPA report from the faculty demonstrates employers' appreciation for the teaching team and support staff. This finding is unexpected and suggests that the institute has limited involvement in maintaining these professional relationships. As one student informant reported, these networks are not sustainable, and problems arise when a professor leaves the institute. The quality of the replacement networks may not be the same. This finding supports the notion that staff connections and networks are crucial for the growth of VPET development.

Another important finding is the need for teaching staff to stay up-to-date with the latest industry skills. Teaching staff are a key source of skills and knowledge in VPET, and the chain of high-quality human capital may break if this source of knowledge is not sustained. While foundational-level skills may remain applicable for a longer time, advanced-level skills often emerge quickly and require time and practice to master. Lloyd and Payne (2012) discuss common problems faced by vocational teachers in keeping themselves current with their craft, primarily related to time and resources. The findings of this study align with similar studies conducted in Norway, England, and Wales, indicating a need for additional resources to support this requirement.

Previous studies highlighting the importance of staff competence have mainly focused on traditional VET rather than VPET. For example, Andersson and Köpsén (2018) emphasized the necessity of active involvement with the industry and updated skills for traditional VET staff. The findings of this study align with that line of discussion. The recruitment requirements for staff also reflect this need. The staff handbook states that a master's degree is sufficient for teaching or professorial positions, and as of 2014, only one staff member held a doctoral degree in the entire faculty. This is reasonable as vocational education focuses on specialized skills and prepares students for the workplace rather than academia. However, the practical experience

requirement is more demanding and receives greater emphasis in the recruitment process. Teaching staff are also required to have substantial teaching experience at the tertiary level for mid-level teaching positions. This combination of academic qualification, work experience, and teaching experience lays a solid foundation for the first cohort of students.

However, the situation seems to have changed a few years after the establishment of the institute. The institute began hiring more academics from local universities to manage its programs and compete for research grants, which marked the beginning of a dilemma. The overall focus shifted from providing quality VPET education to competing for research grants and pushing for research publications. Contrary to the early findings, the competence required for VPET teaching staff should be academically higher than that of traditional VET, as staff are now required to engage in more research tasks. The literature does not discuss the desirable qualifications for VPET teachers that facilitate effective teaching and the development of VPET.

Teaching staff play an essential role in an educational institute. However, with an unclear positioning and shift in focus, it becomes difficult to ensure the production of higher-quality, work-ready graduates and human capital. There is a trend in VPET programs to hire more staff from traditional universities with research experience to

teach VPET courses, as the institute must compete for government research grants.

This approach seems to conflict with the literature (Böckelmann et al., 2021) and international practices viewed through the lens of new vocationalism.

Based on my experience working in Hong Kong institutions, there has been an increasing emphasis on research and the recruitment of employees with doctoral degrees in recent years. This trend can be attributed to the promotion of new vocationalism, which encourages educational institutions to compete globally for students and resources. VPET institutes are therefore compelled to compete for government research funding to sustain their development and meet the research requirements for university status. However, this shift also blurs their work-ready positioning and diminishes the advantage of having a strong industry network through teaching staff. This departure from our guiding framework's recommendations necessitates further empirical research to assess the performance and implications of this approach.

Industry and Employer Aspects

The industry plays a crucial role in the overarching framework as it serves as the ultimate destination where high-quality human capital is nurtured and optimized. In the traditional vocationalism perspective, the industry primarily demanded that human

resources be trained in specialized skills to carry out assigned tasks. While this functionalist concept still holds true for lower-level vocational training, it no longer aligns with the neoliberalist viewpoint, where employees are not merely seen as resources but also as valuable assets to both companies and society as a whole. The ideology of new vocationalism posits that modern employees should possess advanced specialized skills and the ability to engage in self-directed learning in order to enhance corporate performance and maintain a competitive position in our ever-evolving economy.

The introduction of the vocational degree programme has effectively bridged the gap between academic degrees and vocational higher diplomas by offering integrated education that encompasses both theoretical knowledge and specialized practical training.

In light of new vocationalism, the industry actively supports the development of Vocational and Professional Education and Training (VPET). The definition of "work-ready" has undergone a significant transformation. The traditional functionalist notion that vocational education solely produces low-cost labour for predetermined jobs is increasingly inadequate in today's modern world. Work tasks have become more sophisticated, demanding independent thinking and problem-solving skills.

Given similar labour costs, certain job positions now favour skilled VPET graduates over their traditional academic counterparts due to the comprehensive and high-quality work-related training they have received over the course of their four-year program.

Based on the responses gathered from the interviews, all the informants expressed confidence in the employability of VPET graduates. Additionally, the program's re-accreditation report indicates an impressive average employment rate of 98% within three months of graduation.

One of the underlying assumptions of new vocationalism, as supported by Higgs (2017), forms the basis of our conceptual framework: an educational institution should possess the ability to adapt its position and remain competitive among other institutes. This assumption is pivotal in our framework as it emphasizes that a VPET institute should be capable of self-adjustment in the free market while nurturing high-quality human capital in a sustainable manner. However, a critical issue arises when the market becomes saturated and is unable to absorb all the graduates produced by a VPET institute, particularly as the number of graduates accumulates over the years. Additionally, the ability to adjust enrolment numbers and allocate resources in response to market changes is often constrained, particularly considering the

economic circumstances. This presents a challenge as the VPET institute loses the flexibility required to address unforeseen market fluctuations. An illustrative example is the impact of COVID-19 on hospitality programs. These circumstances highlight the inadequacy of the traditional university model for VPET, which necessitates a more agile and adaptable mechanism.

In this study, the investigated program employs various strategies to address these demanding requirements. For instance, it utilizes part-time teaching staff for elective subjects, allows students to select project topics aligned with their interests and internship needs, and encourages involvement in real-world commercial projects or participation in international competitions. Respondents in the study indicated that the majority of students from THEi (The Technological and Higher Education Institute) are offered diverse opportunities to work on foreign projects and participate in overseas study trips.

According to a teacher informant, THEi aims to provide their students with real-world commercial project experiences at least once a year, possibly every semester. Student informants also noted that most of these internships are paid at market rates. This significant differentiation from traditional academically oriented higher education is made possible by the professional connections and industry support that THEi has

established. Consequently, it can be assumed that an active VPET student would have engaged in at least eight commercial projects within their specialized area, in addition to other projects and experiences gained through part-time work and competitions. A VPET graduate's portfolio should highlight their diverse expertise and experiences across various areas, presenting a distinct advantage compared to graduates with solely academic degrees. This point of differentiation was acknowledged by respondents at all levels. A leadership level informant further emphasized the significant efforts undertaken to build trust with the industry and potential employers. For example, a student informant mentioned that one of the guest lecturers was the director of photography from Pixar Inc. This unique feature of THEi sets it apart from traditional universities.

The literature has documented similar modern apprenticeship models found in the Australian and Canadian systems. Although VPET education is highly localized and context-dependent, it offers stable and favourable employment opportunities, particularly in unstable economic conditions. The literature also suggests that VPET is appealing to new immigrants seeking to acquire new skills or gain local work experience. However, this phenomenon has yet to be observed in Hong Kong's VPET sector.

Institute and Resources Aspects

There is a notable convergence between professional degrees and vocational degrees in practice, blurring the boundaries between the two. Both types of degrees aim to produce high-quality human capital for specific trades or industries, with the main distinction lying in the level of study and the structure of internships. This study revealed that the institute made several unsuccessful attempts to have its professional degree offerings recognized. For instance, the Bachelor of Landscape Architecture (Hons) and BSc (Hons) Nursing programs were proposed but never successfully launched. In our guiding framework, we interpret the institute's intention to produce higher-quality, work-ready graduates for the industry as a reason for extending its offerings to a higher level to cultivate better human capital.

Based on the document analysis, the VPET institute under study is limited to offering vocational degrees and does not offer professional degrees, as many professional degrees in Hong Kong are at the postgraduate level or require a postgraduate qualification for initial professional registration. Examples include the Postgraduate Certificate in Laws (PCLL) for law, Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) for education, and Master of Architecture (March) for architecture. We discovered that if an institute intends to offer these types of professional degrees that lead to

professional registration or licensing, it must obtain university status. However, this would create conflicts and competition with existing universities in Hong Kong that already offer these programs. Although the institute may apply for approval to offer postgraduate degrees, obtaining recognition from professional bodies is challenging due to various levels of regulatory protectionism, as explained by Sommer (2021).

Different countries and industries have their own criteria for recognizing qualifications and prior experience, regardless of the actual training graduates have received. Building on the previous discussion, our guiding framework demonstrates a significant limitation of VPET when it seeks to expand its offerings to industries where employers and regulators prefer graduates from avenues other than VPET.

While this limitation may be context-specific, empirical studies increasingly support similar outcomes.

Vocational and Professional Education and Training (VPET) programs rely on industry endorsement, and their graduates are positioned as human capital to meet current and future industry demands. This is a notable departure from the conventional academically oriented higher education. In this sense, a vocational degree is a context-restricted qualification and holds an advantage over other types of degrees when it is endorsed by the industry. The functionalist perspective and Durkheim's approach to education and training may not be appropriate in this context,

as these concepts suggest that an industrialized economy requires a complex division of labour, with many occupations requiring high levels of skill. This restricts graduates to certain types of jobs that may be less adaptable to a changing environment. A VPET degree can be seen as occupying a position between an academic degree and a technical higher diploma in terms of employment flexibility.

The mission of THEi (The Technological and Higher Education Institute) is not publicly available and can only be found in the initial institute accreditation document submitted to HKCAAVQ (Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications). It is not presented on the website, public materials, or staff handbook. From my understanding, the interpretation of the mission is left to the staff. In the interviews, management informants were unable to differentiate between traditional vocational education and training (VET) and VPET, or between vocational degrees and professional degrees. As a result, they pursued the offering of professional degrees that fall outside the VPET domain. The failure to launch such degree programs can be explained within this context. While the progression from vocational degrees to professional degrees may seem like a natural development, it represents a clear deviation from the mission set out during the start-up phase of a VPET institute.

Conversely, top management also desires THEi to obtain university status to enhance competitiveness and gain more resources. This creates a loop of consequences. There is limited discussion in the literature regarding this area, but our international experience provides examples such as the UAS (University of Applied Sciences) model in Europe, private universities in the UK, and the college model in Australia and Canada, which demonstrate how VPET institutes can expand and offer career-oriented degrees leading to professional registration.

VPET is designed to focus on vocational degrees, but if it begins to overlap with regular higher education or professional education, its orientation becomes unclear. This may be attributed to the history of the new management team, as discussed in previous sections of this chapter. Many of the new staff members, particularly those in leadership and management positions, previously worked as academics in universities. They brought not only the research culture but also the programs and operational standards from universities. This clashed with the original mission of VPET and blurred the advantages valued by students and employers. Respondents also shared that their research projects shifted from applied to academic in nature, and they felt unprepared for this type of work.

Informants at the management level, who joined THEi during its establishment, expressed a sense of contradiction in the government's positioning of VPET. On one hand, the government allows higher education institutes or universities to offer vocational degrees, but on the other hand, it encourages VPET institutes to engage in academic research to compete for additional funding. The informant also mentioned that this is seen as the only solution to secure funding.

The cost of offering a tertiary VPET program compared to a traditional academic degree or a postsecondary VET diploma program is relatively high. Considerable investments are required for advanced studio equipment and laboratories alone. With limited government funding and small class sizes, the institute must recover costs through tuition fees. This also hinders the rapid growth of THEi despite its advantages.

Another issue is the ambiguous and diverse understanding of VPET and THEi among stakeholders. Respondents emphasized that VPET education is heavily driven by industry needs, but many stakeholders, regardless of their position, struggle to distinguish between traditional VET and upgraded VPET. Informants in leadership positions emphasized the strengths of VPET education and THEi in producing work-ready graduates, while those in management positions added that VPET encompasses

an additional dimension of soft skills embedded in the curriculum. Students appeared to have a clearer perspective. They recognized that degree programs provide a more comprehensive education compared to certificate programs, which often have a more practical focus. Degree programs typically cover more theoretical content and offer a deeper understanding of the subject area. On the other hand, diploma programs tend to prioritize practical skills acquisition and may not cover as much academic content. However, this may vary depending on the specific program and school, so it is advisable to research and evaluate multiple options to determine the best fit for educational aspirations. The response from students might differ if the same questions were posed to first-year or prospective students. This discrepancy could be attributed to a lack of transparent information in public communication materials. Although the institute's registration document clearly stated that a "fine balance of theory" is an essential component of VPET, this point was not mentioned in public communication materials. Instead, these materials focus on the idea of being work-ready or utilize the slogan "a degree that works for you." Another possibility is that the current staff differs from the staff involved in the institute's establishment, leading to a lack of continuity in conveying the mission and vision.

Overall, the interpretation and understanding of VPET and THEi among stakeholders are ambiguous and varied. The clash between the original mission of

VPET and the influence of staff with university backgrounds, along with the government's contradictory positioning and limited funding, contribute to the challenges faced by THEi. Transparent and consistent communication, as well as a clearer delineation of VPET's scope and advantages, are essential in addressing these issues and aligning the institute's goals with the needs of students and employers.

Chapter Summary

I revised the conceptual framework based on the findings mentioned in this chapter (see Figure 1). The revised framework shows that the sustainable elements of the VPET system require more than just a vocational- or career-oriented curriculum to produce employable graduates. To develop work-ready graduates for the industry, it requires the input and network of expert academics with current industry experience, as well as an industry-driven vocational curriculum with carefully structured supporting activities.

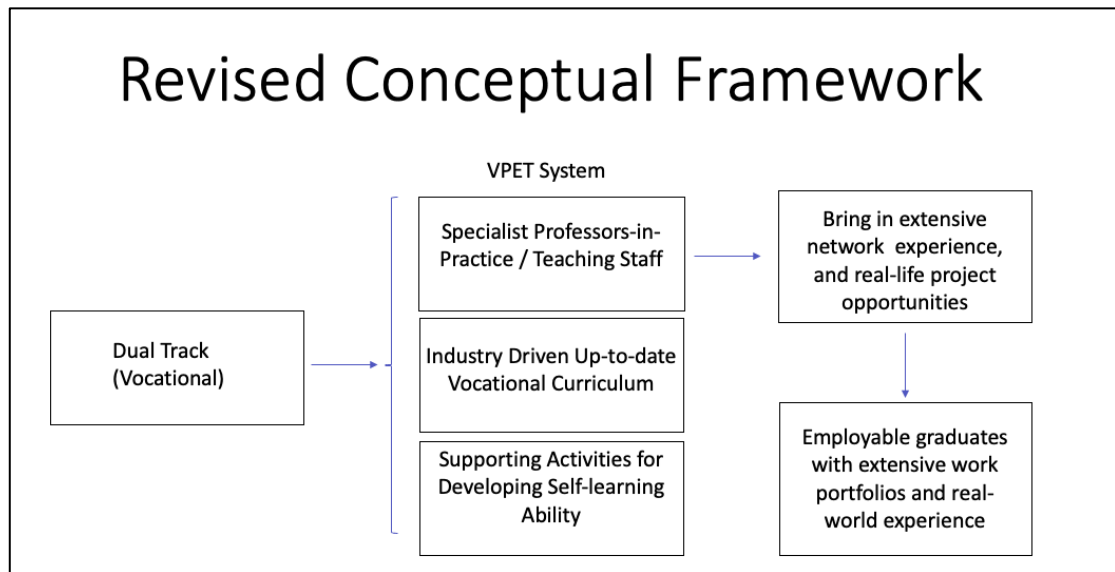


Figure 1. Revised Conceptual Framework of the Development of VPET in Hong Kong

The revised framework summarizes the key findings derived from my data gathering efforts, which involved conducting in-depth interviews with senior executives, management-level academics, teaching staff, and current students. Additionally, institutional and program accreditation documentation was examined. This comprehensive approach demonstrates the interconnectedness of various principles, beginning from student entrance through the dual track system and culminating in the graduation of marketable graduates who are well-prepared for the workforce. The gathered data is triangulated and synthesized in the next chapter to provide responses to each research topic.

Chapter 6 – Summary of the Present Study, Implications, and Conclusion

In this chapter, I will provide a summary of the reasons behind conducting this research and outline the main findings that have been obtained. I will also evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the chosen methodology and provide recommendations for the future advancement of vocational and professional education and training (VPET) in Hong Kong. Furthermore, I will offer an overview of the general strengths and limitations of the study, propose potential areas for future research, and reflect on my personal experiences as a practitioner-researcher throughout the research process.

Review of the Study's Rationale

Literature Review

My experience in higher education administration, corporate training, and teaching part-time degree programs to mature students initially sparked my interest in VPET.

However, I soon realized that my understanding of vocational education was limited and one-sided, as it was primarily shaped from the perspective of a higher education administrator.

To deepen my knowledge of the subject, I began by exploring a wide range of sources and readily available materials. I reviewed all relevant information on VPET from the

education bureau, VPET steering committee, and the minutes of legislative council meetings. Once I had gained an initial understanding of the practical aspects of VPET, I delved into the vast ocean of academic literature. My aim was to explore different philosophical perspectives, research methodologies, ongoing debates, and relevant empirical studies. In this process, I examined three theories related to this study: the functionalist viewpoint of vocationalism, the neoliberal perspective of vocationalism, and the human capital theory. Additionally, I explored various VPET models from around the world to gain insights into how each system functions within its specific context.

I discovered that there was a lack of readily available guiding frameworks that explained the development of VPET in the existing literature. Therefore, I formulated my own guiding framework to illustrate the relationship between key components and the ultimate goal of a VPET system. To address the aim of this study, I developed three research questions based on the framework and literature review. Given that vocational education is highly contextualized and may not be easily generalized across countries and industries, I opted for a qualitative case study approach. This approach allowed me to investigate the development, achievements, and challenges of VPET in Hong Kong. As there is currently only one VPET institution in Hong Kong

based on mission and registration, I focused my study on THEi (The Technological and Higher Education Institute).

Data Collection

During the data collection period in 2015, I had the opportunity to conduct pilot interviews with students and staff who shared similar profiles (such as first cohort VPET students and teachers) at THEi. These interviews were conducted on campus after obtaining approval for the study. Subsequently, official in-depth interviews were conducted over a three-month period, from late 2015 to early 2016. However, interview invitations extended to the President of THEi and certain well-known external examiners were either denied or disregarded. In light of this, I revised my research plan and supplemented the study with relevant non-confidential internal documents, which included written comments from employers and external examiners. These additional sources of information helped to complement the data obtained through interviews to answer these questions:

1. How has THEi developed in the Hong Kong VPET context?
2. What are the current achievements and challenges related to VPET in Hong

Kong?

3. What are the current challenges facing VPET in Hong Kong?

Answers to Research Questions

After conducting a thorough examination of the literature, research questions were formulated, and the findings of this study directly address these questions while also enhancing the preliminary guiding framework developed in Chapter 2.

The study aimed to provide an overview of the international trends and development of VPET. The answer to this question emerges from the literature review itself, as discussed in Chapter 2. The study reviewed various world models of VPET, analysing their advantages, disadvantages, and underlying philosophical assumptions. While this question did not require empirical input, it offered a new and original interpretation of existing data. For example, the new and expanded classification of academic, professional, and vocational degrees introduced in this study contributes novel insights to the existing body of literature and offers alternative perspectives.

Based on the interpretation of international trends and development, the research question is answered in the discussion chapter. In the context of Hong Kong, vocational and professional education and training has progressed from functional vocationalism,

which focuses on training students for specific job roles, to a neoliberalist new vocationalism that prepares students for highly skilled technological careers. The findings of this study provide additional support for the theory of education borrowing and present an original interpretation of VPET policy development in Hong Kong, tracing its introduction to the graduation of the first cohort of VPET students.

The interview data and documents collected and analysed in the study address the main focus of the current research, as presented in the discussion chapter. The overall development of VPET in Hong Kong aligns with international trends, with some notable exceptions in staffing, funding, and resources. The answers derived from the data demonstrate originality by presenting new information. This study is the first to gather, evaluate, and present a comprehensive set of interview and document data specifically focused on the Hong Kong VPET framework. The analysed interview data and documents also provide additional support for the guiding framework and its underlying theories, namely new vocationalism and human capital theory. The specific details revealed in the findings also contribute to modifying the initial guiding framework for future research. The recommendation section offers new solutions to existing problems. The findings of this study are relevant and valuable to the author as a VPET lecturer, corporate trainer, and higher education administrator.

7.3 The Methodological Approach's Strengths and Weaknesses

The literature survey conducted in this study served as a solid foundation for exploring different methodological approaches. Due to the contextual and subjective nature of VPET, an interpretivist research philosophy was adopted. The case study methodology was chosen to investigate how recent policy trends have been shaped by international and local factors, and to comprehensively document the origins, nature, and development of THEi through an empirically grounded case study. The author highly values the interactions with the informants during the in-depth interviews, which provided insights from stakeholders at all levels.

While the qualitative case study approach offered numerous advantages, there are also limitations discussed in Chapter 6. Some informants declined to participate in the interviews due to personal reasons. Given that THEi is a member institute of the VTC, a quasi-government organisation, informants were cautious in their responses to interview prompts and cross-checking their interview transcripts. Other limitations include the focus on only one institution and the findings not being generalizable, although they are transferable to other similar contexts.

Recommendations for VPET's Future Development

The findings of the current study shed light on the impact of professional practice, VPET institute administration, and policymakers in shaping the next VPET policy.

The mission of THEi underscores the heavy reliance of VPET education on employers and industry. Based on these findings, the following recommendations are proposed for the further development of VPET:

Firstly, it is recommended to consider the establishment of a UAS (University of Applied Sciences) dedicated solely to applied research, consultancy, and vocational degree programs for vocational students. This would complement the academic counterparts and strengthen the VPET pillar. While the lower tier of vocational education is well-established, introducing a UAS system within the VPET pillar would enable current VPET institutes to differentiate themselves from traditional universities and academically oriented institutions. As previously discussed, the distinction between a professional degree and a vocational degree lies in the emphasis on internship and practical experience. Although universities may also offer programs with internship requirements, the VPET program uniquely positions itself by providing students with extensive real-world experience and a comprehensive portfolio before graduation. Universities do not typically specify the number of

internship hours or the volume of real-world projects facilitated by industry experts.

This exemplifies the distinctive nature of vocational degrees, which focus on specialized skills rather than professional registration. Notably, some VPET graduates have successfully launched their own businesses post-graduation. Feedback from employers, as documented in the program reaccreditation report, highlights that start-ups and new companies are inclined to hire VPET fresh graduates due to their up-to-date skills and innovative ideas compared to their university counterparts.

The second recommendation is to introduce VPET programs at the postgraduate level, such as postgraduate certificates or diplomas, to address the current shortfall of academic degree programs. This approach has been successful in the Canadian VPET system, and certain Australia TAFEs have adopted this positive model. Offering VPET programs at the postgraduate level would not only diversify the student pool, compensating for the projected decline in undergraduate student numbers due to a low birth rate, but also enable shorter course durations by eliminating general education subjects. Students admitted to these programs would typically possess an undergraduate degree. This setup would allow university graduates to acquire specialized skills in a particular area, endorsed and taught by industry experts, within a year. It would also benefit individuals seeking to upgrade their skills or change careers after gaining a few years of work experience in their respective industries.

This approach defers the division between academic and high-level vocational training to the postgraduate level, ensuring that students either receive a foundational university education or opt for a more traditional vocational diploma with a functionalist focus should they choose a junior entry point in certain technical positions. This initiative could potentially attract students from China's Great Bay Area to pursue VPET opportunities in the Hong Kong environment.

The third recommendation is to establish a professor-of-practice track within VPET institutes. Recognizing the value and importance of scholar-practitioners in the VPET context is crucial, as emphasized in Chapter 6. Teaching staff play a vital role in the success and sustainability of VPET institutes by virtue of their industry networks and expertise. Regrettably, this aspect is rarely addressed in the existing literature, which predominantly focuses on staff development in the traditional VET sector. There is a notable lack of in-depth research on how VPET employees can stay abreast of current skill sets. Implementing the professor-of-practice track would involve ensuring that staff members within this track remain actively engaged in industry projects to keep their skills and knowledge up to date.

Effective implementation of VPET has the potential to position it as a strategic tool for developing the necessary human capital and providing the industry with a valuable

resource for overall economic growth. Vocational and Professional Education and Training also play a pivotal role in establishing clear expectations for students, parents, and employers regarding the specific skills that VPET graduates can demonstrate. This clarity is crucial in aligning the goals and outcomes of VPET programs with the needs and expectations of stakeholders, ultimately contributing to a more effective and efficient workforce development strategy.

Overall, these recommendations aim to enhance the VPET system by diversifying educational offerings, strengthening the vocational pillar, bridging the gap between academia and industry, and ensuring the currency of skills among VPET staff. By implementing these suggestions, policymakers and stakeholders can capitalize on the potential of VPET to meet the evolving demands of the labour market and foster economic growth.

Strengths and Limitations of the Present Study

Strengths

This research represents the first of its kind in Hong Kong, providing valuable insights for policymakers in neighbouring areas who are interested in establishing their own degree-level VPET institutions. While it is true that successful cases exist in

other cities or countries, it is important to recognize the uniqueness of each context.

What works well in the UK, for example, may not be directly applicable to Hong Kong, and vice versa. Therefore, it is crucial to understand the specific context and operational mechanisms within a particular culture.

By acknowledging the significance of contextual factors, policymakers can make informed decisions and tailor their policies to suit the local needs and circumstances.

This research serves as a reference point, offering policymakers in neighbouring areas valuable insights into the process of building a degree-level VPET institution in Hong Kong. They can draw upon this research as a model to inform their own policy development efforts, taking into account the specific nuances and requirements of their respective contexts.

It is worth reiterating that the uniqueness of each context should not be underestimated. While there may be successful cases in other regions, the particular characteristics and dynamics of Hong Kong necessitate a careful and context-specific approach. By recognizing and understanding these nuances, policymakers can develop policies and initiatives that are well-aligned with the local culture and effectively address the needs of the VPET sector in Hong Kong.

Limitations

While the data provided valuable insights into the current state of VPET in Hong Kong, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. Firstly, there was an unexpected delay between data collection and the completion of this dissertation. Various social and personal factors, including my departure from THEi as a lecturer in 2016 for career advancement, significantly extended the timeline. Unforeseen workload and stress in the new working environment further impeded progress on the dissertation. Additionally, starting from early 2019, Hong Kong experienced a series of social movements and issues, which complicated the situation and affected my family both personally and professionally. The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 further disrupted work and life, causing me to resume writing the dissertation only in April 2022. It is important to note that while the data were collected a few years ago, the fundamental aspects remain relevant.

Another potential limitation is the sample of informants, who were all employees or students of the institute under study. This may have limited their ability to express their opinions freely due to their affiliations with the institution. Furthermore, the vocational education community, regardless of level, is relatively small, which may have made informants hesitant to discuss sensitive issues.

It is essential to acknowledge these limitations and their potential impact on the findings and conclusions of the study. Despite these challenges, the data collected and analysed still provide valuable insights into the VPET landscape in Hong Kong.

Suggestions for Future Research

Vocational and Professional Education and Training (VPET) is a rapidly growing field that is garnering increasing attention across all levels. In light of this, I propose that future research studies should prioritize investigating the establishment and effectiveness of internships and modern apprenticeships within the VPET sector. It is essential to differentiate between traditional higher education and contemporary VPET, emphasizing the unique characteristics and requirements of VPET programs. By focusing on the development and efficacy of internships and apprenticeships in VPET, researchers can contribute to the ongoing advancements and improvements within the field.

Another crucial area for future studies to explore is the utilization of online learning to enhance VPET education. The widespread adoption of "learning from home" and "working from home" during the pandemic has highlighted the significance of online learning. While online platforms have become the new norm for academic degree programs, the practical nature of vocational subjects makes it challenging to

effectively deliver them through online platforms. Therefore, future studies should delve into strategies and approaches for leveraging online learning to enhance VPET education, addressing the unique requirements and constraints of vocational subjects.

By directing research efforts towards these areas, scholars can contribute to the continuous development and improvement of VPET, ensuring its alignment with the evolving needs and demands of the education and employment landscape.

Personal Reflection on My Research Journey

As I reach the conclusion of this research journey, I feel compelled to share some personal reflections on my exploration of VPET development. My interest in vocational and professional education began during my pursuit of a master's degree in marketing. The program I enrolled in was unique, with more than half of the courses being taught by top business consultants. This innovative approach had a surprisingly positive impact on the employability of graduates. Engaging in projects based on real business data exposed us to the latest business scenarios and equipped us with practical solutions. Consequently, many of us received competitive job offers upon graduation.

Through this experience, I realized that students are more motivated and engaged when they can immediately apply the skills they learn in a work environment. Furthermore, graduates who have been educated in such an environment are highly sought after by employers due to their readiness for the workforce. This shift in perspective, where education is seen as a means of building professional skills for the job market, holds true in many contexts within our society today.

In the subsequent years of my career, when I started teaching part-time at a traditional university, I adopted a similar VPET teaching methodology, and the outcomes were highly positive. In 2014, I began teaching at THEi, and during my interactions with parents, I encountered a different worldview. Many parents emphasized the importance of education in broadening one's worldview and connecting with the world we live in. This contrasted with the traditional elitist approach to education prevalent in Hong Kong and wider Asian culture. As a result, they opted to enrol their children in VPET institutes rather than traditional universities. Embracing this teaching methodology led to referrals to other universities for part-time teaching opportunities and corporate training programs for professionals. This doctoral journey has significantly shifted my perspective on education, and I am confident it will open new avenues for career advancement in Canada.

Engaging in an in-depth qualitative research project for the first time has been a transformative experience. My previous training in marketing predominantly focused on quantitative methods, and the research projects I conducted at work were largely quantitative in nature. I chose a qualitative approach for this study to gain a deeper understanding of students' and instructors' perspectives and thought processes.

Embarking on qualitative research required venturing into the unknown. As a marketing professional and educator, it was challenging to maintain a reflective mindset throughout the study, from data collection to analysis. I also faced the difficulty of avoiding the expression of my own experiences and views during interviews with informants, so as not to influence their responses.

Ultimately, this qualitative research journey has equipped me with valuable skills that extend beyond my professional life. I have developed a greater capacity for understanding meanings and discerning the inner voices of others, which may not be adequately captured through numbers and statistics alone. Moreover, I have gained a deeper appreciation for the needs and challenges faced by different stakeholders within the VPET system, enabling me to work more effectively in the future.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research study offers valuable insights and contributions to our understanding of VPET systems in Hong Kong. Firstly, the historical dimension of the study provides a deeper contextualization of contemporary VPET systems, allowing for a broader understanding of their development. This historical perspective serves as a valuable reference for other major cities with similar backgrounds and cultures, such as Macau SAR of China, providing them with an opportunity to draw from the successes and learn from the challenges in building their own VPET systems.

Secondly, this research enhances our evidence-based knowledge of the potentials and limitations of human capital theory and new vocationalism when applied to VPET. It adds to the body of literature that explores the intersection of policy and practice in VPET, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of how human capital theory and new vocationalism can shape and inform VPET policies and initiatives.

Of particular significance is the micro-level study of human capital theory within the context of THEi, which represents a novel contribution to the field. As highlighted by Bray and Thomas (1995), such detailed studies are often lacking, yet they are essential for a better understanding of the real-world challenges and successes

encountered in translating policy into effective practice. The findings of this study suggest that strengthening professional and vocational policies has the potential to expand the range of higher education alternatives not only in Hong Kong but also in Macau and other cities facing similar cultural circumstances. The implications of this VPET research extend to the higher education sector as a whole, shedding light on the controversies and dilemmas that arise at the intersection of professional and higher education.

Overall, this research study enriches the current literature on human capital theory and new vocationalism, with specific relevance to the field of vocational education. It offers valuable insights into the complexities and dynamics of VPET, informing policymakers, practitioners, and researchers about the intricacies involved in developing and implementing effective VPET policies and programs.

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