



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Investigation and Analysis on the Current Situation of Equity in Higher Vocational Education in Guangdong Province

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In order to investigate the current status and existing problems of equity in higher vocational education in Guangdong Province, this study used questionnaire survey and SPSS software to quantitatively analyze the perception of higher vocational students on the current status of equity in higher vocational education in Guangdong Province; semi-structured interviews were used to qualitatively analyze the opinions put forward by the respondents. The results show that students in higher vocational colleges in Guangdong Province mainly come from low- and middle-income or poor families. Their satisfaction with higher vocational education, higher vocational education in Guangdong Province, and educational equity in schools is at a medium-low level. They generally believe that there are large gaps in the development of higher vocational education in different regions, large gaps in the allocation of educational resources, some local governments do not attach importance to higher vocational education, and social prejudice and discrimination are serious. They do not have high expectations for their future development. The results of this study provide a current reference for education policy makers, educational institutions, and academia to further improve the fairness and quality of higher vocational education, thereby promoting the overall progress and harmonious development of society.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduce the problem

As a fundamental issue related to the future development of a country, educational equity serves not only as an important foundation for social equity but also as a critical consideration in the decision-making of higher vocational education. Globally, the pursuit of educational equity remains a key focus of contemporary society, with most countries incorporating it into their strategic agendas. Article 26, paragraph 1, of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (United Nations, 1948) states, "Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and vocational education shall be generally available. Higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit." Furthermore, the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (United Nations, 1966) recognizes the right to equal education as a fundamental human right, rooted in the inherent dignity and equality of all people and its interconnection with other basic human rights.

As a nation prioritizing educational equity, China has worked diligently to achieve this goal. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, the government has emphasized "opening up education to workers and farmers." In the 21st century, the *National Medium- and Long-Term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010–2020)* (Ministry of Education, 2010) identified "promoting educational equity as a basic national education policy" and "improving quality as the core task of education reform and development." These efforts have significantly advanced China's educational system, with substantial improvements in educational equity. From the widespread illiteracy of the past to the

near-universal availability of compulsory education and the establishment of a multi-level education system—including junior high school, high school, and vocational education—China has made historic progress. Today, the number of college students in China ranks first globally, and the average years of education per capita have risen from 1.6 years in 1949 to 10.9 years in 2022 (Ministry of Education, 2022). These achievements underscore China's dedication to promoting educational equity.

The *Opinions on Promoting the High-quality Development of Modern Vocational Education* (General Office of the CPC Central Committee & State Council, 2022) emphasizes that "as an important part of the national education system and human resources development, vocational education shoulders the important responsibilities of cultivating diverse talents, inheriting technical skills, and promoting employment and entrepreneurship." The newly revised *Vocational Education Law of the People's Republic of China* (CPC Central Committee & State Council, 2022) further asserts that "vocational education is a type of education that has the same importance as general education." Despite its elevated status in laws and regulations, vocational education faces imbalances in its practical development. For decades, some regions have regarded vocational colleges as a "low-end version" of general education, prioritizing general education over vocational training. This misconception has led to discrimination and bias from some local governments, as well as a skewed allocation of educational resources favoring other types of education.

1.2 Explore importance of the problem

The issue of fairness in higher vocational education is critical, particularly in Guangdong Province, one of China's most economically developed regions. Educational fairness plays a fundamental role in promoting social equity and mobility. Higher vocational education serves as a vital pathway for students from low-income and rural families to access quality education, acquire technical skills, and enhance their socioeconomic status. Addressing inequalities in this system ensures that all students, regardless of their background, have equal opportunities to succeed and contribute to society (United Nations, 1966; Ye & Fan, 2021).

Regional economic disparities in Guangdong Province further highlight the importance of educational equity. While the Pearl River Delta thrives as an economic powerhouse, the eastern, western, and northern regions lag behind in development. Unequal access to quality higher vocational education exacerbates these regional inequalities, restricting underdeveloped areas from cultivating skilled labor crucial for local economic growth. Bridging this gap through fair educational practices can significantly impact regional balance and prosperity (Xu, 2020; Guangdong Provincial Department of Education, 2023).

Workforce development also hinges on equitable vocational education. By focusing on practical and technical training, higher vocational institutions play a key role in meeting the demands of Guangdong's diverse and expanding economy. Ensuring fairness in access and resource allocation not only addresses labor shortages but also enhances overall productivity and competitiveness. Equitable vocational education systems are vital for developing the skilled workforce necessary for sustained economic growth (General Office of the CPC Central Committee & State Council, 2022).

Moreover, disparities in educational resources, such as funding, infrastructure, and faculty quality, reveal inefficiencies in policy implementation. Tackling these issues can guide more effective resource distribution and policy reforms, ensuring balanced development across all regions of the province. Fairness in vocational education is essential for maximizing the impact of public investment in education and achieving long-term sustainability (Luo, 2019; Ministry of Education, 2010).

On a broader scale, Guangdong's success in achieving fairness in vocational education could serve as a model for other regions in China and globally. Promoting equitable access to education aligns with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal 4, which emphasizes inclusive and equitable quality education for all (United Nations, 1948; Song, Vongurai, & Duangekanong, 2023). This makes the pursuit of fairness in vocational education not only a regional but also a global priority.

Finally, addressing educational inequalities has profound implications for students' aspirations and societal perceptions. Unresolved disparities can negatively influence students' perceptions of fairness and limit their future ambitions. Moreover, societal bias and stigma toward vocational education may persist, further marginalizing these students. By ensuring equity, the system can enhance students' confidence and encourage broader societal recognition of vocational education as a valuable and equal alternative to traditional academic pathways (Zhang & Lei, 2023).

In summary, addressing the issue of fairness in Guangdong's higher vocational education system is essential for fostering social equity, balancing regional development, meeting workforce demands, and improving the effectiveness of educational policies. It also has the potential to influence national and global efforts toward creating inclusive and equitable educational environments.

1.3 Describe relevant scholarship

According to the *Guangdong Provincial Higher Vocational Education Quality Annual Report (2023)*, Guangdong Province has 95 independent higher vocational colleges, with 75% located in the Pearl River Delta, 7% in eastern Guangdong, 10% in western Guangdong, and 5% in northern Guangdong (Guangdong Provincial Department of Education, 2023). Li et al. (2016) further demonstrated that the proportion of higher vocational colleges and students in eastern, western, and northern Guangdong is lower than the GDP share of these regions, highlighting an imbalance between the development of higher vocational education and regional economic levels. This uneven distribution of educational resources within the province directly impacts the fairness of higher vocational education.

Xu (2020) highlighted that although Guangdong Province has implemented measures such as requiring higher vocational colleges in developed areas to provide counterpart assistance, supporting the development of higher vocational education in eastern, western, and northern regions, and conducting targeted poverty alleviation initiatives by leveraging regional and professional advantages, there is a lack of comprehensive development plans and policy support for higher vocational education in economically underdeveloped areas. This deficiency has led to inadequate school conditions in the east, west, and north of Guangdong and significant disparities in development between these areas and the Pearl River Delta, further widening the regional development gap. Similarly, Zhang (2017) found that the Guangdong Provincial Government's macro-control efforts in higher vocational colleges have been limited to ensuring that each prefecture-level city has at least one vocational college, with insufficient follow-up measures for development and quality control, resulting in inconsistent quality across institutions. Additionally, Luo (2019) noted that the province's funding for higher vocational education does not align with its developmental needs. This mismatch has resulted in inadequate resources for higher vocational colleges, making it challenging to cultivate high-quality, multi-skilled talents, thereby affecting the sustainable development and overall quality improvement of education.

Jin (2010) argued that the current role of local governments in the development and management of higher vocational education is either inaccurate or unreasonable, significantly hindering the progress of higher vocational education and reducing management efficiency. Similarly, Luo (2019) noted that local governments in underdeveloped areas of Guangdong Province have yet to establish effective management mechanisms for higher vocational education. These governments often lack a clear understanding of the critical role higher vocational education plays in regional economic development and scientific and technological advancement. Additionally, support for the development of higher vocational education has not been adequately integrated into the overall planning of economic and social development in most regions.

In summary, the main unfair problems in Guangdong Province's higher vocational education are imbalanced regional layout, insufficient policy support, poor policy implementation, and insufficient investment in higher vocational education in underdeveloped areas. The existence of these problems has seriously affected the fairness and quality of Guangdong Province's higher vocational education, and urgently needs the attention and improvement of the government and all sectors of society.

1.4 State hypotheses and their correspondence to research design

To examine the current status and existing challenges regarding equity in higher vocational education in Guangdong Province, this study employed research tools including questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Additionally, experts were invited to evaluate the research instruments to ensure their validity and reliability. The research framework guiding this study is presented in Figure 1.

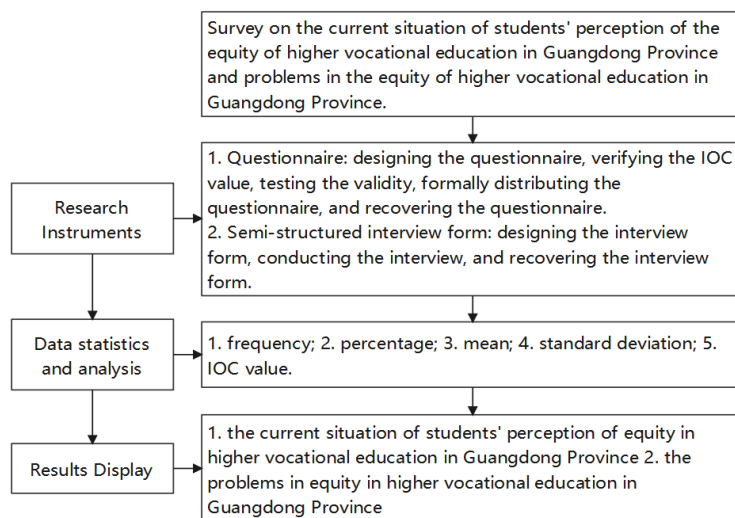


Figure 1: Research framework

The objective of this study is to investigate and study the current equity situation and existing problems in higher vocational education in Guangdong Province.

2. METHOD

The study surveyed students from higher vocational colleges in the Pearl River Delta, eastern Guangdong, western Guangdong, and northern Guangdong regions of Guangdong Province. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with administrative staff and teachers from these institutions. The research utilized questionnaires and semi-structured interview outlines as primary tools. An online questionnaire survey was administered to students, with the data analyzed quantitatively using SPSS software. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted online to gather qualitative insights. The findings of this study provide valuable perspectives for advancing research on educational equity, offer a scientific foundation for addressing fairness issues in higher vocational education, and assist government departments in gaining a deeper understanding of these challenges to inform policy and practice.

2.1 Participant (subject) characteristics

2.1.1 Total sample for questionnaire survey

A stratified sampling method was employed to select two vocational colleges from each of the 4 regions in Guangdong Province: the Pearl River Delta, East Guangdong, West Guangdong, and North Guangdong. This approach resulted in a total of eight vocational colleges. The selected schools in the Pearl River Delta were Shenzhen Vocational and Technical College and Guangdong Light Industry Vocational and Technical College. In East Guangdong, Jieyang Vocational and Technical College and Shanwei Vocational and Technical College were chosen. For West Guangdong, Yangjiang Vocational and Technical College and Maoming Vocational and Technical College were included. In North Guangdong, Heyuan Vocational and Technical College and Qingyuan Vocational and Technical College were selected. The total population for the questionnaire survey consisted of 142,051 students from these eight vocational colleges.

2.1.2 Total sample for semi-structured interviews

The semi-structured interview sample included 5,971 teachers and 2,474 administrators from the same eight vocational colleges.

2.3 Sampling procedures

2.3.1 Sample group for questionnaire survey

Using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sampling table, 384 students were randomly selected from the eight vocational colleges for the questionnaire survey. To improve the reliability and accuracy of the data, the sample size was increased to 400 students.

2.3.2 Sample group for semi-structured interviews

A purposive sampling method was applied to select 8 full-time teachers and 8 administrative staff from the 8 vocational colleges for semi-structured interviews.

There are the Criterias for Administrative Staff: Administrative staff were required to hold a department deputy position or higher, possess at least 5 years of administrative management experience in higher vocational colleges, and be well-versed in the laws, regulations, and local policies governing higher vocational education.

There are the Criterias for Teachers: Teachers were required to hold the title of associate professor or higher and have at least 5 years of experience in teaching or student management in higher vocational colleges.

2.3.3 Measures and covariates

1) Research instrument

1. Questionnaire

The questionnaire was distributed to respondents online, and the collected data were statistically analyzed to capture students' perceptions of fairness in higher vocational education in Guangdong Province and identify existing issues. The questionnaire consisted of two main parts:

Part 1: Basic demographic information, including gender, registered residence, family economic status, and the region where the higher vocational college is located.

Part 2: Perceptions of educational fairness. Using a Likert Scale, the survey assessed respondents' views on:

- a. Educational fairness within their school.
- b. Fairness in higher vocational education across Guangdong Province.
- c. Overall fairness in higher vocational education.
- d. Their expectations for their personal future.

2. Semi-structured interview outline

To complement the questionnaire and obtain deeper insights, a semi-structured interview outline was designed for administrative staff and teachers at higher vocational colleges. The interviews aimed to reveal the current status and challenges of equity in higher vocational education in Guangdong Province. The Core Interview Questions are as follows:

- a. Are there unfairness issues in higher vocational education in Guangdong Province?
- b. What specific educational unfairness problems exist?
- c. What are the reasons behind these issues?
- d. How do these problems impact students?

The details about questionnaire and interview are shown as Table 1.

Table 1: Key points in the research

	Method	Purpose	Components
1	Questionnaire	Assess students' perceptions of fairness in higher vocational education.	- Part 1: Demographic information (gender, residence, economic status, college location). - Part 2: Perception of fairness in school, provincial fairness, overall fairness, and future expectations.
2	Semi-Structured Interviews	Gain in-depth insights into fairness challenges from administrative staff and teachers.	- Are there unfairness issues in higher vocational education? - What specific problems exist? - What are the causes of these issues? - How do these issues impact students?

2) Data collection

The online questionnaire survey was conducted using the WJX platform, resulting in the collection of 400 valid responses.

semi-structured interviews were conducted with 8 administrative staff and 8 teachers, yielding a total of 16 completed interview forms after the sessions.

3) Data analysis

The questionnaire data were analyzed using SPSS, focusing on frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation. This analysis covered respondents' basic demographic information and their perceptions of educational equity.

A qualitative analysis was conducted on the content of the semi-structured interviews to explore the current status of equity in higher vocational education in Guangdong Province.

4) Reliability and validity

Before collecting questionnaire data and conducting focus interviews, the researchers invited five experts from Thai universities with expertise in education, sustainable development, and linguistics research to conduct an Item-Objective Consistency (IOC) assessment of the questionnaire and interview forms. The IOC values for all items were ≥ 0.6 , indicating that all items met the required standard.

Prior to the official distribution of the questionnaire, the researchers conducted a preliminary reliability test. A random sample of 20 eligible participants was invited to complete the questionnaire. The Cronbach's α coefficient for the preliminary survey was 0.815, indicating acceptable reliability.

After collecting 400 valid questionnaires, the researchers assessed the reliability and validity of the data. The Cronbach's α coefficient was 0.923, demonstrating excellent reliability based on the evaluation standard of Cronbach's $\alpha \geq 0.8$. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test score was 0.909, indicating that the data were highly suitable for extracting information, reflecting strong validity according to the evaluation standard of $KMO \geq 0.8$.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Recruitment

Table 1 shows that among the students who participated in the survey, the largest number of people were registered in rural areas, accounting for 66.5%, followed by cities and towns, accounting for 17.5% and 16% respectively. Family economic conditions are mainly concentrated in two levels: ordinary and poor. Ordinary families accounted for the highest proportion, reaching 67%, and poor families accounted for 23.5%. Rich families accounted for the lowest proportion, only 1%. Middle-class families accounted for 8.5%. Overall, low- and middle-income families accounted for the vast majority.

Table 1: Demographic and general data table (N=400)

Project	Options	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Cumulative percentage (%)
Gender	Male	113	28.25	28.25
	Female	287	71.75	100
Place of residence	City	70	17.5	17.5
	Township	64	16	33.5
	Rural	266	66.5	100
Family's financial situation	Rich	4	1	1
	Middle class	34	8.5	9.5
	Ordinary	268	67	76.5
	Poor	94	23.5	100
The region where the vocational	Pearl River Delta	166	41.5	41.5
	East Guangdong	51	12.75	54.25
	Western Guangdong	86	21.5	75.75

college you are attending is located	Northern Guangdong	97	24.25	100
Total		400	100	100

Through interviews, it learned that the student aid policy provides strong financial support for the education of students in rural areas, poor students, and special students. In 2023, approximately 10%-15% of new students will be admitted through the green channel, 23%-25% of students will apply for scholarships and student loans, and 20% of needy students will reduce their daily financial burden by applying for on-campus work-study positions.

In summary, the study found that the majority of students in higher vocational colleges come from rural families, ordinary and poor families, and higher vocational colleges provide more affordable educational opportunities for the above students.

3.2 Statistics and data analysis

3.2.1 Perception of the current status of school education equity

According to the statistical results in Table 2, the highest score is "I have equal access to education" ($\bar{x}=3.37$), followed by "the school provides necessary scholarships and grants to help students in need complete their studies" ($\bar{x}=3.27$), and the lowest score is "the school provides us with a variety of overseas university study and training programs to choose from" ($\bar{x}=2.49$).

Table 2: Perception of educational equity in the school you attend (N=400)

	Project	\bar{x}	S.D.	Level	Order
1	I have equal opportunity in school	3.37	1.31	Medium	1
2	My classmates of different ethnicities, genders, and socioeconomic backgrounds have equal access to educational resources at school.	3.13	1.45	Medium	3
3	The school's educational and teaching conditions (teachers, internship and training equipment, books and materials, etc.) can help me to carry out theoretical and practical learning well.	3.02	1.27	Medium	4
4	The school provides us with advanced training and teaching conditions such as artificial intelligence and virtual simulation	2.65	1.30	Medium	7
5	The school provides necessary scholarships and grants to help students with difficulties complete their studies	3.27	1.30	Medium	2
6	The school provides us with high-quality internship opportunities	2.75	1.39	Medium	5
7	The school provides us with a variety of overseas university study and training programs to choose from	2.49	1.40	low	8
8	The cost of higher vocational education does not constitute a financial burden for me	2.66	1.23	Medium	6
	Total	2.92	1.33	Medium	

Through interviews, it learned that the main educational unfairness problems in Guangdong Province's higher vocational education include uneven regional development, differences in admissions policies and uneven distribution of educational resources, which have led to a large gap in the development of higher vocational colleges between economically developed and underdeveloped regions, a large gap in admission opportunities, and a large gap in the development of undergraduate and higher vocational education.

In summary, the study found that higher vocational colleges, especially those in underdeveloped areas, can only provide basic educational and teaching conditions. They are generally unable to meet students' needs in terms of obtaining advanced teaching conditions, high-quality internship opportunities, international projects and other higher educational requirements. As a result, students' perception of educational fairness in their schools is at a medium level.

3.2.2 Perception of the current status of equity in Guangdong's higher vocational education

According to the statistical results in Table 3, the highest score is "The Guangdong Provincial Government should formulate more policies to support the development of higher vocational education" ($\bar{x}=3.22$), followed by "I am satisfied with the current development of higher vocational

education in Guangdong Province" (\bar{x} = 2.51), and the lowest score is "The local government of Guangdong Province attaches great importance to the development of higher vocational education" (\bar{x} = 2.06).

Table 3: Perception of the current status of fairness in Guangdong's higher vocational education (N=400)

	Project	\bar{x}	S.D.	Level	Order
1	There is no big development gap between vocational colleges in the eastern, western and northern regions of Guangdong and those in the Pearl River Delta region.	2.23	1.17	low	3
2	There is no unfairness in the allocation of higher vocational education resources by the Guangdong Provincial Government	2.08	1.21	low	4
3	The local governments of Guangdong Province attach great importance to the development of higher vocational education	2.06	1.26	low	5
4	The Guangdong Provincial Government should formulate more policies to support the development of higher vocational education	3.22	1.48	Medium	1
5	I am satisfied with the current development of higher vocational education in Guangdong Province	2.51	1.29	Medium	2
	Total	2.42	1.28	low	

Through interviews, it was learned that the main educational unfairness problems in Guangdong Province's higher vocational education include uneven regional development, differences in enrollment policies, and uneven distribution of educational resources, which have led to a large gap in the development of higher vocational colleges between economically developed and underdeveloped regions, a large gap in admission opportunities, and a large gap in the development of undergraduate and higher vocational education. These problems directly affect students' learning opportunities and development paths. At the same time, Song et al. (2023)'s research shows that management, facilities, teaching quality, academic support, and image have a significant impact on satisfaction and loyalty.

In summary, the study found that the students' satisfaction with the current development status of higher vocational education in Guangdong is at a medium level. They generally believe that there is a large development gap between higher vocational colleges in the east, west and north of Guangdong and those in the Pearl River Delta, unfair allocation of educational resources, and some local governments' lack of attention to the development of higher vocational education. At the same time, they strongly call for more policies to support the development of higher vocational education.

3.2.3 Perception of the current status of equity in higher vocational education in China

According to the statistical results in Table 4, the highest score is "the similar concept proposed by national laws and policies that 'vocational education and general education are two different types of education with equal importance' has enhanced my sense of identity with higher vocational education" (\bar{x} = 2.85), followed by "the country attaches importance to the development of higher vocational education" (\bar{x} = 2.78), and the lowest score is "there is no prejudice or discrimination against higher vocational education in society" (\bar{x} = 2.33).

Table 4: Perception of the current status of fairness in higher vocational education in China (N=400)

	Project	\bar{x}	S.D.	Level	Order
1	My relatives and friends generally have a positive attitude towards higher vocational education	2.66	1.25	Medium	3
2	There is no prejudice or discrimination against higher vocational education in society	2.33	1.13	low	5
3	I believe that the status of higher vocational colleges is equal to that of undergraduate colleges	2.59	1.16	Medium	4
4	The state attaches great importance to the development of higher vocational education	2.78	1.37	Medium	2
5	The concept that "vocational education and general education are two different types of education and have equal importance" put forward by national laws and	2.85	1.37	Medium	1

	policies has enhanced my recognition of higher vocational education.				
	Total	2.64	1.26	Medium	

Through interviews, it learned that although the social status and development speed of higher vocational colleges have improved under the attention of the state, they are still constrained by the uneven distribution of educational resources, resulting in limited opportunities for higher vocational students to obtain high-quality education, hindered career development of teachers, and affected teaching quality of higher vocational colleges, thus affecting society's evaluation of higher vocational college students.

In summary, the study found that the attitudes of the interviewed students and their relatives and friends towards higher vocational education are at a medium level, and they still feel strongly about the prejudice and discrimination against higher vocational education in society.

3.2.4 Personal future expectations

According to the statistical results in Table 5, the highest score is "receiving vocational education is conducive to future job promotion and salary increase" ($\bar{x}= 2.9$), followed by "I can get equal employment opportunities with those with general education" ($\bar{x}= 2.86$), and the lowest score was "I have access to equal employment opportunities with general education" ($\bar{x}= 2.86$).

Table 6: Personal future expectations (N=400)

	Project	\bar{x}	S.D.	Level	Order
1	I have the opportunity to study undergraduate	2.78	1.37	Medium	4
2	I can get equal employment opportunities with general education	2.86	1.34	Medium	2
3	I can get the same financial benefits as a general education	2.75	1.36	Medium	5
4	Receiving vocational education is beneficial to future job promotion and salary increase	2.90	1.37	Medium	1
5	You will not be discriminated against at work because of your educational level	2.84	1.37	Medium	3
	Total	2.82	1.36	Medium	

Through interviews, it learned that employers, including government departments, generally set excessively high educational qualifications when recruiting, resulting in higher vocational students failing to meet basic educational requirements, limiting their employment scope, and causing them to have difficulty finding employment.

In summary, the study found that the expectations of the interviewed students for future employment were at a medium level, and they expressed concerns about the opportunities to further improve their academic qualifications and the academic discrimination they might face in future employment.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 Conclusion and discussion

This study investigated the actual perception of students from higher vocational colleges in Guangdong Province on the current status of fairness in higher vocational education in Guangdong Province, revealing the current status and existing problems of fairness in higher vocational education in Guangdong Province.

1. Most students in higher vocational colleges come from rural areas, and their families are mostly in the middle-low income or poverty level. This highlights the key role of higher vocational colleges in providing affordable education, promoting social mobility and promoting educational equity, and providing a platform for students from ordinary and poor families to realize their dreams. This role not only reduces the financial burden on students and families, but also creates more opportunities for these students in society. The results of this study are consistent with the research conclusions of Ye Yuting & Fan Weichen (2021). Their research found that about 70% of higher vocational students come from rural areas, becoming the first generation of college students in millions of families, which shows that higher vocational education plays an important role in intergenerational transmission.
2. The interviewed students' perception of educational fairness in their schools is at a medium level. They believe that the schools provide equal admission opportunities, good practical training and teaching conditions, necessary scholarships and grants, and fair distribution of

educational resources. However, they have doubts or dissatisfaction in improving advanced teaching conditions, high-quality internship opportunities, international projects and economic burdens. It is necessary for the government to increase investment in higher vocational colleges to better meet the higher level of learning, research and internship requirements of higher vocational students, and further reduce the economic burden of students' study, so as to improve the overall quality of talent training and meet the society's demand for high-quality technical and skilled talents. The results of this study are consistent with the conclusions of Xu Guiting (2020). Her research proposes that efforts should be made to promote fairness in the higher vocational education process, vigorously strengthen the basic capacity building and management of higher vocational colleges, effectively promote the integration of production and education and school-enterprise cooperation, increase various investments in higher vocational education, focus on improving the quality of talent training and employment, and strive to improve the ability and level of higher vocational education technology to serve economic and social development. Xianquan et al. (2024) proposed that higher vocational colleges should adjust their professional structure in a timely manner and actively adapt to market demand, industrial structure and technological innovation.

3. The students interviewed were satisfied with the overall development status of higher vocational education in Guangdong Province at a medium level, but generally believed that there was a significant development gap between higher vocational colleges in the eastern, western and northern regions of Guangdong and the Pearl River Delta. In addition, students generally believed that there was a large development gap between higher vocational colleges in the eastern, western and northern regions of Guangdong and those in the Pearl River Delta, unfair allocation of educational resources, and some local governments did not attach importance to the development of higher vocational education. The results of this study are consistent with the research conclusions of Xu Xiaoqin (2020). She believed that there was an imbalance between the layout scale of higher vocational colleges in Guangdong Province and educational opportunities, an imbalance between higher vocational education in Guangdong Province and regional economic development, and an imbalance in investment in higher vocational education in Guangdong Province. These problems have affected students' overall perception of educational equity to a certain extent. To this end, students called on the Guangdong Provincial Government to formulate more policies to support higher vocational education in order to improve the fairness and overall quality of vocational education.
4. The overall perception of society towards higher vocational education is at a medium level, and most of the relatives and friends of the respondents have a neutral attitude towards higher vocational education. The respondents believe that social prejudice and discrimination against higher vocational education still exist, and the status of higher vocational colleges is generally considered to be lower than that of undergraduate colleges. The results of this study are consistent with the research conclusions of Zhang Wenbo & Lei Jianming (2023). Their research found that for a long time, vocational education has been affected by social prejudice, resulting in the low social status of professional talents. Despite this, the country's emphasis on the development of higher vocational education and the support of relevant laws and policies have enhanced the respondents' sense of identity with higher vocational education. This shows that national policies have played a positive role in improving the social status and recognition of higher vocational education. The results of this study are consistent with the research conclusions of Hou Cao (2020), who found that the government, as the main provider and distributor of public resources and services, plays a vital role in the issue of educational equity.
5. The interviewed students have medium expectations for future employment. They are concerned about the opportunity to further improve their academic qualifications and the academic discrimination they may face in future employment. They still lack confidence in future development. This reflects that there is still room for improvement in the social recognition and actual benefits of vocational education. The results of this study are consistent with the research conclusions of Zhang Wenzhi (2017). His research found that with the development of the times, government public service units and enterprises and institutions have higher and higher academic requirements for applicants, which directly leads to the general public's contempt for higher vocational education. Therefore, strengthening the social recognition of vocational education and further improving the allocation of educational resources will help improve the overall benefits of vocational education and students' confidence in future development.

The results of this study are of great significance to education policy makers, educational institutions and academia. By recognizing and solving the current problems, the fairness and quality of higher vocational education can be further improved, thus promoting the overall progress and harmonious development of society.

4.2 Recommendations

1. Expand the research sample and geographical scope. It is recommended that future research should not be limited to Guangdong Province, but also cover higher vocational colleges in other parts of China to more comprehensively reflect the current status and problems of equity in higher vocational education across the country. Factors such as economic development level, policy support and cultural background in different regions may have different impacts on students' perception of fairness.
2. Further explore the impact of background differences. This study found that economic background and urban-rural differences have a significant impact on students' perception of educational equity. Future research can further explore the specific mechanisms and paths of these background differences on the perception of educational equity, such as the specific impact of variables such as family income and parents' education level.
3. Pay attention to the actual effect of policy implementation. Although the government has introduced a number of policies to promote equity in higher vocational education, the actual effect of these policies needs further verification. It is recommended that future research can evaluate the effectiveness of different policy measures and explore their implementation effects and challenges in different regions and contexts.
4. Explore the long-term impact of perceived educational equity on student development. Future research can also track students' career development paths and study how perceived educational equity affects their career choices, career development, and income levels. This will help understand the long-term impact of perceived educational equity on the improvement of an individual's socioeconomic status.

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