Human System Transformation in Organizational Change: A Qualitative Study of Chinese Vocational Education

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how transforming human systems can influence organizational change and development within a vocational education context in China. Using the Department of International Business (DIB) at Wen Zhou Industry and Trade Vocational College as a case study, this research addresses persistent challenges in spoken English acquisition and organizational communication. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three key stakeholders—a student, a faculty member, and the department dean—to examine divergent perspectives on the implementation of a new training model. Findings reveal systemic gaps in communication, hierarchical decision-making structures, and a lack of faculty empowerment, all of which hinder effective educational reform. Drawing upon theories of organizational motivation and change, such as Vroom's Expectancy Theory and 360-degree feedback mechanisms, the study proposes a set of actionable strategies to promote inclusive leadership, improve internal communication, and build trust across administrative levels. These findings offer practical implications for institutional reform and leadership development in similar vocational and higher education settings.

Keywords: organizational change, vocational education, leadership, communication, faculty empowerment, training program, China

INTRODUCTION

In the era of accelerating globalization and technological transformation, vocational education systems worldwide are under increasing pressure to produce graduates who are not only technically competent but also culturally agile and communicatively proficient. This imperative is particularly pronounced in the context of China, where the evolving demands of the global economy have made foreign language proficiency—especially spoken English—a key determinant of employability and career advancement. As China continues to deepen its integration into global markets, vocational institutions are tasked with a dual mandate: to provide industry-relevant technical training and to foster soft skills that enhance cross-cultural communication and global adaptability.

Within this national context, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institutions serve as the frontline of workforce development. However, many Chinese TVET programs remain entrenched in rigid, exam-oriented pedagogies that emphasize written grammar and vocabulary memorization over communicative competence. Despite policy initiatives advocating for competency-based and practice-oriented curricula, the implementation gap remains wide. As a result, students often graduate with limited ability to apply their English skills in authentic workplace scenarios, particularly in international trade and service sectors. This issue is further compounded by institutional inertia, hierarchical decision-making, and limited faculty autonomy, which together constrain innovation in curriculum reform and instructional design.

This study investigates the intersection of organizational behavior, educational reform, and human system transformation through a case study of the Department of International Business (DIB) at Wen Zhou Industry and Trade Vocational College (WITVC) in Zhejiang Province. The department, established to prepare students

for careers in global commerce, has struggled to achieve its mission despite ongoing efforts to revise its training models. According to internal data, only 12.6% of its graduates secure employment in international trade-related fields—an alarming figure given the department's strategic positioning and stated goals. This statistic highlights a critical disconnect between institutional objectives, pedagogical practices, and labor market expectations.

In response to these challenges, DIB launched a reform initiative centered on the development of a new spoken English training model. The model aimed to improve students' real-world communication skills by integrating scenario-based learning, interdisciplinary faculty collaboration, and enhanced assessment mechanisms. However, as the initiative unfolded, it encountered numerous obstacles, including limited buy-in from faculty, poor cross-level communication, and the persistence of top-down leadership norms. These challenges point to broader systemic issues that go beyond curriculum design, implicating the institution's underlying human systems—its people, structures, and relationships—in the success or failure of reform efforts.

Drawing from established theories of organizational change, including Vroom's (1964) Expectancy Theory and Kotter's (1996) 8-Step Change Model, this study explores how leadership style, communication dynamics, and motivational structures influence the trajectory of institutional reform in vocational education settings. Particular attention is given to the emotional and relational dimensions of change, including faculty resistance, student disengagement, and administrative inflexibility. The theoretical framing is further enriched by the application of 360-degree feedback systems as a lens for examining accountability, collaboration, and faculty development.

Methodologically, this research adopts a qualitative case study design grounded in semi-structured interviews with three key stakeholders: a senior student, a mid-career faculty member, and the department dean. These interviews offer insight into the lived experiences of organizational actors situated at different levels of the institutional hierarchy. By analyzing their narratives, the study aims to uncover the implicit tensions and cultural norms that shape organizational behavior and to identify the human factors that either enable or hinder effective change.

The significance of this research lies in its dual contribution to theory and practice. Theoretically, it extends the discourse on organizational change by emphasizing the relational and motivational aspects of reform within highly centralized, hierarchical educational systems. Practically, it offers policy-makers and educational leaders actionable recommendations for navigating resistance, building trust, and fostering inclusive leadership in vocational institutions. These recommendations are particularly relevant for middle-income countries undergoing educational modernization amid rapid socio-economic transformation.

In sum, this paper seeks to illuminate how transforming human systems—rather than merely modifying curricula or adding new policies—can serve as the foundation for sustainable organizational development in vocational education. It argues that successful change requires more than structural adjustment; it requires emotional alignment, shared vision, and participatory governance. Through the lens of one department's struggle to reform its English training program, the study provides broader insights into the dynamics of institutional transformation in China's evolving TVET landscape.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Human Emotions and Resistance to Change

Resistance to change remains a cornerstone of organizational behavior literature and continues to be a significant barrier to educational innovation. Scholars such as Liu and Perrewé (2005) argue that emotional responses—ranging from fear and anxiety to frustration and apathy—often override rational assessments of proposed reforms. These emotional barriers are particularly acute in education systems where individuals' professional identities are closely tied to long-standing pedagogical routines. In China's vocational education institutions, where hierarchical structures are pervasive and job security is often uncertain, such emotions may be magnified by concerns over evaluation, workload, and unclear reform outcomes.

Oreg's (2006) multidimensional model of resistance provides a more granular understanding of these responses. It categorizes resistance into routine-seeking tendencies, affective reactions, short-term orientation, and

cognitive rigidity. These categories offer valuable lenses to interpret why faculty at WITVC might resist the new spoken English model—not necessarily because of opposition to change per se, but due to perceived threats to autonomy, added administrative burden, and the potential loss of professional efficacy.

Moreover, the role of institutional culture cannot be overlooked. Hofstede's (2001) dimensions of national culture suggest that high power distance and uncertainty avoidance—both salient in Chinese organizational culture—may further exacerbate resistance. Employees are less likely to question top-down directives or embrace ambiguous innovations without explicit instructions, reassurance, or incentives. This theoretical lens complements findings from Chinese scholars (e.g., Huang, 2012), who emphasize that resistance is often a rational response to opaque reforms lacking stakeholder inclusion.

Motivation and Expectancy Theory

Motivation has been consistently identified as a crucial factor in the implementation of organizational change. Vroom's (1964) Expectancy Theory posits that individuals are more likely to engage in behaviors when they believe that effort will lead to performance and that performance will result in desirable outcomes. This framework is particularly relevant in educational settings where faculty and students balance competing priorities and often face unclear reward structures.

In the WITVC case, both students and faculty expressed limited motivation to engage with the new training model due to skepticism about its long-term benefits. This aligns with findings by Oxford and Shearin (1994), who explored expectancy beliefs in language learning and found that learners are less likely to persist in skill development if they perceive low likelihood of success or irrelevance to their career goals.

Furthermore, Deci and Ryan's (1985) Self-Determination Theory (SDT) complements Vroom's model by highlighting intrinsic motivation factors—such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness—that are often missing in top-down institutional reforms. Faculty members may resist reform not only because they doubt its effectiveness, but because they feel excluded from decision-making and unsupported in professional development. Without channels for agency and recognition, reforms may fail to ignite the intrinsic motivation necessary for sustained participation and improvement.

Leadership and Change: Lewin and Kotter

Leadership style and change management capacity play an instrumental role in determining the success or failure of organizational reform. Lewin's (1947) three-step change model—unfreezing, changing, and refreezing—remains a foundational framework for understanding transformation. In the context of WITVC, the "unfreezing" stage was initiated by poor job placement rates and internal dissatisfaction. However, the institution has struggled to operationalize the "changing" and "refreezing" phases due to fragmented leadership and unclear responsibilities.

Building on Lewin, Kotter's (1996) 8-step model adds depth by identifying critical actions needed to foster momentum and institutionalize change. These steps include creating urgency, building a guiding coalition, developing and communicating a vision, removing obstacles, generating short-term wins, and anchoring change in organizational culture. Unfortunately, many of these components are underdeveloped in the WITVC case. The lack of a guiding coalition, for example, suggests that reform is largely administrative rather than collaborative, undermining legitimacy among front-line faculty.

In parallel, transformational leadership theory (Bass, 1985) offers insight into how visionary and empowering leadership can motivate staff to exceed expectations and embrace innovation. Transformational leaders foster trust, model change behavior, and offer intellectual stimulation—qualities that were not clearly observed in the case institution, where leadership was perceived as procedural rather than inspirational.

Performance Management and Feedback Systems

Effective change requires robust feedback systems that support both individual performance and institutional learning. One increasingly adopted mechanism is the 360-degree feedback system, which gathers evaluative

input from multiple sources, including peers, subordinates, supervisors, and even clients or students. Fleenor and Prince (1997) suggest that such feedback promotes transparency, reduces hierarchical bias, and enhances professional development by offering a well-rounded view of performance.

In educational institutions, 360-degree systems can also promote greater accountability and inclusiveness. For example, Hazucha et al. (1993) found that multi-source feedback increased managerial competence and team alignment in higher education contexts. However, in the WITVC case, feedback remains largely unidirectional and hierarchical. Faculty evaluations are often based on rigid administrative metrics rather than peer or student input, which limits opportunities for reflective practice and bottom-up reform.

The integration of coaching frameworks into feedback processes (Stern, 2004) may also strengthen reform outcomes. Coaching can transform evaluation from a compliance exercise into a development tool, empowering educators to set goals, monitor progress, and align with institutional strategies. The absence of such systems at WITVC limits the potential for ongoing dialogue, adaptation, and trust-building between faculty and administration.

Organizational Change in Chinese Vocational Education

Finally, the broader context of Chinese vocational education poses unique challenges to organizational change. The centralized and bureaucratic nature of governance in Chinese TVET systems often results in rigid planning processes, limited faculty autonomy, and minimal stakeholder consultation. According to UNESCO-UNEVOC (2019), meaningful reform in vocational education requires not only curriculum redesign but also the empowerment of local actors and the decentralization of decision-making authority.

Studies such as Yang (2017) and Wang and Ke (2020) highlight the structural constraints facing Chinese vocational colleges, including funding limitations, unclear career pathways for teachers, and misalignment between educational outcomes and labor market demands. These challenges mirror the situation at WITVC, where despite reform intent, implementation falters due to systemic inertia and stakeholder disengagement.

Moreover, the push toward adopting global competencies—including communication, critical thinking, and collaboration—demands a paradigm shift in both pedagogy and institutional culture. Traditional teacher-centered models must give way to learner-centered approaches that prioritize skills application and real-world relevance. Yet, such a transition is often impeded by faculty workload, evaluation pressures, and lack of professional development opportunities.

In sum, the literature underscores that sustainable organizational change in vocational education requires more than structural or curricular adjustments. It demands systemic realignment of motivation, leadership, communication, and performance evaluation. The case of WITVC illustrates how deeply embedded human systems—emotions, expectations, roles, and relationships—can either enable or constrain reform. The following case study analysis builds on these theoretical insights to explore the lived experiences of stakeholders navigating a spoken English reform initiative within a hierarchical institutional environment.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative case study methodology to explore how human systems—comprising communication channels, motivational structures, and leadership practices—impact the implementation of organizational change in a vocational education context. The case study approach is particularly well-suited for in-depth investigation of contemporary phenomena within real-life contexts where the boundaries between phenomenon and context are blurred (Yin, 2014). By focusing on a single department within a Chinese vocational college, this research seeks to generate rich, context-specific insights into the barriers and enablers of reform efforts.

Research Design and Rationale

A qualitative design was chosen to capture the complex, subjective experiences of key stakeholders involved in the implementation of a new spoken English training model. While quantitative studies may offer breadth and

statistical generalizability, qualitative research excels at illuminating the "how" and "why" of social processes, particularly in organizational settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study is exploratory in nature, seeking to understand not only what challenges emerged during the reform process, but also how different actors interpreted these challenges in light of their institutional roles.

The case under investigation is the Department of International Business (DIB) at Wen Zhou Industry and Trade Vocational College (WITVC), located in Zhejiang Province, China. DIB was selected due to its explicit mandate to prepare students for global commerce and its recent initiative to overhaul spoken English training. This department serves as a microcosm of larger systemic issues in vocational education reform, making it a theoretically and practically significant site for investigation.

Participant Selection and Sampling Strategy

Purposeful sampling was employed to select three participants who occupy distinct roles within the department's hierarchy: one senior student, one full-time faculty member, and the dean of the School of Economics and Trade. This triadic sampling strategy aligns with Creswell's (2013) recommendation to include diverse voices for triangulation and depth. The selected student had participated in the new spoken English program, offering firsthand insight into learner reception and perceived impact. The faculty member had over 10 years of teaching experience and was directly involved in implementing the reform, while the dean was responsible for initiating and overseeing the change process.

Although the small sample size may appear limited, it was appropriate for this in-depth case study. The goal was not to generalize findings statistically, but to understand the dynamics and perceptions that shaped a particular reform process. Additionally, the use of participants from different hierarchical levels enabled vertical data triangulation and provided a more holistic view of organizational dynamics.

Data Collection Procedures

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the primary data collection method to allow flexibility while ensuring consistency across interviews. A standardized interview protocol was developed in advance, containing open-ended questions designed to explore themes such as leadership communication, stakeholder motivation, institutional challenges, and perceptions of the new training model. Sample questions included:

• "Can you describe your experience with the spoken English program?"

• "How would you characterize the communication between faculty and administration?"

• "What do you see as the major barriers to educational change in this department?"

Interviews were conducted face-to-face in Mandarin between September and October 2023, each lasting between 45 to 60 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' informed consent and later transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were then translated into English by the researcher, who is bilingual, to ensure consistency of meaning. Where necessary, back-translation was used to verify accuracy.

Field notes were also taken during and immediately after the interviews to capture non-verbal cues, context, and reflections. These notes were used to supplement and contextualize the transcribed data.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo 12, a qualitative data analysis software that facilitates the organization, coding, and synthesis of large text corpora. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach, the researcher first familiarized herself with the transcripts, then generated initial codes inductively. These codes were refined into broader themes that reflected recurring patterns across participant accounts, including communication breakdowns, leadership discrepancies, and motivational barriers.

The coding process was iterative. Initial codes such as "lack of recognition," "hierarchical culture," and "disconnect between goals and outcomes" were grouped under overarching themes like "administrative constraints" and "resistance to change." The constant comparison method was used to analyze differences and similarities across participants' perspectives. Triangulation of data from the three different stakeholder groups enhanced the analytical depth and credibility of the findings.

Ensuring Trustworthiness

To ensure methodological rigor, the study employed strategies consistent with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

• Credibility was enhanced through member checking: after preliminary analysis, interview summaries and key interpretations were shared with participants for feedback and validation.

• Transferability was addressed by providing thick descriptions of the institutional context and participants' backgrounds.

• Dependability was supported by maintaining a detailed audit trail documenting the research process, including coding decisions and analytical memos.

• Confirmability was reinforced through researcher reflexivity and peer debriefing with a second qualitative researcher.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to ethical standards for research involving human subjects. Informed consent was obtained in writing before interviews began. Participants were assured of their right to withdraw at any point and of the confidentiality of their responses. Pseudonyms are used throughout this article to protect anonymity. Ethical approval was secured from the academic institution affiliated with the researcher.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This section presents the empirical findings derived from semi-structured interviews with three stakeholders from the Department of International Business (DIB) at Wen Zhou Industry and Trade Vocational College (WITVC): a senior student, a mid-career faculty member, and the department dean. Thematic analysis of the data revealed four interrelated categories of organizational tension: (1) misalignment between training and workplace demands, (2) communication breakdown among stakeholders, (3) motivational barriers resulting from institutional structures, and (4) discrepancies in leadership perception and accountability. These themes not only reflect surface-level implementation challenges but also point to deeper systemic contradictions embedded within the institutional culture.

Misalignment Between Training and Workplace Demands

All three participants acknowledged a gap between the current curriculum and the skills required for success in international business environments. The student emphasized that while theoretical knowledge was covered extensively, real-world application—especially in spoken English and intercultural communication—was largely absent.

"We had classes on trade theory and grammar rules, but no one taught us how to actually talk to a client or negotiate in English. Even the internship had nothing to do with trade—it was just clerical work in a local company." (Student)

The faculty member echoed this concern, noting that although the department aspired to align with global competencies, outdated curricula and bureaucratic procedures limited any meaningful change. She cited a lack of collaboration between teaching staff and industry partners as a persistent obstacle:

"We're being asked to train globally competitive students, but we're not given the tools, autonomy, or partnerships to do that. Everything is decided in offices, not classrooms."

The dean recognized this gap but attributed it to systemic constraints such as limited resources and restricted control over internship placements, which are often managed by external administrative units. This disconnect illustrates what Fullan (2007) terms "decoupling"—where reform rhetoric fails to translate into actual practice due to fragmented institutional capacity.

Communication Breakdown Between Stakeholders

A recurring theme across all interviews was the inadequacy of communication between different levels of the organization. The student reported that efforts to provide feedback on the internship experience or course effectiveness were often ignored or redirected without resolution.

"I told our counselor that the internship didn't help my English at all, and she said it wasn't her responsibility. I don't know who to talk to anymore."

The faculty member shared similar frustrations. She mentioned multiple instances of proposing curriculum revisions or requesting adjustments to class schedules, only to be met with silence or procedural deflection.

"We're told to innovate, but then meetings are canceled, or proposals are stalled. There's no follow-up, no two-way dialogue—it feels like we're talking into a void."

In contrast, the dean expressed surprise at these sentiments and maintained that communication channels were available. He described weekly meetings and open-door policies as evidence of accessibility:

"Faculty are welcome to express their ideas anytime. The problem is that many suggestions lack feasibility or alignment with school policy."

This divergence reflects what Argyris and Schön (1996) describe as a "theory-in-use" versus "espoused-theory" contradiction. While administrators may believe systems are open and collaborative, front-line actors experience them as opaque and unresponsive. The absence of structured, bidirectional communication mechanisms—such as formalized feedback loops or participatory planning forums—appears to exacerbate this perceptual gap.

Motivational Barriers and Administrative Constraints

Motivation, particularly among faculty members, was reported as being significantly undermined by structural and cultural constraints. The faculty interviewee revealed that although she was initially enthusiastic about the spoken English reform, her motivation quickly diminished due to overwork, inconsistent recognition, and lack of professional autonomy.

"We're expected to do more with less—design new courses, run extracurricular programs, meet with students—but there's no compensation, no acknowledgment. It becomes hard to stay committed."

She also pointed out that evaluation criteria remained focused on student test scores and administrative compliance, rather than teaching innovation or student engagement—leading to what Deci and Ryan (1985) might classify as a "controlled motivation" environment, where external demands override internal drive.

The student similarly noted low peer motivation in spoken English activities, often attributing it to unclear expectations and lack of incentives:

"Many of my classmates see English practice as a waste of time because it doesn't affect their final grade or help with finding internships."

The dean acknowledged that faculty were overburdened but emphasized that performance metrics were set by higher authorities, limiting his flexibility. This again highlights the challenges posed by top-down governance

structures common in Chinese vocational institutions, where administrative accountability supersedes pedagogical priorities.

Leadership Perception and Organizational Accountability

Perhaps the most striking contrast emerged in perceptions of leadership behavior and accountability. The dean described himself as a proactive reformer who encouraged experimentation and valued faculty input:

"We've organized workshops, invited guest speakers, and set up pilot courses. Change takes time, but we are doing our part."

Yet the faculty member's account painted a different picture. She described leadership as largely reactive and symbolic, emphasizing form over substance:

"Yes, there are workshops, but they're mostly for show. The real decisions are made behind closed doors, and our voices don't shape them."

This perception gap extended to the student as well, who expressed skepticism toward leadership's commitment to reform:

"They say they want us to be better, but they don't listen. If we're not part of the solution, how can we trust the process?"

These findings suggest a lack of shared vision, a core requirement in Kotter's (1996) model of successful change. When leadership is seen as performative rather than participatory, it erodes trust and discourages collective ownership of reform efforts. Furthermore, the absence of clear accountability frameworks—such as structured performance reviews or feedback systems—prevents the alignment of institutional goals with individual responsibilities.

Cross-Case Reflections and Interactions

When viewed holistically, these four themes reveal not only individual frustrations but also systemic disjunctures. For instance, the faculty member's lack of motivation cannot be divorced from the communication failures and misaligned leadership practices that define her work environment. Similarly, the student's disengagement is not simply a pedagogical issue but a reflection of deeper institutional contradictions between reform rhetoric and lived experience.

Notably, all stakeholders expressed some level of aspiration for improvement, suggesting that the problem lies not in resistance to change per se, but in the absence of enabling structures and shared agency. This confirms the importance of adopting a systems-thinking perspective in organizational reform—one that accounts for emotional dynamics, institutional incentives, and relational trust.

Table 1: Themes and Stakeholder Perspectives on Organizational Change at WITVC

Theme	Student Perspective	Faculty Perspective	Dean Perspective
1.Misalignment between Training and Workplace Demands	Training content not aligned with real-world needs; internships irrelevant to career goals.	Curriculum outdated; lack of industry collaboration limits reform potential.	Acknowledges gaps but attributes them to external constraints (e.g., placement logistics, funding limits).
2.Communication Breakdown	Feedback on programs/internships often dismissed or redirected; unclear channels.	Proposals for curriculum revision ignored; communication is one-way and lacks follow-up.	Believes communication mechanisms (e.g., meetings) are sufficient; cites lack of actionable input from faculty.

3.Motivational Barriers	Low engagement due to unclear incentives and perceived irrelevance.	Overburdened and unrecognized; evaluation focuses on metrics rather than meaningful outcomes.	Acknowledges workload issues but cites limitations from upper administration regarding policy flexibility.
4. Leadership and Accountability	Distrust toward leadership intentions; feels excluded from reform processes.	Leadership perceived as symbolic and top-down; limited space for bottom-up innovation.	Sees self as proactive reformer; emphasizes visible efforts like workshops and pilot programs.

Note. This table summarizes how different actors—students, faculty, and leadership—interpret reform themes such as alignment with workforce demands, communication, motivation, and leadership behavior. It highlights the perceptual gaps that hinder systemic coherence and reform success.

DISCUSSION

This study explored the human dimensions of organizational change within a Chinese vocational college through the lens of stakeholder experiences. Drawing on theoretical frameworks in motivation, change management, and organizational communication, the findings illustrate the tensions between top-down reform intentions and bottom-up lived realities. The discussion is organized into five interrelated domains: communication and resistance, leadership dissonance, motivational misalignment, feedback system limitations, and broader systemic implications for TVET institutions.

Communication and Resistance to Change

The most prominent finding across all interviews was the breakdown of effective communication. While leadership believed that mechanisms were in place for open dialogue, both faculty and students reported a lack of responsiveness and follow-up. This gap mirrors Liu and Perrewé's (2005) argument that emotional and relational barriers are often more influential than structural ones in resisting change. Faculty members expressed frustration and helplessness when their feedback was ignored or dismissed, triggering defensive attitudes and disengagement.

Oreg's (2006) typology of resistance further helps explain why change initiatives—even when well-intentioned—are met with skepticism. In this case, faculty responses reflected emotional resistance rooted in perceived loss of control, unpredictability of outcomes, and concern over increased workloads. Meanwhile, students' reluctance to participate in reform activities stemmed from unclear relevance and a lack of personal stakes. These findings reinforce the idea that resistance is not merely opposition to change, but often a rational response to how change is communicated and enacted.

The results underscore the need for more than just information dissemination. Institutions must foster emotionally intelligent communication that builds trust, demonstrates responsiveness, and allows stakeholders to feel heard and valued.

Leadership Style and Organizational Buy-in

A significant contributor to the reform's limited success was the perceptual divide between leaders and other stakeholders. The dean presented himself as a reform-minded leader, citing workshops and pilot programs as evidence. Yet both faculty and student perspectives depicted leadership as distant, symbolic, and disengaged from day-to-day realities. This disconnect aligns with Kotter's (1996) warning that a lack of visible, participatory leadership can derail change initiatives.

The failure to establish a "guiding coalition," as Kotter recommends, was evident. While reform began with a clear mandate, it lacked sustained collaboration among those expected to implement and benefit from the change. Transformational leadership theory (Bass, 1985) also suggests that effective leaders inspire, motivate, and

empower their followers. However, the dean's leadership style appeared to be transactional at best, focused on maintaining compliance rather than cultivating commitment.

This dissonance not only weakened faculty motivation but also diluted the reform's legitimacy in the eyes of students. Without shared ownership, even strategically sound changes struggle to gain traction.

Motivation and Expectancy Gaps

The third key issue was the erosion of motivation among both faculty and students. Vroom's (1964) Expectancy Theory provides a useful lens to analyze this dynamic. Faculty members did not believe that increased effort would result in meaningful recognition, career advancement, or improved institutional outcomes. Similarly, students felt that participation in English reform activities had little bearing on academic success or job placement.

Oxford and Shearin's (1994) language motivation model emphasizes the importance of learners' belief in the value and attainability of language goals. In this study, students were not convinced that improving their spoken English would improve their career prospects—especially when internships failed to match their intended career paths.

Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) also illuminates how the lack of autonomy and perceived irrelevance undermines intrinsic motivation. Faculty were not empowered to shape or adapt the curriculum. Instead, they were asked to implement changes with minimal input and under rigid evaluation regimes. These conditions contributed to feelings of disempowerment and burnout, commonly cited in the Chinese educational workforce.

To sustain motivation, institutions must link reform efforts to clear, personalized rewards—whether in the form of professional development, recognition, or observable student outcomes.

Feedback Systems and Structural Blind Spots

Another crucial insight was the absence of robust feedback mechanisms. The study found no formal system for gathering multi-directional input on reform effectiveness. Feedback from students was sporadic and poorly integrated, while faculty feedback was rarely acted upon. This contradicts best practices in performance management, which emphasize the importance of cyclical, multi-source feedback (Fleenor & Prince, 1997; Hazucha et al., 1993).

The 360-degree feedback model offers a pathway toward greater transparency and alignment. If such systems had been in place at WITVC, leadership might have identified and addressed perception gaps earlier, adjusted reform strategies in real-time, and empowered faculty to take on more active roles. Moreover, coaching-based models (Stern, 2004) could have transformed faculty evaluation from a compliance mechanism into a professional growth opportunity.

The failure to institutionalize reflective dialogue not only weakened trust but also limited the system's capacity to adapt and learn—an essential function in any organizational change process.

Broader Implications for Chinese Vocational Institutions

Beyond the local case, this study raises broader concerns about reform in centralized education systems. Chinese TVET institutions, like WITVC, operate under multiple layers of bureaucratic control that constrain autonomy, slow decision-making, and prioritize short-term administrative goals over long-term educational innovation (UNESCO-UNEVOC, 2019). These structural limitations are often compounded by cultural factors, such as high power distance and aversion to uncertainty (Hofstede, 2001), which inhibit open dissent and grassroots experimentation.

Despite these constraints, there are promising signals. All three stakeholders—despite their frustrations—expressed aspirations for better outcomes. The faculty member's commitment to student development, the

student's desire for more meaningful learning, and the dean's emphasis on reform-oriented vision reflect an underutilized resource: internal motivation for change.

To harness this motivation, institutional reform must focus not only on policy design, but also on human systems transformation. This includes redefining leadership roles to prioritize empathy and co-creation, redesigning evaluation frameworks to recognize intangible contributions, and fostering inclusive governance structures that elevate voices from across the organizational hierarchy.

Table 2: Discussion Thematic Summary

Theme	Key Findings	Theoretical Lens	Implications
Communication and Resistance	Stakeholders report poor dialogue, leading to emotional resistance.	Liu & Perrewé (2005); Oreg (2006)	Foster trust-based, two-way communication to reduce resistance.
Leadership Dissonance	Gap between espoused leadership and stakeholder perception.	Kotter (1996); Bass (1985)	Build guiding coalitions and visible, empowering leadership.
Motivational Misalignment	Effort-outcome disconnect demotivates students and faculty.	Vroom (1964); Deci & Ryan (1985); Oxford & Shearin (1994)	Strengthen relevance and recognition to enhance motivation.
Feedback Deficit	Lack of structured feedback inhibits adaptive reform.	Fleenor & Prince (1997); Stern (2004)	Implement 360-degree systems and coaching models.
Systemic Constraints in TVET	Centralized control limits reform flexibility.	UNESCO-UNEVOC (2019); Hofstede (2001)	Empower institutional actors through participatory governance.

Note. Table summarizes five core themes discussed in Section 5, highlighting the connections between observed challenges, relevant theories, and practical implications for institutional change.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study has examined how human systems—including communication practices, leadership styles, motivational dynamics, and feedback mechanisms—shape the implementation and outcomes of organizational change in the context of a Chinese vocational college. Drawing upon a single case from the Department of International Business (DIB) at Wen Zhou Industry and Trade Vocational College (WITVC), the research revealed profound misalignments between institutional reform intentions and stakeholder experiences. While the department's goal of enhancing spoken English instruction reflected national policy priorities and global labor market demands, its execution was hindered by fragmented communication, leadership dissonance, and rigid institutional structures.

The findings highlight the importance of attending not only to the technical dimensions of educational reform—such as curriculum design and assessment criteria—but also to the relational and emotional systems in which these reforms unfold. Through thematic analysis of interviews with students, faculty, and leadership, this study uncovered a shared aspiration for improvement that was repeatedly frustrated by systemic constraints. The result is an institutional environment in which change efforts generate skepticism rather than momentum, and where stakeholder participation is constrained rather than cultivated.

Theoretical and Practical Contributions

Theoretically, this study contributes to the literature on organizational change in education by foregrounding the role of human systems within hierarchical and bureaucratically managed institutions. While existing models

such as Vroom's Expectancy Theory, Kotter's Change Model, and 360-degree feedback systems have typically been applied in corporate or Western educational contexts, this study demonstrates their relevance—and necessary adaptation—to the unique cultural and structural configurations of Chinese TVET institutions. By integrating these frameworks, the research advances a more holistic understanding of change as a socially embedded, emotionally charged, and politically negotiated process.

Practically, the study offers several actionable implications for educational leaders, reformers, and policymakers operating in similar contexts:

1. Institutionalize Multi-Directional Communication: Effective reform requires robust, trust-based communication mechanisms that allow for upward, downward, and horizontal feedback. Institutions should go beyond formal meetings and create safe spaces for reflection, dissent, and collaborative planning.

2. Empower Frontline Actors: Teachers and students must be treated as co-creators of change, not passive recipients. This includes involving faculty in decision-making, recognizing informal leadership, and ensuring that students' learning needs inform program design.

3. Reframe Leadership Roles: Leaders must move from procedural coordination to transformational engagement. This involves modeling desired behaviors, facilitating cross-level dialogue, and building guiding coalitions that include diverse voices within the institution.

4. Redesign Motivation and Evaluation Systems: Faculty motivation can be enhanced through clearer linkages between effort, recognition, and impact. Institutions should align performance evaluations with both student-centered outcomes and faculty development goals, reducing reliance on rigid compliance metrics.

5. Adapt Global Models Locally: While change management tools such as 360-degree feedback and coaching have proven effective elsewhere, they must be adapted to fit local norms, values, and administrative logics. The implementation of such systems must respect existing cultural sensitivities while pushing toward institutional learning and transparency.
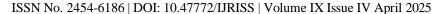
Limitations and Future Research Directions

As with all case studies, the generalizability of this research is limited. The study focused on a single department within a single institution, drawing on a small but purposefully selected sample of three stakeholders. While this design enabled rich, in-depth analysis, it does not allow for broad claims about Chinese vocational education as a whole. Future research could adopt comparative case study methods, exploring multiple institutions across regions or administrative types to identify patterns and variations in organizational change dynamics.

In addition, the study relied on self-reported data gathered through interviews. Although measures such as member-checking and triangulation were employed to ensure credibility, further research could integrate observational data, institutional documents, or quantitative indicators of reform impact. Mixed-method approaches could offer more comprehensive insights into how human systems evolve over time and in response to specific interventions.

Finally, this study focused primarily on internal dynamics within the institution. Future research should also consider the role of external actors—such as government bodies, industry partners, and accreditation agencies—in shaping the conditions under which change becomes possible or constrained.

In conclusion, this research reaffirms that educational reform is as much about people as it is about policy. Transforming human systems—by building trust, enhancing motivation, and cultivating inclusive leadership—is not an ancillary task, but a central pillar of sustainable organizational development. For vocational institutions in China and similar contexts, the path to meaningful change lies not in replicating foreign models wholesale, but in reimagining them within the lived realities of their own organizational cultures and constraints.

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