Implementing A Psychological Capital–Organizational Commitment Strategy in the Reform Environment of Chinese Higher Vocational Colleges: A Case Study on Enhancing Teacher Work Engagement Through Process-Oriented Human Resource Management

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ABSTRACT

This case study investigates the challenge of low and unstable work engagement among teachers in Chinese higher vocational colleges within the context of rapid educational reform and performance-driven management systems. Drawing upon psychological capital theory and the three-component model of organizational commitment, the case examines how institutional constraints and material incentives alone have proven insufficient in sustaining teachers' vigor, dedication, and absorption. Through an in-depth analysis of teacher management practices, organizational culture, and psychological support mechanisms, the study evaluates multiple feasible alternatives, including intensified performance-based incentives, structural reform of evaluation systems, and the establishment of a comprehensive psychological mentorship system. After assessing the advantages and limitations of each alternative, the study proposes an integrated strategy centred on systematic cultivation of psychological capital and strengthening of affective organizational commitment through process-oriented human resource management. The case concludes that sustainable teacher engagement requires a shift from results-based control to people-centred empowerment supported by institutional fairness, participatory governance, and structured psychological support. Policy implications and contingency recommendations are provided for vocational colleges seeking high-quality development.

Keywords: Psychological Capital; Organizational Commitment; Work Engagement; Higher Vocational Colleges; Human Resource Management; Teacher Development

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INTRODUCTION

Under the national reform agenda promoting modernization of vocational education, higher vocational colleges in China have transitioned from peripheral institutions to central actors in cultivating technical and skilled professionals. The rapid economic transformation and industrial upgrading have intensified expectations placed upon vocational institutions, thereby increasing the complexity of teachers' professional roles. Teachers are now expected not only to fulfil instructional duties but also to engage in research, skills competitions, social services, student mentoring, and curriculum innovation.

Within this evolving environment, work engagement has emerged as a critical determinant of institutional effectiveness. Work engagement, conceptualized by Wilmar Schaufeli and Arnold Bakker as a positive and fulfilling work-related state characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004), extends beyond mere job performance. It reflects the psychological depth of teachers' involvement in their

professional roles. Empirical studies indicate that teachers' engagement significantly influences teaching effectiveness, student outcomes, and institutional sustainability (Fernandez, 2020).

However, current personnel management in many vocational colleges remains heavily dependent on institutional constraints, performance assessments, and material incentives. Although such systems maintain baseline productivity, they often neglect teachers' intrinsic psychological needs. As a result, psychological exhaustion, declining enthusiasm, and weakened organizational identification have become increasingly evident (Wang & Jamil, 2025).

This case study explores how psychological capital and organizational commitment interact to influence teacher engagement and examines practical pathways to reconstruct endogenous motivational mechanisms within vocational colleges.

Conceptual Background and Theoretical Framework

Psychological Capital as a Developable Resource

Psychological capital (PsyCap) was introduced by Fred Luthans and colleagues as a higher-order construct comprising self-efficacy, hope, optimism, and resilience (Luthans & Youssef, 2004; Luthans et al., 2006). Unlike fixed personality traits, psychological capital is considered state-like and malleable, capable of development through targeted interventions.

Self-efficacy reflects confidence in one's capability to mobilize motivation and resources to accomplish tasks. Hope represents goal-directed energy and pathway planning. Optimism refers to positive attribution styles regarding future outcomes. Resilience denotes the capacity to bounce back from adversity. Research demonstrates that psychological capital enhances job satisfaction, performance, and engagement (Deng, 2023).

In vocational colleges, where teachers encounter diverse student abilities and high-performance demands, psychological capital serves as a buffer against occupational stress and burnout. Teachers with strong psychological capital are better equipped to maintain vitality and commitment under pressure.

Organizational Commitment as a Mediating Mechanism

Organizational commitment describes the psychological bond between employees and their organization. The three-component model proposed by John P. Meyer and Natalie J. Allen distinguishes affective, continuance, and normative commitment (Meyer & Allen, 1991).

Affective commitment reflects emotional attachment and identification. Continuance commitment relates to perceived costs of leaving. Normative commitment involves a sense of obligation to remain. Among these, affective commitment has been shown to be most strongly associated with engagement and performance (Van Waeyenberg et al., 2022).

Teachers' psychological capital alone does not guarantee sustained engagement. Organizational commitment functions as a bridge through which psychological resources are translated into behavioural investment. When teachers perceive fairness, support, and participation, they are more likely to convert intrinsic motivation into sustained engagement.

Work Engagement as an Integrated Outcome

Work engagement integrates individual psychological states and organizational conditions. According to Schaufeli and Bakker (2004), vigor, dedication, and absorption collectively define engagement. High engagement correlates with improved teaching quality and reduces turnover intention (Zhang et al., 2022).

The theoretical framework of this case study posits that psychological capital influences work engagement directly and indirectly through organizational commitment. Management systems that undermine fairness or neglect psychological support weaken this pathway.

Case Background: Institutional Context and Emerging Dilemmas

The focal institution in this case is a representative public higher vocational college undergoing rapid expansion and reform. Over the past decade, enrolment has increased substantially, accompanied by intensified performance requirements linked to government evaluation metrics.

Teachers are evaluated based on quantifiable indicators, including teaching hours, published papers, research grants, competition awards, and community service outcomes. While such metrics aim to enhance accountability, they often overlook process-oriented efforts such as curriculum development, mentoring, and innovation experimentation.

Several dilemmas have emerged. First, psychological support mechanisms are minimal. Although student counselling services exist, structured psychological assistance for teachers is rare. Teachers experiencing burnout often rely on self-adjustment.

Second, promotion pathways are perceived as opaque, leading to frustration and weakened affective commitment. Third, decision-making processes are centralized, limiting teachers' participation and reducing their sense of ownership. Finally, fault-intolerant management discourages innovation.

These factors collectively contribute to declining engagement levels despite formal compliance with performance standards.

Evaluation of Feasible Alternatives

Alternative One: Intensifying Performance-Based Incentives

One feasible solution involves increasing financial incentives and tightening performance assessments. The advantage of this approach lies in its clarity and measurability. Quantitative indicators facilitate objective comparisons and administrative control.

However, empirical research suggests diminishing marginal returns of extrinsic rewards in knowledge-intensive professions (Wang, 2024). Overemphasis on results may exacerbate stress and undermine intrinsic motivation. Teachers may prioritize short-term outputs over meaningful pedagogical development. Consequently, engagement remains superficial.

Alternative Two: Structural Reform of Evaluation Systems

Another alternative involves redesigning evaluation criteria to incorporate diversified indicators and peer review mechanisms. This approach enhances fairness and recognizes hidden labour.

While beneficial, structural reform alone may not address underlying psychological depletion. Without parallel development of psychological capital and affective commitment, revised metrics may still be perceived as administrative adjustments rather than supportive change.

Alternative Three: Establishing a Comprehensive Psychological Mentorship System

The third alternative proposes systematic cultivation of psychological capital through mentorship, counselling services, and developmental training. Its strength lies in addressing root psychological needs and preventing burnout.

Nevertheless, psychological interventions without institutional reform risk being viewed as superficial remedies. If organizational injustice persists, psychological empowerment may fail to translate into sustained engagement.

Proposed Integrated Solution

After evaluating alternatives, the most effective strategy combines psychological capital development with strengthened organizational commitment within a process-oriented human resource framework.

Establishing a Psychological Mentorship System

A structured mentorship system should be implemented across career stages. New teachers require adaptation guidance; mid-career teachers need career planning support; senior faculty benefit from technological upskilling assistance. Regular psychological assessments and confidential counselling services should be institutionalized.

Drawing upon psychological capital theory (Luthans et al., 2006), workshops enhancing hope, resilience, and self-efficacy can be conducted. Leadership participation signals institutional endorsement.

Strengthening Affective Organizational Commitment

Institutional fairness must be ensured through transparent promotion procedures and participatory governance. Faculty representative assemblies should possess substantive authority. Teachers involved in decision-making develop stronger identification with organizational goals.

Humanistic care initiatives, including flexible scheduling and recognition programs, reinforce emotional bonds. Research indicates that perceived organizational support significantly predicts engagement (Wang, 2024).

Transitioning to Process-Oriented Management

Evaluation systems should integrate qualitative indicators documenting teaching innovation and mentoring contributions. Peer review and student feedback diversify perspectives.

A fault-tolerance mechanism encourages experimentation in curriculum reform and research initiatives. When mistakes occur without ethical violations, reflective improvement rather than punitive action should prevail. Such policies enhance psychological safety and resilience.

Implementation Strategy

Implementation requires coordinated action. College leadership should allocate resources and embed psychological mentorship within personnel policy. Human resource departments must redesign appraisal frameworks emphasizing balanced metrics.

Department heads should conduct regular developmental dialogues rather than solely performance reviews. Faculty development centres can organize resilience training and collaborative workshops.

Monitoring mechanisms should assess engagement levels periodically using validated scales derived from Schaufeli and Bakker's framework (2004). Data analysis will inform continuous improvement.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This case study demonstrates that improving teacher engagement in higher vocational colleges necessitates a comprehensive strategy integrating psychological capital cultivation and organizational commitment enhancement. Purely results-based management yields limited and unstable outcomes.

By establishing psychological mentorship systems, ensuring institutional fairness, promoting participatory governance, and adopting process-oriented evaluation, vocational colleges can transform extrinsic control into intrinsic motivation.

The principal lesson is that sustainable engagement arises when teachers feel psychologically empowered and emotionally connected to their institution.

As a contingency plan, colleges should prepare crisis intervention protocols for severe burnout cases and maintain adaptive flexibility during policy transitions. Continuous feedback and evaluation ensure long-term effectiveness.

Ultimately, embedding psychological capital and organizational commitment within personnel management systems supports both teacher development and institutional high-quality growth, aligning vocational education with national modernization goals.

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