

A Systematic Review of the Determinants of Job Satisfaction among Professional Teachers in Chinese Vocational Colleges

Liu Ting, Hazri Bin Jamil*

School of Educational Studies, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Malaysia

Email: Liuting202502@163.com

*Corresponding Author Email: hazri@usm.my

DOI Link: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARPED/v14-i3/26247>

Published Online: 29 August 2025

Abstract

This study presents a systematic review of empirical research on job satisfaction among vocational college faculty in mainland China, covering literature published between 2020 and 2024. Employing the PRISMA methodology, 24 peer-reviewed articles were selected from the Scopus database to identify key determinants of faculty job satisfaction. The analysis categorizes influencing factors into five major domains: organizational environment (e.g., leadership quality, collegial support), economic and welfare conditions (e.g., salary, benefits), career development opportunities (e.g., training, promotion), job characteristics (e.g., workload, autonomy), and individual and psychological traits (e.g., intrinsic motivation, work-life balance). Findings reveal that job satisfaction is shaped by a complex interplay of institutional, personal, and contextual variables, with notable variations across regions and institutional types. The study addresses gaps in fragmented literature by synthesizing diverse perspectives and methodological approaches, and it proposes a conceptual framework for future research and policy development. By highlighting the most influential factors, this review offers actionable insights for policymakers and administrators aiming to enhance faculty well-being, institutional performance, and the sustainability of China's vocational education system.

Keywords: Job Satisfaction, Determinant Factor, Vocational College, Professional Teacher

Introduction

Job satisfaction is widely recognized as a key factor influencing employee performance, organizational commitment, and long-term retention (Irabor & Okolie, 2019; Shakeel & But, 2015; Siswanto, 2023). In the field of education, faculty job satisfaction plays a pivotal role in determining teaching quality, student outcomes, and the sustainability of institutional development (Hoque et al., 2023; Tria, 2023). While considerable research has been conducted on university faculty in developed countries, the job satisfaction of vocational college faculty in China remains an underexplored area. As China promotes vocational education as a strategic pillar of its national development agenda (Liu & Hardy, 2023; Liu &

Chen, 2025), understanding the determinants of faculty satisfaction in this context becomes increasingly significant.

In recent years, a series of policy reforms—most notably the National Vocational Education Reform Implementation Plan (2019)—has aimed to improve the quality, scale, and relevance of vocational education in China (Hardy & Liu, 2022; Liu & Hardy, 2023). Vocational colleges are now expected to cultivate skilled workers who can meet the demands of industrial upgrading and technological innovation. However, these ambitions have also created new pressures for faculty, including increased workloads, limited research opportunities, and ambiguous promotion criteria. Compared with university faculty, vocational educators often receive lower social recognition and fewer institutional resources (Alam & Mohanty, 2023; Ingersoll & Tran, 2023), which may negatively affect their job satisfaction. Additionally, vocational colleges in China vary significantly by region, funding, and administrative structure. Faculty working in underdeveloped or rural institutions often face greater challenges, including poor infrastructure, limited access to training, and high turnover rates (Dlamini et al., 2023; Ingersoll & Tran, 2023). These disparities, coupled with systemic undervaluation of vocational education, can lead to dissatisfaction, burnout, and reduced teaching motivation (Ngwenya, 2021; Şahin et al., 2024; Tran & Smith, 2021). The role of socio-cultural factors—such as power distance, collectivism, and perceptions of academic prestige—also adds complexity to faculty experiences, which may differ substantially from those in general higher education institutions.

Despite growing interest, current research on vocational faculty job satisfaction in China is fragmented and lacks a unified framework. Some studies focus on economic determinants such as salary and benefits, while others highlight psychological or organizational factors, including leadership style, work autonomy, and professional identity. Moreover, methodological inconsistencies—ranging from small sample sizes to regionally limited studies—make it difficult to draw generalizable conclusions. There is a clear need for a comprehensive synthesis of the literature to clarify the key factors shaping faculty satisfaction and provide guidance for policy and practice.

In response to this gap, the present study conducts a systematic review of existing research on the determinants of job satisfaction among vocational college faculty in China. The objectives of this study are fourfold. First, it aims to identify and categorize the main factors that influence faculty satisfaction, including individual, institutional, and external variables. Second, it seeks to examine the relative importance of these factors across different institutional and regional contexts. Third, it assesses the methodological quality of the reviewed studies to highlight strengths, weaknesses, and areas for future improvement. Finally, the study proposes a conceptual framework that integrates key findings and can serve as a foundation for future research and policy formulation.

This study offers several important contributions: (1) it advances the understanding of job satisfaction by situating it within the unique institutional and cultural environment of Chinese vocational education. (2) the study contributes by synthesizing a diverse and often inconsistent body of research. By organizing findings from multiple sources and evaluating the rigor of various approaches, it helps bring coherence to an emerging field. The use of a systematic review methodology ensures transparency, replicability, and comprehensiveness

in the selection and analysis of studies; (3) the findings of this study offer actionable insights for policymakers, institutional leaders, and educational administrators. By identifying the most influential determinants of faculty satisfaction, the research provides evidence-based recommendations to improve working conditions, enhance faculty development programs, and strengthen institutional support systems. In the broader context of China's educational reform, addressing faculty satisfaction is not merely a human resource issue, but a strategic imperative to ensure the long-term success and credibility of vocational education.

Research Methods

Analysis Technique

This study adopts the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) methodology to ensure a transparent, replicable, and comprehensive review process. PRISMA provides a structured framework for identifying, screening, and selecting relevant studies, and is widely regarded as a gold standard for systematic reviews in the social sciences and health disciplines (Mengiste et al., 2023; Nezameslami et al., 2025; Ogunmakinde et al., 2024). The PRISMA approach includes four key phases: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. By adhering to this approach, we ensured that the review process was systematic, reproducible, and free from selection bias. The PRISMA flow diagram was used to present the progression of study selection (Bhuiyan et al., 2024; Oluleye et al., 2022). This framework facilitated the extraction and synthesis of reliable and valid findings from the literature, contributing to a robust understanding of job satisfaction determinants among Chinese vocational college faculty. Moreover, the PRISMA checklist ensured that all methodological elements were addressed in the review process, further enhancing its transparency and credibility.

Resources and Search Strategy

The Scopus database was selected as the primary source for data collection due to its extensive coverage of peer-reviewed literature in education, social sciences, and management. The database includes a wide range of international and regional journals, making it particularly suitable for studies published in English (Malanski et al., 2021; Nandiyanto et al., 2024). The search strategy was developed using a combination of keywords and Boolean operators, including "job satisfaction," "faculty," "teachers," "vocational college," "technical college," and "China." The search was limited to articles published between January 2020 and March 2024 to capture contemporary insights and recent trends. Filters were applied to restrict results to peer-reviewed journal articles and empirical studies. The initial search yielded 278 articles. After removing duplicates and non-relevant titles, 112 articles were retained for abstract screening. Of these, 48 articles underwent full-text review, resulting in the final inclusion of 24 studies that met all eligibility criteria. These studies form the empirical basis for the analysis presented in this systematic review.

Data Collection and Eligibility Criteria

The data collection process followed a rigorous and pre-defined protocol to ensure consistency and relevance. Studies were included if they met the following criteria: (1) focused on faculty or instructors working in vocational colleges in mainland China; (2) examined job satisfaction as a primary or secondary research topic; (3) used empirical methods with clearly reported data; and (4) were published in English-language peer-reviewed journals. Both quantitative and qualitative research designs were considered.

Exclusion criteria included studies centered on general higher education faculty, secondary school teachers, administrative personnel, or studies conducted outside the Chinese mainland. After initial title and abstract screening, a more detailed full-text assessment was conducted based on the PRISMA guidelines. This process ensured the relevance and methodological rigor of included studies. The inclusion of 24 high-quality empirical articles provides a solid foundation for synthesizing findings and identifying key determinants of job satisfaction specific to the Chinese vocational education context. The technical roadmap of the systematic review is shown in Figure 1.

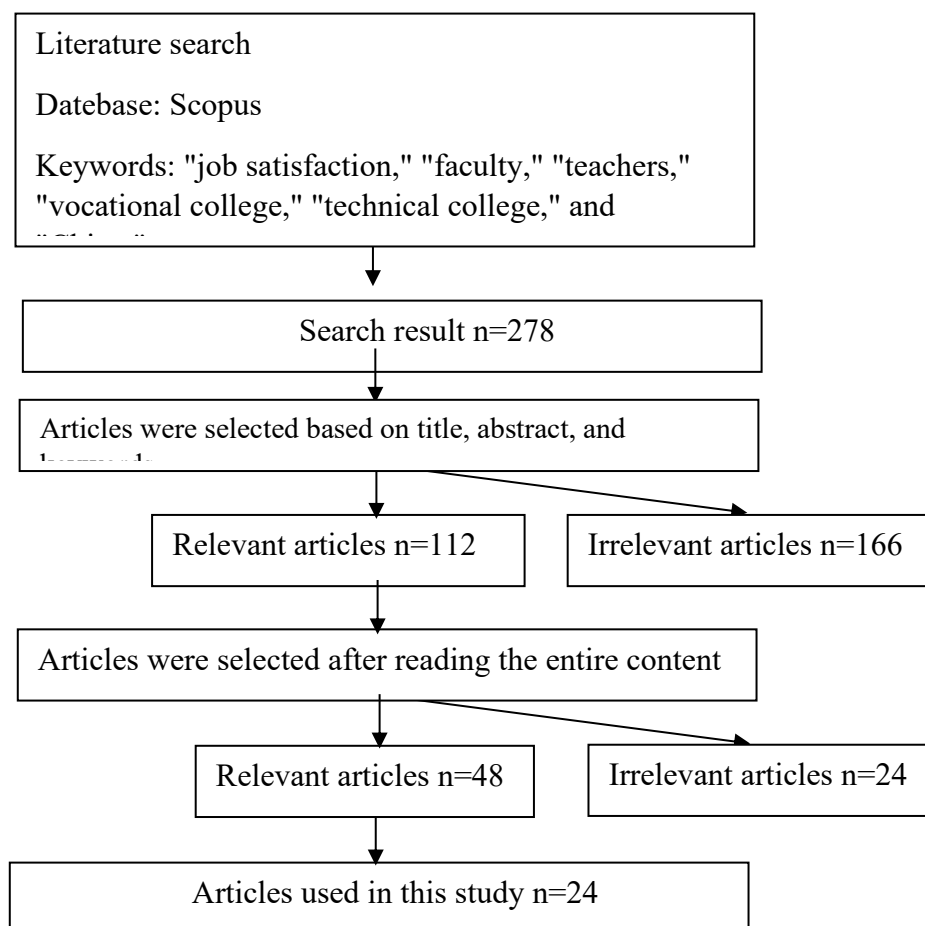


Figure 1 Technical roadmap of the systematic review

Data Items

For each of the 24 included studies, detailed information was systematically extracted to enable a structured and thematic comparison. Data items included the following: (1) author(s) and year of publication; (2) research methodology (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-method); (3) sample size and demographics; (4) geographical location of the vocational institution; (5) theoretical framework, if any; and (6) primary findings related to determinants of job satisfaction. Additionally, studies were coded according to the types of influencing factors they reported—organizational environment, economic and welfare conditions, career development opportunities, job characteristics, and individual or psychological traits. Where applicable, statistical effect sizes, correlation coefficients, and thematic frequencies were also noted. This level of data granularity enabled both descriptive and comparative analyses in subsequent sections. The extracted information was organized in a matrix format for ease of

synthesis and to ensure consistency across studies, thereby allowing the identification of common patterns and context-specific findings in the results.

Results

Categorization of Influencing Factors

Organizational Environment Factors

Organizational environment factors emerged as a central determinant of job satisfaction in vocational college faculty across the reviewed studies (Kim et al., 2023; McNaughtan et al., 2022; Tria, 2023). Key components under this category include leadership quality, institutional culture, administrative support, and collegial relationships. Faculty members reported higher satisfaction when they perceived strong leadership characterized by transparency, inclusiveness, and professional respect (Gbobaniyi et al., 2023; Ravdansuren et al., 2024; Redondo Jr et al., 2024). Studies consistently noted that participatory decision-making processes, where faculty voices are acknowledged in institutional policies and governance, significantly boosted morale and institutional commitment. Additionally, a collaborative and supportive work environment—manifested through peer networks, mentoring systems, and open communication channels—was linked to enhanced job satisfaction. Some studies highlighted the importance of institutional recognition mechanisms, such as performance-based rewards and teaching excellence awards, in reinforcing a positive work culture (Khaemba et al., 2024; Ndirangu & Mungai, 2024). Conversely, faculty working in institutions with rigid hierarchies, opaque administrative practices, or insufficient interpersonal cohesion expressed lower levels of satisfaction. These findings underscore that the institutional environment, including leadership style and workplace culture, plays a foundational role in shaping faculty attitudes and experiences in the vocational education sector.

Economic and Welfare Factors

Economic and welfare-related variables were identified as significant yet variably influential determinants of job satisfaction. Across the reviewed studies, faculty commonly cited salary levels, housing subsidies, medical insurance, and pension schemes as important considerations (Mabaso & Dlamini, 2021; Miti et al., 2021; Sun et al., 2025). Several studies found that dissatisfaction with compensation packages was a recurrent theme, especially in less-developed regions or lower-tier vocational institutions (Dunleavy & Margetts, 2025; Gui, 2024; Xu, 2021). Compared to counterparts in general higher education or industry positions, vocational college faculty often perceive their financial remuneration as inadequate, which negatively affects morale and long-term career commitment. However, the influence of economic factors is moderated by faculty expectations, local cost of living, and supplemental benefits. For instance, studies from urban areas emphasized the importance of housing and transportation allowances, while research in rural settings highlighted access to healthcare and retirement benefits (Chirimbana et al., 2023; Mansueto et al., 2025). Additionally, institutions that offered clear and equitable salary structures and opportunities for performance-based bonuses were more likely to report higher faculty satisfaction (Ranjbar et al., 2025; Rustamova et al., 2025). The findings suggest that while economic incentives alone may not ensure satisfaction, they serve as foundational motivators that support overall well-being and job stability.

Career Development Opportunities

Career development opportunities play a pivotal role in influencing job satisfaction among vocational college faculty. Reviewed studies emphasized that access to professional growth, such as training programs, academic exchanges, promotions, and advanced study opportunities, was highly valued by faculty (Chaudhary et al., 2023; O'Dowd & Dooly, 2022; Zhao et al., 2024). Institutions that provided structured and transparent pathways for career advancement reported higher levels of faculty engagement and satisfaction. Particularly important were opportunities for research participation, professional certification, and cross-industry collaboration, which enabled faculty to stay updated with technological and pedagogical developments. Several studies pointed out disparities in development opportunities across different institutional types and regions, with faculty in metropolitan colleges generally enjoying better access to resources and training (Chiramba & Ndofirepi, 2023; Ehlenz & Mawhorter, 2022). Furthermore, mentorship programs and institutional investment in faculty development were identified as key facilitators of positive career trajectories. In contrast, limited career mobility, unclear promotion criteria, and lack of institutional support for continuing education were frequently associated with dissatisfaction and professional stagnation (Precellas & Bauyot, 2025; Shahid et al., 2024; Unnikrishnan & Rajeev, 2024). These findings affirm that sustained investment in faculty development is not only beneficial to individual career outcomes but also essential for enhancing institutional quality and retention.

Job Characteristics

Job characteristics—such as workload, teaching autonomy, task diversity, and alignment with personal expertise—emerged as crucial determinants of job satisfaction. Faculty expressed higher satisfaction when their job roles allowed for creativity, autonomy in instructional design, and manageable teaching loads (Javed & Akhter, 2024; Martin & Benedetti, 2025). A recurring theme was the mismatch between job expectations and actual responsibilities. Many faculty members in vocational institutions are required to balance teaching, research, administrative duties, and industry engagement, often without adequate institutional support. Studies found that excessive workloads, especially when unaccompanied by compensation or recognition, led to burnout and diminished job satisfaction. On the other hand, faculties who reported high levels of task variety and alignment between their expertise and assigned subjects expressed stronger engagement and professional identity (El-Soussi, 2022; Mukhalalati et al., 2024; Veles et al., 2023). Job clarity and role definition also played a significant role in shaping satisfaction. Clear expectations, timely feedback, and consistent evaluations were linked to a stronger sense of purpose and institutional alignment. Therefore, job design and role management appear central to creating a fulfilling and sustainable work environment for vocational educators.

Individual and Psychological Factors

Individual and psychological factors—including intrinsic motivation, personality traits, professional identity, and work-life balance—significantly influenced faculty job satisfaction. Intrinsically motivated individuals who viewed teaching as a meaningful vocation reported higher satisfaction levels, regardless of external challenges. Studies identified traits such as resilience, optimism, and self-efficacy as positive predictors of satisfaction (Kuşcu Karatepe et al., 2022; Sabouripour et al., 2021). Furthermore, a strong sense of professional identity—defined by pride in one's role, alignment with institutional values, and perceived societal

impact—was consistently associated with job fulfillment. Psychological stressors, including role conflict, emotional exhaustion, and lack of work-life balance, negatively impacted satisfaction. Faculty members juggling caregiving responsibilities or dealing with extended work hours reported higher stress levels and reduced satisfaction. Notably, faculty who had access to psychological support services, flexible scheduling, or wellness programs demonstrated greater job engagement and retention (Azour & McGuinness, 2023; Kennedy et al., 2022). These findings suggest that beyond institutional and economic considerations, individual dispositions and psychological well-being are critical components of a holistic satisfaction model for vocational college faculty.

Comparative Analysis Across Studies

The comparative analysis revealed both commonalities and divergences in how job satisfaction determinants manifest across regions, institutional types, and faculty demographics. Organizational environment and career development consistently ranked among the top influencing factors, regardless of location or institutional status. However, economic and welfare concerns showed more variability, with faculty in rural or underfunded institutions expressing heightened dissatisfaction compared to those in well-resourced urban colleges. Studies also differed in the weight they assigned to individual factors: for instance, some quantitative studies emphasized measurable variables like salary and workload (Hashim et al., 2022), while qualitative studies highlighted emotional well-being and institutional culture. Additionally, gender and age differences surfaced as moderating variables in several studies, with younger faculty more focused on career growth and older faculty more concerned with job stability and benefits. Variations were also noted in the theoretical frameworks employed, ranging from Herzberg's two-factor theory to self-determination theory, which shaped the scope and interpretation of findings. Overall, while a shared core of determinants was evident, the interplay of contextual, institutional, and personal factors suggests that job satisfaction in vocational education is a multi-dimensional construct requiring nuanced analysis.

Discussion

Integrated Analysis of Key Determinants

This section integrates the key findings from the reviewed studies to offer a comprehensive understanding of the determinants of job satisfaction among vocational college faculty in China. The results highlight the multifaceted nature of job satisfaction, shaped by both external and internal influences. Organizational environment factors emerged as foundational, underscoring the importance of transparent leadership, participatory governance, and collegial support. These elements collectively create a sense of belonging and institutional alignment that fosters satisfaction. Economic and welfare factors, while not the sole drivers, were also significant. Although monetary incentives alone do not ensure high satisfaction, their absence often leads to dissatisfaction, especially in contexts marked by economic disparity.

Career development opportunities appeared as a strong motivator, affirming that faculty value professional growth and institutional recognition. Where such opportunities are limited, faculty may feel stagnant, leading to disengagement. Job characteristics, including workload, autonomy, and task relevance, also shaped satisfaction. The balance between responsibilities and institutional support proved critical in determining whether faculty

experience their roles as rewarding or overwhelming. Lastly, individual and psychological dimensions, such as intrinsic motivation and work-life balance, provided an essential internal framework for interpreting workplace experiences. Faculty with high resilience and professional identity demonstrated greater job engagement, even in less favorable institutional settings.

Together, these factors suggest that job satisfaction in vocational colleges is influenced by an intricate web of interrelated determinants. No single factor operates in isolation; instead, satisfaction results from the dynamic interaction between institutional structures, individual dispositions, and contextual realities. A key insight is the central role of alignment—between faculty expectations and institutional practices, between job demands and personal strengths, and between economic conditions and perceived value. Policies aiming to improve faculty satisfaction must therefore adopt a holistic perspective, simultaneously addressing institutional governance, professional development, economic welfare, and psychological well-being.

Comparison with International Contexts

Comparing the determinants of job satisfaction in Chinese vocational colleges with international counterparts reveals both shared and unique patterns. Globally, organizational climate, professional development, and compensation are commonly cited as primary factors influencing job satisfaction. For instance, studies from Western countries such as the United States, Germany, and Australia emphasize institutional autonomy, academic freedom, and research support as critical factors. While these elements resonate with Chinese faculty to some extent, the vocational education context in China introduces unique challenges and priorities. Unlike in many developed countries, Chinese vocational institutions are still in a transitional phase of professionalization. This evolution places a stronger emphasis on administrative oversight and teaching responsibilities, often at the expense of research and innovation. Faculty in China frequently face institutional constraints such as limited funding, hierarchical management structures, and inconsistent access to development resources, especially in rural or lower-tier colleges. Consequently, economic concerns and administrative transparency weigh more heavily in Chinese contexts compared to settings where basic welfare and autonomy are more established.

Another point of divergence lies in the socio-cultural context. Chinese faculty often place significant value on collective harmony, institutional loyalty, and hierarchical respect—cultural traits that shape expectations around leadership and peer relationships. In contrast, Western faculty may prioritize individual achievement, academic freedom, and innovation. This cultural difference means that strategies successful in one context may not translate effectively to another without adaptation. Furthermore, while psychological well-being and work-life balance are emerging global concerns, their practical implementation varies widely. In China, systemic support for psychological services remains uneven, affecting the sustainability of faculty engagement.

Overall, while the determinants of job satisfaction share a universal core, their expressions and relative importance are context-dependent. Understanding these cross-cultural differences is essential for designing responsive, localized strategies that respect institutional diversity and cultural norms.

Theoretical Contributions

This systematic review contributes to the theoretical discourse on job satisfaction by offering an integrative framework tailored to the vocational education sector in China. First, the findings validate the relevance of established theories, such as Herzberg's two-factor theory and self-determination theory, in explaining faculty satisfaction. Herzberg's model is evident in the bifurcation between hygiene factors (e.g., salary, institutional policies) and motivators (e.g., recognition, professional growth). The alignment between these dimensions and the reviewed data supports the model's applicability to vocational faculty settings. Self-determination theory further enriches the understanding by highlighting how autonomy, competence, and relatedness shape intrinsic motivation and satisfaction. Faculty who experienced greater autonomy in curriculum design or decision-making reported higher engagement, illustrating the theory's emphasis on psychological needs. Moreover, the relational dimension—manifested in collegial networks and leadership quality—emerged as a critical predictor of satisfaction, aligning with the theory's concept of relatedness.

Beyond validating existing models, the review advances a context-sensitive theoretical contribution. It proposes that job satisfaction in vocational education is best understood as a layered construct that incorporates institutional, economic, professional, and psychological domains. Each layer interacts dynamically with others, suggesting that interventions must be multi-level and adaptive. For instance, increasing salaries without reforming governance structures may yield limited improvements in satisfaction. Similarly, offering training programs without addressing workload or recognition mechanisms may fail to engage faculty meaningfully. This layered perspective invites the development of hybrid models that integrate organizational theory, psychological theory, and socio-cultural analysis. By doing so, researchers and policymakers can better capture the complex realities of vocational college faculty and move beyond one-size-fits-all solutions. This theoretical lens not only enriches academic discourse but also offers practical guidance for institutional reform and policy innovation in the Chinese context and beyond.

Conclusion

Summary of Key Findings

This systematic review identified and synthesized the key determinants of job satisfaction among faculty in Chinese vocational colleges. The findings suggest that job satisfaction is influenced by five primary categories of factors: organizational environment, economic and welfare conditions, career development opportunities, job characteristics, and individual psychological attributes. Within these, organizational and psychological factors emerged as particularly significant in shaping faculty members' experiences. Transparent governance, collegial support, and opportunities for professional growth were central to fostering a positive working environment. Meanwhile, intrinsic motivation, resilience, and work-life balance moderated the impact of structural constraints, highlighting the complex interplay between institutional and individual-level variables. The cross-study comparison further illustrated that while economic incentives are important, they are not sufficient on their own to ensure high levels of satisfaction. Faculty members' perceptions of fairness, recognition, and autonomy played equally critical roles. The review also underscored context-specific dynamics, especially the influence of cultural values and institutional maturity on faculty satisfaction. Overall, the findings emphasize the necessity of multidimensional and

context-sensitive approaches when seeking to understand and improve faculty job satisfaction in Chinese vocational education settings.

Policy and Practical Implications

Based on the review findings, several policy and practical recommendations can be drawn to enhance faculty satisfaction in vocational colleges. First, institutional leaders should prioritize transparent and inclusive governance structures. Involving faculty in decision-making processes and fostering a culture of mutual respect and accountability can significantly improve morale. Second, although salary improvements are important, comprehensive welfare programs—including housing support, healthcare, and retirement planning—can provide additional security and satisfaction. Third, more attention should be given to career development pathways. Providing access to continuous professional training, research opportunities, and academic recognition can counteract stagnation and enhance faculty motivation. Workload management is another critical area. Institutions should assess and redistribute teaching responsibilities to ensure a more balanced and sustainable work environment. Finally, mental health and well-being support services should be institutionalized, recognizing their importance in maintaining faculty engagement and resilience. Policymakers at the national and regional levels must also consider differentiated strategies for urban and rural colleges, where resources and challenges vary significantly. A one-size-fits-all approach will likely fall short; instead, tailored interventions that respect local contexts and institutional diversity are essential for meaningful reform.

Limitation and Future Research

While this review provides valuable insights into the determinants of job satisfaction among vocational college faculty in China, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the scope of the study was limited to articles available in English and Chinese from specific databases, potentially omitting relevant research published elsewhere. Second, despite efforts to apply rigorous inclusion criteria, the variability in methodological quality and focus across studies may have influenced the consistency of findings. Third, the review primarily captures cross-sectional insights; longitudinal studies would be helpful in understanding how satisfaction evolves over time and in response to policy interventions. Moreover, the role of emerging factors such as digital teaching environments, generational differences, and post-pandemic adjustments remain underexplored. Future research should consider comparative analyses across different types of vocational institutions, including private vs. public and urban vs. rural settings, to further refine understanding. There is also a need for more empirical studies that test intervention models in real-world institutional contexts. By addressing these gaps, future scholarship can contribute more robustly to theory development and policy design in the field of vocational education.

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