Article

Humanistic Governance and Student Development in Vocational Education

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Abstract: As vocational education in China transitions toward quality-oriented development, governance reform in higher vocational colleges has become increasingly urgent. However, institutional management continues to be shaped by performance-based evaluation systems and administrative control logic, generating tensions between accountability and student-centered development. Drawing upon person-centered theory, hierarchy of needs theory, and contemporary student engagement research, this study examines the structural conditions, relational dynamics, and practical manifestations of humanistic-oriented educational management within higher vocational contexts. Using a qualitative research design based on semi-structured interviews with administrators, teachers, and students from five vocational colleges in Inner Mongolia, the study explores how governance principles are interpreted and enacted across institutional levels. Findings indicate that dialogic governance mechanisms, emotionally supportive disciplinary approaches, and individualized developmental support systems significantly enhance students' sense of belongingness, autonomy, competence, and sustained engagement. These practices contribute to stronger professional identity formation and internalized responsibility. Nevertheless, the persistence of metric dominance, performance-driven accountability, and uneven resource distribution constrains the long-term sustainability of humanistic reforms. Tensions remain between quantitative evaluation standards and relational care practices. In response, this paper proposes a Humanistic Governance Transformation Framework designed to integrate institutional regulation with developmental facilitation. By recalibrating accountability structures and embedding relational ethics into governance systems, the framework offers both theoretical refinement and practical guidance for advancing vocational education modernization in China.

Keywords: humanistic governance; vocational education; student development; institutional transformation; higher vocational colleges

1. Introduction

The modernization of vocational education governance has become a central objective in China's educational reform agenda, closely aligned with national strategies for skilled talent cultivation and industrial upgrading. As the vocational education system shifts from expansion-driven development to quality-oriented transformation, higher vocational institutions are increasingly required to cultivate not only technically skilled graduates capable of meeting immediate industrial demands but also individuals with strong professional identity, solid ethical awareness, and sustainable learning capacity to adapt to technological iterations. This shift reflects a recognition that modern vocational

education must transcend mere skill training to foster holistic human development—yet bridging policy intent with institutional practice remains a formidable challenge. Despite this clear policy orientation, governance structures in many higher vocational colleges remain deeply dominated by a performance-based logic rooted in decades of scale-focused development. Employment rates (often measured within six months of graduation), awards in national vocational skills competitions, and the number of vocational qualification certifications frequently function as the primary institutional evaluation criteria, shaping resource allocation, reputation ranking, and even leadership appraisal at the institutional level. While these quantifiable metrics enhance administrative accountability and address the urgent need for workforce supply, they risk reducing the multifaceted value of vocational education to a narrow set of measurable outcomes, sidelining intangible yet critical dimensions of student growth.

Under such metric-centered governance, institutional decision-making often prioritizes short-term, visible indicators over long-term developmental goals, creating a disconnect between educational design and student needs. For instance, administrative departments may allocate teaching resources disproportionately to majors with high employment rates or competition potential, while cutting funding for humanities courses, career counseling, or extracurricular activities that nurture professional ethics and interpersonal skills. Curricula are frequently tailored to align with certification exam syllabuses, emphasizing rote memorization of technical standards rather than critical thinking or problem-solving abilities. Teachers, meanwhile, are assessed primarily based on student pass rates, competition awards, and research output quantified by journal rankings—leaving limited space for relational, emotional, and identity-oriented dimensions of education that require time and flexibility to cultivate. Consequently, students may be viewed more as data points within institutional performance reports than as developing individuals with diverse aspirations, psychosocial needs, and unique learning rhythms. This instrumental orientation can unintentionally marginalize student voice: surveys in some vocational colleges show that less than 30% of students have participated in curriculum design consultations, and feedback channels for teaching improvement often lack substantive response mechanisms. Dialogic communication between teachers and students is further weakened by time constraints—many instructors are burdened with heavy teaching loads and administrative tasks related to performance assessment, leaving little room for in-depth academic guidance or emotional support. Additionally, teachers' professional autonomy is constrained, as they are pressured to adhere to standardized teaching plans rather than adapting to students' practical learning contexts or integrating cutting-edge industrial experiences into classrooms.

Moreover, excessive emphasis on standardized evaluation may generate pervasive performative pressures within institutions, reshaping the behavior of both teachers and administrators. Teachers often face conflicting demands: on one hand, they are expected to foster student autonomy and creativity; on the other, they must ensure their students meet rigid performance targets to secure institutional resources. This contradiction leads many educators to adopt a "safety-first" approach—prioritizing exam preparation and competition training over exploratory teaching. Administrative staff, meanwhile, grapple with mounting accountability stress, as their work is evaluated through quantitative indicators such as the number of certifications obtained by students or the rate of employment contract signing. Such pressures not only affect their mental health but also reduce their capacity to engage in empathic and student-centered practices, as administrative efficiency takes precedence over understanding the actual challenges faced by teachers and students. When governance systems reward numerical achievements more than holistic growth, educational interactions risk becoming procedural rather than developmental: practical training sessions may focus on repeating standardized operations to achieve "perfect" assessment results, while ignoring the cultivation of troubleshooting skills or teamwork; student counseling may be reduced to perfunctory

career advice centered on employment statistics, rather than addressing the psychological struggles of adapting to vocational identity.

Furthermore, this performance-driven governance model exacerbates the gap between vocational education and industrial transformation. As industries increasingly demand workers with cross-disciplinary capabilities, lifelong learning awareness, and ethical judgment (e.g., data privacy in digital manufacturing, professional integrity in healthcare), vocational colleges trapped in metric-centered logic struggle to adjust. For example, while many institutions have added "smart manufacturing" courses, the focus remains on technical operation rather than the ethical implications of automation or the ability to upskill with emerging technologies. Graduates may thus meet short-term employment needs but lack the resilience to thrive in dynamic work environments, leading to high turnover rates in some industries—a paradox that undermines the long-term value of vocational education. Additionally, the marginalization of student voice and teacher autonomy hinders institutional innovation: without input from those closest to teaching and learning, governance reforms often remain superficial, failing to address the root causes of quality gaps.

Therefore, the challenge facing higher vocational education is not the rejection of accountability, but the recalibration of governance priorities—integrating measurable performance with relational care, institutional efficiency with human dignity, and regulatory compliance with the cultivation of meaningful educational experiences. This requires reconstructing evaluation systems to include qualitative indicators such as student satisfaction, teacher professional growth, and graduates' long-term career development; establishing mechanisms for student and teacher participation in governance, ensuring their voices shape curriculum design and institutional policies; and providing sufficient resources for humanistic education and student support services. Only by moving beyond the narrow confines of performance-based logic can vocational education governance truly achieve modernization, nurturing skilled talents who are not only technically competent but also ethically grounded, socially responsible, and capable of sustainable development in a rapidly changing world.

2. Theoretical Foundations

2.1. Person-Centered Governance

Rogers emphasized that growth occurs under conditions of empathy, authenticity, and unconditional positive regard [1]. Within institutional governance, these principles translate into dialogic communication, recognition of student agency, and developmental facilitation rather than coercive enforcement. Authority is reinterpreted as supportive guidance.

When applied to educational management, this perspective reframes governance as a relational process rather than a purely administrative mechanism. Empathy encourages administrators and teachers to understand students' academic struggles, emotional experiences, and vocational aspirations from the learners' own perspectives. Authenticity requires institutional actors to communicate policies, expectations, and feedback transparently and congruently, reducing hierarchical distance and fostering trust. Unconditional positive regard, in turn, affirms students' inherent worth beyond their performance outcomes, particularly in moments of failure or disciplinary concern.

Such an approach shifts disciplinary practices from punitive regulation toward restorative dialogue, where mistakes are treated as opportunities for reflection and growth. It also supports participatory decision-making structures that invite student voice into institutional processes. In this way, governance becomes an enabling environment that cultivates responsibility, self-efficacy, and professional identity, aligning institutional order with human development rather than subordinating the latter to bureaucratic control.

2.2. Psychological Needs and Institutional Belonging

In higher vocational contexts, many students enter with fragile academic confidence. Institutional environments that fail to provide psychological security may undermine developmental potential. Self-determination theory further clarifies that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are essential for intrinsic motivation [2].

Within higher vocational education, these theoretical insights carry particular significance. A considerable proportion of students may have experienced academic setbacks prior to enrollment, which can affect their self-concept and learning expectations. If institutional governance emphasizes comparison, ranking, and external performance indicators without cultivating relational support, students' needs for belonging and esteem may remain unmet. In such climates, learners may adopt defensive or disengaged attitudes, focusing on minimum compliance rather than meaningful participation.

Conversely, governance structures that intentionally foster inclusive campus cultures, respectful teacher–student interactions, and recognition of individual progress can strengthen students' sense of relatedness and competence. Autonomy-supportive practices—such as flexible learning pathways, participatory feedback mechanisms, and opportunities for self-directed projects—encourage students to internalize vocational goals rather than merely respond to external pressure. When autonomy, competence, and relatedness are institutionally embedded, motivation becomes more self-determined and sustainable.

Thus, integrating Maslow's hierarchy and self-determination theory into governance design suggests that institutional effectiveness cannot be measured solely through employment statistics or certification rates. Instead, the psychological climate of the institution becomes a foundational condition for students' long-term professional growth, resilience, and identity formation.

2.3. Student Engagement and Institutional Conditions

Student engagement research demonstrates that learning outcomes are shaped significantly by institutional environments rather than solely by individual traits [3,4]. Institutions that foster trust, participation, and meaningful interaction tend to cultivate stronger academic commitment, deeper learning strategies, and greater persistence. Engagement is not merely a psychological disposition residing within students; rather, it emerges through structured opportunities for dialogue, feedback, collaborative learning, and supportive relationships. When governance systems prioritize transparent communication, accessible support services, and inclusive decision-making processes, they create conditions in which students feel recognized as legitimate members of the academic community. Such recognition enhances both behavioral engagement (active participation), emotional engagement (sense of belonging), and cognitive engagement (investment in complex learning tasks).

In higher vocational colleges, engagement assumes additional importance because students' professional identity formation is closely tied to authentic practice environments and mentorship relationships. Institutional climates that encourage teacher accessibility, industry collaboration, and reflective learning spaces can strengthen students' sense of purpose and vocational direction. Conversely, when institutional policies emphasize compliance, surveillance, and standardized output, engagement risks becoming instrumental—students participate to fulfill requirements rather than to construct meaning. Over time, this instrumental participation may weaken intrinsic motivation and reduce adaptability in rapidly changing labor markets.

However, Biesta cautions that a pervasive culture of measurement can distort educational aims by equating quality with what is easily quantifiable [5]. When governance frameworks privilege indicators such as graduation rates, competition awards, and certification counts, they may marginalize dimensions of education that resist numerical capture, including ethical development, critical thinking, and civic

responsibility. The narrowing of purpose can transform institutions into performance-driven systems that value efficiency over deliberation and outputs over subject formation.

Marginson similarly argues that higher education must balance accountability mechanisms with broader public value commitments [6]. While transparency and evaluation are necessary for responsible governance, they should not overshadow the societal and developmental missions of education. In vocational contexts, this balance entails recognizing that employability statistics, though important, do not fully represent the public good contributions of vocational institutions. These colleges also cultivate social mobility, regional development, and personal empowerment. Therefore, modernization of governance requires integrating engagement-oriented practices with carefully calibrated accountability structures, ensuring that measurement supports—rather than constrains—the broader educational purpose.

2.4. Structural Conditions of Governance

Employment rate remains a dominant evaluation indicator in vocational education. While labor market alignment is essential, equating institutional quality solely with employment outcomes compresses complex developmental processes into simplified statistics. Curriculum orientation may become short-term and utilitarian, and teachers may experience intensified performance pressure. Such performative accountability risks redefining educational success in purely instrumental terms [5].

Under metric-dominant governance, institutional strategies often revolve around optimizing statistical performance within limited evaluation cycles. Programs may prioritize immediately marketable skills at the expense of foundational knowledge, ethical reasoning, and adaptive learning capacities that sustain long-term career development. As a result, curriculum design can become narrowly aligned with short-term industry demand, potentially neglecting broader competencies such as communication, critical thinking, and lifelong learning skills.

For teachers, heightened emphasis on employment data and certification outputs may translate into increased administrative reporting, competitive benchmarking, and target-based assessments. This environment can generate anxiety and encourage risk-averse pedagogical behavior, where innovation is avoided if it does not guarantee measurable outcomes. Professional judgment may be subordinated to institutional targets, weakening educators' sense of autonomy and professional identity.

Moreover, metric dominance may subtly influence student perceptions of success. When institutional discourse consistently highlights employment statistics as the primary marker of achievement, students may internalize a transactional view of education, perceiving learning as a means to secure immediate job placement rather than as a process of personal and professional formation. Over time, this instrumental framing can erode intrinsic motivation and diminish students' engagement with reflective or exploratory learning experiences.

Therefore, while employment outcomes remain a legitimate and important indicator in vocational education, governance systems must guard against reductive interpretations of quality. A more balanced framework would situate labor market alignment within a broader developmental perspective, integrating quantitative accountability with qualitative indicators of growth, identity formation, and social contribution.

3. Research Procedure

Humanistic governance offers a viable pathway for reconciling accountability with student-centered development in higher vocational education. By embedding relational ethics within institutional structures, governance can move beyond performance reductionism toward holistic formation. The modernization of vocational education governance ultimately requires balancing efficiency with dignity and institutional discipline with human growth.

To empirically examine how such governance principles are enacted in practice, this doctoral study adopted a qualitative research design. Qualitative inquiry was selected because it enables in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of institutional practices within real-life contexts. Rather than testing predetermined hypotheses, the study sought to understand how humanistic education management is operationalized and experienced across different stakeholder groups in higher vocational institutions.

The research was conducted in five higher vocational colleges located in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region of China. These institutions were selected to reflect variation in institutional size, disciplinary focus, and governance structure while remaining within a shared regional policy environment. A total of twenty-five participants were purposively recruited. The sample consisted of five administrators, five teachers, and fifteen students. Administrators were selected based on their direct involvement in student affairs, academic management, or institutional governance. Teachers were chosen from different academic departments to provide diverse instructional perspectives. Student participants represented various year levels and majors, ensuring a range of academic and developmental experiences.

Semi-structured interviews were employed as the primary data collection method. Interview questions were organized around core analytical dimensions derived from Person-Centered Theory and self-determination theory, including congruence, unconditional positive regard, empathic understanding, dialogic communication, restorative discipline, autonomy support, and developmental guidance. The semi-structured format allowed for both comparability across participants and flexibility to probe individual experiences in greater depth. Each interview explored participants' perceptions of governance practices, institutional climate, disciplinary approaches, communication channels, and support systems.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis. Coding procedures involved initial open coding to identify recurring concepts, followed by axial coding to organize themes into broader categories aligned with the conceptual framework. Data from administrators, teachers, and students were compared to identify convergences and divergences in perspectives. This triangulation enhanced interpretive credibility and allowed the study to capture governance practices across multiple institutional levels.

Through this qualitative design, the research provides a nuanced understanding of how humanistic governance is both facilitated and constrained within vocational education contexts. The findings reveal that dialogic mechanisms, emotionally supportive discipline, and integrated developmental support systems contribute positively to student engagement and professional identity formation. However, metric-driven accountability structures continue to exert significant influence, creating tensions between relational care and performance evaluation.

By grounding theoretical discussion in empirical evidence from five vocational colleges and twenty-five participants, this doctoral study substantiates the argument that humanistic governance represents not merely an idealistic aspiration but a practicable and contextually grounded reform pathway for higher vocational education modernization.

4. Practical Manifestations of Humanistic Governance

Beyond structural design, the effectiveness of humanistic governance ultimately depends on institutional culture. Governance mechanisms, no matter how well designed, cannot generate developmental outcomes if they are implemented merely as procedural requirements. A dialogic meeting that exists only on paper, or a mentoring system reduced to formal checklists, risks becoming symbolic rather than transformative. Therefore, modernization must address both formal policy frameworks and informal relational climates. Institutional actors—administrators, teachers, and student leaders—

must internalize the value orientation underpinning dialogic participation, restorative discipline, and autonomy support. Without this internal alignment, governance reforms remain technocratic adjustments rather than cultural transformation.

A crucial dimension of this cultural shift involves leadership philosophy. Humanistic governance requires leaders who conceptualize authority as facilitative rather than supervisory. Instead of viewing institutional order as the product of control and enforcement, facilitative leadership understands stability as emerging from shared meaning and relational trust. Research on engagement and belonging indicates that students are more likely to commit to institutional norms when they perceive leadership as fair, accessible, and responsive [7]. Transparent decision-making processes, open-door communication practices, and regular dialogue sessions reduce psychological distance between students and administrators. Over time, such accessibility fosters what may be termed relational legitimacy—an institutional condition in which governance authority is accepted not merely because of formal power, but because of perceived fairness and care.

Furthermore, dialogic mechanisms must extend beyond reactive problem-solving toward proactive co-creation. Institutions may integrate student advisory councils into curriculum reform, internship planning, and campus culture initiatives. When students contribute to shaping educational pathways, they develop ownership over outcomes. Ownership, in turn, strengthens accountability in a self-determined manner. Rather than complying with externally imposed rules, students uphold standards they have helped formulate. This participatory accountability represents a qualitative transformation from performative compliance to collaborative governance.

Emotionally supportive discipline also benefits from systematic embedding within institutional frameworks. Restorative practices should not rely solely on individual administrators' interpersonal skills but be supported through professional development programs and formal procedural guidelines. Training workshops on empathetic communication, conflict mediation, and reflective questioning can enhance staff capacity to implement restorative approaches effectively. Empirical findings demonstrate that consistent restorative frameworks improve school climate and reduce exclusionary disciplinary practices [8]. In vocational education, where many students may face socioeconomic or academic challenges, restorative approaches prevent marginalization and promote reintegration. Such approaches also model professional conflict-resolution skills relevant to workplace environments.

Reflective self-regulation constitutes another long-term stabilizing force within humanistic governance. Self-regulation is not an innate trait but a cultivated capacity. Institutions can embed structured reflection into academic programs through capstone projects, learning portfolios, and periodic self-assessment dialogues. These practices encourage students to articulate vocational aspirations, evaluate competencies, and set incremental developmental goals. According to self-determination theory, internalization of norms occurs when individuals perceive autonomy support and meaningful rationale behind expectations [2,9]. By framing institutional standards as professional preparation rather than administrative imposition, vocational colleges strengthen students' identification with those standards.

Moreover, reflective self-regulation contributes to resilience. In rapidly changing labor markets, technical skills alone may become obsolete. However, individuals who possess self-regulated learning capacities can adapt to new technological and organizational contexts. Humanistic governance therefore supports not only immediate academic performance but also long-term employability. By cultivating autonomy, competence, and relatedness within governance systems, institutions indirectly enhance graduates' adaptive capacity and lifelong learning orientation.

Developmental support systems, meanwhile, require integrative coordination. Psychological counseling services, academic advising, and career guidance units should operate collaboratively rather than in isolation. Students often experience academic, emotional, and vocational challenges simultaneously. Fragmented support structures risk

addressing symptoms without considering underlying developmental trajectories. An integrated advising model ensures continuity of care, allowing mentors to track progress holistically. Research on student persistence underscores the importance of academic and social integration in promoting retention and success [3]. Mentorship relationships, especially when sustained across semesters, provide stable relational anchors within complex institutional environments.

Additionally, developmental systems should incorporate industry partnerships that bridge classroom learning with authentic professional contexts. Internship supervision, enterprise mentoring, and alumni engagement programs create experiential continuity between institutional governance and labor market expectations. However, these partnerships must align with humanistic principles. Industry collaboration should not merely serve employment statistics but contribute to students' professional identity formation and ethical awareness. Structured reflection sessions following internships, for example, can help students interpret workplace experiences in relation to personal values and long-term goals.

Importantly, the modernization of governance also requires revisiting evaluation systems. While employment rates and certification achievements remain significant, complementary qualitative indicators can capture relational and developmental outcomes. Surveys measuring belongingness, perceived autonomy support, and institutional trust may provide valuable insights into governance effectiveness. Student engagement indices, reflective portfolio assessments, and mentoring feedback reports can enrich evaluation frameworks. By broadening accountability metrics, institutions prevent metric dominance and preserve educational purpose [5,6].

Furthermore, governance reform should consider equity dimensions. Humanistic governance recognizes diversity in students' backgrounds, aspirations, and learning trajectories. Autonomy-supportive policies must be accompanied by equitable resource distribution to ensure that participation opportunities are accessible to all students, not only those with high confidence or prior achievement. Inclusive governance structures reduce structural marginalization and enhance social mobility—a key public value of vocational education.

At the systemic level, humanistic governance contributes to institutional sustainability. Institutions characterized by relational trust, participatory culture, and developmental support tend to exhibit lower conflict levels, stronger community cohesion, and more stable student engagement patterns. Stability derived from internal commitment reduces reliance on intensive surveillance and administrative enforcement. Over time, this reduces bureaucratic strain and enhances organizational resilience.

In sum, dialogic mechanisms, emotionally supportive discipline, reflective self-regulation, and integrated developmental systems form a comprehensive architecture of humanistic governance. These elements interact dynamically: dialogue builds trust; trust facilitates restorative discipline; restorative discipline nurtures self-regulation; self-regulation strengthens institutional stability; and developmental support sustains long-term engagement. Rather than functioning as isolated innovations, they collectively redefine governance as a relational ecosystem.

The modernization of vocational education governance, therefore, is not merely an administrative restructuring project. It represents a normative transformation in how institutions conceptualize authority, accountability, and human development. By embedding person-centered principles, autonomy-supportive environments, engagement-based participation, and restorative justice practices, higher vocational colleges can reconcile efficiency with dignity and measurement with meaning [1,2,3,7-9]. In doing so, they cultivate graduates who are not only technically competent but also self-directed, ethically grounded, and capable of contributing to both economic development and social cohesion.

5. Findings and Conclusion

The modernization of vocational education governance has become a central objective in China's educational reform agenda, closely aligned with national strategies for skilled talent cultivation and industrial upgrading. As the vocational education system shifts from expansion-driven development to quality-oriented transformation, higher vocational institutions are increasingly required to cultivate not only technically skilled graduates capable of meeting immediate industrial demands but also individuals with strong professional identity, solid ethical awareness, and sustainable learning capacity to adapt to technological iterations. This shift reflects a recognition that modern vocational education must transcend mere skill training to foster holistic human development—yet bridging policy intent with institutional practice remains a formidable challenge. Despite this clear policy orientation, governance structures in many higher vocational colleges remain deeply dominated by a performance-based logic rooted in decades of scale-focused development. Employment rates (often measured within six months of graduation), awards in national vocational skills competitions, and the number of vocational qualification certifications frequently function as the primary institutional evaluation criteria, shaping resource allocation, reputation ranking, and even leadership appraisal at the institutional level. While these quantifiable metrics enhance administrative accountability and address the urgent need for workforce supply, they risk reducing the multifaceted value of vocational education to a narrow set of measurable outcomes, sidelining intangible yet critical dimensions of student growth.

Under such metric-centered governance, institutional decision-making often prioritizes short-term, visible indicators over long-term developmental goals, creating a disconnect between educational design and student needs. For instance, administrative departments may allocate teaching resources disproportionately to majors with high employment rates or competition potential, while cutting funding for humanities courses, career counseling, or extracurricular activities that nurture professional ethics and interpersonal skills. Curricula are frequently tailored to align with certification exam syllabuses, emphasizing rote memorization of technical standards rather than critical thinking or problem-solving abilities. Teachers, meanwhile, are assessed primarily based on student pass rates, competition awards, and research output quantified by journal rankings—leaving limited space for relational, emotional, and identity-oriented dimensions of education that require time and flexibility to cultivate. Consequently, students may be viewed more as data points within institutional performance reports than as developing individuals with diverse aspirations, psychosocial needs, and unique learning rhythms. This instrumental orientation can unintentionally marginalize student voice: surveys in some vocational colleges show that less than 30% of students have participated in curriculum design consultations, and feedback channels for teaching improvement often lack substantive response mechanisms. Dialogic communication between teachers and students is further weakened by time constraints—many instructors are burdened with heavy teaching loads and administrative tasks related to performance assessment, leaving little room for in-depth academic guidance or emotional support. Additionally, teachers' professional autonomy is constrained, as they are pressured to adhere to standardized teaching plans rather than adapting to students' practical learning contexts or integrating cutting-edge industrial experiences into classrooms.

Moreover, excessive emphasis on standardized evaluation may generate pervasive performative pressures within institutions, reshaping the behavior of both teachers and administrators. Teachers often face conflicting demands: on one hand, they are expected to foster student autonomy and creativity; on the other, they must ensure their students meet rigid performance targets to secure institutional resources. This contradiction leads many educators to adopt a "safety-first" approach—prioritizing exam preparation and competition training over exploratory teaching. Administrative staff, meanwhile, grapple with mounting accountability stress, as their work is evaluated through quantitative

indicators such as the number of certifications obtained by students or the rate of employment contract signing. Such pressures not only affect their mental health but also reduce their capacity to engage in empathic and student-centered practices, as administrative efficiency takes precedence over understanding the actual challenges faced by teachers and students. When governance systems reward numerical achievements more than holistic growth, educational interactions risk becoming procedural rather than developmental: practical training sessions may focus on repeating standardized operations to achieve "perfect" assessment results, while ignoring the cultivation of troubleshooting skills or teamwork; student counseling may be reduced to perfunctory career advice centered on employment statistics, rather than addressing the psychological struggles of adapting to vocational identity.

Furthermore, this performance-driven governance model exacerbates the gap between vocational education and industrial transformation. As industries increasingly demand workers with cross-disciplinary capabilities, lifelong learning awareness, and ethical judgment (e.g., data privacy in digital manufacturing, professional integrity in healthcare), vocational colleges trapped in metric-centered logic struggle to adjust. For example, while many institutions have added "smart manufacturing" courses, the focus remains on technical operation rather than the ethical implications of automation or the ability to upskill with emerging technologies. Graduates may thus meet short-term employment needs but lack the resilience to thrive in dynamic work environments, leading to high turnover rates in some industries—a paradox that undermines the long-term value of vocational education. Additionally, the marginalization of student voice and teacher autonomy hinders institutional innovation: without input from those closest to teaching and learning, governance reforms often remain superficial, failing to address the root causes of quality gaps.

Therefore, the challenge facing higher vocational education is not the rejection of accountability, but the recalibration of governance priorities—integrating measurable performance with relational care, institutional efficiency with human dignity, and regulatory compliance with the cultivation of meaningful educational experiences. This requires reconstructing evaluation systems to include qualitative indicators such as student satisfaction, teacher professional growth, and graduates' long-term career development; establishing mechanisms for student and teacher participation in governance, ensuring their voices shape curriculum design and institutional policies; and providing sufficient resources for humanistic education and student support services. Only by moving beyond the narrow confines of performance-based logic can vocational education governance truly achieve modernization, nurturing skilled talents who are not only technically competent but also ethically grounded, socially responsible, and capable of sustainable development in a rapidly changing world.

Humanistic governance offers a viable pathway for reconciling accountability with student-centered development in higher vocational education. By embedding relational ethics within institutional structures, governance can move beyond performance reductionism toward holistic formation. The modernization of vocational education governance ultimately requires balancing efficiency with dignity and institutional discipline with human growth.

Such reconciliation does not imply weakening accountability standards; rather, it calls for redefining what counts as accountable performance. In a humanistic framework, accountability extends beyond numerical outputs to include relational quality, developmental progress, and institutional climate. Employment rates, certification achievements, and skills competition results remain important indicators, yet they are interpreted as partial representations of educational effectiveness rather than its entirety. Governance systems grounded in relational ethics recognize that sustainable outcomes emerge from environments where students experience belonging, autonomy, and competence.Thus, measurable success becomes the byproduct of supportive institutional ecosystems rather than the sole target of policy intervention.

Moreover, humanistic governance reframes efficiency itself. Administrative efficiency is often associated with streamlined procedures, standardized evaluation, and hierarchical clarity. While these elements contribute to organizational order, they may inadvertently suppress professional discretion and student voice if applied rigidly. A humanistic orientation introduces the concept of relational efficiency—the capacity of institutions to generate trust, reduce conflict, and foster voluntary compliance through dialogue and transparency. When students internalize institutional norms through participatory engagement, fewer resources are required for surveillance and enforcement. In this sense, dignity and discipline are not opposites; dignity becomes the foundation upon which authentic discipline is built.

Institutional discipline, under a humanistic model, shifts from coercive enforcement to shared commitment. Rules and regulations remain necessary for maintaining academic standards and campus safety, yet their legitimacy depends on communicative justification and procedural fairness. When governance mechanisms articulate the rationale behind policies and invite student input, institutional order becomes co-constructed. This co-construction enhances moral development and professional responsibility, particularly within vocational contexts where workplace ethics and collaborative competence are essential.

Finally, balancing human growth with structural regulation positions vocational colleges as developmental communities rather than production units. Students are prepared not only for immediate employment but also for adaptive lifelong learning and civic participation. By integrating relational care with structural accountability, higher vocational institutions can achieve modernization that is both administratively robust and ethically grounded—ensuring that governance reform advances human flourishing alongside economic productivity.

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