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Career Education Curriculum in General Senior High Schools: An International Comparative Review Through the Lens of the Four Curriculum Elements

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Abstract: With the deepening of the New Gaokao (National College Entrance Examination) Reform, which grants students greater autonomy in course selection and college application, career education has become an urgent priority in general senior high schools (GSHS) in the Chinese mainland. This study systematically reviews and internationally compares research on GSHS career education curricula in the United States, the United Kingdom, Japan, South Korea, and China (including the mainland, Taiwan, and Hong Kong Special Administrative Region), using a four-element curriculum framework comprising objectives, content, implementation, and evaluation. The findings reveal that: (1) although countries converge on self-understanding, exploration of the world of work, and career planning competence as core objectives, with lifelong learning and self-directed development as a common foundation, the mainland lacks an institutionalized and refined objective system; (2) curriculum content exhibits both temporal extension and spatial openness, oscillates between a "career-focused" and a "whole-person" perspective, and remains weakly structured as comprehensive practical knowledge; (3) implementation is diverse in form yet convergent in pattern, suffering from insufficient integration across lesson types and educational resources; and (4) while Anglophone and East Asian systems have developed institutionalized benchmarks and continuous evaluation tools, evaluation studies in the mainland are scarce and predominantly short-term, with longitudinal evidence largely absent. Building on these findings, the paper argues for a paradigmatic shift from static person-environment fit to Career Construction Theory, and proposes recommendations for an integrated curriculum scheme and an evidence-based evaluation system, so as to inform both theory and practice of GSHS career education.

1. Introduction

Career education helps students develop self-awareness, explore the world of work, make career decisions, and pursue lifelong development. Since China's State Council issued the 2014 Implementation Opinions on Deepening the Reform of the Examination and Enrolment System, the New Gaokao Reform has expanded student autonomy through the abolition of liberal arts/science streaming, the adoption of "3+1+2" or "3+3" elective schemes, and the "major (category) + university" application model. The widening gap between expanded choice and underdeveloped career decision-making competence has turned career education from a peripheral activity into a pressing need in general senior high schools (GSHS), making curriculum-based delivery an inevitable path toward systematization.

Paradoxically, research on career education curricula remains fragmented: curriculum sources are poorly documented, theoretical grounding is under-discussed, and the four elements—objectives, content, implementation, and evaluation—are developed in isolation rather than as an integrated whole. Empirical and longitudinal studies are particularly scarce. Internationally, the United States and the United Kingdom have mature, long-standing systems; Japan and South Korea—East Asian countries with examination-centred education systems resembling China's—offer distinctive experience in aligning career education with high-stakes testing. Taiwan and Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, which introduced senior high career education earlier and share institutional roots with the mainland, provide further reference cases.

Against this backdrop, the present study uses the four curriculum elements—objectives, content, implementation, and evaluation—as an analytical framework to systematically review and compare GSHS career education curricula across these countries and regions. It addresses three questions: (a) What patterns and commonalities characterize career education curricula across the four elements? (b) Compared with leading systems, what structural gaps exist in mainland research and practice? (c) What directions should future research and curriculum development take?

2. Research Design

2.1. Analytical Approach

This study combines documentary analysis with comparative education research. Analytically, it adopts the classic "four curriculum elements" structure from curriculum theory—objectives, content, implementation, and evaluation—as the organizing framework. In selecting comparison cases, two criteria were applied: maturity and comparability. The United States and the United Kingdom were selected as early-mover countries with well-developed career education; Japan and South Korea were selected as East Asian countries whose examination systems resemble China's; Taiwan and Hong Kong Special Administrative Region were selected as Chinese-language jurisdictions with earlier institutionalized practice. For the mainland, representative scholarly studies are reviewed, while policy documents and textbook analysis are beyond the scope of this paper.

2.2. Sources of Literature

The literature falls into three categories: (a) officially published curriculum frameworks and policy documents, such as the U.S. National Career Development Guidelines (NCDG), the UK's Framework for Career Employability and Enterprise Education, Japan's Comprehensive Career Education Plan of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), and Chinese Taiwan's Career Planning curriculum guidelines; (b) academic journal articles and

dissertations from China and abroad; and (c) international empirical studies, including quasi-experimental and longitudinal studies on the effects of career education interventions in the United States, South Korea, and Australia.

3. Findings

3.1. Curriculum Objectives: Emphasizing Planning, Lacking Refinement

The U.S. NCDG divides career-development learning outcomes into three domains—personal social development, educational achievement and lifelong learning, and career management—each further specified by age, stage, or grade, forming a developmental sequence spanning basic education [1]. He et al.'s comparative study of the top 100 U.S. high schools found that objectives centre on raising career awareness, mastering vocational skills, providing college entrance guidance, promoting deep learning, and cultivating civic consciousness [2]. The UK's Framework for Career, Employability and Enterprise Education, developed by the Career Development Institute [3,4], defines objectives for students aged 7–19 as enabling self-development, understanding the world of work, and developing career management skills. In Japan, MEXT established career education in 2009 and gradually institutionalized a "four domains and eight competencies" framework: social competence (self/other understanding; communication), information-use competence (information gathering; occupational understanding), future-planning competence (responsibility; planning and execution), and decision-making competence (choice; problem-solving) [5]. South Korea's objectives comprise self-understanding and social competence, occupational and world-of-work understanding, career-exploration competence, and career-design and preparation competence [6].

Chinese Taiwan's Career Planning curriculum guidelines stipulate four basic objectives—understanding the relation between personal development and career planning; enhancing career resources and basic planning skills; guiding self and environmental exploration and decision-making; and cultivating a forward-looking career attitude—together with nine core competencies, forming a two-tier "objectives–competencies" structure [7]. Chinese Hong Kong's senior high career education pursues four orientations: self-directed development grounded in self-awareness; value recognition anchored in ideals and aspirations; unity of knowledge and action across moral, intellectual, physical, social, and aesthetic education; and lifelong learning that explores multiple pathways [8].

Mainland scholarly conceptualizations are diverse. Liu argued that modern career planning education should go beyond occupational counselling to help students contemplate "what kind of life to live," addressing both immediate college-entrance needs and core competencies for future occupational change [9]. Suo located the objective in fostering students' self-directed development under the key-competencies framework [10]. Tian proposed a system led by the Key Competencies for Chinese Student Development, spanning career cognition, career belief, self-management, high school–higher education articulation, and choice competence [11]. Shen condensed GSHS career education objectives into four points: clarifying values and personality and consolidating self-identity; determining occupational preferences and acquiring career-development knowledge; choosing suitable pathways and developing decision-making competence; and cultivating lifelong-learning attitudes and taking responsibility for one's choices [12].

Despite cross-national variation, commonalities emerge: lifelong learning and self-directed learning attract universal attention, and self-understanding, world-of-work exploration, and career planning constitute the "greatest common denominator." Mainland conceptualizations, however, remain individual scholarly constructions; a systematic, developmental, and observable objective framework comparable to the NCDG or Chinese Taiwan's guidelines has yet to be institutionalized.

3.2. Curriculum Content: Rich but Under-structured

The United States has no unified federal content standard; states and schools design their own, yet content clusters into five strands [13]: (a) career awareness, fostering self-exploration and social perception, including exposure to universities and the social world; (b) vocational skills, covering occupation-specific and general employability skills; (c) college entrance guidance, respecting student choice and supported by a rich elective system; (d) deep learning, developing cognitive and non-cognitive capacities for thinking and learning-to-learn; and (e) civic consciousness, encouraging engagement with community and social issues. Building on its three core areas, the UK framework specifies 17 sub-domains with illustrative activities to guide schools [3]. In Japan, guided by the Career Passport [14] and generic competencies, content is integrated across in-class learning, extracurricular activities, and out-of-school activities, with emphasis on experiential activities and school ceremonies, and students' records undergo deep processing rather than mere archival storage.

Chinese Taiwan's guidelines organize content into three domains and nine themes: career exploration of the person (growth history; personal traits and potential; career roles and life patterns); exploration of environmental resources (educational development and discipline clusters; university life and occupational choice; working life and social needs); and interaction and decision between self and environment—a clear "self–environment–decision" logic [7]. Mainland school-based studies exhibit rich variety. Pan, using Shanghai Qibao High School as a case, embedded career development into daily teaching and school activities, covering life ideals, career choice and academic guidance, psychological counselling, and lifestyle cultivation [15]. Zhang and Wang designed content along a grade timeline: Grade 10 emphasizes adaptation to high school and basic planning theory; Grade 11 emphasizes self-acceptance and career-development wisdom; Grade 12 emphasizes assessment of academic standing and scientific decision-making [16]. Wang organized content around career cognition, skills, attitudes, and behaviours within a seminar-style structure [17]. Suo decomposed self-directed development into three capacities: exploration (autonomous inquiry into interests, personality, abilities, occupations, and the social environment), decision (autonomous choice of career and life paths and scientific goal-setting), and management (effective management of learning and life and active coping with change) [10].

Two consensuses emerge. Content extends both temporally—spanning immediate choices (subject selection, college application) and lifelong development—and spatially—embracing academic pursuit, occupational preparation, self-directed learning, and career adaptability. Career knowledge is essentially comprehensive and practical, aimed at generating career-development competence rather than transmitting traditional cognitive knowledge. Two perspectives nevertheless coexist: the "career" perspective concentrates on occupational guidance organized around self-cognition, environmental exploration, and decision planning, whereas the "whole-person" (da sheng ya) perspective incorporates mental health, interpersonal relations, and appreciation of life. Which better fits adolescents' developmental needs remains insufficiently argued and empirically untested.

3.3. Curriculum Implementation: Diverse in Form, Deficient in Integration

In the United States, Career Technical Education (CTE) is the dominant form, combining formal coursework with rich extracurricular activities that expose students to the social environment and cultivate independent work and teamwork. Career education is embedded in the overall curriculum and integrated with academic subjects, delivered mainly through classroom instruction and group activities, and systematically implemented by school counsellors; the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) provides templates for both core curriculum action plans and group activity plans [18]. In the UK, career education is delivered three ways: as a standalone subject or integrated

into PSHE (Personal, Social, Health and Economic) education; infused into academic subjects such as mathematics, English, and science; and provided through extracurricular activities tied to the formal curriculum. Schools typically adopt blended approaches, advocate whole-staff participation, and encourage resource co-construction. In Japan, MEXT's Comprehensive Career Education Plan requires schools to mobilize diverse resources to organize varied career-education activities [5].

Chinese Taiwan's supplementary guidelines call for flexible, diversified use of teaching resources tailored to school characteristics and student needs, and emphasize partnership mechanisms with alumni, working professionals, and career role models [7]. Chinese Hong Kong's curriculum guide includes a standalone booklet, "Career Planning—Multiple Pathways to Excellence," and has shifted implementation from schools as sole providers toward joint provision by multiple in-school and off-campus actors through diversified school-based provision that accommodates students of different aptitudes [8].

In the mainland, most scholars agree that career education should span the entire senior high stage and that systematic, professional career-planning courses are an important vehicle for deepening self-cognition and enhancing planning competence [19,20]. Deng et al.'s longitudinal tracking study provides critical evidence: when the career course was abruptly interrupted, the experimental group showed increased career distress and decreased career adaptability, demonstrating the importance of systematic, sustained, and sequential course delivery [21]. Case compilations document a variety of school-based practices, including infused teaching, diversified electives, and school signature activities [22]. Interview- and survey-based research tells a two-sided story. Nie, studying five high schools in Hangzhou, found rich content and formats, attention to both general career knowledge and discipline-infused teaching, and abundant in-school and out-of-school resource platforms [23]; yet he also identified a lack of overall design—fragmented rather than integrated delivery—and an ecosystem in which schools, families, and communities were insufficiently linked. Mainland implementation displays multiple forms: infused teaching alongside specialized courses; career-planning lessons, themed class meetings, lectures, club activities, and individual counselling; and project-based experiences such as career role-play, career-figure interviews, enterprise visits, major-and-university investigations, and occupational simulation.

Implementation pathways in the mainland are diverse and content-rich, yet "deficient in integration" is the prominent bottleneck: there is a lack of overall design across lesson types, with activity-based, fragmented delivery preventing competence progression; and school, family, and community resources have not formed an integrated career-education ecosystem, leaving continuity and systematicity insufficiently guaranteed.

3.4. Curriculum Evaluation: Inconsistent Standards, Limited Research

The UK, US, and Japan emphasize a balance between formative and summative evaluation, supported by institutionalized benchmarks and tools. The ASCA National Model offers diverse evaluation tools; U.S. secondary career education attaches great importance to summative evaluation, requiring school counsellors to demonstrate that their work contributes to student success, while formative evaluation proceeds through portfolios, observation, interviews, and surveys [18]. UK evaluation is based on the Gatsby Benchmarks, using the Compass self-evaluation tool developed by the Careers & Enterprise Company and the Gatsby Foundation to assess provision completeness and stability [24,25]. Japan's Career Passport, proposed in 2016 and rolled out nationwide from 2020, connects academic and occupational careers through retrospective record-keeping, enhancing students' self-evaluation, self-directed learning, and self-actualization [14].

Internationally, empirical evidence has accumulated. Gottfried and Plasman found that students

taking CTE courses had lower dropout rates and higher on-time graduation rates, with particularly pronounced effects for later-high-school course taking [26]. McWhirter et al. showed that a career intervention promoted academic success and career preparation among Latina/o immigrant high school students [27]. In a longitudinal survey of South Korean high school students, Choi et al. found that students who had participated once or twice in school career-education programs over two years scored highest on career-development skills and school success, whereas no association was detected among students with only one or no participation [28]. Creed et al. demonstrated that self-efficacy and early work experience significantly predicted changes over time in career planning and exploration; lack of early work experience was associated with stagnation in both [29].

In the mainland, the value of career education is widely recognized: most students, parents, and teachers regard senior high career guidance as important [20,30]. Yet implementation effects are underwhelming. Students' understanding of career planning remains largely perceptual and poorly connected to future development; content is poorly designed and delivered through single, fragmented channels, leaving students "excited when listening, but at a loss when doing" [20]. As one student interviewed by Wang put it, after an inspiring alumnus lecture, "I thought for a while about applying for psychology—but only for a while, and then I forgot" [31]. Research on evaluation standards is scarce and differently anchored. Wu and Huang designed a learning-evaluation system oriented to decision-making literacy, covering career knowledge, skills, and affect [32], but did not address operationalization. More researchers assess course effects through changes in psychological indicators: Gu, Chen, and Chen found that a career-education-based subject-selection guidance model reduced career decision-making difficulties, enhanced career maturity, and stimulated learning motivation [33]; Chen reported significant improvements in career exploration, adaptability, and subject-selection satisfaction following a teaching intervention [34]; and Dou et al. found that a Cognitive Information Processing (CIP)-based teaching intervention significantly enhanced students' self-efficacy in major decision-making, reduced decision-making difficulties, and made metacognition more active [35].

Despite broad consensus on the importance of career-education courses, the mainland started late, and research on "how to evaluate" and "how to verify" is weak, with evaluation standards particularly underdeveloped. Existing empirical studies are predominantly short-term interventions without longitudinal follow-up, leaving the sustained effects of courses undocumented. The distinguishing features of international evaluation practice—"institutionalized benchmarks, professionalized tools, and continuous data"—precisely mark the gaps mainland research must remedy.

4. Discussion

4.1. Theoretical Paradigm: from Person-Environment Fit to Career Construction

Across curriculum designs, the prevailing logic is that of person-environment fit, the classical occupational guidance paradigm in which individuals' traits, identified through assessment, are matched to suitable occupational categories. However, according to Super's career development theory, senior high students are in the exploration stage: their interests, abilities, and values are undergoing rapid differentiation and reorganization, and self-identity remains unstable [36]. A curriculum built on static matching can neither respond to a "self not yet formed" nor help students construct career meaning amid social uncertainty. Career Construction Theory offers an alternative: the goal of career education is not to help students "find the best match" but to develop career adaptability—concern, control, curiosity, and confidence—through narrative reflection and adaptability routines [37]. This paradigm shift has integrative implications for China: reorienting objectives (from "planning a single choice" to "developing lifelong construction competence"),

reorganizing content (from static knowledge to adaptability practice), and reforming evaluation (from one-off assessment to developmental evidence). It also points to a concrete agenda: curriculum development grounded in this paradigm and its empirical validation.

4.2. Implications for China

Four implications follow from the four-element comparison. First, systematize objectives. Drawing on the NCDG and Chinese Taiwan's experience, a national framework of GSHS career education objectives should be developed with grade-level progression and observable learning outcomes. Second, structure the content. Comprehensive, practical career knowledge should be transformed into coherent curricular modules, and an evidence-based reconciliation between the "career" and "whole-person" perspectives should replace the piling up of activities in lieu of curriculum construction. Third, integrate implementation. An overarching curriculum scheme should coordinate specialized courses, subject infusion, and practical activities, while a school–family–community ecosystem safeguards continuity and systematicity. Fourth, ground evaluation in evidence. Localized benchmarks and instruments should be developed; a continuum of formative and summative evaluation should be established; and large-scale longitudinal studies should be vigorously pursued to build an evidence base for curriculum improvement.

4.3. Limitations and Future Directions

This study has three limitations. First, the review is selective rather than exhaustive; a systematic review protocol with exhaustive retrieval and quality appraisal was not followed, which future work should remedy to strengthen the research design section. Second, systematic analysis of policy documents and textbooks across countries awaits further study. Third, the comparison emphasizes commonalities and gaps but probes insufficiently into the institutional and cultural causes underlying them. Future research may proceed in three directions: (a) systematic development and multi-round iterative validation of a senior high career curriculum grounded in Career Construction Theory; (b) construction of large-sample, long-term tracking databases to test the sustained effects of courses on distal variables such as career adaptability; and (c) in-depth comparative case studies across institutional contexts to uncover the conditions under which curriculum reforms take root.

5. Conclusions

This study systematically reviewed and compared international research on GSHS career education curricula through the four-element framework. At the level of objectives, countries converge on career planning competence as the core and lifelong learning and self-directed development as the foundation, whereas the mainland lacks institutionalized, refined objectives. At the content level, the "career" and "whole-person" perspectives coexist, and the curricular structuring of comprehensive practical knowledge remains weak. At the implementation level, diverse forms coexist with insufficient integration across lesson types and resources. At the evaluation level, foreign practice is more benchmarked, instrument-based, and continuous, whereas mainland research lacks standards and relies on short-term studies. Looking forward, a paradigmatic shift from person-environment fit to career construction, an integrated scheme spanning objectives, content, implementation, and evaluation, and an evidence-based evaluation system constitute the necessary path toward maturity in both research and practice of career education curricula in general senior high schools.

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