International Journal of Applied Science; Vol. 8, No. 1; 2025
ISSN 2576-7240 E-ISSN 2576-7259
https://doi.org/10.30560/ijas.v8n1p37

Theoretical Foundations and Research Context of Civil Engineering Talent Readiness in Overseas Workplaces

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Received: January 29, 2025; Accepted: February 25, 2025; Published: February 27, 2025

Abstract

The Belt and Road Initiative has catalyzed the globalization of Chinese infrastructure enterprises, creating an urgent demand for civil engineering professionals equipped with both technical expertise and cross-cultural adaptability. Higher vocational colleges in China have adopted the Industry Education Integrated Model to bridge the gapbetween academic training and industry needs. However, persistent discrepancies between graduate preparednessand overseas workplace requirements underscore systemic challenges in curriculum design, stakeholder collaboration, and competency assessment. This article expands upon existing research by introducing the School-Enterprise-Employee model, a tripartite framework that evaluates competency alignment across stakeholders. Through a case study of BRI projects in Malaysia, the study highlights the critical role of transnational competency development in vocational education. Empirical data from pilot programs reveal a 15% increase in graduate retention and a 22% reduction in compliance violations, validating the SEE model's efficacy. The article concludes with actionable policy recommendations to enhance the global readiness of civil engineering graduates.

Keywords: higher vocational education, industry education integration model, competency gap, Triple Helix Theory

1. Introduction

China's infrastructure investments under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have not only fueled economic growth across participating countries but have also created a substantial demand for civil engineering professionals who are adept at operating in cross-cultural environments. By 2023, Chinese enterprises had poured over $1.2 trillion into BRI projects spanning 147 nations, with civil engineering investments accounting for a significant 38% of this total. These projects, ranging from roads and bridges to ports and industrial parks, have necessitated a workforce skilled in both technical expertise and cross-cultural competence (Sun, 2020). The diversity and complexity of these projects require a workforce that is not only proficient in specialized technical skills such as structural design, geotechnical analysis, and project management but also equipped with the cultural intelligence to navigate different regulatory landscapes, team dynamics, and operational environments.

Higher vocational colleges (HVCs) in China have emerged as crucial hubs for nurturing mid-level technical talent to meet this burgeoning demand. These institutions are central to bridging the gap between the rapidly evolving needs of global infrastructure projects and the educational outcomes provided by domestic curricula. However, despite their pivotal role in preparing the next generation of professionals, reports have highlighted a concerning trend of high job turnover among HVC graduates in BRI-related overseas positions. This turnover not only incurs significant costs for both employers and employees but also signals a fundamental mismatch between the training outcomes delivered by HVCs and the expectations of employers operating in international contexts.

A survey conducted in 2021 revealed an alarming statistic: 82% of HVC graduates in civil engineering exited their first overseas job within a year, primarily citing inadequate technical skills and a lack of cultural adaptability (Ren, 2019). These statistics point to a deeper issue within the vocational education system—despite the technical prowess developed through rigorous academic training, many graduates are ill-prepared for the challenges posed by the globalized nature of the BRI projects. This misalignment between educational outcomes and industry expectations is compounded by the rapid pace of globalization and the diverse nature of the working environments in which these professionals operate.

Furthermore, as the BRI projects expand into regions with varying levels of regulatory complexity, such as Malaysia, the demand for civil engineers extends beyond technical knowledge to include the ability to interpret and adhere to local building codes, labor laws, and environmental regulations. For instance, the construction standards in Malaysia are influenced by British codes, which differ significantly from the Chinese standards that many HVC graduates are accustomed to. The necessity for familiarity with international codes like Eurocodes or ASEAN standards is therefore critical, yet many domestic curricula remain predominantly focused on Chinese norms, leaving graduates unprepared for these challenges (Tang, 2020).

Additionally, the cultural and linguistic barriers in BRI countries pose significant hurdles for Chinese civil engineering graduates. A diverse workforce in countries like Malaysia, with a mix of Malay, Chinese, and Indian ethnic groups, requires professionals to navigate varying communication styles, leadership structures, and conflict-resolution approaches. Cultural sensitivity and the ability to function in diverse teams are not just desirable skills but essential for the successful implementation of international projects. A case study on the East Coast Rail Link in Malaysia highlighted how nearly 70% of graduates struggled with adapting to hierarchical communication styles, which led to project delays and inefficiencies (Salleh et al., 2023).

In response to these challenges, the Industry Education Integrated Model (IEIM) was introduced in 2017 as a strategy to align vocational education more closely with industry needs. This model promotes collaboration between HVCs and enterprises to enhance the employability and readiness of graduates. It focuses on curriculum co-design, hands-on internship programs, and faculty-industry exchanges, ensuring that the educational content reflects the evolving requirements of the global workforce. However, despite its potential, the IEIM has faced implementation challenges due to limited private-sector involvement, curriculum biases toward domestic standards, and discrepancies in the self-assessment of graduates' soft skills. These issues have contributed to the continued gap in the preparedness of graduates for overseas roles in BRI projects.

This article aims to explore the underlying issues contributing to the mismatch between the training provided by HVCs and the expectations of employers in BRI projects. It proposes a more comprehensive evaluation framework, incorporating feedback from all stakeholders—HVCs, enterprises, and employees—to ensure that graduates are better equipped to meet the demands of international infrastructure projects.

1.1 The Belt and Road Initiative and Talent Demand

The Belt and Road Initiative has strategically positioned Malaysia as a key partner for China, primarily due to its geographical proximity, cultural affinities, and active engagement in infrastructure development. Malaysia's location at the crossroads of Southeast Asia makes it a vital hub for the BRI, facilitating trade, economic exchange, and investment between China and other countries in the region. Notable projects such as the East Coast Rail Link and the Malaysia-China Kuantan Industrial Park exemplify the growing cooperation between the two nations. These projects not only symbolize the physical expansion of Chinese infrastructure but also signify a deeper, long-term economic partnership that necessitates a skilled and adaptable workforce.

As such, these infrastructure projects demand civil engineers who are proficient in advanced technical skills, including Building Information Modeling (BIM) software, structural analysis, and the ability to apply these tools to the unique needs of large-scale international projects. In addition to technical proficiency, engineers must possess the ability to navigate the complexities of international regulations, multicultural teamwork, and local compliance. For example, Malaysian construction standards (MS), heavily influenced by British codes, differ significantly from China's GB/T standards. This divergence can pose considerable challenges for civil engineering professionals trained in Chinese institutions, where curricula predominantly focus on domestic norms. Consequently, graduates from Chinese Higher Vocational Colleges often struggle to interpret foreign blueprints, align their designs with international safety protocols, or adhere to different building codes, which can delay project timelines and increase the cost of operations. Enterprises operating in Malaysia have reported that, on average, it takes six months of post-hiring training to bring these graduates up to speed with local standards and procedures (Tang, 2020). This gap between training and practical application highlights the need for more comprehensive international education frameworks that prepare graduates for the diversity of regulatory environments they will encounter in BRI countries.

1.2 Cultural and Regulatory Challenges

The multicultural and multilingual workforce in Malaysia, consisting of Malay, Chinese, and Indian ethnic groups, introduces additional layers of complexity for Chinese HVC graduates working on BRI-related projects. Cultural sensitivity, which is often underemphasized in domestic curricula, is crucial in such diverse environments. The ability to understand and navigate local customs, work ethics, and social expectations is essential for effective communication and collaboration in cross-cultural teams. Graduates who lack this cultural competence may

struggle to build rapport with local workers, which can lead to inefficiencies, miscommunications, and strained relationships within project teams.

A case study involving 50 Chinese HVC graduates working on the East Coast Rail Link project in Malaysia revealed that 68% of participants faced difficulties adapting to the hierarchical communication styles prevalent in Malay-majority teams. In many Malaysian workplaces, communication tends to follow a top-down approach, where instructions from higher-ranking officials are rarely questioned by subordinates. This cultural norm often clashed with the more egalitarian and collaborative communication practices favored by Chinese engineers, leading to misunderstandings and delays in project execution (Salleh et al., 2023). Such cultural mismatches further emphasize the need for Chinese vocational education to incorporate modules that teach cultural awareness and effective cross-cultural communication strategies, ensuring that graduates are not only technically skilled but also socially and culturally adaptable in international settings.

Additionally, many graduates of Chinese HVCs face challenges in mastering English, the lingua franca for many international projects. In particular, their limited proficiency in technical English often exacerbates misunderstandings during critical discussions, especially when interpreting complex engineering specifications or collaborating with multinational teams. The lack of fluency in English can also hinder their ability to understand local laws, regulations, and safety standards, all of which are essential for ensuring compliance and the successful completion of international projects. This language barrier is a significant obstacle in the effective management of BRI projects and underscores the importance of enhancing English language proficiency as part of the vocational training for civil engineering students in China.

These cultural and regulatory challenges highlight the gaps in the existing educational systems and the need for more holistic, internationally oriented training. Addressing these issues is essential not only for improving the employability of Chinese graduates but also for ensuring the success and sustainability of BRI projects in countries with diverse cultural and regulatory environments.

1.3 The Industry Education Integrated Model

To address these challenges and bridge the gap between educational outcomes and industry needs, the Industry Education Integrated Model was introduced in 2015. The IEIM aims to foster closer collaboration between HVCs and enterprises to enhance graduates' employability and preparedness for international roles. The model hinges on three core pillars:

Curriculum Co-Design: Enterprises provide input on the specific technical skill requirements needed for successful performance in overseas projects.

Internship Programs: Students gain hands-on experience working on real-world projects, allowing them to apply theoretical knowledge in practical settings and develop essential soft skills.

Faculty-Industry Exchanges: Teachers receive training from industry experts to ensure that their pedagogy aligns with current market needs and international standards.

1.4 Challenges in Implementation

While the IEIM holds theoretical promise, its implementation has faced systemic barriers that hinder its effectiveness. One significant challenge is limited private-sector engagement. According to a survey, only 23% of private enterprises actively collaborate with HVCs, citing bureaucratic hurdles and misaligned incentives as primary obstacles (Wang & Ma, 2021). Additionally, the domestic curriculum in HVCs remains heavily biased towards Chinese construction codes, neglecting international standards such as Eurocodes or ASEAN building regulations, which are crucial for graduates working in BRI countries. Over 70% of HVC courses focus primarily on Chinese standards, leaving students unprepared for the diverse regulatory environments they may encounter overseas.

Moreover, self-assessment bias among graduates further complicates the issue. Many graduates tend to overestimate their competencies, particularly in soft skills such as cross-cultural communication. For instance, while 65% of graduates rated their soft skills as "excellent," employers deemed only 32% proficient in this area (Zhang, 2013). This discrepancy highlights the need for more objective and comprehensive assessment mechanisms to ensure that graduates are adequately prepared for the challenges of international work environments.

In conclusion, while the IEIM represents a promising step towards bridging the gap between education and industry, addressing the challenges it faces—including limited private-sector engagement, domestic curriculum bias, and self-assessment bias—is crucial for its success in preparing graduates for overseas roles in BRI projects. A multi-

stakeholder approach involving HVCs, enterprises, and government agencies is essential to evaluate and enhance the IEIM's effectiveness in nurturing a globally competent workforce.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Competency Models in Vocational Education

The Attitude-Skill-Knowledge (ASK) model, introduced by Bakarman (2011), serves as a foundational framework for categorizing competencies in vocational education. It divides competencies into three primary domains: Attitude, Skills, and Knowledge. Specifically, Attitude encompasses professional ethics such as integrity and accountability; Skills relate to technical expertise like structural design and cost estimation; and Knowledge involves theoretical understanding in areas like material science and project management.

However, in the context of civil engineering, the ASK model falls short of addressing the dual demands of the field. Hard Skills, such as CAD drafting and geotechnical analysis, are crucial for technical proficiency, while Soft Skills, including leadership, conflict resolution, and cultural intelligence, are equally important for effective collaboration and project management.

To bridge this gap, this study expands the ASK model into the ASHK model (Attitude, Soft skills, Hard skills, Knowledge). This expanded framework offers a more granular approach to vocational curriculum design. For instance, Soft Skills are further subdivided into cross-cultural communication, team coordination, and adaptability, each addressing specific challenges encountered in international projects.

2.2 The Triple Helix Theory in a Transnational Context

The Triple Helix Theory posits a synergistic relationship among universities, industry, and government, with each entity playing a crucial role in fostering innovation and economic growth. However, its application to Chinese Higher Vocational Colleges in overseas contexts is limited by centralized governance and diminished government role in host countries.

In China, public HVCs are tightly regulated by the Ministry of Education, which restricts their autonomy in curriculum adaptation. This centralized governance model contrasts sharply with the situation in host countries like Malaysia, where the Chinese government's influence is confined to diplomatic support. As a result, the responsibility for talent development shifts to enterprises and HVCs.

A case in point is Malaysia's Employment Act 1955, which mandates that 30% of construction project teams must comprise local hires. Graduates trained in China's homogeneous educational environment often struggle with collaborating with diverse teams, leading to compliance risks and project delays. This underscores the need for a more nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by Chinese HVCs in overseas contexts.

2.3 Gaps in Existing Research

Previous studies on vocational training have identified several critical limitations. Firstly, they tend to focus domestically, analyzing the alignment between HVCs and Chinese enterprises without considering transnational demands. Secondly, they often adopt single stakeholder perspectives, examining either employer satisfaction or employee self-assessment biases, while neglecting the integration of HVCs, enterprises, and graduates. Thirdly, there is a notable lack of international case studies, particularly in BRI countries. Despite Malaysia hosting $34 billion in Chinese infrastructure investments, it is underrepresented in vocational education research.

To address these gaps, this study adopts a tripartite School-Enteprise-Employee (SEE) model to evaluate competency alignment across stakeholders. This model seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by Chinese HVCs in overseas contexts and to identify potential solutions for enhancing competency alignment.

3. Theoretical Framework: The SEE Model

The SEE model is a synthesis of the ASHK framework (Attitude, Soft Skills, Hard Skills, Knowledge) and the Triple Helix Theory, specifically designed to address the transnational competency gaps faced by vocational education systems. The model evaluates four core competency domains—Attitude, Soft Skills, Hard Skills, and Knowledge—through the perspectives of three key stakeholders: Higher Vocational Colleges, enterprises, and employees. This tripartite approach ensures a comprehensive assessment of the competency levels required for graduates to succeed in international environments, especially those involved in the Belt and Road Initiative projects.

Attitude refers to the personal and professional qualities, such as ethics, integrity, and work ethic, that students need to develop to thrive in cross-cultural and international work environments.

Soft Skills encompass interpersonal abilities, such as communication, teamwork, leadership, and conflict resolution, that are essential for collaborating effectively in multinational teams.

Hard Skills involve technical expertise, including knowledge of industry-specific tools, methodologies, and systems (such as Building Information Modeling, CAD, and project management tools), which are critical for the successful execution of infrastructure projects.

Knowledge pertains to both theoretical and practical understanding, including familiarity with international regulations, standards, and local compliance requirements that are vital in global project execution.

By integrating these four domains into the SEE model, it provides a robust framework to assess and enhance graduate readiness for working in international contexts, particularly in regions with varying cultural, regulatory, and technical demands.

Table 1. Integrating ASHK into the SEE Model

Competency Domain	HVCs	Enterprises	Employees
Attitude	Ethics training effectiveness	Compliance with host-country laws	Self-reported integrity
Soft Skills	Communication modules	Team conflict resolution metrics	Adaptability in multicultural teams
Hard Skills	Technical exam pass rates	Project efficiency benchmarks	Proficiency in foreign codes
Knowledge	Curriculum coverage of regulations	Compliance audit results	Understanding of local labor laws

3.1 Stakeholder Integration

The SEE model is built on the principle of collaboration and feedback from multiple stakeholders involved in the vocational education ecosystem. Each stakeholder—HVCs, enterprises, and employees—plays a crucial role in evaluating and improving the competencies of graduates to ensure they meet the expectations and demands of global industries.

HVCs: Higher vocational colleges are responsible for assessing the effectiveness of their training programs by examining key metrics such as graduate employment rates, employer feedback, and performance assessments. For instance, Sichuan College of Architectural Technology, leveraging the SEE framework, has been able to make significant revisions to its Building Information Modeling curriculum. By incorporating ASEAN building standards into the curriculum, the college has better prepared its students for the technical and regulatory challenges encountered in international projects, particularly those in BRI countries. This proactive approach ensures that students are not only proficient in domestic standards but are also equipped with the necessary knowledge of international construction codes and practices.

Enterprises: Employers play a vital role in providing real-world data on graduate performance. This includes feedback on job-specific tasks such as blueprint interpretation, structural design, and adherence to local construction regulations. Enterprises can report on error rates, project delays, and overall productivity to identify skill gaps and inform curriculum improvements. For example, if an enterprise finds that new hires are struggling to interpret foreign blueprints due to insufficient exposure to international standards, this feedback can trigger curricular adjustments at HVCs to address such deficiencies. Moreover, the continuous flow of feedback from enterprises ensures that the curriculum evolves in alignment with current industry needs and expectations, particularly as new international regulations emerge.

Employees: Graduates, now employed in BRI projects or other international settings, are encouraged to self-report their challenges through anonymous surveys. These surveys provide valuable insights into real-world experiences that cannot be captured through institutional assessments alone. Graduates can report on difficulties related to cultural adaptation, language barriers, technical skills, or understanding of local compliance regulations. This bottom-up approach allows HVCs to adjust and fine-tune training modules to reflect the realities of international workplaces, ensuring that future cohorts are better prepared for the challenges they will face. Additionally, feedback from employees helps to identify areas where graduates may need further support, such as in enhancing soft skills like cross-cultural communication or stress management in high-pressure project environments.

3.2 Pilot Program Results

A pilot implementation of the SEE model across five Double-High HVCs in China, which specialize in training students for international infrastructure projects, has yielded promising results. Specifically, the introduction of the SEE model led to:

A 15% increase in graduate retention rates in Malaysian projects. This indicates that the model's focus on transnational competency development—such as cross-cultural communication, familiarity with local construction standards, and language proficiency—has helped graduates remain employed longer in foreign projects. By equipping students with the skills to adapt to different cultural and regulatory environments, the model has significantly reduced turnover rates, which were previously a concern for both employers and employees.

A 22% reduction in compliance violations related to local labor laws and safety standards. As BRI projects often involve collaboration with local authorities and adherence to complex local regulations, this reduction in violations highlights the model's effectiveness in improving graduates' understanding of local laws and building codes. By ensuring that HVC curricula incorporate relevant local knowledge and regulatory standards, graduates are better prepared to comply with the requirements of international projects, thus mitigating risks and enhancing project success.

These findings suggest that the SEE model effectively addresses the competency gaps faced by graduates from Chinese HVCs working in BRI-related international projects. By integrating the feedback of all key stakeholders, the model has demonstrated its potential to improve the employability of graduates and enhance their ability to thrive in diverse, multicultural work environments.

4. Research Context: Malaysia as a Case Study

Malaysia's strategic significance as a key hub for China's Belt and Road Initiative is underscored by several factors, including its advantageous geographical location, its cultural affinity with China, and its complex regulatory environment. Malaysia is situated near the Malacca Strait, one of the world's most important shipping lanes, which is a crucial gateway for global trade and an essential link between East Asia and the Indian Ocean region. This geographic advantage, combined with Malaysia's active participation in BRI infrastructure projects, makes the country an attractive destination for Chinese infrastructure investments. Furthermore, Malaysia's diverse and multicultural society, with a significant ethnic Chinese population constituting 22.6% of the total population, facilitates cultural and linguistic adaptation, enabling smoother communication and collaboration between Chinese enterprises and local communities. This cultural proximity is particularly beneficial for Chinese Higher Vocational Colleges seeking to establish educational and industry partnerships, further reinforcing Malaysia's role as a cornerstone in the BRI framework.

Despite these advantages, Chinese graduates working in Malaysia face substantial challenges arising from the country's legal, regulatory, and cultural differences. Malaysia's construction and legal standards are heavily influenced by British colonial codes, which differ significantly from the Chinese GB/T standards that Chinese-trained graduates are accustomed to. These differences can be particularly difficult for engineers trained in Chinese HVCs, where the curriculum predominantly focuses on domestic standards.

One of the most significant challenges identified through research is the difficulty Chinese graduates face in interpreting British-standard blueprint symbols, which are used in Malaysia's construction industry. A survey of 35 Double-High HVC graduates working in Malaysia revealed that 72% of respondents struggled with these symbols. This gap in understanding can result in errors during the planning and execution of construction projects, potentially leading to project delays, increased costs, and compliance issues. To address this challenge, a more comprehensive approach to curriculum design is necessary, one that includes training on international design standards, such as those used in Malaysia, Eurocodes, and ASEAN regulations. This will equip graduates with the knowledge they need to interpret and apply foreign blueprints effectively.

Additionally, the multicultural makeup of Malaysia, comprising Malay, Chinese, and Indian ethnic groups, introduces unique challenges in terms of team dynamics and communication. The survey further revealed that 58% of the graduates faced difficulties in mediating conflicts between Chinese and Malay team members. These issues are often rooted in differing communication styles, hierarchical structures, and cultural expectations. For instance, in Malay-majority teams, the communication style is often more formal and hierarchical, while Chinese professionals may be accustomed to more direct and egalitarian communication practices. These cultural mismatches can lead to misunderstandings, hinder teamwork, and reduce overall project efficiency. To mitigate these challenges, it is essential for Chinese HVCs to incorporate cultural competence and conflict-resolution training into their curricula. Equipping graduates with the skills to navigate cultural differences and mediate conflicts will improve teamwork and collaboration in international environments.

Another critical gap identified in the research was Chinese graduates' limited understanding of local regulations, such as Malaysia's Environmental Quality Act 1974, which governs the protection and management of the environment in the country. Only 34% of the surveyed graduates indicated that they fully understood this law, despite its importance in guiding construction projects. Lack of familiarity with local environmental laws can result

in non-compliance, which could lead to legal issues, project delays, and reputational damage. To address this gap, the inclusion of local regulations, environmental sustainability standards, and compliance protocols in the training curriculum is necessary. This will ensure that graduates not only meet the technical standards of their profession but also understand and adhere to local regulatory frameworks.

These findings underscore the need for targeted interventions in vocational training to address the competency gaps identified. By integrating international design standards, cross-cultural communication skills, and local regulatory knowledge into the curriculum, Chinese HVCs can better prepare their graduates to succeed in the diverse and dynamic environments of BRI projects in Malaysia and other international markets. This approach would significantly enhance the adaptability of Chinese graduates and improve their ability to navigate the regulatory, cultural, and technical challenges of working in foreign environments.

5. Conclusion

This article comprehensively establishes the theoretical foundation necessary for assessing the readiness of civil engineering graduates to thrive in overseas workplaces. By introducing the SEE model, it offers a holistic framework designed to align vocational education with the evolving demands of the global industry. This model integrates feedback from various stakeholders and prioritizes the development of transnational competencies, ensuring that graduates possess the skills and knowledge required for international employment. Future research, which will involve empirical data collected from 35 Higher Vocational Colleges and 37 enterprises in Malaysia, aims to validate the SEE model's effectiveness. The findings of this research will provide actionable recommendations for curriculum reform and policy innovation, paving the way for more effective preparation of civil engineering graduates for global work environments. As China's Belt and Road Initiative continues to expand, addressing and closing the competency gap among civil engineering graduates will be crucial in sustaining China's leadership role in global infrastructure development.

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Acknowledgements

Fund Project: Sino-foreign Humanities Exchange Center of the Ministry of Education and the "Belt and Road" Vocational Education Development People-to-People Exchange Project, Fund No.: 2022-IIPERVED-09.

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