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Bridging the Gap: Aligning Vocational Graduates' Competencies with Employer Expectations Using the KSAO Model

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Abstract

In response to growing concerns regarding vocational college students' career issues, this study uses the KSAO model to investigate the competency gap between upper vocational accounting majors and employer expectations. The study used a survey research design to assess the core competencies of accounting graduates from eight top vocational colleges in Guangdong, China. The study used a survey research design to assess the core competencies of accounting graduates from eight top vocational colleges in Guangdong, China. About 367 graduates were randomly selected, and 33 employers from various industries were purposively selected as samples in this study. Data was collected through two sets of questionnaires. This study identifies differences across important dimensions: knowledge (K), skills (S), ability (A), and other attributes (O) by using two set of instruments with four major indicators and 32 secondary indicators. The findings indicate that the satisfaction ratings of employers regarding students' core competencies and the graduates' self-assessments of their core competencies across all KSAO elements exhibit high mean scores. Findings show that the satisfaction rating of employers on the core competencies of students' employment in descending order is other attributes > ability > knowledge > skills. On the other hand, graduates perceived themselves on the core competencies of students' employment in descending order: knowledge > other attributes > skills > ability. There is a mismatch between employers' perception and the graduated perception of the core competencies of students' employment, and it is proven by the independent sample t-test. A strategy to enhance the core competencies of higher vocational accounting students through SWOT analysis was recommended as guidance for vocational institutions in strengthening talent development strategies and student core competencies, thereby contributing to bridging the gap between education and workforce needs.

1. Introduction

The modern world is changing rapidly, globalization, aging populations, the expansion of the knowledge-based economy, technological advancements, and intercultural integration—all of which place new demands on workers' core competencies. As higher education expands and labor market expectations rise, vocational students are pressured to match employer demands (Lu, 2023). Core competencies refer to a person's ability to find, keep, and transfer between employment in the labor market. It combines knowledge, abilities, personal characteristics, and professional literacy (Zhang & Zhu, 2024). The level of core competencies directly impacts vocational graduates' success in the labor market.

However, a number of significant questions emerge: What are the job characteristics of vocational graduates? How do their career paths, starting incomes, and job satisfaction compare? What variables influence their core competencies? Research in this topic is critical for strengthening vocational graduates' career prospects, guiding talent development reforms, and promoting the high-quality advancement of vocational education. Addressing the core competencies gap remains a pressing issue that necessitates targeted efforts to improve vocational students' career preparedness and facilitate higher-quality employment outcomes. The weak core competencies and limited long-term career development of college students have been persistent challenges in China's higher education system. These issues manifest in various ways, including insufficient professional competence, weak general abilities (Peng, 2020), constrained development potential, low social adaptability (Zhang, 2023), and inadequate professional literacy (Wang & Yun, 2023).

Li and Nan (2018) developed a mismatch model highlighting discrepancies between academic disciplines and employer expectations to quantify the disconnect between higher education and industry demands. Their findings indicate that engineering and management fields exhibit high degrees of mismatch—34% and 26%, respectively. Employees who perceive alignment between their skills and organizational needs are better positioned to navigate their careers and enhance job performance. This perspective underscores the importance of core competencies, skills, and the ability to adapt to workplace demands, emphasizing a dynamic interaction between individual capabilities and job requirements.

Researchers have recently reevaluated and classified vocational students' core competencies using well-established models such as the USEM model, the "psycho-social construct" model, and the Career EDGE model. Building on the Career EDGE model, Lan (2014) categorized core competencies into three dimensions: intrinsic qualities, social skills, and job-handling capabilities. Studies suggest employers prioritize individual traits (Shi, 2024), including professional interests, work ethics, craftsmanship, and other vocational values (Deng, Tan, & Zheng, 2021), alongside technical qualifications and competencies. The KSAO core competencies model proposed by Harvey serves as a widely recognized framework for assessing job qualifications, particularly in American enterprises. By applying the KSAO model, researchers can systematically analyze whether individuals possess the essential core competencies skills for specific professions, offering a comprehensive assessment of their career readiness. This model evaluates core competencies through four key dimensions:

a. Knowledge (K) – Domain-specific expertise required for the job.
b. Skills (S) – Practical competencies developed through training and experience.
c. Abilities (A) – Innate capabilities that influence job performance.
d. Other attributes (O) – Additional attributes such as personality traits and work ethics.

In summary, this study analyzes employment survey data from fresh graduates of seven higher vocational colleges and the related employers in Guangdong Province. Through a comparative analysis of vocational graduates' core competencies, this study aims to objectively present the satisfaction level of core competencies mismatch between employers and graduates in the accounting discipline and potential gaps. The findings will provide targeted recommendations to help vocational accounting graduates better adapt to shifting labor market demands and achieve optimal employment outcomes through SWOT analysis.

2. Methodology

A survey research design was employed to comprehensively assess the core competency of accounting graduates from eight top-ranked higher vocational colleges in Guangdong Province. A total of 367 accounting graduates were selected as participants through stratified sampling. At the same time, 33 employers were purposefully sampled for their input, among the employers participating in this study, including financial agency bookkeeping companies, commercial services, individual private enterprises, transportation and logistics companies, foreign-invested commercial enterprises, commodity retailing, and investment companies. All these employers have recruited graduates from the above seven vocational colleges in Guangdong Province.

Two sets of questionnaires served as instruments for data collection. The description of these questionnaires is shown in Table 1. The Student Core Competencies Self-Assessment Questionnaire was distributed to fresh graduates in seven higher vocational colleges and universities ranked top in various aspects in Guangdong Province, which was designed to gain a comprehensive understanding of the level of the actual core competencies

of the students of higher vocational colleges in Guangdong Province. Meanwhile, the Employer's Satisfaction Rate on Graduates Core Competencies Questionnaire was issued to the relevant personnel. Experts and scholars were consulted to review and refine the content of the Chinese-language questionnaire used in Guangdong Province to ensure its validity. A panel of three experienced academicians in English and accounting assessed its clarity and measurement variables based on their survey design and data collection expertise. After systematic evaluation, experts confirmed the questionnaire's content validity and suggested modifications to enhance its effectiveness. Pilot testing was conducted with 46 vocational college graduates and 33 employers to ensure the questionnaire's reliability. The Cronbach's coefficient for the graduates' questionnaire was 0.982, indicating high reliability. Similarly, the employer questionnaire showed Cronbach's Alpha coefficients above 0.9 for all variables, with an overall reliability coefficient of 0.979, confirming a very high level of reliability. The collected data were analyzed using mean scores, standard deviations, an independent sample t-test, and SWOT analysis to achieve the study's aims.

Table 1 *Questionnaire description and items*

Description	Items	
	Graduates' self-assessment Questionnaire	Employers' Satisfaction Rate on Graduates Core Competencies Questionnaire
Part A: Demographics	8	8
Part B: Core Competence based on KSAO Model		
Knowledge (K)	8	8
Skills (S)	8	8
Abilities (A)	8	8
Other Attributes (O)	8	8
Total	40	40

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Comparative Analysis of KSAO Core Competencies between Employers' Satisfaction and Vocational Accounting Graduates' Self-Assessment

This section presents the findings and discussion based on employers' evaluations of the KSAO core competencies required for college graduates' employment. Employers rated the importance of various competencies across four dimensions, and the rankings were determined by analyzing the average scores of 32 core competencies. Meanwhile, the graduates proceeded with self-assessment of KSAO core competencies through questionnaires with 32 items too. To assess whether significant differences existed between high and low subgroups, independent samples t-tests were conducted for the 32 items within the four latent variables. The analysis primarily relied on independent samples t-tests, where t-values were obtained and corresponding p-values were checked. If $p > 0.05$, the null hypothesis was not rejected, indicating that the difference between the two groups was not statistically significant.

Table 2 *Comparison between employers' satisfaction and vocational accounting graduates' self-assessment of KSAO core competencies*

	Employers		Graduates
↓	Other attributes (M=3.931, SD=0.817)	↓	Knowledge (M=3.422, SD=0.926)
	Abilities (M=3.859, SD=0.772)		Other attributes (M=3.408, SD=0.901)
	Knowledge (M=3.765, SD=0.653)		Skills (M=3.300, SD=0.941)
	Skills (M=3.700, SD=0.695)		Abilities (M=3.169, SD=0.789)

*M=mean score, SD=standard deviation

Table 2 presents the comparison of employers' satisfaction and vocational accounting graduates' self-assessment regarding the KSAO core competencies. The results indicate that employers rated Other Attributes as the most important competency (M=3.931, SD=0.817), followed by Abilities (M=3.859, SD=0.772) and Knowledge (M=3.422, SD=0.926), while Skills received the lowest rating (M=3.408, SD=0.901). In contrast, graduates perceived Knowledge as their strongest competency (M=3.765, SD=0.653), followed by Skills (M=3.700, SD=0.695

and M=3.300, SD=0.941), with Abilities receiving the lowest self-assessment score (M=3.169, SD=0.789). These findings highlight a notable misalignment between employer expectations and graduates' self-perceptions. Employers emphasize Other Attributes, such as responsibility, adaptability, and willingness to learn, while graduates prioritize Knowledge and Skills, suggesting that students may not fully grasp the broader competencies required for long-term career success. Figure 1 illustrates the difference in KSAO core competencies score between graduates and employers visually.

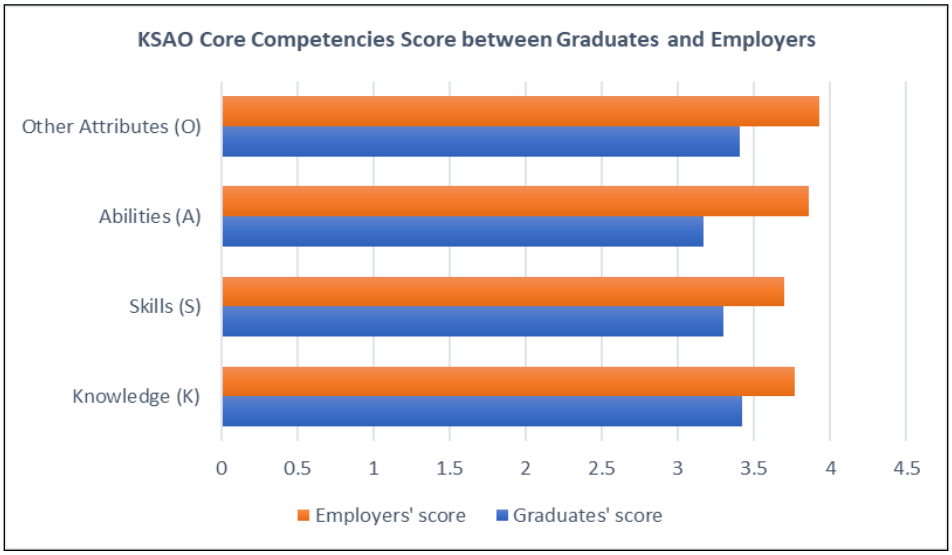

Fig. 1 *KSAO core competencies score between graduates and employers*

Table 3 *The independent sample t-test analysis for comparison between employers' satisfaction level and vocational accounting students' core competencies in KSAO*

Core Competence	F	Sig.	t	df	p-value (2-tailed)
Knowledge (K)	10.236	0.001	-2.778	44.494	< .05
Skills (S)	5.502	0.019	-3.065	43.325	< .05
Abilities (A)	0.089	0.765	-4.824	398	<.001
Other Attributes (O)	0.665	0.415	-3.223	398	< .05

The independent samples t-test examined differences in perceptions of core competencies between employers and vocational accounting graduates. The analysis assessed four competency dimensions: Knowledge, Skills, Abilities, and Other Attributes, with significance levels reported to determine statistical differences between the two groups, as shown in Table 3.

For Knowledge, there was a statistically significant difference between employer and graduate perceptions, t (44.49) = -2.78, p < .05. Employers rated knowledge competency lower than graduates' self-assessment, suggesting that students may overestimate their academic preparedness. The effect size for this difference was Cohen's d = 0.91, indicating a significant effect, meaning this discrepancy has substantial practical significance. Regarding Skills, the results showed a significant difference, t(43.32) = -3.07, p < .05. Employers expressed lower satisfaction with graduates' practical skills than graduates' self-evaluations, highlighting a significant gap in applied competency and workplace readiness. The effect size for this comparison was Cohen's d = 0.92, the highest among the four dimensions, reinforcing the need for stronger skill development in vocational education.

For Abilities, the t-test demonstrated a statistically significant difference, t (398) = -4.82, p < .05. Employers rated ability-related competencies, such as problem-solving and adaptability, higher than graduates, suggesting that students may underestimate the importance of these attributes for career success. The effect size, Cohen's d = 0.79, was slightly lower than other dimensions but still represents a significant effect, emphasizing the need for targeted competency-building initiatives. Similarly, a significant difference was observed for Other Attributes, t (398) = -3.22, p < .05. Employers strongly emphasized qualities such as initiative, responsibility, and workplace adaptability, while graduates rated these competencies lower. The effect size for this discrepancy was Cohen's d = 0.89, indicating another significant effect, supporting the argument that vocational training should integrate soft-skills enhancement programs.

The study indicates several important gaps in vocational graduates' employment readiness, exposing differences between academic training in institutions and industrial requirements. One primary concern is graduates' inadequate awareness of essential capabilities. Many vocational accounting graduates define job-related abilities as technical skills and professional knowledge. On the other hand, employers place a premium on broader qualities like initiative, innovation, and responsibility. This difference shows that vocational curriculum should include more comprehensive skill development to ensure that graduates have technical expertise and the necessary attributes for the job (Halik Bassah & Mohd Noor, 2023). Another challenge is bridging the gap between the school curriculum and industry standards. The study found that vocational graduates usually lack self-directed learning skills and goal-setting awareness, making them less adaptable in professional contexts. Furthermore, a lack of practical experience hinders students from successfully applying their academic knowledge to real-world problems. To address this gap, vocational colleges should offer more experiential learning opportunities, such as internships, industry collaborations, and competency-based training, to enhance work performance (Sharberi et al., 2019). Furthermore, rising industry expectations in a competitive job market create new challenges. As business hiring criteria continue to rise, graduates must develop problem-solving and analytical abilities in addition to their technical competencies. A balanced approach to education, integrating core knowledge with hands-on experience, will better prepare students to fulfill workforce demands and stay competitive (De Guzman & Cristobal, 2021).

These findings also highlight the critical need for vocational education reforms consistent with global talent development trends, particularly in industrial upgrading. Experiential learning, soft skill development, and industry-driven training can help students enhance their employability and career preparedness (Yunos, 2023) through the KSAO model that emphasizes the core dimensions of employability, demonstrating their broad application across vocational education systems (Bardusova, 2025). Addressing the capability gaps in this study will improve vocational graduates' employment prospects while promoting greater alignment between higher education institutions and employer expectations. Future research should focus on KSAO-based interventions to ensure graduates have complete skills that suit the changing demands of the global job market (Asian Development Bank, 2014).

In summary, the findings highlight an apparent misalignment between vocational graduates' key abilities, as measured by the KSAO model, and employer expectations. Bridging this gap requires a collaborative effort from educational institutions, governments, and industry players. Strengthening ties between institutions and industries, regularly updating curriculum content to meet industry expectations, and adding soft-skill development into vocational training are all important steps toward improving graduates' workforce readiness. Furthermore, enhancing students' ability to adapt to workplace dynamics and overall vocational competence will result in a smoother transition into employment, eventually meeting the changing demands of the labor market.

3.2 Strategy for Enhancing Core Competencies of Vocational Colleges Accounting Students Using SWOT Analysis

This study examines the gap of accounting graduates' current core competencies and employers' expectations, analyzing the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats in accounting talent development. By exploring the interaction between graduates' competencies and the external environment, the study categorizes various employment scenarios and strategic conditions that influence graduates' job prospects. When graduates' strengths align with favorable external opportunities, they can leverage their advantages to secure high-quality employment. Conversely, if graduates possess strengths but face an unfavorable job market, they must actively capitalize on their skills to create opportunities and mitigate threats. In contrast, when graduates lack advantages and unfavorable external conditions, employment challenges become severe, necessitating strategies to overcome weaknesses and minimize external threats.

SWOT analysis is an essential strategic technique that examines internal strengths and weaknesses and external opportunities and threats. In the context of higher vocational graduates focused on accounting, SWOT analysis allows for a methodical study of employment dynamics. This technique provides a solution for dealing with employment difficulties by systematically examining the internal (advantages and disadvantages) and external (opportunities and threats) working environments. Furthermore, this study's findings illuminate how China's accounting and finance vocational colleges might incorporate social resources to help their graduates create long-term careers. Using SWOT analysis to examine the employment landscape for vocational accounting graduates assists in identifying existing difficulties and developing practical solutions.

This study illustrates the primary techniques for optimizing job outcomes through this analytical lens: graduates with limited chances owing to personal disadvantages must improve their abilities to maximize external opportunities. Meanwhile, graduates with excellent qualifications in an indifferent labor market must aggressively craft challenges and capitalize on their abilities. Finally, focused interventions are required to promote employability and reduce risks for graduates facing internal and external challenges.

Table 4 presents the internal advantages of vocational college graduates' core competencies. Vocational college students acquire substantial professional technical knowledge and skills early in their studies. Graduates get strong hands-on abilities, operational skills, and application analysis capacities through on-campus practical training, off-campus internships, and school-employer collaborations. As a result, they have strong technical skills, making them highly employable and sought after by various sectors. Compared to undergraduates, vocational college students complete their studies one year earlier, allowing them to enter the workforce sooner and gain valuable work experience. Many graduates exhibit clear career goals and are willing to engage in technical and operational roles, have a stable work ethic, and have a long-term commitment to their employers. Additionally, their higher education background equips them with a level of overall work quality superior to that of the general labor force.

Regardless of their technical talents, vocational college graduates suffer some career disadvantages. Personal traits and professional talents, such as technical skills, occupational knowledge, and basic workplace competencies, are required for success in the labor market. Personal characteristics substantially impact how these talents develop and are applied. Currently, vocational college graduates do not fulfill all industry standards for mastery and application. If industry needs are assumed to be 100%, the vocational college graduates' core knowledge level is assessed to be 61%. Similarly, their professional quality, which includes occupation-related skills, is rated at 64%, indicating significant space for development.

Table 4 *Strategy for enhancing core competencies of vocational colleges accounting students using SWOT analysis*

Interior、environment、analyze External Strength analyze	Advantage（S）	Disadvantaged（W）
	1. Strong hands-on ability, skilled professional skills 2. Willing to engage in basic technical work, practical work, strong stability 3. The starting point of the salary package is low	1. The comprehensive quality is not high 2. The employment cognition is not reasonable 3. The level of education is relatively low
Opportunity（O）	Dominant opportunity strategy（SO）	Dominated opportunity strategy（WO）
1. Local economic development has created a large number of jobs 2. Highly skilled people are in short supply 3. The government has introduced a series of policies to encourage employment and entrepreneurship 4. The country and society value highly skilled talents	1. Economic growth leads to employment growth 2. Encourage entrepreneurship and give preferential policies 3. Vigorously develop vocational education and build a vocational education system 4. School-employers cooperation in running schools	1. Improving the personnel training model 2. Improve the overall quality of students 3. Enhancing employability 4. Improve academic qualifications
Threaten（T）	Dominant threat strategy（ST）	Dominant threat strategy（WT）
1. Compared with the overall level of the country, Guangdong's economy is developing relatively fast, and the competitive pressure is great 2. The social recognition of higher vocational college students is not high	1. Reshape the understanding of vocational education 2. Change the concept of employment 3. Expand employment channels 4. Jointly build a public employment service system	1. Develop the local economy 2. Improving the social security system 3. Change the concept of employment 4. Strengthen employment guidance

3.	The number of graduates is large, and the competition is fierce

According to Yue (2023), many students at vocational colleges prioritize certification and specialized instruction, essentially transforming these institutions into test preparation centers. While this strategy may boost test scores, it does not necessarily increase pupils' general basic competencies. Graduates who do not obtain vocational certifications or higher academic degrees frequently struggle to find decent employment. Vocational graduates compete with undergraduate and graduate students when seeking opportunities at respected companies or for senior responsibilities. The lower academic level of junior colleges frequently restricts students' ability to obtain attractive jobs. To overcome these obstacles, vocational graduates must succeed in education, knowledge, professional skills, and personal characteristics. Distinctive personal characteristics, such as unique skills or exceptional abilities, might set someone apart in the job market, necessitating additional investments in self-improvement and skill development.

The employment structure of college graduates varies by industry and is frequently influenced by wider economic situations. Industrial transitions directly impact employment patterns, as economic imbalances cause differences in labor demand. Changes in industrial structures unavoidably affect employment patterns. Increasingly, tertiary industries absorb workers from primary and secondary sectors, shifting the employment model from a traditional "pyramid" structure, where primary industries dominate, to an "inverted pyramid," with an expanding tertiary sector. Economic development, which includes manufacturing, services, and agriculture, has increased demand for highly qualified people in short supply. High-quality and skilled workers are essential for industrial progress, promoting technical innovation and increasing market competitiveness.

Despite these shifts, vocational education in China has yet to meet market demands regarding graduate quantity and quality fully. As the industry transitions from employer-led to service-led operations, vocational graduates must adapt to changing employment landscapes. Emerging fields, including digital technology, intelligent manufacturing, the platform economy, and the sharing economy, have seen rapid expansion and provide new employment opportunities (Qiu & Yue, 2022). These sectors have become important sources of stable jobs and key drivers of economic growth.

4. Conclusion

This study highlights a significant gap between the expectations of employers in Guangdong Province, China, and the core competencies of vocational college accounting graduates. Employers place greater value on practical abilities and skills than graduates do on knowledge and qualities, according to findings from the KSAO model. This underscores the need for specific curriculum improvements. To close this gap, vocational colleges must adopt competency-driven instruction that supports the development of adaptable skills and aligns with changing industry expectations. To ensure graduates have technical knowledge and real-world problem-solving skills, policymakers and educators should actively improve training frameworks. This will increase graduates' preparedness for an increasingly global workforce. In order to improve employability and enable graduates to succeed in a competitive labor market, future research should examine dynamic industry trends and incorporate all-encompassing training approaches.

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Conflict of Interest

Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of the manuscript.

Author Contribution

The authors confirm full responsibility for the following: study conception and design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of results, and manuscript preparation.

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