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## Understanding and Mitigating Academic Burnout and Learned Helplessness Among Vocational College Students in China

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### Abstract

*Academic burnout and learned helplessness are significant psychological challenges faced by vocational college students in China, with detrimental effects on their academic performance and mental health. This study explores the interplay between these two phenomena, examining their causes and consequences within the unique context of China's vocational education system. Drawing on theoretical frameworks such as Maslach's burnout model and Seligman's learned helplessness theory, the research highlights how systemic issues—including high academic workloads, societal stigma, and inadequate support systems—contribute to emotional exhaustion, disengagement, and diminished self-efficacy among students. A comprehensive literature review reveals a bidirectional relationship between burnout and helplessness, creating a vicious cycle that exacerbates psychological distress. The study identifies gaps in current research, such as the lack of integrated models and context-specific interventions. To address these challenges, the paper proposes actionable recommendations for educators, institutions, families, and policymakers, emphasizing student-centered pedagogy, mental health support, and societal recognition of vocational education. By adopting a multidimensional approach, stakeholders can mitigate these issues and foster a more inclusive and supportive environment for vocational students, ultimately enhancing their well-being and academic success.*

**Keywords:** *Academic Burnout, Learned Helplessness, Vocational Education, China, Student Well-Being, Psychological Stress.*

### Introduction

Vocational education is a vital component of China's higher education system, designed to cultivate technical talent aligned with the nation's industrial and economic needs. According to the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (2021), over 11 million students are currently enrolled in secondary and higher vocational education institutions. As part of China's broader educational reform, national policies such as the "Modern Vocational Education System Construction Plan (2014-2020)" and the "National Vocational Education Reform Implementation Plan (2019)" have significantly expanded vocational education, increasing enrollment and accessibility, particularly for students from rural and lower-income backgrounds (MOE, 2019).

These developments represent a shift toward inclusivity and economic responsiveness, helping to address the nation's demand for skilled labor in fields such as advanced manufacturing, information technology, and service industries. However, despite the positive structural expansion, recent findings suggest that the psychological well-being of vocational students is a growing concern. The rapid growth of vocational institutions has sometimes outpaced the development of adequate student support systems, leading to increased psychological stress

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Among the most significant psychological challenges are academic burnout and learned helplessness. Academic burnout refers to a psychological syndrome resulting from prolonged academic stress and is characterized by three main components: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization (detachment from academic work), and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment (Maslach et al., 2001). Vocational students often face a high academic workload, limited autonomy in their studies, and low societal recognition, all of which contribute to burnout.

In contrast, learned helplessness is a cognitive-emotional condition that develops when students repeatedly encounter academic failure and begin to believe that their efforts are ineffective, thereby fostering passivity and disengagement (Seligman, 1975; Peterson & Seligman, 1984). This phenomenon is particularly prevalent among vocational students who enter their programs with a history of poor academic performance or low self-efficacy, often shaped by systemic educational tracking and social stigma (Yang, 2021).

Both academic burnout and learned helplessness are detrimental to student academic performance and mental health. Burnout can lead to anxiety, depression, and school dropout (Zhang & Liu, 2022), while helplessness undermines motivation and leads to academic disengagement (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Studies indicate that these conditions often coexist and reinforce each other, creating a vicious cycle of academic decline (Zhou, 2021).

Recognizing the seriousness of these intertwined challenges is essential for educators, administrators, and policymakers seeking to improve the quality and sustainability of vocational education. A comprehensive approach that addresses both institutional and psychological factors is necessary to support vocational students' academic success and holistic development.

## **Theoretical Foundations**

### **Academic Burnout**

Academic burnout, originally conceptualized in the context of occupational stress, has been effectively adapted to educational settings. Maslach et al. (2001) define academic burnout as a multidimensional construct encompassing emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment:

**Emotional Exhaustion:** This dimension reflects the chronic fatigue students experience due to ongoing academic pressures, such as excessive workloads, continuous assessments, and time constraints. **Depersonalization:** Also known as cynicism, this refers to students' emotional detachment or indifferent attitudes toward their studies and learning environment. **Reduced Personal Accomplishment:** Students feel inadequate about their academic achievements, often underestimating their competence and effectiveness in learning tasks.

In the context of vocational education, these symptoms are exacerbated by systemic issues such as low societal regard for vocational careers, limited opportunities for academic mobility, and inflexible curricular structures (Liu et al., 2022). Hobfoll's (1989) Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory offers a robust framework to understand the development of burnout. According to COR theory, burnout results from the persistent loss or inadequate replenishment of valuable resources—emotional, psychological, and temporal. Vocational students often report depleted resources due to demanding practical training schedules, lack of autonomy, and inadequate institutional support (Wang & Liu, 2020).

## Learned Helplessness

The theory of learned helplessness, first introduced by Seligman (1975), describes a psychological state where individuals believe they have no control over outcomes due to repeated exposure to uncontrollable or adverse events. In academic settings, students may begin to perceive their efforts as ineffective following repeated failures, which in turn leads to disengagement and passivity. Two key psychological mechanisms underpin learned helplessness:

**Attributional Style:** According to Peterson and Seligman (1984), individuals with a pessimistic attributional style—attributing failures to internal ("I'm not smart"), stable ("I will never improve"), and global causes ("I fail at everything")—are more susceptible to helplessness. Vocational students with a history of academic underachievement often exhibit these cognitive patterns.

**Support Systems:** The presence or absence of supportive figures plays a crucial role. Students who lack encouragement or constructive feedback from family members and teachers are more likely to internalize failure and adopt helpless attitudes (Yang, 2021).

Research by Dweck and Leggett (1988) links learned helplessness to maladaptive motivational patterns. Students who adopt performance-oriented goals, rather than mastery-oriented goals, are more likely to withdraw from challenging tasks after setbacks. Empirical studies show that learned helplessness reduces motivation and academic effort, contributing to poor performance, depression, and even dropout (Zhang & Liu, 2022).

## Literature Review

This study conducted a comprehensive and systematic review of scholarly literature to identify key themes, trends, and gaps related to academic burnout and learned helplessness among vocational college students. Literature was sourced from major academic databases including CNKI, Web of Science, PsycINFO, Scopus, and Google Scholar, focusing on peer-reviewed journal articles published in the last ten years. The search strategy included keywords such as "academic burnout," "learned helplessness," "vocational education," "vocational college students," and "China." Studies selected for review included both quantitative and qualitative research, meta-analyses, and theoretical discussions.

**Academic Burnout:** Multiple studies highlight the high prevalence of academic burnout among vocational college students. Lian (2023) and Zhang & Liu (2022) found that students in vocational tracks often face academic overload due to intensive practical training and condensed theoretical coursework. Moreover, unclear career trajectories and limited employment opportunities contribute to uncertainty and stress. Rigid teaching methods that emphasize rote learning over interactive or experiential methods further alienate students, exacerbating feelings of depersonalization and emotional exhaustion (Chen et al., 2021; Wang & Liu, 2020). A nationwide survey conducted by the Chinese Ministry of Education in 2021 reported that more than 60% of vocational students reported moderate to severe levels of academic stress, many of which align with burnout symptoms.

**Learned Helplessness:** Learned helplessness has been observed in students with repeated experiences of academic failure or marginalization, which leads to the development of a belief that personal effort is futile (Seligman, 1975; Peterson & Seligman, 1984). Li H. (2022) found that students who repeatedly scored below average in assessments were more likely to internalize

their failures as a reflection of their intrinsic capabilities. Yang (2021) emphasized that a pessimistic attributional style—where students blame themselves in a stable, global, and internal manner—fosters learned helplessness. A lack of family and institutional support, especially in lower-income or rural areas, further compounds the issue. Supportive environments have been shown to buffer against helplessness, but such structures are often underdeveloped in many vocational colleges (Liu et al., 2022).

**Co-Occurrence and Interaction:** Recent literature indicates a growing awareness of the interplay between burnout and helplessness. Zhou (2021) notes that academic burnout can lead to learned helplessness by diminishing a student’s motivation and sense of self-efficacy. Conversely, feelings of helplessness may lead students to disengage from academic tasks, accelerating the onset of burnout. Lin & Huang (2022) demonstrated through structural equation modeling that emotional exhaustion was a significant predictor of academic disengagement, mediated by feelings of helplessness. However, studies often investigate these issues in isolation or use limited sample sizes, restricting the generalizability of their findings.

**Cultural and Institutional Contexts:** Chinese vocational education operates within a unique sociocultural landscape. Vocational pathways are often perceived as inferior to academic ones, affecting students’ self-esteem and identity (Tang, 2019). Such societal stigmas, when internalized, can intensify both burnout and helplessness. Furthermore, institutional limitations, such as outdated curricula, insufficient mental health services, and performance-oriented evaluation systems, fail to address students’ psychological needs (Zhang et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2021).

### **Interrelation and Research Gaps**

Recent empirical studies indicate a bidirectional relationship between academic burnout and learned helplessness. Zhou (2021) found that emotional exhaustion and reduced personal accomplishment often precede feelings of helplessness, which in turn reinforce burnout by diminishing motivation and increasing disengagement. This cyclical interaction exacerbates psychological distress and impairs learning outcomes.

However, despite growing interest in these constructs, the literature remains limited in several ways. First, most research isolates academic burnout or learned helplessness without examining their interdependence. Second, existing studies often lack a multidimensional lens that integrates individual psychological factors with broader institutional, cultural, and policy-related variables. Third, there is a noticeable scarcity of studies focusing specifically on vocational college students in China, whose educational and social experiences differ significantly from those in general academic tracks (Chen et al., 2021). Research gaps despite a growing body of literature, several gaps remain:

- a. **Lack of Integrated Models:** Many studies examine academic burnout and learned helplessness separately, without exploring their bidirectional relationship or shared antecedents.
- b. **Limited Contextualization:** There is a scarcity of research specifically focused on Chinese vocational students, whose experiences are shaped by distinct cultural and institutional dynamics.
- c. **Insufficient Longitudinal Studies:** Most research adopts a cross-sectional design, limiting insights into causal relationships or developmental trajectories over time.
- d. **Intervention Studies:** Few studies evaluate the effectiveness of targeted interventions

within the vocational education context to reduce burnout and helplessness.

Addressing these gaps through a multidimensional, context-sensitive framework is essential for developing effective strategies to support the psychological well-being and academic success of vocational college students in China. It also requires a comprehensive and context-specific approach that captures the complex interplay between personal, educational, and societal factors in shaping student well-being.

## Discussion and Recommendations

The relationship between academic burnout and learned helplessness among vocational college students is shaped by a multifaceted array of personal, institutional, and societal influences. On the individual level, low self-efficacy and negative attributional styles significantly contribute to students' vulnerability. Students who consistently view failures as reflections of their innate incompetence are more likely to experience learned helplessness and emotional exhaustion (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Peterson & Seligman, 1984). Vocational students often enter educational tracks perceived as less prestigious, which undermines their self-concept and motivation (Tang, 2019).

Institutionally, vocational colleges face challenges such as outdated pedagogical practices, limited innovation in teaching methodologies, and an overemphasis on performance metrics over holistic development. The pressure to meet academic standards without sufficient support fosters a transactional learning environment that fails to address students' emotional needs (Chen et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2022). Furthermore, high student-teacher ratios and lack of mental health infrastructure impede timely interventions for at-risk students.

At the societal level, deep-rooted cultural values emphasizing academic achievement and university pathways over practical skills further stigmatize vocational education (Wang & Liu, 2020). This societal devaluation exacerbates internalized stress among vocational students and reduces their perceived legitimacy and future opportunities. When educational success is narrowly defined, students in alternative tracks are more susceptible to feeling marginalized and disengaged (Zhang et al., 2020).

The dynamic interaction between burnout and helplessness forms a feedback loop: burnout diminishes cognitive and emotional resources, increasing susceptibility to helplessness; helplessness, in turn, leads to academic disengagement and further burnout. A comprehensive understanding of this cycle necessitates a systems-thinking approach that integrates psychological, educational, and sociocultural dimensions (Hobfoll, 1989; Zhou, 2021).

### For Educator: Enhancing Pedagogical Approaches for Vocational Education

To effectively mitigate academic burnout and learned helplessness, educators should implement pedagogical practices that foster intrinsic motivation and psychological well-being. **Student-centered instructional models**—such as project-based learning, flipped classrooms, and cooperative learning—have been shown to enhance students' sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which are essential for sustained academic engagement (Deci & Ryan, 2000). These approaches not only promote active learning but also empower students to take ownership of their educational journey, thereby reducing feelings of passivity and disengagement.

Furthermore, **integrating Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)** into the curriculum can significantly strengthen students' emotional regulation, self-awareness, and resilience. SEL programs have demonstrated efficacy in improving academic performance while simultaneously

reducing symptoms of anxiety and depression (Durlak et al., 2011). Embedding these competencies into daily teaching routines helps students build coping mechanisms essential for navigating academic pressures.

Lastly, a shift toward **formative assessment strategies**—which emphasize feedback, reflection, and ongoing improvement—can reduce performance-related anxiety and foster a growth-oriented mindset. Unlike summative assessments that often emphasize high-stakes outcomes, formative assessments encourage students to view learning as a continuous process, thus supporting motivation and perseverance, especially among those who may otherwise succumb to feelings of helplessness.

### **For Institutions: Strengthening Structural and Cultural Support**

To address the psychological challenges faced by vocational college students, institutions must prioritize comprehensive mental health infrastructure. This includes the establishment of accessible and confidential psychological support systems, such as on-campus counseling centers, helplines, and digital mental health platforms, ensuring timely intervention and continuous care for students in need (Liu et al., 2022).

Moreover, fostering an inclusive and psychologically supportive campus culture is essential. Institutions should broaden recognition beyond academic metrics to celebrate diverse forms of student achievement—including creative expression, community involvement, and vocational excellence. Organizing extracurricular programs, skill-based competitions, and community service initiatives can enhance students' sense of belonging and self-worth (Zhang & Liu, 2022).

Equally important is continuous professional development for faculty and staff, aimed at equipping them with the knowledge and skills to identify early signs of student distress. Training in trauma-informed teaching, mental health first aid, and classroom strategies for creating emotionally safe learning environments empowers educators to act as frontline responders in promoting student well-being.

### **For Families and Society: Fostering Collaborative and Cultural Support**

Support from families and broader society plays a pivotal role in mitigating academic burnout and learned helplessness among vocational college students. First, it is essential to strengthen family-school partnerships through consistent communication, collaborative workshops, and active parental engagement in school activities. Such efforts build mutual trust and shared responsibility for students' academic and emotional development, creating a supportive ecosystem that extends beyond the classroom (Li H., 2022).

Second, reducing the societal stigma associated with vocational education is critical. Public awareness campaigns, media storytelling that highlights successful vocational graduates, and inclusive policy discourse can shift public perceptions and elevate the status of vocational pathways. By portraying vocational education as a respected and essential contributor to national development and economic resilience, these initiatives can enhance students' self-esteem and societal acceptance (Wang & Liu, 2020; Tang, 2019).

Lastly, greater involvement of employers and local communities is needed to bridge education with real-world relevance. Developing structured internship opportunities, mentorship programs, and industry-academia collaborations not only validates the vocational education track but also equips students with practical experience and professional networks. These initiatives reaffirm the dignity of skilled work and offer students a clearer, more hopeful

trajectory for their future careers.

A coordinated, systemic response involving all stakeholders including educators, institutions, families, employers, and policymakers is essential to disrupt the burnout-helplessness cycle and support vocational students' mental health and academic success.

## Conclusion

Academic burnout and learned helplessness represent significant and growing challenges within China's vocational education landscape. This study highlights the urgent need for comprehensive, multidimensional interventions that address both the psychological and systemic factors contributing to these issues. By integrating established psychological theories with context-specific analysis, the research provides evidence-based pathways for educational reform aimed at fostering student resilience, engagement, and well-being. Ultimately, these efforts not only support individual student success but also contribute to the creation of a more equitable, inclusive, and effective vocational education system, aligned with the broader goals of national development and social progress.

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