Professional Challenges and Professional Identity of an Early-Career Counsellor in a Vocational University: A Case Study of One Counsellor in Zhejiang Province, China

Zhang Chuyang, Chen Yuewei, and Yang Xianghui

Abstract – **In recent years, the development of vocational education in China has entered a new historical stage under the promotion of national policy documents. However, existing studies have paid more attention to the professionalism and professional development of university teachers and researchers, while relatively limited attention has been given to the psychological conditions and professional experiences of managerial and administrative staff in vocational universities. University counsellors, as a special group positioned between teaching and administrative staff, undertake multiple responsibilities related to student education, student management, psychological support, crisis intervention, and administrative affairs.This study aims to explore the professional challenges and professional identity of an early-career counsellor in a vocational university. Using a narrative-oriented qualitative case study design, this research focuses on a 29-year-old female counsellor in a vocational university in a prefecture-level city in Zhejiang Province. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically with the assistance of MAXQDA.The findings generated two main themes: professional challenges and professional identity. The professional challenges of the counsellor mainly included heavy workload, multiple sources of pressure, and a worsening emotional state. These challenges were reflected in broad responsibilities, 24-hour availability, student safety concerns, document writing, research tasks, teaching duties, leadership pressure, overtime work, and emotional exhaustion. Meanwhile, the counsellor's professional identity was mainly derived from professional value, especially the emotional value gained through helping students, receiving students' trust, offering positive guidance, and providing humanistic care.This study suggests that although vocational university counsellors face complex professional challenges and potential occupational burnout, they may also construct professional identity through meaningful interactions with students.**

Keywords – **Vocational university, University counsellor, Professional challenges, professional identity**

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, China has issued a series of policy documents on promoting the development of vocational education, marking a new historical stage in the development of vocational education in China (Zhang, 2024). In China, most researchers have been interested in studying the professionalism of university researchers and staff members (Wang, 2022) and their professional development pathways (Sun & Yang, 2025). However, relatively little attention has been paid to the psychological conditions of these practitioners. Even when relevant studies exist, their research subjects are mostly university teaching and research staff, focusing on issues such as occupational burnout and research-related pressure (Zhang et al., 2026). By contrast, the psychological conditions of managerial and administrative staff, especially those working in vocational universities, have received limited scholarly attention.

In vocational universities, young managerial staff, especially counsellors, face multiple pressures. In the organizational system of most Chinese universities, counsellors are a special group positioned between teachers and administrative staff. They are not only the frontline executors and implementers of various management measures and relevant policies at the college level, but also guides for students' healthy development (Yu & Chen, 2013). Counsellors are expected not only to possess the ability to identify students' mental health problems, provide psychological guidance, and conduct crisis intervention, but also to undertake numerous administrative and managerial tasks (Wang, 2026). Wu (2019) argued that counsellors serve as caregivers in students' university life, problem-solvers in their learning, and consultants in their employment. Wu pointed out that the diversification of counsellors' identities creates a contradiction between professional positioning and personal development. As this contradiction continues to evolve, counsellors' sense of achievement and value in their work decreases, leading to identity anxiety.

II. PROBLEM STATEMENT

In vocational universities, because students' learning and living habits are not as strong as those of students in non-vocational universities, counsellors may face even greater pressure than counsellors in non-vocational universities. According to the empirical study by Chen et al. (2023), years of work experience have a significant impact on counsellors' perceived stress, occupational burnout, and mental health. Counsellors with one to four years of work experience had significantly higher average scores than those with less than one year or more than four years of experience.

To understand the real psychological conditions of early-career counsellors in vocational universities, this study conducted a narrative study of a counsellor who had worked in a vocational university for more than two years. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically using MAXQDA (2024 version), with the aim of understanding the real professional challenges and professional identity experienced by her and her colleagues.

Zhang, Chuyang, City University Malaysia, Malaysia (Email address: zcyyxh@gmail.com).
Chen, Yuewei, Jiaxing Vocational & Technical College, China (email address: 297045426@qq.com).
Yang, Xianghui, Nanhu School Affiliated to Beijing Normal University, China (email address:1248223180@qq.com).

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Professional Challenges of University Counsellors

Huang (2004) was among the earliest to propose the concept of identity anxiety among counsellors. He argued that counsellors' psychological anxiety mainly stems from the conflict between the idealized self and the real self. Counsellors are a professional group characterized by multiple identities; they are educators, managers, service providers, student caregivers, confidants, and may also be senior peers (Yu, 2007). These multiple roles bring corresponding multiple pressures, and the accumulation of pressures from different roles significantly intensifies their sense of anxiety. At the same time, counsellors occupy a marginal position between teaching staff and administrative personnel, which leads many counsellors to experience uncertainty in their role identity and a loss of self-worth.

Hou and Xiang (2025) argued that university counsellors have a heavy workload and low salary, resulting in an imbalance between work input and rewards. This imbalance indirectly affects counsellors' anxiety. According to the empirical study by Tang et al. (2022), many counsellors experience depression and anxiety. As society and universities place increasing demands on student mental health management, counsellors' work intensity will further increase, and their mental health problems may become more severe in the future. Fang (2024) pointed out that, with the accelerated development of Chinese society, university counsellors face increasing workloads and working hours, which lead them into a situation of time scarcity and generate considerable time-related anxiety.

Counsellors' anxiety also stems from their career prospects. Their work outcomes cannot be quantified in the same way as academic papers and publications, and there is a lack of clear evaluation standards (Feng, 2025). The counselling profession has neither the central status of teaching staff nor the political career prospects of administrative personnel (Yu & Chen, 2013). The promotion pathways for counsellors are limited. In terms of professional title promotion, their research output cannot compete with that of full-time teaching staff; in terms of administrative promotion, they cannot compete with administrative personnel. In some universities, counsellors' promotion is also related to social networks outside of work (Feng, 2025). As a result, although counsellors appear to have multiple career options, in reality, each path presents significant difficulties.

In summary, identity conflict, heavy work pressure, and uncertain career prospects jointly contribute to the anxiety of university counsellors.

Professional Identity of University Counsellors

The full title of a university counsellor is "university ideological and political counsellor." According to official documents issued by the Ministry of Education, counsellors are organizers, implementers, and guides of students' daily ideological and political education and management in higher education institutions (Chen & Dai, 2025). There is no unified standard for the professional value of university counsellors, and many researchers have offered perspectives from different angles. Bu and Qi (2017) argued that the professional value of university counsellors is mainly reflected in two aspects. One aspect is the value of ideological and political education. Ideological and political education, which mainly includes ideological education, political education, and moral education, emphasizes guiding students' thinking. The other aspect is the value of serving students, which is mainly reflected in carrying out education, management, and service work well, playing the roles of life mentor and close friend, and promoting students' all-round development.

Zhao and Zhang (2023) believed that the value of the counselling profession for counsellors, students, universities, and the state is a process of mutual connection, mutual promotion, and mutual coupling. In this process, the counselling profession should be based on the improvement of counsellors' professional qualities and work abilities, exert a positive influence on the healthy development of university students, fulfill the fundamental task of talent cultivation in higher education institutions, and cultivate a new generation of individuals who develop morally, intellectually, physically, aesthetically, and in labor for the cause of the Party and the state. Zhu and Wang (2019) pointed out that the value of university counsellors is related to their realm of life, and its core lies in the historical mission of the new era. Counsellors should be clear about what kind of life realm they should possess and how to use their own life realm to influence and enhance that of university students.

In summary, the professional value of university counsellors is mainly reflected in ideological and political education and in serving students' development, and its core lies in guiding students' healthy growth through counsellors' own qualities and practical work.

IV. METHOD

This study uses a narrative-oriented qualitative case study design, focusing on an early-career counsellor from a vocational university in a prefecture-level city in Zhejiang Province as the research subject. The reason for selecting this case is that the participant is in the early stage of her career and has experienced an identity transition from an enterprise employee to a counsellor in a vocational university, which can relatively intensively present the real experiences of early-career counsellors in career adaptation, work pressure, and the construction of professional identity. This study does not pursue general representativeness in a statistical sense, but attempts to present the complexity of the professional experiences of early-career counsellors in vocational universities through an in-depth analysis of a single case.

This study selected the participant through purposive sampling. The participant holds a postgraduate degree, is 29 years old, and is female. After graduation, she once worked in a state-owned enterprise, and at the end of 2023, she entered a vocational university as a counsellor and has worked there since then. The study used semi-structured interviews as the main method of data collection. The interview content was audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, repeatedly checked and revised by the researcher, and then imported into MAXQDA software. Data analysis followed the thematic analysis method proposed by Braun and Clarke

(2006). Through repeated reading, open coding, and theme induction, a thematic structure was formed, thereby extracting the main experiences of this young counsellor in the vocational university in terms of work pressure and professional identity.

V. FINDINGS

This study contains two themes and four parent codes, and their structures can be clearly seen in Figure 1 and Figure 2.

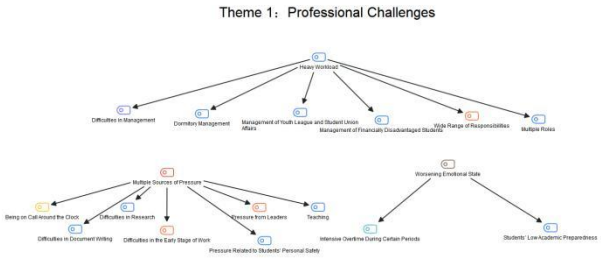


Figure 1. Theme 1: Professional Challenges



Figure 2. Theme 2: Professional Identity

TABLE I: EXPLANATION OF THEMES

Themes	Explanation of themes
Professional Challenges	Counsellors in vocational universities have a wide range of responsibilities, experience great work pressure, and their work emotions are continuously consumed, showing a tendency toward occupational burnout.
Professional Identity	Vocational university teachers gain emotional value and a sense of professional achievement through humanistic care, such as helping students resolve confusion, giving students positive guidance, and gaining students' exclusive trust.

Theme 1: Professional Challenges

The theme of Professional Challenges contains three parent codes, namely Heavy Workload, Multiple Sources of Pressure, and Worsening Emotional State. As shown in Table 1, Professional Challenges can be explained as follows: counsellors in vocational universities have a wide range of responsibilities, experience great work pressure, and their work emotions are continuously consumed, showing a tendency toward occupational burnout.

The first parent code is Heavy Workload. This part emphasizes many details of management.

First of all, the scope of responsibilities is broad. The respondent believed that counsellors in vocational universities have a wide range of responsibilities. Counsellors need to manage many student-related matters and invest a great deal of energy.

"In vocational universities, the management of students is still very strict, which means you have to manage many things."

The respondent mentioned several aspects that need to be managed, including financial aid for students with financial difficulties, the student union in the college, and student dormitories.

"Some are related to financial aid for students with financial difficulties, and some are specifically responsible for Youth League and student union affairs, and then there is dormitory management."

In addition, the respondent also stated that, apart from management, counsellors may also engage in work in other positions, and this is a common phenomenon.

"An identity like mine is actually not an isolated case in our university, because we really have too few administrative positions, while there may be slightly more counsellor positions. In our department, there may be four, five, or six people who all came from counsellor positions."

Overall, the work of counsellors in vocational universities is not simply ideological education, but includes many aspects. In addition to students' life and learning, it also includes student organizations, student financial aid, and administrative work.

The second parent code is Multiple Sources of Pressure.

In addition to heavy workload, counsellors also face many pressures. The respondent believed that counsellors in vocational universities are like 24-hour nanny-like figures.

"It is like being a 24-hour nanny."

She further explained:

"Because counsellors are on call 24 hours a day. For example, if a student feels physically unwell in the middle of the night, you definitely have to show up immediately. There are many situations like this."

She shared an example:

"For example, if there is a sudden onset of mental illness or something like that, and the student has to be in the hospital, then apart from the parents needing to accompany the student, our university must also provide a certain degree of care. Then our teachers will also be put on shifts. You may be assigned several hours in a day to stay in the hospital and watch over the student. So the shift arrangement is 24 hours. You never know when your turn will be. It may be in the early morning or at some other time."

Student safety also often troubles counsellors in vocational universities, especially when some students have suicidal tendencies.

"News about suicide or things like that does happen in every university, and the frequency of such incidents is indeed much higher than before."

The respondent stated:

"My anxiety comes from students' personal safety."

Apart from the pressure of managing students, counsellors also feel pressure from written work. Writing documents is one of the main sources.

"One difficulty is writing documents, because I feel that documents are just the same few sentences repeated over and over again, but they have to be written into a manuscript of several thousand words."

Another source of pressure comes from research tasks.

"Actually, in the process of applying for professional title promotion, we need some research achievements."

She stated:

"The research path is still relatively difficult for non-

professional teachers like us."

Counsellors' pressure also comes from teaching.

"For us counsellors, the subjects we teach are still relatively narrow. Basically, we teach career planning courses."

The respondent also mentioned the influence of different leaders. Among them, leaders with high demands constitute a source of pressure for counsellors in vocational universities.

"Our leader is a leader with high demands. He is a very hardworking leader, with very strong self-management ability, and he also has very high requirements for those under him. For everything, perhaps according to his requirements, you have to reach 95 points for it to be acceptable."

Overall, counsellors have many sources of pressure, including students' personal safety, leaders' high demands, teaching, writing documents and research, as well as the psychological pressure caused by being on call 24 hours a day.

The third parent code is Worsening Emotional State. Counselling is a job that consumes emotions, and emotional decline mainly comes from overtime work and students' low level.

The respondent shared an experience of working overtime.

"When I had just started the job, in 2024, we happened to experience a leadership transition, namely the Party Congress. At that time, overtime work was the most serious. It may have lasted for more than one consecutive month, one or two months. When it was late, we might have had to work overtime until 12 o'clock at night before getting off work."

The respondent also believed that some students' poor communication ability and mental maturity consume emotions.

"Because as a counsellor, you have to interact with actual students. Some students still do not understand after you have explained to them for a long time. This is one aspect that consumes emotions."

Overall, the work emotions of counsellors in vocational universities are easily consumed by overtime work and students' low level, leading to a gradual deterioration of their emotional state.

Combining the three parent codes, it can be seen that the professional challenges of counsellors in vocational universities include both tedious, 24-hour work and endless, multi-faceted pressures. Under the influence of overtime work and students' low level, these work tasks and pressures continuously consume counsellors' work emotions, causing them to develop occupational burnout and occupational anxiety.

Theme 2: Professional Identity

Although the work of counsellors in vocational universities involves many professional challenges, many counsellors also gain a great deal of beneficial professional identity from it. Professional Identity contains one parent code, Professional Value. As shown in Table 1, the theme of Professional Identity can be explained as follows: vocational university teachers gain emotional value and a sense of professional achievement through humanistic care, such as helping students resolve confusion, giving students positive guidance, and gaining students' exclusive trust.

The parent code Professional meaning includes the emotional value generated in the interaction between counsellors and students. Counsellors can feel students' gratitude.

"If students remember your kindness, they will be grateful."

At the same time, counsellors can gain happiness from helping students resolve confusion.

"If I can help him resolve some confusion, I think this is a kind of happiness as a teacher."

Third, counsellors can bring positive guidance to students and help them move toward the right path.

"Some children nowadays can be said to be mature early, and they can also be said to be immature. As an adult, it is about the positive guidance that you can bring to students."

In addition, excellent counsellors can also gain students' exclusive trust. The respondent shared a story:

"Some students may be relatively closed off. They may not be very willing to show interest in other teachers, but they are willing to communicate with their own counsellor."

Finally, counsellors' professional identity also comes from bringing humanistic care to students.

"This position should bring students more humanistic care."

Overall, the professional identity of counsellors in vocational universities comes from multiple aspects. Counsellors can gain positive emotions from students' gratitude, gain happiness from helping students resolve confusion, gain a sense of achievement from positively guiding students, and gain professional identity from students' exclusive trust. In general, counsellors' professional identity comes from their own humanistic care. This humanistic care can bring positive influence to students and can also bring themselves a sense of professional achievement.

VI. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study present the current professional challenges faced by counsellors in vocational universities. The work of counsellors in vocational universities is not simply ideological education, but includes many aspects, such as student education, student life, student organizations, student financial aid, and administrative work. Since Yu (2007) proposed that counsellors are a professional role integrating multiple identities, counsellors' work pressure has not been reduced, resulting in the time anxiety mentioned by Fang (2024) and the promotion pressure pointed out by Feng (2025). This study also found that the current professional challenges of counsellors in vocational universities stem from tedious work conditions and being on call 24 hours a day, which is highly similar to the heavy workload proposed by Hou and Xiang (2025). However, judging from the interview results, the respondent did not mention low salary. This may mean that counsellors' treatment differs across different regions, and that not all regions have an imbalance between counsellors' work input and rewards. This study also found that counsellors in vocational universities easily experience emotional exhaustion at work and show a tendency toward occupational burnout. This has many similarities with Tang et al.'s (2022) empirical finding that many counsellors experience depression and anxiety, and that their mental

health problems may become more severe in the future.

The findings of this study also present the current professional identity of counsellors in vocational universities. This professional identity does not come from empty documents, nor does it come from professional missions, but from the happiness based on humanistic care generated in real communication with students. This finding is similar to Bu and Qi's (2017) view that university counsellors should play the roles of life mentors and close friends and promote students' all-round development, as well as Zhao and Zhang's (2023) key point that university counsellors should exert a positive influence on the healthy growth of university students. However, this study did not find relevant evidence for Zhu and Wang's (2019) view that the value of university counsellors should be related to the realm of life.

VII. CONCLUSION

The professional challenges of counsellors in vocational universities mainly come from three aspects: complicated work, multiple sources of pressure, and the continuous consumption of work emotions. These current conditions have caused counsellors to experience occupational anxiety and foreseeable occupational burnout. Counsellors in vocational universities also gain professional identity in their work. This professional identity does not come from a sense of professional mission, but is based on the sense of achievement and value gained after providing practical help to students. This qualitative study has a limited sample size, and future research can further expand this study by using mixed qualitative and quantitative research methods based on a wider range of samples.

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