

Reform Pathways for the Vocational Skill Level Certification of Agriculture Majors as Floral Designers

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Abstract

With the deepening reform of the national skilled talent assessment system, the certification for floral designers has shifted from a professional qualification to a vocational skill level accreditation, creating new career development opportunities for students in agricultural disciplines such as horticulture and landscape architecture. However, students currently face significant challenges in pursuing this certification, including a disconnect between training programs and industry needs, fragmented curricula, rigid accreditation mechanisms, and poor policy alignment. Using the Outcome-Based Education (OBE) framework and the integrated "Post-Course-Competition-Certificate" educational model, this paper systematically analyzes the current status and difficulties associated with obtaining the floral designer certification. It proposes reform strategies-such as restructuring the curriculum, optimizing accreditation mechanisms, and deepening school-enterprise collaboration-aimed at fostering the deep integration of talent cultivation in agricultural majors with vocational skill level accreditation, thereby enabling students to achieve the dual acquisition of academic diplomas and vocational skill certificates upon graduation.

Keywords

Floral Designer; Vocational Skill Level Certification; Post-Course-Competition-Certificate; Reform Pathway.

1. Introduction

Since 2021, in accordance with the reform of China's national skilled talent assessment system, vocational qualifications for skilled personnel based on proficiency assessment have been removed from the official vocational qualification catalog and transitioned to a system of vocational skill level recognition [1]. The Floral Designer occupation (occupational code: 4-09-10-05)-recognized by human resources and social security authorities-comprises five levels: Level V (Junior Worker), Level IV (Intermediate Worker), Level III (Senior Worker), Level II (Technician), and Level I (Senior Technician). This reform signifies that government departments no longer directly organize assessment exams or issue certificates; instead, assessments are conducted and certificates issued by vocational skill level assessment bodies registered with human resources and social security authorities.

For students majoring in agricultural disciplines such as horticulture and landscape architecture, the Floral Designer certificate serves not only as authoritative proof of professional competence but also as a vital bridge between academic studies and professional careers. On one hand, there is a natural alignment between these majors and the Floral Designer profession; fields such as horticultural technology, landscape technology, and landscape architecture are recognized as relevant disciplines for this certification. On the other hand, fresh graduates from certain institutions are eligible to apply directly for the Senior Worker (Level III) certification. This policy advantage saves students significant time in their career

development, contrasting with the step-by-step progression-starting from the junior level-required for the general public.

However, in practice, students in horticulture and landscape architecture still face numerous institutional barriers when attempting to obtain the Floral Designer certificate. Common issues include a disconnect between training programs and occupational standards, a separation of classroom instruction from certification requirements, a lack of flexibility in recognition mechanisms, and insufficient policy support. Breaking down the barriers between academic education in these fields and vocational skill level recognition-and establishing a talent cultivation pathway that deeply integrates "academic education with skill certification"-has become a critical issue in the current reform of agricultural majors like horticulture and landscape architecture [2]. This paper employs the OBE (Outcome-Based Education) concept and the "Post-Course-Competition-Certificate" integrated talent cultivation model as analytical frameworks to systematically examine existing problems and propose corresponding reform recommendations.

2. Current Status of Vocational Skill Level Certification

2.1. National Formulation of Vocational Skill Level Certification Policies

The profession of floral designer has undergone an evolution in both its title-shifting from "flower arranger" to "floral designer"-and the scope of its professional definition. In 2016, the State Council of China abolished the vocational qualification examination for flower arrangers, leaving the domestic floral design sector without an official certification system for a time. Subsequently, a multitude of non-official training institutions flooded the market; however, the quality of training varied significantly, leading to disorder in industry certification.

Following the launch of the national reform of the skilled talent evaluation system in 2021, the role of floral designer was incorporated into the vocational skill level certification framework. According to the "National Vocational Skill Standards (Draft for Comment) ", a floral designer is defined as a professional who engages in the processing and preparation of floral materials (such as fresh, dried, and artificial flowers) and accessories, as well as artistic conceptualization and the design of color and composition, to create floral art pieces. Certificates are issued by the China Flower Arrangement and Floral Art Association following filing with the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, and their authenticity can be verified via the "Skilled Talent Evaluation Network."

2.2. Implementation of Vocational Skill Level Certification in Higher Education Institutions

In recent years, an increasing number of higher education institutions have begun incorporating vocational skill level certification for floral designers into their talent cultivation systems. Hu Lin, a graduate of the Horticulture Education program at Chengdu Normal University in Sichuan, participated in floral design training organized by local employment authorities and mastered over ten styles of Chinese and Western floral arrangements. Across Sichuan Province, a total of 108 higher education institutions have registered as vocational skill level assessment bodies; these institutions have conducted assessments for 236,800 participants, resulting in the issuance of 163,100 certificates [3]. At Shanghai Vocational College of Agriculture and Forestry, 103 students from the Department of Plant Science participated in the vocational skill level assessment for floral designers (Level III). The Vocational Skill Level Assessment Center at Jinling Institute of Technology has included floral design in its scope of certified occupations, covering key disciplines such as horticulture. These practices demonstrate that higher education institutions are actively exploring ways to integrate vocational skill level certification into the training of students majoring in agricultural sciences.

3. Issues in the Assessment of Professional Skill Levels

3.1. Inadequate Implementation of the OBE Concept

The Outcome-Based Education (OBE) concept emphasizes a "student-centered, outcome-oriented, and continuous improvement" approach, requiring that talent cultivation programs be designed via "backward design," starting with industry needs. However, there is currently a significant disconnect between the talent cultivation programs for horticulture and landscape architecture majors and the national professional skill standards for floral designers [4].

First, there is a lack of precise alignment between cultivation objectives and professional standards. Many talent cultivation programs in horticulture and landscape architecture remain centered on disciplinary knowledge systems, failing to adequately reference the systematic provisions regarding professional functions, work content, and skill requirements for various levels outlined in the *National Professional Skill Standards for Floral Designers*. The correspondence between cultivation objectives, graduation requirements, and the curriculum system is often subjective; curriculum matrices frequently amount to little more than a formal exercise in filling out charts, failing to establish a precise link between competency indicators and individual courses.

Second, curriculum content lags behind industry development. Requirements for practitioners in the floral industry have expanded from mere floral arrangement techniques to encompass comprehensive capabilities such as floral environmental design, commercial space floral planning, and the preservation of traditional floral arrangement culture. Yet, floral arrangement courses at many institutions remain focused on basic technique training, lacking a dynamic response to industry trends, market demands, and evolving professional standards.

3.2. Integration of Curriculum and Certification Has Not Yet Been Achieved

The integration of curriculum and certification is a core component of the "Post-Curriculum-Competition-Certification" (PCCC) holistic education model. However, a disconnect persists between the instruction provided in horticulture and landscape gardening majors and the certification process for floral designers [5].

First, there is a mismatch between teaching content and certification requirements. The assessment for floral designer vocational skill levels comprises both theoretical exams and practical skills tests, with content strictly aligned with national vocational skill standards. Yet, many institutions fail to systematically incorporate the specific knowledge and skills required for certification into the syllabi of courses such as "Flower Arrangement and Floral Design" or "The Art of Flower Arrangement." Consequently, students are often compelled to prepare for certification exams outside of regular class hours, thereby increasing their academic burden.

Second, there is a lack of alignment between course assessment methods and certification standards. Course assessments rely primarily on the subjective judgment of instructors, differing significantly from the standardized evaluation models used for vocational skill level certification. When designing assessments, instructors tend to prioritize the breadth of course content coverage and student pass rates rather than aligning evaluations with the specific competency requirements outlined in vocational skill standards.

3.3. Obstacles in the Student Application Process

Although policies permit recent graduates holding an associate degree or higher in a relevant major to apply directly for the "Senior Technician" (Level III) qualification, significant barriers remain in practice.

First, there is insufficient coverage by certification bodies. Vocational skill level assessments for floral designers must be conducted by social training and evaluation organizations registered with human resources and social security authorities. While organizations such as the China

Floral Art Association have begun offering these assessments to the public, the number of qualified certification bodies remains limited in many regions-particularly in second- and third-tier cities.

Second, on-campus assessment mechanisms are not yet widespread. Although higher education institutions can apply to become vocational skill level evaluation bodies, only a few have successfully registered to conduct floral designer assessments. Consequently, the majority of students majoring in horticulture or landscape architecture must seek certification through off-campus organizations, incurring additional time and financial costs.

Third, assessment schedules are often misaligned with academic cycles. Vocational skill level assessments typically follow fixed schedules that do not necessarily coincide with institutional academic calendars, leading to awkward conflicts between certification exams and mandatory end-of-term course examinations.

3.4. Insufficient Motivation among Students to Register for the Exam

The vocational skill level certificate for floral designers should ideally offer multiple policy benefits-such as eligibility for skill enhancement subsidies, entitlement to special additional deductions for individual income tax, and support for point-based residency registration. However, the actual delivery of these policy dividends is often diluted.

First, there is an information gap. Most students majoring in horticulture or landscape architecture lack a full understanding of the certificate's policy value, registration requirements, and the certification process. Some students are even unable to distinguish between vocational skill level certificates recognized by human resources and social security authorities and training certificates issued by various private organizations.

Second, the implementation of subsidy policies is inadequate. Although many regions have introduced policies for skill enhancement subsidies, the application criteria and procedures are complex; furthermore, there is a requirement that the certificate be issued by an assessment body registered within the province. Consequently, students who study or take the exam in a different province may be unable to access local subsidy benefits.

4. Reform Pathways for the Vocational Skill Level Certification

4.1. Restructuring the Curriculum System to Integrate Courses with Certifications

Horticulture and landscape architecture programs should align with the "National Vocational Skill Standards for Floral Designers". They should break down the vocational functions, work content, and skill requirements associated with each certification level and translate them into specific course objectives and learning outcomes. Specifically, basic floral skills corresponding to Level 5 (Junior Worker) can be integrated into lower-level courses, while floral design and creative capabilities corresponding to Level 3 (Senior Worker) can be incorporated into upper-level courses, thereby establishing a tiered curriculum structure comprising "basic, intermediate, and advanced" stages.

In strict alignment with national vocational skill standards, institutions should develop textbooks and teaching resources that facilitate the integration of coursework and certification. Concurrently, they should leverage information technologies-such as virtual simulation-to build hybrid online-offline teaching platforms and incorporate floral competition events and assessment criteria into course syllabi, thereby achieving the integration of competitions and classroom instruction.

4.2. Optimize the Certification Mechanism and Streamline Application Channels

Colleges and universities offering majors such as horticulture or landscape architecture are encouraged to apply to human resources and social security authorities for registration as vocational skill level assessment bodies for floral designers. This initiative not only provides convenient certification services for their own students but also enables the institutions to offer certification to the general public, thereby enhancing their influence within the industry. Institutions should incorporate floral designer vocational skill level certification into their annual teaching plans, scheduling specific assessment windows that align with the academic cycle. Schools should organize students to take the certification exams collectively and may grant academic credits or course exemptions to those who successfully pass the assessment.

4.3. Deepen School-enterprise Collaboration and Strengthen Practical Training Support

Educational institutions should partner with employers-such as floral design firms, flower production bases, and wedding planning companies-to jointly establish off-campus practical training bases, thereby providing students with opportunities for real-world, on-the-job experience. Models of industry-education integration, such as "factory-within-school" programs or "customized training classes," can be adopted to enable students to hone their floral design skills in authentic work environments.

Industry experts and national-level floral design masters should be invited to serve as part-time instructors or external mentors, participating in curriculum delivery, skills coaching, and assessment reviews. This approach not only provides students with cutting-edge practical guidance but also ensures that instruction and certification standards align closely with actual industry needs.

Institutions should actively participate in and host floral design skills competitions at various levels, integrating competition standards into daily instruction. Events such as national vocational skills competitions for floral design help standardize industry skills and foster the improvement of practitioners' theoretical knowledge and technical proficiency. Through these competitions, students can test and refine their skills in a practical setting while accumulating the hands-on experience necessary to obtain vocational skill level certificates.

5. Conclusion

The transition of the floral artist qualification from a traditional professional qualification to a professional skill level certification serves not only as a microcosm of the reform of the national skilled talent assessment system but also as a catalyst for reforming talent cultivation models in horticulture and landscape architecture. Currently, students in these fields face challenges when pursuing floral artist certification, such as misaligned training programs, fragmented curricula, rigid certification mechanisms, and poor policy coordination. Guided by the Outcome-Based Education (OBE) philosophy and an integrated "post-course-competition-certificate" cultivation approach, educational institutions should drive the transformation of talent training from mere knowledge transmission to competency building. By restructuring curricula to integrate coursework with certification, optimizing certification mechanisms to streamline the application process, and deepening school-enterprise collaboration to strengthen practical training, institutions can bridge the gaps between classroom and examination hall, and between campus and workplace. This ensures that graduates possess both the academic credentials and the practical skills evidenced by professional certificates, thereby supplying the floral industry with high-quality professionals.

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