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## From “Tracking” to “Collaboration”: The Transition Logic, Multidimensional Dilemmas, and Systemic Solutions of the Coordinated Development Policy for General and Vocational Education

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### Abstract

The 2022 Vocational Education Law shifted the policy framework from “tracking between general and vocational education” toward their “coordinated development.” This shift has triggered public misinterpretations that tracking has been abolished, reflecting deep-seated societal anxieties about educational stratification and the persistent stigma associated with vocational education. Drawing on theories of social stratification, educational ecosystems, and institutional change, this paper traces the policy’s evolution from a model of “rigid tracking” to one aspiring toward “collaborative symbiosis.” It examines the multidimensional dilemmas impeding this transition across socio-cultural, institutional, resourcing, and integrative dimensions. In response, the study proposes a comprehensive restructuring spanning four interconnected domains: conceptual, institutional, resource-based, and integrative. Recommended strategies include refining policy narratives, establishing flexible tracking mechanisms, implementing differentiated funding models, and promoting mutual recognition of courses and credits. These measures are designed to dismantle structural barriers, foster a symbiotic educational ecosystem, and advance the high-quality development of both general and vocational education.

**Keywords:** *Coordinated development of general and vocational education, Policy transition, Educational equity, Institutional innovation, Resource optimization*

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## 1. Introduction

In April 2022, the newly revised *Vocational Education Law of the People’s Republic of China* explicitly emphasized

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the necessity to “promote the coordinated development of vocational education and general education in different stages post-compulsory education in a coordinated manner, based on local conditions” ([Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress, 2022](#)). However, certain media outlets and the public misconstrued this as a move to “abolish post-junior high school general-vocational tracking”, triggering extensive social discourse. In response, the Ministry of Education promptly issued a clarification, categorizing such interpretations as “misunderstandings” and underscoring the four key phrases enshrined in the new law: “post-compulsory education, different stages, based on local conditions, and coordinated development” ([Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2022](#)). The essence of this reform lies in refining the tracking mechanism rather than eliminating it altogether. Nevertheless, the misinterpretation reflects the profound public anxiety surrounding educational tracking and the persistent societal stigma that vocational education is “inferior”.

Beneath this policy readjustment lies a profound transformation in China’s educational landscape. The “approximately equal enrollment ratio” policy, implemented for nearly four decades, played a crucial role in safeguarding the scale of vocational education and catering to the demands of industrialization. However, its inherent rigidity in tracking not only exacerbated social stratification but also intensified educational anxiety. The revised policy seeks to facilitate a paradigm shift in vocational education from a mechanism of “stratification” to one of “classification”, thereby constructing a modern educational system conducive to lifelong learning for all. Subsequent to the promulgation of the amended *Vocational Education Law of the People’s Republic of China*, localities nationwide have proactively explored innovative pathways for coordinated development. Notably, the principle of “proceeding in light of local conditions” has already manifested distinct regional characteristics in practice.

The profound underpinning of this policy transition resides in the structural disjuncture between talent supply and market demand. On the one hand, industrial upgrading necessitates a cohort of high-caliber technical and skilled personnel with unprecedented urgency. On the other hand, vocational education continues to suffer from low social prestige and recognition. This dual pressure has catalyzed a strategic shift in policy focus, moving away from simplistic scale regulation towards a paradigm centered on connotative development and systemic reconstruction.

The core essence of the coordinated development policy is to construct an “overpass” for talent progression ([Li et al., 2017](#)), thereby dismantling the identity-based barriers that have long segmented vocational and general education. This transformation does not merely concern intra-systemic reforms within education, but also involves a comprehensive overhaul of societal perceptions and innovative reconfiguration of talent cultivation models.

## **2. Theoretical Framework: Constructing an Analytical Lens for the Coordinated Development of General and Vocational Education**

The formulation and implementation of policies governing the coordinated development of general and vocational education necessitate examination through a multidimensional theoretical lens, to gain a deeper understanding of the policies’ underlying motivations, inherent dilemmas, and potential pathways for advancement.

### **2.1. Social Stratification and Educational Reproduction Theory**

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s cultural capital theory posits that the education system reproduces social inequality by legitimizing elite culture ([Bourdieu and Passeron, 1997](#)). Students’ choice of vocational education is not a purely autonomous decision but rather a habitus shaped by the long-term internalization of external social structures. Under the urban-rural dual structure, rural students and their families often develop self-limiting beliefs, perceiving vocational education as a predetermined destiny. This internalized constraint transforms educational choice into a pre-scripted act in social reproduction. In the relationship between general and vocational education, different social groups compete for access to high-quality educational resources. General education is perceived as high-value cultural capital, occupying a dominant position in the educational field, while vocational education is stigmatized as the “choice for underachievers”. This form of symbolic violence is internalized through the family and school fields, fostering a collective unconscious

that prioritizes general education over vocational education. Consequently, a disproportionately high percentage of vocational college students originate from rural families (82.64%) (Lin and Zhu, 2025), thereby reinforcing class solidification.

However, this structure is not immutable. Vocational education offers an efficient alternative pathway to success for groups disadvantaged in the academic track. Targeted poverty alleviation initiatives through vocational education—such as specialized enrollment schemes in quality secondary vocational schools for children from registered impoverished families, free secondary vocational education policies, and national financial aid—coupled with large-scale vocational skills training for migrant workers and laid-off employees, enhance their employability. By attending high-quality vocational and technical colleges, acquiring market-demanded skills, and securing decent employment, children from disadvantaged backgrounds can transform simple menial labor into certified, credentialed technical work endowed with bargaining power and social status, thereby unlocking new avenues for upward social mobility. Meanwhile, government intervention mitigates the barriers imposed by cultural capital. By vigorously advancing the County High School Revitalization Plan, promoting general-vocational integration, and establishing comprehensive high schools, the aim is to delay tracking, expand options, and provide more pathways and opportunities of fair competition for students with weak cultural capital.

## **2.2. Educational Ecosystem Theory**

Conceptualizing the general-vocational relationship as a subsystem within the broader educational ecosystem necessitates adherence to the principles of diversity, symbiosis, and balance. Firstly, vocational education and general education represent two equal educational types, each corresponding to distinct societal demands for talent structures. Individuals may select differentiated developmental pathways based on their unique intelligence structures and interest inclinations. A coordinated developmental ecology necessitates establishing a value system grounded in type equality—one that affords equal respect and developmental opportunities to both technical-vocational and academic-research talents. Secondly, general and vocational education are not opposing or competitive but rather interdependent and symbiotic (Wang and Xie, 2022). General education lays a solid cultural foundation for students, while vocational education cultivates practical competencies and vocational skills, each having its inherent merits. Nevertheless, to foster students' holistic development and lifelong growth, it is imperative to dismantle barriers, enabling the circulation of resources, curricula and talent, in order to generate complementary and synergistic effects. Finally, the scale, structure, and quality of general and vocational education must align with the needs of socioeconomic development. Concurrently, individual growth and development need to align with societal talent requirements, thereby achieving the integration of instrumental rationality and value rationality.

The principle of “proceeding in light of local conditions” enshrined in the newly revised *Vocational Education Law* precisely embodies the principle of balance. Regions ought to flexibly adjust the general-vocational education ratio based on their local industrial structure, demographic characteristics, and educational development status, thereby avoiding implementation biases and ecological imbalances stemming from a “one-size-fits-all” approach. The essence of coordinated development lies in dismantling the singular evaluation criterion and constructing a diverse, symbiotic, and dynamically balanced educational ecosystem.

## **2.3. Path Dependence and Institutional Change Theory**

Rooted in historical materialism, the theory of path dependence and institutional change offers a valuable analytical perspective for understanding the transition dilemmas and exploring potential breakthroughs in the policy.

China's general-vocational tracking policy, evolved over four decades, has formed a stable path-dependent trajectory. Firstly, the inherent notion of a “roughly equivalent general-vocational ratio” has long been embedded in the decision-making mechanisms of the education system. Even at critical junctures under new policies and economic development models, there persists an adherence to quantitative parity. The erstwhile “roughly equivalent” policy has shaped supporting frameworks, including resource allocation, school evaluation, and social perceptions. Its lock-in effects and inertial forces continue to exert influence. Secondly, the existing structure of general and vocational education constitutes an entrenched institutional arrangement, creating

stable interest spaces in areas such as resource distribution and student recruitment. Any reform or adjustment inevitably encounters resistance from vested interest groups. Finally, the institutional systems underpinning general-vocational tracking—such as examination and enrollment systems and school evaluation mechanisms—have formed a mutually reinforcing ecosystem. Therefore, only comprehensive and systematic supporting policies can fundamentally achieve reform objectives; isolated policy interventions are unlikely to yield substantial effects.

The stability of path dependence is not unbreakable. When external environmental shifts, incremental policy adjustments, and actor realignments converge to form a combined force, a critical juncture for institutional change is triggered. The introduction of the newly revised *Vocational Education Law* in 2022 was propelled by multiple factors. On the one hand, economic and social transformation has generated an urgent demand for technical and skilled talent. This policy, to a certain extent, has spurred the development of vocational education, secured a steady student pipeline, facilitated human capital renewal, and equipped disadvantaged populations with vocational skills—enhancing their intrinsic motivation and participation in the labor market, and consequently proactively addressing the talent deficit in China's manufacturing sector. Meanwhile, years of institutional changes have laid a cognitive foundation for the design and implementation of the new policy. Practical explorations in general-vocational integration and comprehensive high schools have further deepened the understanding of the dynamic between general and vocational education. Furthermore, various stakeholders—including educational researchers, reform-oriented officials, and enterprise representatives—have contributed to the enactment of the new law.

### **3. Policy Evolution: The Historical Logic from “Rigid Tracking” to “Collaborative Symbiosis”**

The evolutionary trajectory of China's general-vocational education policy manifests a distinct transition from the “rigid tracking” model of the planned economy era to the “collaborative symbiosis” paradigm in the new era. This progression not only reflects the shifting socioeconomic demands talent cultivation across different historical periods but also embodies profound transformations in educational philosophy.

#### **3.1. The Tracking Period (1978-1999): Scale-Oriented Institutional Foundation Laying**

In the early stages of reform and opening-up, China embarked on the initial phase of industrialization, generating an urgent demand for skilled labor in labor-intensive industries. In 1983, the Ministry of Education and other relevant departments jointly issued the *Opinions on Reforming the Structure of Urban Secondary Education and Developing Vocational and Technical Education*, which for the first time proposed the goal of “striving for a roughly equivalent ratio of student enrollment in various types of vocational and technical schools to that in regular senior high schools by 1990” (Ministry of Education, Ministry of Labor and Personnel, Ministry of Finance *et al.*, 1983). This policy marked the formal launch of vocational education system construction, bearing distinct characteristics of the era. In subsequent policy implementation, the “roughly equivalent” principle was continuously reinforced through institutional arrangements. The 1993 *Outline for the Reform and Development of Education in China* further affirmed that vocational education had “altered the monolithic structure of secondary education,” with both enrollment and student numbers in secondary vocational and technical schools exceeding 50% (He, 1998). This provided concrete empirical evidence supporting the implementation of the general-vocational education track system. Providing a concrete policy foundation for general-vocational tracking. During this period, as the job assignment system for graduates remained in place, the guarantee of “employment upon graduation” rendered secondary vocational education highly appealing. According to data from the *China Education Statistical Yearbook* (1980-1997), by 1997, the general-to-vocational enrollment ratio reached 4:6, with secondary vocational school enrollment exceeding that of regular senior high schools for the first time, marking a “golden period” for vocational education development.

#### **3.2. The Communication Period (2000-2017): An Exploratory Phase of Institutional Adjustment**

At the turn of the century, profound changes in China's economic and social environment significantly impacted the established general-vocational tracking model. On the one hand, the deepening reform of the employment

system meant that graduates of secondary specialized schools no longer enjoyed job assignments through the state-controlled distribution system. On the other hand, the college enrollment expansion initiative, launched in 1999, dramatically increased access to higher education. The college admission rate for regular senior high school graduates surged from 46.1% in 1998 (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 1999) to 83.4% in 2003 (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2004). These concurrent developments fueled a growing sentiment colloquially referred to as “suppressing vocational education, promoting general education”, causing a continuous decline in secondary vocational enrollment. By 2001, enrollments had decreased by 1.0473 million compared to 1998 figures.<sup>1</sup>

Facing the new situation, the policy system underwent adaptive adjustments. Both the 2002 *State Council Decision on Vigorously Promoting the Reform and Development of Vocational Education* (National Academy of Education Administration, 2010) and the 2004 *Opinions of the Ministry of Education and Seven Other Departments on Further Strengthening Vocational Education Work* (Ministry of Education et al., 2004) reaffirmed the “roughly equivalent” principle but introduced more flexible implementation mechanisms. In 2005, the *State Council Decision on Vigorously Developing Vocational Education* set a specific target of 8 million enrollments for secondary vocational education and promoted its achievement through comprehensive measures such as administrative assessments and financial incentives (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2005). Concurrently, recognizing that the proportion of students from impoverished families in secondary vocational education was significantly higher than in higher education, the state began gradually refining relevant subsidy policies (Ministry of Finance & Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2006). A pivotal innovation during this period was the exploration of the “overpass” model. The 2010 *National Medium- and Long-Term Education Reform and Development Plan Outline (2010-2020)* explicitly proposed “exploring the development model of comprehensive high schools” (General Office of the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2010), signaling a strategic shift toward general-vocational integration. However, since 2010, the proportion of vocational high school students among total senior secondary enrollments has exhibited a declining trend, dropping to 42.49% by 2016 (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2017).

### **3.3. The Integration Period (2017-Present): Quality-Oriented System Reconstruction**

Since 2017, China's general-vocational education policy has entered a phase of in-depth adjustment. Against the backdrop of accelerated industrial upgrading and improved living standards, societal demands for education have shifted from “access to education” to “access to quality education.” The 2017 *Plan for Popularizing Senior Secondary Education (2017-2020)* emphasized the need to “coordinate the development of regular senior high schools and secondary vocational education, and increase the enrollment proportion of secondary vocational education” (Ministry of Education et al., 2017), signaling a clear strategic shift in policy orientation.

The 2022 revised *Vocational Education Law* marked a pivotal breakthrough, shifting the paradigm from “general-vocational tracking” to “coordinated development of general and vocational education” and establishing a new guiding principle: “post-compulsory education development shall proceed in a coordinated manner at different stages and in light of local conditions”. This strategic reorientation has yielded tangible outcomes in local practices. For instance, in Beijing, the planned enrollment for regular senior high schools in 2025 is approximately 85,000 students, while that for secondary vocational education stands at around 33,000, resulting in a general-to-vocational ratio of roughly 72:28—representing a significant departure from the traditional 5:5 ratio (Fan, 2025). Policy innovations at this stage are increasingly systematic. Conceptually, vocational education has been repositioned from a “safety-net education” to a “type education” with equal status to general education. Institutionally, innovations such as the vocational education college entrance examination and credit banking systems have been introduced to construct an “overpass” for talent development. Practically, regions nationwide are exploring diverse models, including comprehensive high

<sup>1</sup> Taking full-time secondary vocational education for fresh junior high school graduates as the mainstay, secondary vocational schools mainly fall into three types: vocational high schools, general secondary specialized schools, and technical schools. According to the 1998 *National Statistical Communique on Education Development* and the 2001 *National Statistical Communique on Education Development*, secondary vocational schools enrolled 4.4226 million students in 1998 and 3.3783 million students in 2001.

schools and curriculum integration. These explorations are collectively propelling the evolution of the general-vocational relationship from rigid tracking to collaborative symbiosis.

Looking back over more than forty years of policy evolution, China's general-vocational education policy has undergone a comprehensive transformation, progressing from system establishment to system reconstruction. This process has maintained policy continuity while achieving innovative breakthroughs in developmental philosophy. Currently, China is in a critical phase of constructing a new paradigm for the collaborative development of general and vocational education. To realize genuine coordinated development, continuous deepening and innovation are required across multiple dimensions, including policy philosophy, institutional design, and social perceptions.

#### **4. Practical Dilemmas: Systemic Obstructions to Coordinated Development**

From the analytical perspective of social stratification and educational reproduction theory, the coordinated development of general and vocational education in China encounters multiple, intertwined systemic dilemmas in practice. These dilemmas collectively constitute structural barriers that impede the high-quality development of vocational education.

##### **4.1. Cultural Capital Imbalance and Stigmatization of Vocational Education**

The marginalized status of vocational education is first reflected in the unequal distribution of cultural capital, and the intergenerational transmission of cultural capital further exacerbates this inequality. The overrepresentation of rural students in secondary vocational education reveals distinct class differentiation characteristics. Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds often find themselves in a passive position in educational decision-making due to insufficient "ascribed" mainstream cultural capital. Even within vocational education, these cultural capital disparities continue to shape students' developmental trajectories, leading to significant differentiation in the construction of "acquired" cultural capital. Societal cognitive biases toward vocational education form a self-reinforcing vicious cycle. Although the revised *Vocational Education Law* explicitly stipulates that "vocational education is a type of education equally important as general education" ([Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, 2022](#)), the label of vocational education being "inferior" remains deeply entrenched. This deep-rooted perception precipitates identity crises among vocational school students, further eroding the attractiveness of vocational education.

##### **4.2. Institutional Lock-in and Path Dependence**

The path dependence inherent in the current institutional system severely constrains the advancement of coordinated development.

Firstly, the rigid tracking mechanism embedded in the enrollment system compels students to make lifelong educational choices at a developmentally immature age. The singular evaluation criterion centered on academic performance endows the senior high school entrance examination tracking process with a distinct filtering and eliminatory nature, precipitating widespread educational anxiety. While education authorities have advocated for reducing the tracking ratio and establishing comprehensive high schools, the fundamental examination-based selection paradigm remains unaltered under the pervasive influence of the senior high school and college entrance examination systems. This merely defers and partially mitigates the pressure rather than addressing its root causes.

Secondly, the singular orientation of the evaluation system results in the homogenization of vocational education. Within a uniform evaluation framework, assessments of vocational schools frequently adhere to general education standards, prioritizing academic publications over practical skills and college admission rates over employment quality. This evaluative bias induces a tendency toward "academic drift" in the operation of some secondary vocational schools. For instance, certain "college-preparatory classes" within vocational institutions have even eliminated vocational courses and skills training, thereby undermining the safety-net function of county-level vocational education.

Finally, obstructed pathways for further education have created a "dead-end" development predicament. A 2023 survey on the development of vocational education students in China, conducted by the National

Institute of Vocational Education at Beijing Normal University, revealed that pursuing higher education is the primary orientation for secondary vocational graduates, with over 60% aspiring to obtain a bachelor's degree or higher (National Institute of Vocational Education, Beijing Normal University, 2025). While policies have dismantled rigid restrictions and significantly broadened further education pathways—with the integration of cultural knowledge and skills emerging as a core principle of the vocational education college entrance examination—tensions persist between the evaluation system and talent cultivation objectives. In prioritizing exam fairness, operational costs, and efficiency, standardized cultural scores often dominate the total score weight. Moreover, students encounter hurdles such as a scarcity of aligned undergraduate majors and disjointed curriculum content when advancing to higher education. This compels many to switch to unrelated fields to obtain degrees, resulting in increased “sunk costs”, disrupted career trajectories, and compromised continuity and systematicity in talent development. Concurrently, in regions with underdeveloped educational resources, there is a big shortage of higher education institutions capable of accommodating secondary vocational graduates, creating a structural contradiction wherein policies exist but opportunities remain scarce. Although policies encourage building an “overpass” for general-vocational integration, in reality, it frequently manifests as a “one-way flow” from vocational to general education, with movement from general high schools to secondary vocational schools being extremely rare. A survey indicated that 51.1% of respondents viewed general-vocational integration as a channel for transferring to general education (Lin and Zhu, 2025). Thus, the “overpass” effectively functions as a “one-way street” and a “one-way valve”.

### **4.3. Imbalanced Resource Allocation and Weak Connotation of Vocational Education**

Significant disparities in resource allocation constitute the material foundation constraining coordinated development. Data revealing that only 16.1% of secondary vocational schools met operational condition standards in 2023 underscores the systemic marginalization of vocational education in resource allocation (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2024). This imbalance is particularly pronounced in areas like school infrastructure, faculty resources, and funding support.

The flow of educational resources between general and vocational systems remains impeded, resulting in the formation of “resource silos”. Laboratories in general education institutions are rarely accessible to vocational students, while training bases in vocational schools fail to benefit general high school students. Poor coordination among multiple departments in resource management leads to mutual obstruction. Education administrative departments, general schools, secondary vocational schools, industries, and enterprises exhibit resource fragmentation due to segregated management systems and fragmented policies.

Structural contradictions in faculty development are prominent. The proportion of “dual-qualified” teachers in vocational education is insufficient, and the part-time employment of technical backbones from enterprises faces institutional barriers related to staffing quotas and compensation mechanisms. Meanwhile, the alignment between program offerings and industry needs is weak. Some school programs lag behind industrial development, leading to a disconnect between talent cultivation and societal demands.

### **4.4. Barriers to Integration and Lack of Coordination Mechanisms**

Despite active policy advocacy for “mutual course selection, credit recognition, and resource sharing”, significant “three incompatibilities” persist in practice.

Firstly, curriculum system incompatibility stands as the primary obstacle. Structural disparities exist between general high schools and secondary vocational schools in curriculum design, teaching standards, and evaluation frameworks. Confronted with this structural gap and the societal bias of “valuing general education over vocational education”, it is imperative to construct an integrated curriculum system comprising “foundation plus module plus extension” components.

Secondly, misaligned credit standards impede the accumulation and transfer of learning outcomes. Due to divergent recognition criteria, absence of conversion rules, information platform barriers, and inadequate certification authority, students' learning achievements struggle to gain cross-system recognition between general and vocational education. This institutional barrier restricts students' diverse development, hampering their ability to adjust academic pathways based on interests and aptitudes.

Finally, constraints on resource-sharing platforms hinder overall efficiency gains. Practices in some regions show that deep integration requires breaking policy bottlenecks related to funding, faculty, and pedagogical research. The lack of unified resource-sharing platforms and coordination mechanisms results in general and vocational schools operating in isolation, failing to form a synergistic educational force (Qingdao Municipal Education Bureau, 2025).

In summary, the four intertwined dilemmas—cultural, institutional, resource, and mechanism-related—confronting coordinated development constitute a complex systemic obstruction. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-dimensional strategy encompassing conceptual reconstruction, institutional innovation, resource integration, and mechanism coordination, aimed at building a truly coordinated ecosystem for general and vocational education.

## **5. Path Optimization: Systemic Reconstruction for the Coordinated Development of General and Vocational Education**

To address these multidimensional challenges, a systemic reconstruction is required across four key dimensions—concepts, institutions, resources, and mechanisms. This reconstruction aims to facilitate the transformation of vocational education from a model of “stratification” to one of “classification”, thereby fostering a diverse and symbiotic educational ecosystem.

### **5.1. Conceptual Reshaping: Dissolving Cultural Capital Barriers**

Prejudices and stigmas against vocational education, rooted in disparities in cultural capital, constitute the primary conceptual barrier impeding its development. Dismantling this barrier necessitates conceptual reshaping. Firstly, transforming the policy narrative is pivotal to reshaping social perceptions. The revised *Vocational Education Law* explicitly positions vocational education as an equally important educational type. Systematic communication strategies are required to embed this positioning into public consciousness. Research indicates that societal attitudes toward higher vocational education remain generally negative, with significant variations based on educational background, family socioeconomic status, type of high school attended, career expectations, and household registration status (He and Zhu, 2025). Consequently, vocational education should be redefined from a “safety-net education” to a primary channel for cultivating technical and skilled talents, highlighting its strategic value in national industrial upgrading and the construction of a skill-based society.

Secondly, disseminating success stories must prioritize effectiveness and inspirational impact. By widely showcasing the achievements of master craftsmen and technical experts, a social ethos that values skills can be fostered. The current high demand for skilled workers, with many enterprises actively recruiting vocational graduates with competitive salaries and career advancement opportunities, underscores the market value of skilled talents, providing compelling evidence against the “degree-centric” mindset.

Finally, advancing career enlightenment to an earlier stage constitutes a long-term mechanism for eradicating deep-seated prejudices. Systematic career exploration courses should be integrated into primary school curricula to develop occupational awareness and respect for labor from an early age. By constructing an integrated educational continuum of “basic education—career awareness—life planning”, the stereotype of vocational education as the “choice for academic underachievers” can be shattered, laying a solid socio-psychological foundation for the coordinated development of general and vocational education.

### **5.2. Institutional Innovation: Breaking Path Dependence**

Conceptual reshaping necessitates institutional support and safeguards, and it is imperative to dismantle the path dependence entrenched within the current institutional framework. Firstly, a flexible tracking mechanism is key to alleviating educational anxiety. Exploration should be undertaken to introduce “second-chance” opportunities, allowing students to transfer between general and vocational tracks based on their interests and aptitudes, potentially during the second semester of tenth grade or the first semester of eleventh grade. This approach would defer the rigid tracking point, thereby circumventing the excessive competition inherent in the “one-exam-decides-all” scenario of junior high school. Several regions have already piloted relevant initiatives, such as the comprehensive high school model, which provides institutional space for lateral mobility between general and vocational education sectors.

Secondly, the reconstruction of a multi-dimensional evaluation system is central to solidifying the status of vocational education. There is an urgent need to establish a vocational education college entrance examination system based on the tripartite framework of “cultural literacy plus vocational skills plus comprehensive qualities” (Hu *et al.*, 2023), which shall ensure the scientific rigor and authoritative standing of skills assessment. This requires breaking the path dependence of the existing admissions examination system and devising a selection method distinct from the general college entrance exam—one that fully embodies the type-specific characteristics of vocational education. Such a reform would offer students diverse pathways to success.

Finally, the development of a credit bank system serves as the cornerstone for constructing an “overpass” for lifelong learning. By achieving the mutual recognition of achievements from degree education and vocational training, institutional barriers between general and vocational education can be broken. Experiences from the “Henan Province Secondary Vocational Education Unified Enrollment Platform” (Henan Provincial Department of Education & Henan Provincial Department of Human Resources and Social Security, 2025) can be referenced to establish regional learning outcome certification centers, enabling credit accumulation and transfer, and providing institutional guarantees for the continuous growth of technical and skilled talents.

### **5.3. Resource Empowerment: Precise Investment and Optimal Allocation**

Conceptual reshaping and institutional innovation must be materialized through optimized adjustments in practice.

Firstly, a differentiated funding mechanism is an important means to optimize resource allocation. Drawing on the experience of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, funding coefficients can be set based on the training costs of distinct program categories and industrial development needs, thereby directing resources toward targeted and precise investments. Research indicates that current vocational education resource allocation in China suffers from imbalances in typology, spatial distribution, targeting, and structure (Wu, 2018). Therefore, an investment mechanism tailored to the type-specific characteristics of vocational education should be established, with support focused on high-demand programs and under-resourced institutions.

Secondly, cultivating a “dual-qualified” teaching faculty is pivotal to enhancing educational quality. It is imperative to refine the system governing teachers’ enterprise internships and establish a new staffing model of “permanent positions plus mobile positions”. This aims to resolve institutional barriers, such as staffing quotas and compensation issues that impedes technical backbones from enterprises from taking on part-time teaching roles (Ministry of Education *et al.*, 2019). Concurrently, a robust professional standards framework for vocational education teachers should be developed to elevate the overall caliber and professional competence of the teaching workforce.

Finally, a dynamic program adjustment mechanism is central to enhancing adaptability. A linkage mechanism between program clusters and industrial parks should be forged to closely align with the demands of industrial chains. In particular, focusing on the six key industries identified in regional development plans and the ten priority areas outlined in the *Manufacturing Talent Development Planning Guide*, program offerings should be promptly adjusted to improve the alignment between talent cultivation and industrial needs (Ministry of Education, Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, Ministry of Industry and Information Technology of the People’s Republic of China, 2017).

### **5.4. Integration-Oriented Barrier-Breaking Integration: Constructing a New Pattern of Collaborative Development**

The ultimate resolution to current dilemmas lies in achieving the coordinated and integrated development of vocational and general education. This necessitates cross-level collaboration and integration across multiple dimensions.

Firstly, curriculum integration serves as a profound breakthrough for cultivating coordination. A unified curriculum system should be developed, encompassing foundational modules, specialized modules, and integration-oriented modules, to facilitate mutual course selection between general and vocational education sectors. This requires dismantling existing curriculum barriers and establishing an interconnected curriculum

system where general and vocational education content interpenetrates, providing diverse pathways for students' holistic development.

Secondly, interoperable student status management is the institutional guarantee for resource flow. By establishing alliances between general and vocational schools, exploring "status-follows-student" management models, and implementing mutual credit recognition, a unified student information management platform can be created. This platform would facilitate the orderly mobility of students across systems, effectively constructing an overpass for talent growth.

Finally, resource integration is an imperative strategy to enhance the overall efficiency. The construction of regional vocational education hubs is essential to realize the shared utilization of faculty, facilities, and equipment. Research suggests that, guided by the new development philosophy during the "14<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan" period, efforts should be directed toward multiple dimensions: eliminating "typological" boundaries, adopting a "macro-education" mindset, providing "complete-process" guarantees, and adhering to "sustainable" principles. These measures aim to address issues such as resource fragmentation and redundant construction, thereby fostering a cluster effect conducive to the collaborative development of general and vocational education (Cheng, 2024).

The policy of coordinated development of general and vocational education represents a profound transformation in China's educational modernization. Its successful implementation necessitates the restructuring of the education system and the reshaping of social perceptions. This constitutes a complex undertaking requiring multifaceted safeguards. True coordinated development can only be achieved through a comprehensive reconstruction of concepts, institutions, resources, and mechanisms, providing suitable educational pathways for every student and diversified talent support for socio-economic development. For instance, in terms of policy coordination, unified efforts among departments such as education, human resources, and finance are essential to forge policy synergy. In funding, an investment mechanism according to the type-specific characteristics of vocational education should be established to ensure adequate resource allocation. In quality assurance, a multi-dimensional evaluation system should be developed, highlighting core indicators such as employment quality, skill levels, and contributions to industrial upgrading. In implementation strategy, a pilot-first, step-by-step approach should be adopted, promptly summarizing experiences for gradual scaling up.

In essence, the true coordination entails allowing every individual to find their niche within the education system and enabling every talent to thrive in society in the unique way. Only when skills and knowledge are equally respected, and when strivers on different paths can all lead fulfilling lives, can the policy vision of coordinated development be fully realized.

## 6. Conclusion

This study argues that the 2022 Vocational Education Law, by mandating the "coordinated development" of general and vocational education, signifies a fundamental paradigm shift in Chinese educational policy. The core logic is transitioning from a model that functioned as an instrument of social reproduction through selective tracking to a vision of constructing a synergistic educational ecosystem. This paradigmatic shift, however, is fraught with profound structural tensions and implementation challenges. At the cultural-cultural level, entrenched inequalities in cultural capital, perpetuated through the symbolic power of families and schools, reinforce the stigma of vocational education as a subordinate choice. Institutionally, a rigid tracking mechanism centred on the senior high school entrance examination has generated strong path dependence. This is compounded by an aligned evaluation regime, inequitable resource allocation, and constrained upward mobility pathways, creating an institutional lock-in that stifles systemic flexibility. Operationally, long-standing structural imbalances in funding and faculty distribution, alongside barriers to mutual recognition across curricula, credits, and administrative platforms, result in fundamental systemic incompatibility, hindering the practical realization of policy goals.

The primary theoretical contribution of this research is the development of an integrated analytical framework that synthesizes social stratification theory, educational ecology, and institutional change theory. This framework elucidates the complex, multi-layered mechanisms—structural, cultural, and institutional—

underpinning policy evolution. It further explicates the deeper logic of the transformation: an exogenous shock, stemming from economic restructuring and escalating skill demands, interacted with incremental institutional adaptations and strategic advocacy by key policy actors, culminating in a critical juncture that enabled the paradigm shift from “tracking” to “coordination”. This provides a robust and critically engaged theoretical lens for analyzing the nuanced trajectory of education policy within China’s distinctive context.

Consequently, effective implementation must transcend mere technical adjustments and pursue a comprehensive, four-dimensional systemic reconstruction encompassing cognitive, institutional, resource, and operational facets. This entails: deconstructing the symbolic hierarchy of academic credentials through re-framed policy narratives and early career education to foster a culture of parity between educational types; innovating institutional designs, such as flexible tracking and a distinct vocational college entrance examination valuing “cultural literacy + vocational skill”, to break the path dependency of monolithic evaluation; instituting a differentiated funding model aligned with program clusters and industrial strategic needs, while removing institutional barriers to teacher mobility; and building integrated platforms for shared courses, portable credits, and pooled resources to enable a substantive, ecological integration beyond mere structural alignment. Future research should employ longitudinal and comparative case studies to empirically validate policy outcomes and investigate the dynamics of constructing a governance ecosystem that balances social equity with efficiency, and individual aspiration with national development imperatives.

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