Original Research Article

The divergence of teaching quality assurance systems between vocational and ordinary undergraduate education: An institutional logics perspective

Xiaobing Li, Hong Chen, Yubao Chu
School of Construction Engineering, Shenzhen Polytechnic University, Shenzhen, Guangdong, 518000, China

Abstract: Promoting categorized development in undergraduate education and establishing differentiated quality assurance systems are crucial for optimizing the structure of higher education in China. As distinct types of education, the differences between vocational undergraduate and ordinary undergraduate programs are rooted in their divergent underlying institutional logics. Based on the institutional logics theory, this paper constructs a three-dimensional analytical framework—"policy regulation, field norms, and professional cognition"—to systematically compare their teaching quality assurance systems. The study finds that: in terms of policy regulation, vocational undergraduate education follows an "industry-education integration" logic, emphasizing the incorporation of industry standards, while ordinary undergraduate education adheres to a "discipline-oriented" logic, focusing on unified academic norms; regarding field norms, vocational undergraduate education relies on the networked governance of "industry-university collaboration," whereas ordinary undergraduate education depends on the peer review of the "academic community"; in terms of professional cognition, teachers in vocational undergraduate education uphold the identity of "practice experts," while their counterparts in ordinary undergraduate education maintain the identity of "scholars." By clarifying the institutional roots of these divergences, this research provides a theoretical basis for constructing categorized evaluation and characteristic development of quality assurance systems, and offers targeted policy implications for helping both educational types avoid the risk of "homogenization."

Keywords: institutional logics; vocational undergraduate education; ordinary undergraduate education; teaching quality assurance system; categorized evaluation; industry-education integration

1. Introduction

China's higher education system is undergoing a profound transformation from scale expansion to connotation development. It has become the core task and urgent challenge of current education reform and development to build a modern education quality assurance system that accurately matches the orientation of personnel training and can effectively support the national innovation-driven development strategy and the needs of industrial transformation and upgrading. In 2022, the newly revised Vocational Education Law of People's Republic of China (PRC) clearly defined the position of type education with the same important position as general education in legal form for the first time. In 2023, the Opinions on Deepening the Reform of Modern Vocational Education System jointly issued by the Ministry of Education and other departments further clearly pointed out that it is necessary to continuously promote the reform of modern vocational education system, optimize the position of vocational education types, establish a quality assurance system that matches the characteristics of vocational education types, and resolutely reverse the inertia tendency of simply measuring the quality of vocational education with general education standards.

By the first half of 2025, China's vocational undergraduate education has achieved remarkable growth in the number of institutions and the size of students, but some institutions still unconsciously imitate or converge to the ordinary undergraduate model 1 in terms of quality standards, teacher construction and evaluation mechanism, which makes it difficult to highlight its type characteristics and weaken the pertinence of personnel training. Faced with this realistic dilemma, the academic circles have discussed it from many angles. Although these studies are valuable, most of them fail to reveal the deep institutional motivation for the systematic differentiation of the two types of education quality assurance systems. Only the difference is attributed to the different training objectives of "application-oriented" and "academic-oriented", It is not enough to explain why

two sets of completely different organizational practices and institutional arrangements have evolved under the same national macro-educational policy environment.Therefore, a more explanatory theoretical framework is urgently needed to penetrate the appearance and gain insight into the essence.

The theory of institutional logic provides a powerful theoretical tool to solve this problem. According to this theory, individual and organizational behaviors in society do not occur in isolation, but are shaped by multiple and possibly competitive institutional logics in their fields. Applying this perspective to the field of higher education, we can clearly recognize that vocational undergraduate education and ordinary undergraduate education are essentially embedded in different institutional fields and dominated by different combinations of institutional logic, which leads to the fundamental differentiation of their quality assurance systems.

Based on this, this paper attempts to construct an integrated analysis framework, focusing on three key dimensions: policy regulation logic (country), field regulation logic (market) and professional cognitive logic (school), aiming at transcending simple phenomenon comparison, explaining the inevitability and rationality of differentiation from the deep structure of the system, providing deep theoretical support for the two types of education quality assurance systems to truly realize "classified evaluation and characteristic development", and providing policy makers and college administrators.

2. The construction of theoretical framework: Analysis of quality assurance system from the perspective of institutional logic

2.1. The logic of policy regulation: State-led top-level design and legitimacy

As the main distributor of educational resources and the ultimate accountability of educational quality, the policy orientation of the state directly sets different "rules of the game" and legitimacy basis for the two types of education.

For vocational undergraduate education, a series of intensive policies in recent years have jointly constructed a mandatory policy environment that emphasizes "integration of production and education, cooperation between schools and enterprises, and combination of work and study". Under this logic, the legitimacy of the quality assurance system of vocational undergraduate comes from the degree of conformity with the national industrial development strategy and regional economic needs, and whether the talents it trains can effectively meet the immediate and future needs of the labor market. The policy text repeatedly emphasizes "promoting the connection between specialty setting and industrial demand, curriculum content and professional standards, and teaching process and production process", which clearly requires that its quality assurance system must be a system that is highly open to industry, and external factors such as industrial standards, enterprise demand and vocational skill level certificates must be deeply embedded in the whole process of internal quality management.

On the other hand, the logic of policy regulation of ordinary undergraduate education has long focused on "discipline orientation" and "academic Excellence". From the "211 Project" and "985 Project" to the "double-class" construction, the policy orientation at the national level has always focused on improving the level of disciplines, enhancing the ability of scientific research and innovation, and cultivating top-notch innovative talents. The corresponding quality evaluation indicators are firmly based on traditional academic dimensions such as academic achievements, teacher education structure, quality of students, and graduation rate of graduates. The legitimacy of the quality assurance system for ordinary undergraduate students depends more on whether it conforms to the inherent law of discipline development and whether it can reach the domestic and even international advanced level in knowledge innovation and inheritance. This kind of policy logic has shaped a relatively introverted quality assurance model dominated by academic community self-evaluation.

2.2. Field normative logic: The differentiated expectations of the market and the academic community

Vocational undergraduate education is mainly active in "economic field" or "market field". The resources for its survival and development, such as students, school funds, internship positions, social reputation, etc., are highly dependent on the recognition of market players such as enterprises, industry associations, students and parents. Therefore, its quality assurance system must be a networked governance structure, and stakeholders such as enterprises and trade associations are the definers of quality, participants in the process and evaluators

of results. The effectiveness of its quality assurance will ultimately be tested by market chemical indicators such as graduates' employment quality, starting salary level, enterprise satisfaction and contribution rate to industrial technology upgrading. This field norm forces vocational colleges to break the "fence" of organizations, build a community of destiny with the industry, and form an open pattern of "you have me and I have you".

Ordinary undergraduate education is deeply rooted in the "academic field". In this field, reputation and status are mainly determined by peer review within the academic community. The ranking of colleges and universities, the evaluation of disciplines, the promotion of teachers and the acquisition of academic resources are all closely related to academic achievements such as publishing papers in high-level journals, obtaining major scientific research projects and cultivating famous scholars. This field norm has shaped a relatively closed and self-consistent quality assurance system. The main body of its quality evaluation is experts and peers in the discipline, and the evaluation criteria are the mastery of subject knowledge, the training level of academic thinking and the potential of academic innovation. Although the importance of social service is increasingly emphasized, its core legitimacy still comes from the recognition within the academic community. This norm makes the quality assurance of ordinary undergraduate pay more attention to internal academic consistency than external market responsiveness.

2.3. Professional cognitive logic: Group identification identity of teachers and the shaping of behavior patterns

Professional cognitive logic focuses on the core actors of educational practice, and this micro-level logic is the key link for macro-policy and meso-field power to finally land.

The construction of teaching staff in vocational undergraduate education is guided by "double-qualified". The ideal vocational undergraduate teacher should be a "practical expert" or "engineer educator". The success of their teaching is reflected in whether they can transform vivid enterprise cases, advanced technology and real project tasks into effective learning situations, and cultivate students to form superb technical skills and professionalism. Therefore, the establishment of its professional authority depends more on its practical reputation and ability to solve practical problems in the industry than on the output of pure academic papers. This cognitive logic inevitably requires the micro-mechanism of quality assurance such as professional title evaluation, examination and encouragement, and must be greatly inclined to the applied achievements such as horizontal topics, technical patents, skills competition guidance, and enterprise service achievements.

In sharp contrast, the professional cognition of ordinary undergraduate teachers is firmly based on the identity of "scholars". Their professional knowledge authority stems from their profound understanding of the theoretical system of the discipline, their keen grasp of the frontier dynamics and the promotion of the knowledge boundary of the discipline through original research. Therefore, "teaching profound knowledge" is its core duty, publishing high-level academic works and applying for important scientific research projects are the core symbols of its professional achievements, and also the fundamental way for its professional title promotion and academic reputation. This deep-rooted "academic identity" is the micro-foundation of the quality assurance system for ordinary undergraduate students, which always takes academic Excellence as the criterion.

3. The practical representation of institutional logic: A comparison of the path differentiation between the two types of quality assurance systems

3.1. The differentiation of policy regulation logic: From the source of quality standards to lock differences

The difference of policy regulation logic is most directly reflected in the formulation of quality standards. The policy directive of vocational undergraduate education clearly requires that its quality standard must be "hard connected" with the external market demand. For example, the "Teaching Standards for Undergraduate Majors in Higher Vocational Education" indicates that graduation requirements must include "post ability requirements" and "industry technical standards"

Quasi "and" professional quality requirements "three modules. This makes its curriculum standards, graduation design (thesis) requirements, and even textbook compilation show strong external dependence. The main body of curriculum standard development must be "school-enterprise dual leaders", and the content must

reflect the current mainstream technical processes and norms; Graduation design emphasizes real questions and real work, and the results can be in the form of product design, scheme optimization, technical report, etc., and the weight of enterprise tutors in its evaluation criteria is extremely high. This "professional logic" or "systematic working process" curriculum development mode ensures the seamless connection between talent training specifications and professional post requirements.

On the other hand, the policy basis of ordinary undergraduate emphasizes the integrity, systematicness and cutting-edge of the discipline. The leading power of standard setting is firmly in the hands of academic experts and teaching guidance committees in colleges and universities, and it follows the "knowledge logic". The design of curriculum system pursues the internal logic and structural integrity of subject knowledge, and the depth and breadth of theoretical courses are given priority. The core goal of graduation project (thesis) is to test students' ability to solve academic problems by comprehensively applying the theories they have learned, emphasizing the theoretical significance of topic selection, the standardization of research methods, the rigor of argumentation and the innovation of conclusions. The evaluation right mainly lies in academic tutors and defense committees on campus. This regulatory logic ensures a relatively stable and self-contained knowledge inheritance and innovation framework.

3.2. The differentiation of field normative logic: The openness and closure of governance structure and evaluation mechanism

The difference of field norms profoundly affects the governance structure and evaluation mechanism of the two types of quality assurance systems. The quality assurance of vocational undergraduate course is a typical open system. Its governance structure emphasizes "multi-governance", and through the establishment of professional construction committees and teaching steering committees composed of representatives from government, industry, enterprises, schools and other organizations, it is ensured that the industrial voice can directly participate in the whole process of talent training program approval, resource investment decision-making and quality evaluation. Its evaluation mechanism is also a formative evaluation with the participation of multiple subjects. In addition to the on-campus assessment, the students' internship performance is evaluated by the enterprise tutor according to the post performance standard; The acquisition of vocational skill level certificate is converted into credits; The salary level of graduates after half a year's employment, professional counterpart rate, employer satisfaction and other indicators have become the key evidence to measure the quality of running a school. This evaluation mechanism directly feeds back the market signal to the teaching improvement link, forming a fast response closed loop.

On the other hand, the quality assurance system of ordinary undergraduate students presents obvious closed characteristics. Its governance structure is centered on academic autonomy, and its quality assurance activities are mainly led by school-level teaching quality management departments, academic committees at college and department levels, and the participation of external stakeholders is limited and mostly advisory. Its evaluation mechanism focuses on the summative evaluation of academic orientation. In-school course examination and graduation thesis (design) defense are the main ways to measure students' learning achievements, and the evaluation criteria are formulated within the academic community, emphasizing the judgment of the depth of theoretical knowledge and academic potential. Although undergraduate teaching evaluation will also examine the employment situation, its weight is far lower than academic indicators. This relatively closed evaluation system is conducive to maintaining the unity and seriousness of academic standards, but it may also lead to a sluggish response to rapidly changing social needs.

3.3. The differentiation of professional cognitive logic: The construction and development of teachers go their separate ways

The difference of professional cognitive logic is finally and most vividly reflected in the construction and development path of teachers. For vocational undergraduates, the construction of "double-qualified" teachers is the cornerstone of quality assurance, but this orientation is facing great practical challenges. The traditional teacher introduction and evaluation system originated from the general education model, and it is difficult to effectively identify and motivate practical talents. Therefore, a breakthrough system innovation is imperative. This includes: setting up flexible posts such as "industrial professors" and "specially hired technicians" to

smooth the channels for introducing high-level technical and skilled talents from enterprises; Reform the evaluation criteria of teachers, and promote the applied achievements such as teachers' participation in enterprise technology research and development, obtaining technology patents, and guiding students to win prizes in national vocational skills competitions to the same or even more important position as academic papers. The core of these measures lies in reshaping teachers' professional cognition, making them truly identify with the status of "practical experts" and feeding back the latest knowledge and technology of the industry frontier to teaching.

The development path of teachers in ordinary undergraduate courses is firmly climbing along the academic ladder. Its introduction threshold generally requires a doctorate, and its academic output and scientific research potential are investigated. Teachers' professional development activities mainly focus on improving their academic ability, such as attending international academic conferences, visiting top universities or research institutions at home and abroad, and applying for postdoctoral research. This kind of strong academic cognitive logic ensures the profound academic background of ordinary undergraduate teachers and is the foundation to maintain their academic innovation ability, but it may also lead some teachers to attach importance to scientific research and neglect teaching, or to be out of touch with the actual needs of society in teaching content.

4. Conclusion

By introducing the theoretical perspective of institutional logic, this study constructs a three-dimensional analysis framework of "policy regulation-field regulation-professional cognition", and systematically analyzes the root causes of the differentiation of the teaching quality assurance system between vocational undergraduate and ordinary undergraduate. The research shows that the difference of quality assurance paths between the two types of education is not accidental, but the inevitable result of the policy orientation at the national level, the different normative requirements of the market and academic fields, and the differentiated professional cognition of teachers. This deep institutional differentiation determines that the two types of education quality assurance systems must adopt completely different construction paths in terms of objectives, subjects, contents and mechanisms. Only by fully respecting this difference and guiding classified development through classified evaluation can we finally build a world-class undergraduate education system with China characteristics and cultivate high-quality talents with solid academic foundation and superb technical skills for modernization. Future research can further trace the practical challenges and coping strategies of the two types of institutions in the process of institutional innovation, and provide an empirical basis for forming a more perfect theory of educational classification development.

About the author

Xiaobing Li (1994-), female, lecturer, university counselor, master's degree graduate, Shenzhen Polytechnic University, Research direction: Ideological and political education in colleges and universities, vocational education, etc.

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