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The Evolution of Vocational Undergraduate Education in Policy Discourse: From "Level Extension" to an "Independent Type"

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Abstract: ***With the adjustment of China's industrial structure and the rise of the digital economy, vocational undergraduate education has emerged as a vital pathway for cultivating high-level technical and skilled talent. However, existing research has paid limited attention to the conceptual evolution of vocational undergraduate education as shaped by shifting policy discourse. This paper analyzes the transformation of policy narratives surrounding vocational undergraduate education, tracing how it has evolved from being viewed as a "level extension" of higher vocational education to an "independent type" within the higher education system. The study explores how policy, socio-economic demands, and changing educational philosophies have jointly driven this conceptual shift and the internal development of the vocational undergraduate model. Through case studies, the paper further illustrates how national and local policies have supported the reform and innovation of vocational undergraduate education in practice-particularly in refining talent cultivation goals, enhancing curriculum design, and strengthening industry-education integration. Based on these findings, the paper offers policy recommendations to promote the continued development of vocational undergraduate education, aiming to provide a theoretical foundation and practical guidance for its sustained innovation and optimization.***

Keywords: Vocational undergraduate education, Policy discourse, Level extension, Industry-education integration, Talent cultivation**.**

1. Introduction

Amid the ongoing expansion and diversification of China's higher education system, vocational undergraduate education has emerged as a distinct type of higher learning, gradually establishing its unique position and function [1]. From its initial stage as a pilot program-transitioning from college-level to undergraduate-level education-to its formal incorporation into the national undergraduate education framework, vocational undergraduate education has evolved from the periphery toward the center, and from experimental practice toward institutionalization [2]. In recent years, as vocational education has received growing national attention, vocational undergraduate programs have come to be recognized not merely as an extension of the education level but as an independent educational type [3]. This conceptual shift is continuously constructed and reconstructed through changes in policy discourse [4]. The transformation reflects not only a reorientation from qualification-based education to competence-based training but also the realignment and upgrading of China's national strategy for talent development.

Driven by evolving policy narratives, the status of vocational undergraduate education has shifted from a compensatory role to a structural one-no longer merely supplementing traditional academic undergraduate education, but emerging as a parallel and autonomous pathway for cultivating high-quality technical and skilled professionals [5]. As an important vehicle for articulating national educational ideology and policy direction, policy discourse largely determines the goals, content, and operational mechanisms of vocational undergraduate education [6]. Analyzing how this discourse has changed is thus essential for understanding the underlying logic of its development and clarifying its institutional trajectory.

This study aims to explore the conceptual evolution of vocational undergraduate education in policy discourse, with particular attention to its transformation from a "level extension" to an "independent type." By analyzing policy documents from various historical stages, the study reveals the policy logic and value orientation behind these shifts and examines how changes in educational philosophy are reflected in policy language. The ultimate goal is to offer theoretical support and actionable insights for further strengthening the content and system of vocational undergraduate education.

Methodologically, this paper employs document analysis to systematically examine key national policies on vocational undergraduate education since 2000. Through chronological analysis, the development process is divided into two stages - "level extension" and "independent type" - to explore the defining features and internal logic of the policy discourse in each phase. In addition, comparative analysis is used to identify semantic changes in policy texts at different time points, and to interpret the socio-political context and reform-oriented intentions behind them. These combined methods help construct a dynamic picture of the conceptual evolution of vocational undergraduate education, offering insights into its institutional positioning in the context of China's high-quality development agenda.

2. Concept of Vocational Undergraduate Education and Background of Policy Evolution

2.1 Understanding the Concept of Vocational Undergraduate Education

Vocational undergraduate education refers to vocational training delivered at the undergraduate level, primarily oriented toward specific industries or occupational roles. It aims to cultivate applied talents with strong technical expertise and practical capabilities [7]. As an integral

component of higher vocational education, vocational undergraduate programs retain the core attributes of vocational education-namely, their practice-oriented and competency-based focus-while also incorporating elements of undergraduate-level academic training [8]. As China's higher education landscape becomes increasingly diversified, vocational undergraduate education has come to represent a third category of undergraduate education alongside traditional academic and higher vocational tracks.

Compared to general undergraduate education, vocational undergraduate programs differ significantly in their training objectives, curricular structure, and graduate outcomes. While academic undergraduate programs emphasize foundational theory, knowledge systematization, and research capabilities, vocational undergraduate education prioritizes technical application and job readiness, focusing on students' practical skills, professional experience, and industry adaptability [9]. Curricula in vocational undergraduate programs typically reduce the emphasis on purely theoretical instruction and instead strengthen modules aligned with occupational competencies [10]. Practical training and internships are integral, preparing students for frontline roles in engineering, technical operations, or industrial management. The orientation is clearly career-driven, centered on "learning by doing" and promoting deep integration between education and industry.

2.2 Policy Discourse: Concept and Function

Policy discourse refers to the set of ideologies, institutional logics, and strategic intentions conveyed by state actors through formal policy documents, official language, and authoritative rhetoric under specific historical contexts. As a critical component of education policy, discourse does more than communicate policy decisions—it defines the scope, legitimacy, and direction of policy objects. Within the education domain, policy discourse plays a highly normative role by shaping educational concepts, directing goals, and guiding the formation of systems—especially in the establishment and evolution of new educational types.

The concept of vocational undergraduate education has gradually emerged and been refined within the evolution of policy discourse. Initially framed as "an extension of higher vocational education," it later evolved into "undergraduate-level vocational education," and more recently has been recognized as an "independent educational type" [11]. These shifts reflect broader developments in institutional identity, functional positioning, and the relationship between vocational and academic tracks. Through a sequence of policy narratives, vocational undergraduate education has secured its legitimacy and direction, representing both a strategic response to the country's skilled labor needs and an acknowledgment of educational diversification [12]. In this sense, the internal independence of vocational undergraduate education is not only a result of policy determination but also an embodiment of a renewed educational philosophy.

2.3 Context of Policy Evolution in China

The development of vocational undergraduate education policy is deeply rooted in China's broader socio-economic transformation and education reform agenda. On one hand, as industries upgrade, services transform, and the digital economy rises, the demand for high-level, technically skilled professionals has increased substantially—beyond what general academic or traditional vocational education alone can supply. On the other hand, as China's higher education system expands and the gross enrollment rate rises, there has been a growing need for differentiation within the system. Vocational undergraduate education has emerged as a logical outcome of this structural expansion.

In the early phases of policy evolution, vocational undergraduate programs were often piloted under labels such as "applied undergraduate education" or "college-to-bachelor transitions." Policy language during this stage was cautious and tentative, with terms like "explore," "encourage," and "moderately advance" frequently used by authorities [13]. For instance, around 2004, some local institutions began experimenting with vocational undergraduate initiatives, but national-level recognition and support remained limited [14]. These programs were often viewed as derivatives or extensions of general undergraduate education, sharing similar models of admission, curriculum, and administration — yet lacking a distinct educational rationale.

Since the 13th Five-Year Plan period, and particularly following the release of the National Implementation Plan for Vocational Education Reform (2019) and the revised Vocational Education Law (2022), the policy discourse has undergone a significant shift. References to vocational undergraduate programs as a "type of education" have become mainstream. These programs have been granted a status equal to that of academic undergraduate degrees and integrated into the formal typology of higher education. This rise in policy legitimacy signifies a move from marginalization to institutional centrality, ensuring greater clarity in educational content and stronger structural support for the independent development of vocational undergraduate education.

3. Evolution of the Concept of Vocational Undergraduate Education: From "Level Extension" to "Type Independence"

3.1 Policy Discourse during the "Level Extension" Stage (1990s–2010)

Between the 1990s and 2010, vocational undergraduate education in China evolved from a pilot initiative into a more structured developmental phase. At this stage, vocational undergraduate education was primarily conceptualized as a "level extension" within the higher education system-a bridging mechanism between higher vocational and general undergraduate education. From a policy perspective, it was not granted a fully independent status but was instead viewed as an adjunct or supplement to academic higher education, with an emphasis on enhancing vocational skill levels and addressing the growing demand for technically proficient personnel.

Policy documents during this period-such as the Outline of the National Medium- and Long-Term Education Reform and

Development Plan (2010-2020) and earlier versions of the Vocational Education Law-did not define vocational undergraduate education as a distinct type of higher education. Instead, they referred to it as an extension or elevation of higher vocational education, focusing on the transition from diploma-level to undergraduate-level training to meet the technical demands of an evolving labor market. The core policy objective was to facilitate the "college-to-undergraduate" transition, upgrading program content and training levels without fundamentally altering the vocational paradigm.

In practice, vocational undergraduate programs during this stage closely resembled general undergraduate education. The curriculum remained largely theory-oriented, and practical training accounted for only a small proportion of instruction. Most programs were built around traditional disciplinary knowledge and general foundational courses, with limited integration of industry-specific skill development. As a result, the concept of vocational undergraduate education remained ambiguous and did not yet diverge significantly from the academic framework of traditional undergraduate education. The policy intent was transitional rather than transformational.

3.2 Policy Discourse during the "Type Independence" Stage (2010–Present)

Since 2010, major shifts in China's economic structure and industrial landscape-especially the emergence of sectors such as the digital economy and intelligent manufacturing-have led to a reconceptualization of vocational undergraduate education. This period marks the transition from "level extension" to "type independence", as vocational undergraduate programs have been redefined as a distinct category within higher education, with specific goals, structures, and institutional identities.

The implementation of key policies, such as the Made in China 2025 initiative and the 2022 revision of the Vocational Education Law, underscores the official recognition of vocational undergraduate education as a parallel and independent system rather than a mere extension of academic programs. These policy developments emphasize that vocational undergraduate education should align with national priorities in economic transformation and industrial upgrading. For example, Made in China 2025 explicitly calls for the integration of manufacturing and information technology and the cultivation of advanced technical talent—objectives that directly shape the policy design and strategic direction of vocational undergraduate programs.

At this stage, the conceptual framework of vocational undergraduate education has become more clearly defined. Curricula are increasingly aligned with industry needs and emphasize both technical competencies and innovation capabilities. Programs aim not only to produce skilled workers for traditional sectors but also to train hybrid professionals capable of thriving in emerging industries. The educational model has shifted from one centered on "basic knowledge + technical skills" to one focused on "practical ability + innovation capacity + interdisciplinary integration."

Driven by this policy evolution, vocational undergraduate education has gradually broken away from the confines of traditional academic education and emerged as a distinct model. It is now positioned to serve national development goals, especially in strategic sectors such as intelligent manufacturing and digital transformation. In this context, vocational undergraduate education must go beyond training in technical skills to cultivate well-rounded graduates with broad competencies in problem-solving, creativity, and adaptability to dynamic labor market demands.

4. Influence of Policy Discourse and Drivers of Conceptual Evolution

4.1 The Role of Policy in the Evolution of Vocational Undergraduate Education

Policy discourse plays a pivotal role in shaping the conceptual development of vocational undergraduate education. In the early 2000s, policies often portrayed vocational undergraduate education as a supplementary or transitional model, focusing on the vertical extension of vocational learning to the undergraduate level. However, the introduction of landmark policies—such as the Outline of National Medium- and Long-Term Educational Reform and revisions to the Vocational Education Law—have transformed this narrative. These documents explicitly state that vocational undergraduate education should not merely be an academic supplement but a functionally independent system that responds directly to labor market needs.

This discursive shift has reinforced the self-identity and institutional autonomy of vocational undergraduate education. Rather than being treated as a modified version of general undergraduate programs, vocational undergraduate education is now developing its own curriculum standards, faculty profiles, pedagogical models, and industry-aligned outcomes. As policy narratives evolved, they facilitated the emergence of a coherent identity for vocational undergraduate education, positioning it as a vital contributor to China's talent development strategy and a critical avenue for the training of high-level technical personnel.

4.2 Socioeconomic Demand as a Driving Force

China's rapid socioeconomic transformation-particularly in the context of industrial upgrading and technological innovation-has fundamentally altered the demand for vocational talent. The rise of high-tech industries, digital platforms, and globalized value chains has increased the need for composite technical professionals with both hard and soft skills. The traditional vocational education model, focused narrowly on operational competencies, can no longer meet the requirements of a knowledge-based and innovation-driven economy.

Enterprises now seek professionals who combine deep technical expertise with management capabilities, innovation literacy, and interdisciplinary knowledge. In response, vocational undergraduate education has been forced to evolve. Curriculum frameworks now incorporate cutting-edge content—such as big data analytics, artificial intelligence, and

intelligent manufacturing—while also fostering innovation, entrepreneurship, and strategic thinking. This shift marks the transformation of vocational undergraduate education from a skill-training platform into a talent cultivation system aimed at producing high-end technical managers and problem-solvers.

4.3 Shifts in Educational Philosophy

Underlying the evolution of vocational undergraduate education is a broader transformation in educational philosophy. As China moves from an exam-centric model to one based on holistic quality development, vocational undergraduate education has embraced new priorities: the cultivation of creativity, innovation, adaptability, and lifelong learning. The educational goal is no longer limited to mastering predefined skills but includes developing thinking styles, problem-solving abilities, and cross-disciplinary literacy.

Concepts such as lifelong learning and industry-education integration have also reshaped vocational undergraduate education. Lifelong learning encourages students to continuously update their knowledge and adapt to industrial shifts, while industry-education integration fosters deep collaboration between schools and enterprises, ensuring that education remains practical and market-driven. Together, these paradigms have contributed to the development of vocational undergraduate education as a comprehensive, high-level educational model that serves both individual growth and national development priorities.

Ultimately, these philosophical shifts have expanded the scope and function of vocational undergraduate education. No longer a mere extension of traditional vocational training, it now stands as a strategic and autonomous system within the higher education landscape, equipped to respond to the demands of a rapidly evolving society and economy.

5. Case Study: Development of Vocational Undergraduate Education under Representative Policies

5.1 Case 1: National Policy-Driven Reform of Vocational Undergraduate Education

Since the early 21st century, the Chinese government has issued a series of policy documents aimed at promoting the rapid growth and deep reform of vocational undergraduate education. Notably, documents such as the Outline of the National Medium- and Long-Term Educational Reform and Development Plan (2010–2020) and the amended Vocational Education Law have provided a systematic policy framework that has underpinned the internal evolution of vocational undergraduate education. These national policies not only affirm vocational undergraduate education as a distinct educational category but also lay a solid institutional foundation for its future development.

The Outline of the National Medium- and Long-Term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010-2020) plays a pivotal role in this regard. It explicitly emphasizes the need to “accelerate the development of modern vocational education and enhance the quality of technical and skilled talent cultivation.” For the first time, it proposes that vocational undergraduate education should function as an independent type of education, oriented toward serving socioeconomic needs and promoting industrial transformation and economic upgrading. This marked a shift from conceptualizing vocational undergraduate education as a “level extension” to recognizing its typological independence. Its core function has since transitioned from extending academic credentials to cultivating advanced technical and skilled personnel capable of driving technological innovation and supporting industrial transformation.

Following the implementation of these policies, vocational undergraduate institutions experienced substantial shifts in educational goals, curriculum design, and industry-education integration. Many institutions began redefining their training objectives—not simply focusing on technical instruction, but also emphasizing the development of students’ overall quality and innovative capabilities. Curricular reform introduced courses closely aligned with cutting-edge industry trends, such as digital technology, intelligent manufacturing, and artificial intelligence, to meet the demand for interdisciplinary and high-skilled professionals. Simultaneously, collaboration with industry intensified: enterprises began to participate more actively in curriculum development and internship offerings, enabling students to combine classroom learning with hands-on, real-world experience.

5.2 Case 2: Local Policy Innovations in Building Vocational Undergraduate Programs

Building upon national strategies, numerous local governments have advanced vocational undergraduate education by aligning it with regional economic characteristics and industrial demands. One exemplary case is Jiangsu Province, where since 2014, the provincial government has issued a series of supportive local policies to encourage close integration between vocational undergraduate institutions and local industries. Jiangsu’s emphasis on developing the intelligent manufacturing sector has created a fertile ground for applying vocational undergraduate education to real-world industrial needs.

For instance, one vocational undergraduate institution in Jiangsu Province, in response to regional industrial transformation, has established a dedicated “Intelligent Manufacturing Engineering” program through strategic collaboration with leading local enterprises. Together, they have developed training centers and co-designed curricula that cover intelligent equipment, data analytics, and automation systems. These efforts are supported by government funding and policy incentives that facilitate deep industry-education integration. Moreover, enterprises are encouraged to take part in educational governance by establishing mentorship studios and regularly hosting exchange sessions between corporate executives and academic faculty. Such joint curriculum development ensures that students gain exposure to the latest industrial technologies and managerial concepts during their studies, thereby improving employability upon graduation.

This case demonstrates how local policy innovation, industry

collaboration, and institutional initiative can jointly contribute to the high-quality and independent development of vocational undergraduate education. The alignment of training programs with local industrial needs not only enhances the talent pipeline for regional economic upgrading but also offers a replicable model for vocational education reform in other regions of China.

6. Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

6.1 Conclusion

The evolution of vocational undergraduate education represents a dynamic and multifaceted transformation, shaped by shifts in socioeconomic demands, educational paradigms, and policy discourse. The transition from "level extension" to "type independence" reflects a deeper structural reorientation: vocational undergraduate education has moved from being a supplementary mechanism to becoming a fully autonomous category within China's higher education system. Early policy discourse emphasized skill development and credential elevation, whereas more recent policies have repositioned vocational undergraduate education as a core vehicle for cultivating composite, innovation-oriented talent capable of supporting industrial and technological advancement.

This evolution—reflected in curriculum reform, faculty development, and institutional partnerships—has helped vocational undergraduate education gain recognition and legitimacy. It is no longer viewed as merely compensatory but rather as strategic, responding directly to national priorities in manufacturing upgrading, digital transformation, and technological innovation.

6.2 Policy Recommendations

To further enhance the development and positioning of vocational undergraduate education, the following policy recommendations are proposed:

1) Clearly define the type and function of vocational undergraduate education.

While vocational undergraduate education is increasingly treated as an independent type, ambiguities still exist in some policy documents. It is recommended that national authorities issue clearer guidelines that delineate the institutional role and functional orientation of vocational undergraduate programs. Such clarification should address classification within the higher education system, training objectives, discipline configuration, and curricular frameworks aligned with industrial and technological needs.

2) Strengthen industry-education integration.

Industry-education collaboration remains a critical pathway for improving the relevance and quality of vocational undergraduate programs. Policies should incentivize partnerships between institutions and enterprises to jointly establish training centers, co-develop curricula, and design talent pipelines. Enterprises should be actively involved in instructional delivery, while institutions should tailor programs to reflect local industrial structures and technological trends.

3) Promote a diversified evaluation system.

Current evaluation systems often emphasize academic achievement while overlooking indicators of practical competence and innovation. A more balanced framework should be adopted—one that integrates academic performance, skills testing, workplace internships, and project-based learning. Drawing on international best practices in vocational qualification certification could help standardize skill credentials and improve students' marketability.

4) Facilitate tripartite cooperation among government, institutions, and enterprises.

The sustainable advancement of vocational undergraduate education requires triangular cooperation. Government agencies should expand policy and funding support while developing mechanisms to encourage enterprise involvement. Institutions should enhance their engagement with industry in designing relevant curricula and applied learning pathways. Enterprises, in turn, should provide internships and participate in educational planning. This coordinated model ensures that vocational undergraduate education remains responsive, practical, and innovation-driven.

Through the implementation of these recommendations, vocational undergraduate education can be better positioned to meet the complex demands of economic modernization, industrial restructuring, and social development. Clarifying its conceptual identity and strengthening its institutional foundation will further enhance its contribution to the broader higher education ecosystem and national human capital strategies.

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