A Critical Reflection on the Impact of International Organisations on Vocational Education Policy in China

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Abstract. Under the influence of globalisation, the importance of international organisations has become increasingly prominent. This paper explores the four stages of China's vocational education policy development and the effects of its implementation, as well as the impact of international governmental and non-governmental organisations on the development of vocational education and training (VET) in China. Specifically, the paper critically reflects on the degree to which the 4A principles, namely acceptability, availability, adaptability, and accessibility, have been accomplished in China's vocational education system in the context of reality, and the role of international organisations in policy-making and economic assistance in vocational education.

Keywords: Globalisation; Nation-state; International organisations; Vocational education; Educational policy; Principle 4A.

1. Introduction

Education is the preparation of every human being for life, a necessary prerequisite for the development of a correct outlook on life and values, and the future and destiny of nations. In recent years, as the term "globalisation" has become ubiquitous in academia and popular culture, the notion that education systems are often the product of nation-states has been challenged. Particularly in terms of educational policy, state-centred policies are no longer sufficient, nor can they adequately respond to the new global realities of transnational economic, political and cultural interconnections. Educational ideologies and experiences are now spreading rapidly around the world, resulting in global education policy networks that are often more influential. Therefore, international organisations negotiate through consensus and conventions to ensure coordinated policy action between national systems. In addition, the development of consistent indicators for assessing the quality of education to support international cooperation in the field of education is playing an increasingly important role in the process of educational policy development and assessment at the national level. China, as a developing country, has much to gain from this.

This paper is concerned with China's vocational education policy since 1996 and the influence and contribution of international governmental and non-governmental organisations to vocational education in China. Three main questions are discussed: (i) how was the vocational education policy enacted? (ii) What are the effects of policy implementation? (iii) What role have international organisations played in the implementation of the policy?

2. Literature review

Before answering the research questions, some of the key concepts that provide the basis for this paper are first outlined.

2.1. Nation-state

The nation-state, the first concept popularised in globalisation and education policy, is a dominant form of social organisation driven by all social groups, whose key feature is the ethical entity as a national policy in economic, cultural, and social life activities [1]. Educational policy is closely related to the baseline of the nation and is also a part of the national policy. Various educational

policies developed by the nation-state to ensure the unity of its culture are the basis on which the globalisation of education circulates and develops.

2.2. Globalisation

This paper is in line with Robertson and White's [2] global systems theory, which argues that the nation-state as an aspect of globalisation cannot develop in isolation from the four dimensions of culture, society, politics, and economics. In the modern world, nation-states, world politics, the individual, and humanity are tightly intertwined, hence the need for a transnational approach that goes beyond the nation-state level is necessary to increase global connectivity and global awareness. It can be concluded that the existence of international organisations is necessary and that it is these organisations that are driving the introduction and implementation of vocational education models and policies in China.

3. How was the vocational education policy enacted?

To address this issue, this section discusses the origins of vocational education policies at both the international and national levels. At the international level, VET as part of the overall educational process is included in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights[3]; the Convention against Discrimination in Education[4]; the Convention on Technical and Vocational Education[5], and the Revised Recommendation concerning Technical and Vocational Education[6], adopted by the International Centre for Technical and Vocational Education and Training (UNESCO-UNEVOC) in 2001, which explicitly refers to the articulation of technical and vocational education and higher education curricula to promote the sustainable development of higher technical and vocational education.

At the regional level, vocational education in China has gone through four stages of development, with different emphases at different stages. In the initial phase of development (1996-2005), China implemented a programme of "reform, reorganisation, reconstruction and supplementation", and in May 1996, the adoption of the Law of the People's Republic of China on Vocational Education [7] initiated the dynamic development of vocational education. In the second phase (2006-2010), the Ministry of Education issued the Opinions on Comprehensively Improving the Quality of Vocational Education [8], aiming to improve the overall quality of China's vocational education system. In the third phase (2014-2018), the State Council issued the Decision of the State Council on Accelerating the Development of Modern Vocational Education [9] to serve the needs of socio-economic development and at the same time to break down the barriers between vocational education and general education. In the fourth phase (2019-present), the State Council issued the Notice on Issuing the Implementation Plan for National Vocational Education Reform [10],to integrate higher technical and vocational education, and put "vocational university" on the stage of history.

It can be said that since the introduction of its vocational education policy in 1996, China has taken various measures to promote and deepen the development of vocational education, and has followed the general recommendations of the Revised Recommendation concerning Technical and Vocational Education [6] of the International Centre for Technical and Vocational Education and Training (UNESCO-UNEVOC) in the course of its implementation.

4. What are the effects of policy implementation?

This section answers the second research question of this paper by critically examining the implementation of vocational education policies in China. As mentioned above, the government has issued a variety of documents to show the importance it attaches to vocational education, but unfortunately, this may only be theoretical [11]. According to the general recommendations of the Revised Recommendation concerning Technical and Vocational Education [6], and the ideas put forward in the Principles and Opinions on Deepening the Reform of Vocational Education and

Teaching in the 21st Century [12], vocational education is characterised by acceptability, availability, adaptability, and accessibility. This section gives answers by discussing each of these four aspects.

4.1. Acceptability

Acceptability requires changing traditional concepts and raising the social status of vocational education so that the form and substance of vocational education can be accepted by more students and parents [13]. From the point of view of social demand for talents, the ratio of applied technical talents to academic talents in developed European countries is generally 8:2, which is consistent with the structure of supply and demand of talents for socio-economic development [14]. Therefore for them, discrimination against vocational education is absurd. However, in the process of borrowing Western policies, the Confucian concept of literati and officialdom has led to discriminatory attitudes towards vocational education and skilled workers. The social status and social recognition of vocational school graduates are low, and the problem of graduate unemployment is becoming increasingly serious, as they are unable to obtain stable and reliable incomes, health insurance and pensions. What's worse, their avenues for upward mobility are becoming more and more limited [15].

As a response to this topic, the State Council issued the Notice on Issuing the Implementation Plan for National Vocational Education Reform [10] in January 2019 to actively promote the equal treatment of graduates of vocational colleges and graduates of general colleges in terms of settlement, employment, and title evaluation. Gradually raising the income level and status of skilled workers. The Chinese government has advocated a change in perceptions of vocational education through higher wages, expanded enrolment, and official propaganda. However, there is no doubt that discrimination is a long-term challenge to the development of vocational education in China for Chinese people, who have been steeped in Confucianism for millennia.

4.2. Availability

Availability implies the availability of adequate infrastructure and trained teachers capable of supporting the delivery of education [16]. According to Fan's[17] measurement analysis of the data on the conditions of operation of vocational colleges in China from 2010 to 2019, thanks to the financial sector's annual increase in education funding, the value of per-pupil instruments and equipment and the number of per-pupil books in the country's eight comprehensive economic regions have met the standards, as well as the teaching infrastructure and the sanitary conditions of students' learning environments. The most striking feature of the conditions of operation of vocational colleges in China today is that "there is no shortage of money, no shortage of goods, but there is a shortage of teachers."

Despite the Government's efforts to ensure the provision of education, for vocational education, especially higher vocational education, the quantity and quality of teachers can hardly meet the needs of the rapid development of higher vocational education. One year after the policy of expanding higher vocational colleges was put forward, the average teacher-to-student ratio in higher vocational colleges nationwide reached 1: 20.28 in 2020, and in terms of the academic structure, only 2 percent of higher vocational teachers have doctoral degrees, while 47.6 percent have bachelor's degrees or no degrees. This data is even grimmer in the secondary vocational school teaching force, where only 0.1 percent of teachers have doctoral degrees, in addition to 7 percent of teachers without degrees [18]. In order to improve the quality of teachers, in 2021 the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Finance decided to jointly implement the Programme for Improving the Quality of Teachers in Vocational Colleges[19], which establishes an open access system for teachers in vocational colleges through government intervention, requiring that graduates from all types of schools, as well as engineers and technicians from enterprises, must meet the employment standards of vocational colleges and obtain teaching qualifications before they can teach in vocational colleges. This is a very good attempt. It is believed that with the gradual improvement and maturity of the policy on vocational education, the right of students to receive quality education will be better protected.

4.3. Adaptability

Adaptability implies that education can evolve in response to changing societal needs and that it can be adapted locally to suit specific situations [16]. Vocational education attributes are a reflection of the adaptability of vocational education. In vocational education, it should be orientated towards vocational needs. For example, vocational education has become a hot demand for enterprises because they pay much attention to the principle of reducing staff and increasing efficiency, i.e., "quick effect, high efficiency and low cost".

One of the ways to adjust education is to promote job adaptation by setting courses and educating students according to their future jobs. However, according to the current employment situation of vocational college graduates, professional mismatch is the norm [20]. For vocational education to be able to adapt to the economy, it first needs to be matched with suitable jobs and have sufficient employment opportunities. In order to make full use of labour resources, in 2023, the General Office of the State Council issued the Notice on Optimizing, Adjusting, and Stabilizing Employment Policies and Measures to Promote Development and Benefits People's Livelihood[21], encouraging enterprises to expand recruitment, and at the same time granting subsidies to support students to start their own businesses, a two-pronged approach to maximise employment opportunities and reduce the unemployment rate. But with 3.99 million secondary vocational school graduates and 4.95 million higher vocational college graduates in 2022 alone, it will take time to test the effectiveness of the policy.

4.4. Accessibility

Accessibility implies that the education system should be non-discriminatory and accessible to all without hindrance on any grounds (e.g. race, gender, and language, economic or social status) [16]. Since most vocational colleges within China are private schools, many vocational colleges enjoy a certain degree of autonomy in pricing, and tuition fees have become unreasonably high. Taking our 2023 tuition rate as an example, as a private vocational college, the annual tuition fee for general majors is 10,600-15,600 yuan ($1,451-2,135), while the tuition rate for general majors in general colleges in Sichuan province is 4,800-5,800 yuan ($657-794) per academic year [22].

Given that tuition fees at vocational colleges are much higher than those at general colleges, and that most students come from low-income families [23], many poor students may have to forgo enrolling in vocational colleges due to their inability to afford the tuition fees, vocational education faces a significant accessibility challenge. In order to alleviate the pressure of tuition fees, the government has introduced the Student Financial Assistance System for Vocational Schools. Abolition of tuition fees in public vocational secondary schools and increase in the level of scholarships and poverty grants for vocational college students. In addition, some scholars [24] have suggested that vocational colleges could be required to shorten the duration of their students' studies by one year, which may help to alleviate the pressure of high tuition fees. However, the quality of students' learning will also be affected by the missing year of study.

5. What role have international organisations played in the implementation of the policy?

In response to the third research question, this section focuses on both policy development and economic assistance.

5.1. Policy development

As one of the oldest and most far-reaching organisations, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) has been actively influencing education policy development in Asia. China, for example, has developed vocational education policies that have benefited from the Convention on Technical and Vocational Education [5], and the Revised Recommendation concerning Technical and Vocational Education [6]. The World Bank, as the

largest funder of international education development and the strongest theorist and monitor of developing countries, also influences financial policy in China, such as student loans and tuition fee waiver programmes to alleviate the pressure on tuition fees in vocational education.

Some scholars have argued that the policy orientations imposed by international organisations are often inconsistent with the autonomous development policies of developing countries, especially the additional political conditionalities that are forced to be accepted in order to borrow money, which come from the World Bank as an external cause rather than a domestic source of motivation, and is not the result of the country's own natural development, they are often resisted and rejected, and difficult to be fulfilled [25]. Overall, however, China's cooperation with international organisations has been successful. Much of what China has achieved in a relatively short period, compared to many countries that are expanding their education systems, can be attributed to absorbing much of the knowledge and practice of the Western experience.

5.2. Economic assistance

In order to popularise vocational education in China, international organisations have provided substantial and timely funding. The first cooperation between China and the World Bank took place in 1981, when the first World Bank loan to China, totalling $200 million, was invested in the much-needed field of education. Next, from 1984, when preparations for the vocational and technical education project began, to 2002, when implementation was completed, the Ministry of Education has twice introduced World Bank loans totalling $80 million, directly benefiting a total of 151 vocational schools at the secondary and tertiary levels, for the purpose of improving conditions of operation and training backbone teachers. As of 6 July 2010, the World Bank had invested in a total of 22 loan projects in education, with a total investment of $1.766 billion. Since then, although China's economy has been far more prosperous than before, the Bank is still concerned about the education situation in China's impoverished areas, and in order to support the construction of vocational education in remote areas, the Bank has successively lent $100 million from 2012-2017 to Yunnan and Xinjiang Provinces for the purchase of experimental and practical training equipment as well as the construction of new teaching buildings or training bases. The financial input of international organisations, especially the World Bank, in the infrastructure and teacher training of vocational education in China is huge, and has largely contributed to the development of vocational education in China.

6. Conclusion

This article explains the need for the existence of international organisations due to globalisation. Through the policy and financial assistance of international organisations, China can implement vocational education policies more smoothly. Although the completion of the 4A principles is limited due to China's cultural background, social environment, and institutional immaturity, reasonable policy lending is still progressing steadily. Unlike UNESCO's relationship with China, some Chinese scholars have questioned the World Bank's influence on recipient countries because the World Bank is not an equal partnership with China. But based on the status quo, China's cooperation with the World Bank and other international organisations has been successful and, as one of the world's largest countries, China has sufficient capacity to operate with relative autonomy, and has earned some control over Bank-assisted projects compared to many other developing countries. It is also because of this successful cooperation that China has been able to benefit greatly from improving the conditions of vocational education and creating better facilities and teachers. Based on the current state of the implementation of vocational education policy, the employment of vocational college graduates must first be addressed, and with the government's policy preferences and the interventions of international organisations, China's vocational education will have a desirable future.

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