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The Evolution of Undergraduate Major Setting Policies Since the Reform and Opening up: From the Perspective of Gradualism

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Abstract: This article takes the perspective of incrementalism to explore the evolution of my country's undergraduate major setting policies since the reform and opening up. The policy is in line with the characteristics of gradualism, relying on the three-level catalog framework, and has gone through three stages: "restoration and rectification (1978-1998, unified catalog), market-oriented exploration (1999-2013, introducing the market to expand autonomy), and high-quality adjustment (2014 to present, focusing on the 'four new' and interdisciplinary subjects)". Currently, there are problems such as professional homogeneity and lag in dynamic adjustment. In the future, it is necessary to promote policy upgrades within a progressive framework by innovating interdisciplinary mechanisms, building early warning closed loops, optimizing four-dimensional collaboration, and deploying new productivity-adapted majors.

Keywords: Incrementalism; Undergraduate Major; Evolution.

1. Introduction

With the deepening of reform and opening up and the development of the economy and society, the strategic position of higher education has become increasingly prominent. The policy on the setting of undergraduate majors, as a core regulatory means for the structure of talent cultivation, directly affects the adaptability of higher education to social demands and its capacity to serve national strategies. Since the reform and opening up, the adjustment of undergraduate major settings in China has shown a distinct gradualist feature, following the path of "accumulating small changes to achieve major ones", and has achieved institutional optimization in response to changes in internal and external environments. This reflects both the leading role of national macro planning and the multiple drivers of economic, industrial, and educational logics.

Currently, regional economic development and industrial upgrading urgently require applied and compound talents. The transformation of newly established undergraduate institutions should focus on professional optimization, but in practice, there are still problems such as insufficient argumentation for new majors, lack of basis for dynamic adjustment, and prominent homogenization. Existing research has explored the evolution of policies, practical models, mechanisms, and evaluations, as well as new scenarios such as new productive forces. However, studies that systematically review the logic of policy evolution over the past four decades from a gradualist perspective and propose optimization strategies are still insufficient.

This study, based on a gradualist perspective, sorts out the phased development of undergraduate major setting policies, explains the internal logic and driving mechanisms, analyzes the problems, and proposes optimization paths to promote the alignment of major settings with national strategies and social changes.

2. Theoretical Foundation: The Connotation and Applicability of the Incrementalism Model

2.1. The Incrementalism Model

Incrementalism was proposed by Lindblom, with its core being the criticism of "complete rationality" decision-making. It advocates that policy-making should not be radical changes but rather local adjustments to elements such as goals, tools, and subjects based on existing policies. It takes "bounded rationality" as a premise and achieves goal iteration through "continuous limited comparisons" and "incremental adjustments". Its core features are:

Continuity: Relying on the existing institutional framework.

Marginality: Small-scale, frequent local adjustments accumulate effects.

Strategic: Controlling risks through strategies such as constraining the strategic space and selective incentives, while emphasizing a monitoring mechanism involving the government, the market, and the academic community.

2.2. The Applicability of Incrementalism to Undergraduate Major Setting Policies

Consistent with path dependence: Undergraduate major policies have not deviated from the existing framework, such as the 12 disciplines established in 1983, which have served as the basis for the revisions in 1997, 2012, and 2023, with only marginal adjustments, showing a progressive sequence of "planned concentration - market guidance - precise alignment", without breaking the framework of "government coordination and university participation";

Adaptable to limited delegation of power: The delegation of the right to set majors follows the process of "pilot - promotion - improvement", from government monopoly to universities obtaining the right to file in 2001, and then to the "optimization of 20% distribution" in 2023, balancing the risk of "chaos" with the vitality of universities;

In line with process control: Establishing a monitoring

system of "employment rate warning - major assessment - resource allocation linkage", such as reducing the enrollment of majors with low employment rates, which is consistent with the logic of rural education policies of "resource inclination + multi-assessment", ensuring that policies do not deviate from public interests.

3. The Development Process of Undergraduate Major Setting Policies since the Reform and Opening-up

Undergraduate major setting policies, guided by national strategies, based on directory management, and driven by mechanism innovation, have formed a "restoration - reform - optimization" trajectory. The key stages are as follows:

3.1. The Restoration and System Reconstruction Stage (1978 - 1998)

Its core goal was to repair the major system damaged by the Cultural Revolution and adapt to the planned-to-market economy transition, featuring unified catalogues and centralized management. In 1983, the Ministry of Education issued the first *Disciplinary and Professional Catalogue* (10 categories, 634 majors), focusing on restoring engineering/science disciplines and merging over-specialized sub-majors[1].

In 1998, the catalogue was revised to 249 majors, adding Management (11 total categories) and forming a "discipline-specialized category-major" three-tier system. It emphasized "broad-based education," e.g., merging economics majors into "Business Administration" to shift talent cultivation to competency-based. This period laid the institutional foundation for modern undergraduate education.

3.2. Market-Oriented Reform and Independent Exploration Stage (1999–2013)

Centered on "introducing market mechanisms and expanding university autonomy", this stage built a government-university-market tripartite mechanism.

In 1999, the *Provisions on Undergraduate Major Setting* launched a "record-filing + approval system" (independent filing for in-catalogue majors, approval for off-catalogue ones), mandating demand research and employment rate evaluation to break the "unified enrollment and job assignment" model[2].

In 2012, the new discipline catalogue added Art (13 total categories), 506 majors (352 basic, 154 specialized), switched in-catalogue majors to record-filing (7 special majors for approval), and shortened the adjustment cycle to 2 years.

The 2011 "Excellent Engineers Program" (612 engineering majors) promoted university-enterprise collaboration, laying the foundation for "Emerging Engineering Disciplines".

3.3. High-Quality Development and Precision Adjustment Stage (2014–Present)

Focused on the "Four New Directions" (Emerging Engineering, New Medical Sciences, New Agricultural Sciences, New Liberal Arts), this stage shifts undergrad education from "scale expansion" to "quality improvement" via strategic layout.

In 2019, 1,672 new majors (e.g., AI, Big Data) were filed, with low-employment ones canceled. 2020 added "Interdisciplinary Studies" (14th category) and allowed independent interdisciplinary majors.2021-2024 saw new majors like Blockchain Engineering; 2024 first had more canceled (1,670) than added (1,580), aligning with 2025's 20% optimization goal, entering "inventory optimization".

4. Gradual Evolution of Undergraduate Major Setting Policies

4.1. "Centralized Gradualism" Under the Dominance of the Planned Economy (1978–1999)

This stage was characterized by centralized government management as its core, aiming to maintain institutional stability.

In terms of path dependence, both the 1983 and 1998 disciplinary and professional catalogues retained the three-tier structure (discipline category – specialized category – major). While the Management discipline category was added in 1998, the 10 basic discipline categories were preserved; additionally, the proportion of engineering disciplines remained consistently high (45% in 1983 and 38% in 1998) to serve the national industrialization drive.

In terms of marginal adaptation, the focus was on the "partial expansion of the scope of majors". For example, in 1998, the number of economics and management-related majors was merged from 25 to 9, an adjustment that optimized the professional structure without restructuring the entire disciplinary system[3].

In terms of interest balance, the concept of "independent major adjustment by universities" was proposed in 1993; however, strict approval procedures for off-catalogue majors were still maintained in 1999. This "limited delegation of authority" effectively struck a balance between the government's oversight needs and universities' demands for greater autonomy.

4.2. "Decentralized Gradualism" with the Introduction of Market Mechanisms (2000–2013)

Centered on "expanding university autonomy + integrating market mechanisms", this stage gradually built a tripartite mechanism (involving the government, universities, and the market).

In terms of marginal delegation of authority, starting from 2000, the major-setting system shifted from a "dual-track system" (combining record-filing and approval) to a "predominantly record-filing system" in 2012. Nevertheless, the government retained regulatory control through measures such as employment forecasting and provincial-level review to prevent disorder from excessive decentralization.

In terms of market integration, employment rates were incorporated into the major early warning system in 2003; enrollment in majors with low employment rates was reduced in 2012; and a pilot program for suspending enrollment of underperforming majors was launched in 2013—these steps gradually strengthened the guiding role of market signals in major adjustment[4].

In terms of institutional innovation, although the Art discipline category became independent in 2012, it still relied on the existing disciplinary classification framework, making

it a case of "institutional innovation within the established system".

4.3. "Precision-Based Gradualism" Under High-Quality Development (2014–Present)

With "serving national strategies and conducting precise fine-tuning" as its core, this stage combines forward-looking planning with refined management.

In terms of high-frequency fine-tuning, the annual record-filing and approval process for majors has formed a pattern of "small adjustments every year". From 2019 to 2024, over 5,000 majors were newly added and more than 3,000 were canceled nationwide; for example, the number of "Artificial Intelligence" programs increased from 180 to 420.

In terms of category-specific guidance, research-oriented universities have established strategic majors (e.g., "Intelligent Medical Engineering"); local universities have developed majors adapted to regional needs (e.g., "Intelligent Manufacturing" in the Yangtze River Delta); and vocational undergraduate institutions have focused on application-oriented majors[5].

In terms of pilot promotion, interdisciplinary disciplines have gradually expanded from 2 first-level disciplines to allowing universities to independently set up interdisciplinary majors. Meanwhile, "Emerging Engineering Disciplines" have expanded from initial pilots to covering 80% of all engineering majors, effectively reducing the risks associated with systemic reform.

5. Conclusion

This study analyzes the evolution of China's undergraduate major setting policies since the Reform and Opening-Up via the lens of Incrementalism. It identifies three stages—"Centralized Gradualism" (1978–1999), "Decentralized Gradualism" (2000–2013), and "Precision-Based Gradualism" (2014–Present)—all adhering to Incrementalism's core principles: path dependence, marginal adaptation, and interest balance.

These policies have effectively supported economic transitions (planned to market economy) and national strategies (industrialization, "Four New Directions") but face challenges like major homogenization and lagging dynamic adjustments.

Future optimization, within the incremental framework, should focus on deepening interdisciplinary mechanisms, improving early warning systems for low-employment majors, and strengthening category-specific guidance. This will shift policies from "passive adaptation" to "proactive leadership," ensuring majors better serve national high-quality development.

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