

# Policy-Driven Development and the Strategic Initiative of One-Million Enrollment Expansion in China's Higher Vocational Education

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**Xiaoxian Fan**

East China Normal University

## Abstract

**Purpose:** This article explores the relationship between governmental policy and the development of higher vocational education in China.

**Design/Approach/Methods:** The article begins with a textual analysis of dozens of policy documents on higher vocational education issued by the Chinese government since 1999.

**Findings:** The article argues that the development of higher vocational education in China has been largely policy-driven. This development can be divided into four stages: scale development, quality improvement, capacity building, and systemwide enhancement. The transition between each of these developmental stages was marked by new policy initiatives undertaken by the Chinese government.

**Originality/Value:** The government's recent efforts to expand higher vocational education enrollment by one million students have significant implications for China's higher vocational education. Additionally, the proposed "1 + X" model—which attaches equal importance to academic education and skill training—may represent the beginning of a new stage in the development of higher vocational education in China.

## Corresponding author:

Xiaoxian Fan, Periodical House of East China Normal University, 3663 North Zhongshan Road, Shanghai 200062, China.  
Email: [fanxx666@163.com](mailto:fanxx666@163.com)



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## **Keywords**

China's higher vocational education, development stage, one-million enrollment expansion, policy incentives

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Since expanding enrollment in 1999, China has substantially developed the scale and quality of its higher vocational education sector. Higher vocational education has comprised roughly half of the higher education sector. According to data published by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (MOE), by 2018, there were 1,418 higher vocational and technical colleges, accounting for 53.2% of the total number (2,663) of higher education institutions in China (MOE, 2019). In 2018, higher vocational education had 3.6883 million newly admitted students and 11.337 million enrolled students, accounting for 46.6% and 40%, respectively, of regular higher education enrollment (Ma & Guo, 2019). Moreover, more than 90% of higher vocational education graduates found jobs within 6 months of graduation.

Thus, after two decades of development, China's higher vocational education has achieved the policy goals set for such indicators as scale, quality, graduate employment rate, and graduate starting salary. Playing a substantial role in the China's move to higher education massification, higher vocational education has become a major component of the higher education system and a major source of the highly skilled and practical personnel. A number of competitive vocational colleges have also emerged, including A Hundred Model Schools, National Advanced Vocational Education Institutions, and National Model Higher Education Institutions of Innovation and Entrepreneurship. These achievements in higher vocational education are inseparable from China's continuous policy incentives.

## **Historical review of China's policy incentives for higher vocational education**

Since the expansion of higher education enrollment in 1999, China has introduced more than 30 policy initiatives for enhancing higher vocational education. These policy initiatives have served as the institutional foundation, policy logic, and common guideline for developing higher vocational education in the country. Consequently, numerous vocational colleges have developed along similar trajectories. Under these policy incentives, higher vocational education has undergone a staged development with different focuses at various stages. This development can be roughly divided into four stages: Stage 1 (1999–2005), Stage 2 (2006–2010), Stage 3 (2011–2018), and Stage 4 (2019–present). This section discusses these stages of development in greater detail.

During the initial development stage, Stage 1 (1999–2005), China introduced the “reform, reorganization, reinstatement, and supplementation” initiative. In January 1999, the MOE and the former State Development Planning Commission jointly issued the *Circular on the Issuance of the Opinions on the Trial Implementation of New Management Modes and Operating Mechanism for Higher Vocational and Technical Education* (document No. 2 [1999] of the MOE), initiating the vigorous development of higher vocational education. In January 2000, the MOE published the *Circular on the Issuance of the Opinions of the MOE on Improving the Talent Cultivation Work of Higher Vocational and Technical Education* (document No. 2 [2000] of the Higher Education Department of the MOE), which defined the guiding principle, priorities, and road map of higher vocational education. In 2004, the General Office of the MOE issued the *Circular on Implementing Comprehensive Performance Assessment of the Talent Cultivation Work of Higher Vocational and Technical Education* (document No. 16 [2004] of the Higher Education Department of the MOE). The nationwide implementation of performance assessments of higher vocational and technical institutions contributed to the sustainable and healthy development of higher vocational education.

The “reform, reorganization, reinstatement, and supplementation” initiative refers to the reform, reorganization, and reinstatement of the existing vocational colleges, independent adult colleges, and some technical colleges into vocational and technical colleges (hereinafter, vocational colleges). This initiative also supplemented higher vocational education by encouraging 4-year regular universities to set up vocational colleges, either independently or in cooperation with industry partners.

Moreover, under the premise of the overall coordination of local education resources, provincial governments were encouraged to allocate local resources to establish comprehensive and communal vocational colleges. The introduction of this policy by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and the State Council, as well as the delegation of the authority to run vocational colleges to local governments, emphasized the importance of higher vocational education as a major component of higher education and defined the development direction of higher vocational education in the context of higher education massification. By 2005, China had more than 1,200 vocational colleges, including those set up by 4-year regular universities accounting for more than half the country’s regular higher education institutions. The annual enrollment and graduate figures for higher vocational education accounted for more than half of those of regular higher education (MOE, 2005). As such, the goal of developing the scale of higher vocational education was achieved.

Stage 2 (2006–2010) involved improving the quality of higher vocational education and centered on an initiative to develop model vocational colleges. In November 2006, the MOE issued the *Decision of the State Council on Rapidly Developing Vocational Education* (document No. 35 [2005] of the State Council) and the *Several Opinions on Comprehensively Improving the*

*Teaching Quality of Higher Vocational Education* (document No. 16 [2006] of the MOE). The policy focus shifted with the development of vocational colleges entering a transformational period centering on improving teaching quality. At the same time, the MOE and the Ministry of Finance (MOF) launched the “Program of Developing National Model Higher Vocational Colleges.” This program supported the development of a hundred higher vocational colleges into national model vocational colleges, and another hundred higher vocational colleges to develop into national key vocational colleges. As such, the program sought to enhance reform and improve the overall quality of China’s higher vocational education system through the demonstration and driving effect of model and key higher vocational colleges.

The indicator framework and method for evaluating the cultivating of talent by vocational colleges were adjusted with the publication of the *Circular of the MOE on the Issuance of the Scheme for Evaluating the Talent Cultivation Work of Higher Vocational Institutions* in April 2008. Led by education agencies, and participated in by society, these adjustments served to gradually develop a teaching quality assurance system for higher vocational colleges. The policy objective of talent cultivation established during this stage sought to develop hundreds of millions of high-quality personnel and tens of millions of highly skilled professionals to serve the needs of socialist modernization. Pursuing a “service- and employment-oriented” direction, China’s vocational education sector was transformed from a plan-driven, examination-oriented sector to one that was market-driven and employment-oriented. Moreover, the role of the government shifted from direct involvement to overall guidance. Consequently, the system of modern vocational education, known as “modern vocational education system with Chinese characteristics,” was formulated. The program for developing national model vocational colleges was launched to build the capacity and improve the quality of vocational colleges on a large scale.

Stage 3 (2011–2018) focused on capacity building—that is, on improving the capacity of the higher vocational education system to serve the needs of socioeconomic development. China has sought to transform its higher vocational education system to serve the economy, while maintaining its present direction and pursuing sustainable, healthy development. This can be observed in a series of policy initiatives introduced during this stage, including the *Outline of the National Medium- and Long-Term Education Reform and Development (2010–2020)*, the *Decision of the State Council on Accelerating the Development of Modern Vocational Education* (document No. 19 [2014] of the State Council), the *Circular of the MOE and Five Other Ministries on the Issuance of the Plan for Developing the Modern Vocational Education System (2014–2020)*, the *Circular of the MOE and the MOF on Supporting Higher Vocational Schools to Improve Their Capacity of Facilitating the Development of Professional Service Industries* (document No. 11 [2011] of the Vocational Education and Adult Education Department of the MOE), and the *Several Opinions of the MOE on Driving the Reform and Innovation of Higher Vocational Education to Steer the*

*Scientific Development of Vocational Education* (document No. 12 [2011] of the Vocational Education and Adult Education Department of the MOE). The idea of enhancing “production–education integration and school–enterprise cooperation” was formulated to accelerate the development of a world-class modern vocational education system with Chinese characteristics. Particular focus was placed on the important role of higher vocational education in optimizing the structure of the higher education system. As such, with its hierarchical structure, institutional type, mission, tasks, road map, and assurance mechanism defined within the framework of the modern vocational education system, China’s higher vocational education entered a new historical stage of development.

The current stage, Stage 4 (2019–present), places equal emphasis on expanding the scale and improving the quality of higher vocational education. This intention is marked by the planned expansion of enrollment by one million students, as well as the initiative to develop the higher vocational education sector through institutional types and major clusters. Issued by the State Council in January 2019, the *Circular on the Issuance of the Implementation Plan for National Vocational Education Reform* (document No. 4 [2019] of the State Council) (State Council, 2019) clarified, for the first time, that “vocational education and regular education are two different types of education with equal importance” and proposed the further development of high-quality higher vocational education. The “1 + X” model, a graduation evaluation system with Chinese characteristics, was announced in this policy. In the “1 + X” model, “1” refers to the universal academic certificate for all students, while “X” refers to a number of skill certificates tailored to fit different students. In the future, “several skill certificates” will be a better indicator of the true value of higher vocational education graduates than an academic certificate, as these skill certificates will better differentiate the job competency and employment competitiveness of graduates. In this regard, the “X” is different from the existing professional qualification certification system supervised by the human resources and social security authority. Based on the top-level design of the MOE, a professional qualification certification system centering on the professional competency of students will be established under the supervision of the education authority. Higher vocational education will extend in two directions, each of equal importance: namely, academic education and vocational training. Vocational education and training will improve the employment competency of groups such as demobilized military personnel, laid-off workers, and rural migrant workers.

Another document, the *Opinions of the MOE and the MOF on Implementing the Program of Developing High-Standard Vocational Colleges and Specialties with Chinese Characteristics* (MOE, 2019), proposed launching a program to develop excellent vocational colleges and academic programs with Chinese characteristics. This initiative places a particular focus on developing about 50 high-standard vocational colleges and approximately 150 high-quality specialties, building platforms for the cultivation of technicians and skilled personnel, and thus fulfilling needs

for technological and skill innovation. This will also serve to support the development of national key industries and local pillar industries, while driving the high-quality development of modern vocational education.

In the *Report on the Work of the Government Delivered at the Second Session of the 13th National People's Congress on March 5, 2019*, Premier Li Keqiang proposed to “reform and refine the examination and admission mechanisms of vocational colleges, to encourage more senior high school students, demobilized military personnel, laid-off workers, and rural migrant workers to apply, and to achieve a large-scale expansion of one million in student enrollments in 2019” (Li, 2019). As such, China’s higher vocational education has entered a new stage that places equal emphasis on scale expansion and quality improvement.

### **Strategic initiative of one-million enrollment expansion**

China’s economy is undergoing structural adjustment and transformation. As a result of several internal and external factors, China’s economy has been under significant pressure in recent years. This has resulted in a reduction in economic growth goals; for example, in the 2019 government work report, the GDP growth rate target was set in the range of 6–6.5% (Li, 2019). The shortage of high-level technicians and skilled workers is a major factor affecting economic growth. In the report, Premier Li attached unprecedented importance to vocational education—establishing vocational education development as a major driving force for maintaining key economic indicators within a reasonable range. Therefore it is strategically necessary to expand the size of higher vocational education for the ongoing transformation, upgrading, and high-quality development of China’s economy.

The enrollment expansion is also an important measure for the country’s stabilization of employment. In 2018, a meeting of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee (China Central Television, 2018) emphasized stable employment, finance, international trade, foreign investment, domestic investment, and expectation—with stable employment considered the top priority. Vocational education plays an important role in “modernizing the economy and attaining high-quality full employment.” The expansion of enrollment by one million students was proposed in the paragraph centered on “using multiple channels to stable and increase employment,” rather than on education issues. This indicates that the Chinese government considers the move from the perspective of addressing the employment challenge rather than education. Indeed, China’s labor market still has prominent structural issues. The one-million enrollment expansion will encourage more senior high school students, demobilized military personnel, laid-off workers, and rural migrant workers to apply for higher vocational education, as well as train more high-level technicians and skilled workers, thereby promoting high-quality employment and easing the structural issues of the employment market. As employment is a basic need of human well-being and a matter

of national stability and social harmony, the Chinese government is directing significant effort and attention to this sector.

Enrollment expansion is considered an opportunity to develop and improve a modern vocational education system with Chinese characteristics. For a long time, higher vocational education was considered a hierarchical level in the education system rather than an institutional type, usually regarded as inferior to undergraduate education. As noted, in the document of implementation plan for national higher vocational education reform issued by the State Council (2019) in January 2019, it was clarified that vocational education and regular education are two different types of education of equal importance. Moreover, vocational education is expected to play an increasingly significant role. Vocational education needs to operate in a model different from that of regular education and provide its own special programs. Thus, this strategic move of enrollment expansion offers an opportunity for the higher vocational education system to enhance the reform of its recruitment system, to develop clusters of academic programs, to optimize its institutional management systems, to improve the quality of student training, as well as to build and improve the modern vocational education system.

Last, local governments at all levels and vocational colleges have been closely connected to achieve the goal of expanding enrollment by one million students. To implement the national strategic move of enrollment expansion, local governments at all levels are mobilized and incentivized to increase investment in higher vocational education, develop diversified policy solutions, and design interdepartmental, intersystem policy coordination mechanisms.

Higher vocational institutions are also proactively implementing the planned expansion. They are searching for multiple solutions to address software and hardware difficulties such as lack of adequate facilities, applicants, and teachers, as well as the lack of a fit model of education and operation. In this regard, higher vocational institutions are seeking school–industry cooperation to solve the shortage of schooling space, and creating new teaching and management models to ease the shortage of teaching resources. They have also reformed recruitment practice by introducing a separate college entrance examination, an independent interview, a “three in one” comprehensive appraisal of student applications or on-demand appraisals by industry partners. Other methods include utilizing teacher resources from industries through school–industry cooperation, expanding enrollment in special programs with better employment prospects, strengthening the connection with secondary vocational education such as preschool education and elderly care, implementing vocational training in emerging industries and industries with shortages of technicians and skilled workers, strengthening the clustering of academic programs to improve the sharing of teaching resources, as well as improving school management systems through production–education integration and school–industry cooperation.

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