

# The Dynamic Analysis of the Policy Change of "Three Educations" Collaborative Innovation Development in China from the Perspective of Multi-Source Theory

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**Abstract.** The collaborative-innovation development of vocational education, higher education and continuing education (referred as “three educations”) is a key initiative of the Party Central Committee’s comprehensive deployment of “the strategy of revitalizing the country through science and education and strengthening the support of modern talents”. The article constructs a multi-flow theoretical analysis framework by reviewing literature on collaborative innovation and development of “three educations”. Based on the perspective of multi-flow theory, we try to analyze the problem flow, political flow and policy flow. The analysis finds that the coupling of the three sources opens the window of policy, and the collaborative innovation and development of “three educations” becomes a national decision. This national decision aims to promote high-quality development of the collaborative innovation of “three educations” based on the new quality of productive forces in the context of the new era and the new journey.

**Keywords.** Vocational education, higher education, continuing education, collaborative-innovation development

## 1. Introduction

The report of the 20th Party Congress emphasized the collaborative innovation of vocational education, higher education and continuing education (here after referred as “three educations”). And it calls for the integration of vocational education and universal education, industry and education, and science and education, and optimizing the positioning of vocational education classification [1]. According to the Basic Information on the development of National Education in 2023, the enrollment of general and vocational undergraduate and junior college students across the country

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reached 10.4222 million, and the gross enrollment rate of higher education was 60.2%, achieving the goals of the “14th Five-Year Plan” ahead of schedule. The collaborative development of the “three educations” has played a remarkable role. Through resource sharing and complementary advantages, it has met the society’s demand for multi-level talents and provided a solid talent support for the country’s sustainable development. Inquiring about how the government makes such a decision and exploring the internal black box of the government’s policy introduction will help improve the scientific nature of government decision-making and achieve positive social goals.

## 2. Related works

Academic research on the collaborative-innovation development of the “three educations” is still in its infancy, and there is no uniform connotation definition [2]. Literature review found that the existing research on collaborative-innovation development of “three educations” mainly focuses on four aspects. First research aspect is about the status of the collaborative-innovation development of “three educations”. Bie Dunrong puts forward the realization path of the collaborative-innovation development of “three educations”, noting the objective necessity and internal unity of it [3]. Gavin Moody argues that the conversion and mobility of students between two types of institutions is more important than the transfer of credits, and that student mobility should be considered the key solution for the integration of vocational education and higher education [4]. Lucas Graves proposed that strengthening the integration of vocational education and higher education is conducive to guaranteeing educational equity and creating more opportunities for students to make educational choices [5]. The second studying field is about the international comparative research on the collaborative-innovation development of “three educations”. Based on international comparative research, Xie Qingsong promotes a collaborative innovation model from the ontological and methodological perspectives [6]. Through studying the advanced experience of Germany’s “dual system” vocational education in teachers’ training, teaching materials construction, and pedagogical reform, Tang Jianhao puts forward the useful inspiration for the innovation and reform of vocational education in the new era [7]. Another study area is empirical research on the innovative collaboration development of the “three educations”. Based on empirical analysis, Hu Yong uses the theory of synergy and puts forward the path of collaborative innovation in order to achieve the effect of  $1+1+1 > 3$  of “three educations” [8]. Based on the perspective of collaborative innovation, Ning Qiyang clarifies the dilemma of the relationship between multiple synergies of higher vocational colleges and universities, and proposes that the development of higher vocational colleges and universities will be led by the collaborative-innovation approach to lead the synergy of resources, promote the synergy of the main body to enhance the adaptability of vocational education, optimize the synergy of goals to achieve the comprehensive development of people, and reach the synergy of governance by digital transformation as the path to realize the innovative integration of multiple subject resources and the deep leap of the effectiveness of human education [9]. The last studying field is the policy research on the collaborative-innovation development of “three educations” based on the theory of multi-source flow. Zhou Zhiying analyzes the policy issuing of the integration of industry and education and proposes proper suggestions by using the multi-source flow theory [10]. Based on the perspective of multi-source flow theory, Han Tong analyzes

the issuing process of “The Vocational Education Law” [11]. Based on existing research results, this paper integrates research perspectives, directions and methods of different scholars, and tries to analyze how the collaborative-innovation development of “three educations” has become a national decision-making on the basis of multi-source flow theory.

3. Theoretical Background

In 1984, American policy scientist John Kingdon put forward the theory of multiple streams in *Agenda, Alternatives and Public Policy* [12-15], which parenthesize the “back-room” operation in the process of policy making and effectively reveals the internal mechanism of policy introduction and change [16]. Multiple streams theory illustrates that the three sources of problems, policies and politics jointly contribute to the inclusion of public issues in the policy agenda. The source of the problem focuses on the identification and establishment of social problems, which is the process of attracting the attention of decision-makers. The source and flow of policy mainly involves the design and selection of policy programs, which is the process of the generation, discussion, redesign and attention paid to policy suggestions. Government officials, parliamentarians, academicians and interest groups form the “policy community” that advocates policy proposals. Political sources mainly involve the influence of political factors on policy agenda setting, which refers to the political process that has an impact on problem solving. When the three sources converge and open the “policy window”, public problems are identified, policy programs are adopted, and policies are jointly promoted into the agenda setting to achieve scientific and effective policy making [17].

At present, the multiple streams theory is widely used in the policy analysis of education, health care, transportation, telecommunications and finance. This paper holds that the theory can also be used to analyze the decision-making process of the “three educations” cooperative policy in China. According to the practical policy of the “three educations” in China, this paper makes proper adjustment of the multiple streams theory and constructs a multiple streams analysis framework (Figure 1).

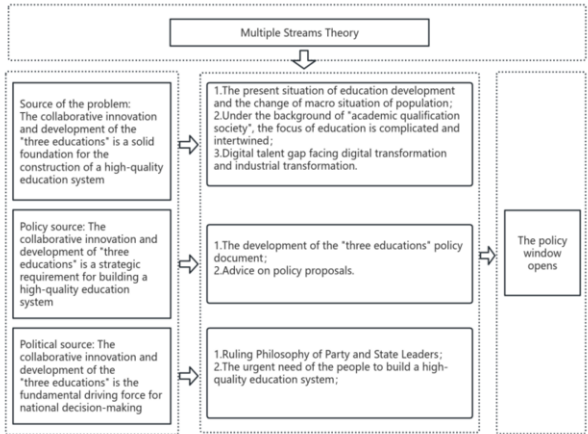


Figure 1 The Multiple Streams Theory analysis framework for the collaborative-innovation development of “three educations”

#### 4. Methodology

The paper adopts the qualitative analysis method. Based on the systematic review of the relevant research literature on “three educations”, this paper summarizes the existing research results of scholars, extracts relevant viewpoints and argumentation materials, and makes a literature review. In addition, through searching on the official website to find relevant policy documents, the authors try to get more effective practical support for this research. By collecting relevant data and literature on the collaborative-innovation development of the “three educations”, the paper constructs a theoretical analysis framework of multiple streams theory, analyzes the problem source flow, policy source flow and political source flow, and concludes that the coupling of the three sources opens the policy window, and the collaborative-innovation development of the “three educations” becomes a national decision.

#### 5. Multi-source flow analysis of the collaborative-innovation development of the “three educations”

*5.1. Source of the problem: The existing education model cannot fully meet the demand for talents*

*5.1.1 Key indicators: changes in the current state of education development and the macro demographic situation*

On the one hand, the status quo of China’s education development has undergone fundamental changes, and the increase in the level of popularization of education at all stages has put forward a new development direction for the collaborative-innovation development of the “three educations”. At present, China has built the world’s largest education system, the level of modernization of education ranks among the world’s middle and upper ranks, laying a solid foundation for the construction of a strong educational country, and is committed to doing a good job of people’s satisfaction with education. From 2020 to 2024, the scale of college graduates grew from 8.74 million to 11.79 million [18]. At present, China’s higher education has entered the “popularization” stage. Scale extension of higher educational institutions mainly brings profits in fulfilling the talent gap, meeting people’s educational needs, and optimizing human resources allocation. However the extension often ignores problems of cultivation quality and employment difficulties incurred by lack of content construction, which is followed by a series of “supply and demand obstruction” phenomenon.

On the other hand, due to the changes of national population distribution pattern, there is the need for “three educations” synergistic innovation and development in order to improve the ability to cope with the situation. At present, China’s population macro situation mainly presents four characteristics: First, the total population is huge. “World Population Prospects 2022” made a prediction of China’s population: 2022 is the first year of China’s negative population growth, and it is expected that China’s population will be 1.416 billion in 2030[19]. Secondly, the aging of the population is aggravated, and as of the end of 2023, China’s population of 60 years of age and older is more than 290 million, accounting for 21.1% of the national population, of which 217 million are aged 65 and above, accounting for 15.4% of the national population [20]. Thirdly, the total population continues to grow negatively, with a very low

fertility rate, and the scarcity of labor resources has intensified. The national population at the end of 2023 was 2.08 million less than that of the previous year[21]. The size of the population of the working age of 16-59 continues to shrink. In 2020, the average years of education for China's working-age population reached 10.8 years and this number is expected to reach 11.3 years by the end of the "14th Five-Year Plan", which means that the average level of education of the working-age population in 2025 in China will reach the level of education above the second grade of high school, which is of great significance for the construction of a modern country and the construction of an educational power[22].

*5.1.2 Focus event: Under the background of "academic qualification first", the problem of education internal volume and resource mismatch is intertwined*

According to Max Weber's theory of social rationalization, the rise of academic qualifications is an inevitable product of the development of capitalism and the construction of the modern hierarchical system. However, Japanese scholar Yakura Hisayoshi analyzed the drawbacks of the "academic society" in his book "Academic Society". On the one hand, focusing on academic qualifications has led to the one-sided development of students' learning and the intensification of the war of exams, which has made many students only sharpen their examination techniques without really improving their thinking power. On the other hand, when selecting talents, various administrative bodies and organizations only take scores as the order of priority, which is not conducive to the selection of genuine talents.

In today's society, excessive rivalry in educational background and mismatch of focuses have become complex and intertwined, with far-reaching impacts on the growth and development of individuals, as well as a severe test of the entire education system and talent cultivation mechanism. First of all, the problem of excessive rivalry in educational background has become increasingly serious. In the context of the academic society, academic qualifications have become an important criterion for evaluating the ability and value of individuals, which makes people pay more attention to the acquisition and improvement of academic qualifications. However, the excessive pursuit of academic qualifications and achievements has neglected students' actual abilities and all-round development, leading to the waste of educational resources and one-sided cultivation of talents. Secondly, the problem of mismatching focuses has also become more and more prominent. Specifically manifested in one is the unbalanced distribution of education resources, with too many resources concentrated on quality education; the second is that the education contents fail to meet market demand, individual growth and development; the third is the mismatch of education objectives, favoring knowledge transfer and test-taking ability, however ignoring the development of students' comprehensive quality and innovation ability. As a result, those problems lead to prominent contradiction between employment supply and demand in the labor market.

*5.1.3 Demand feedback: The technological revolution has created a huge digital talent gap*

The global economic landscape is undergoing profound adjustments. As the new round of scientific and technological revolution and industrial change is deepening day by day, digital technologies such as the big data, cloud computing, artificial intelligence

and blockchain continue to make breakthroughs, and the importance of data resources as an emerging key factor of production is becoming more and more prominent, and it is profoundly transforming the social productivity and way of life. The 20th Party Congress emphasized that digital transformation and technological innovation have become important driving forces to accelerate the construction of a new development pattern and to promote high-quality development. The Industry Digital Talent Research and Development Report (2023) predicts that the scale of China's digital economy will be close to 16 trillion U.S. dollars in 2035, equivalent to 105 trillion yuan. Digital transformation is deepening in all industries, giving rise to a large number of digital and intelligent positions, and the demand for digital talents is surging. It is estimated that the current digital comprehensive talent gap is about 25 million to 30 million, and will continue to expand in the future, becoming a key element restricting the development of the digital economy [23].

## *5.2 Policy source: The collaborative innovation and development of "three educations" is a strategic requirement for building a high-quality education system*

### *5.2.1 The previous policy has laid a solid foundation for the collaborative innovation and development of the "three educations"*

Since the end of the 20th century, with the rapid development of China's economy and society, the demand for the quality of labor has been increasing, and the people's desire to receive education has become stronger and stronger. The state has successively issued relevant policy documents, which clearly put forward the requirements of "mutual convergence" and "mutual communication" between different levels and types of education, prompting the "three educations" to gradually move towards a new stage of mutual communication and convergence. In 1985, the Decision of the CPC Central Committee on the Reform of the Education System emphasized that the synergistic development of higher education and vocational education was aimed at optimizing educational resources and improving the quality of education [24]. In 1991, the Decision of the State Council on Vigorous Development of Vocational and Technical Education further put forward the idea of integrating basic education, vocational education and continuing education in rural areas to meet the demand for diversified talents for rural economic and social development, and to promote fair and balanced development of education.

Since the 21st century, the cooperation of "three educations" has been continuously promoted, forming the mode of adult education bachelor's degree of higher vocational colleges and undergraduate colleges and universities jointly cultivating higher vocational specialists, as well as the mode of jointly organizing the specialties of general undergraduate education in higher vocational colleges, and the mode of "3+4" through talent cultivation of intermediate and undergraduate colleges and universities, respectively. In 2022, the "Opinions of the Ministry of Education on the Implementation of the Reform of Continuing Education in the New Era of the Academic Qualifications of Ordinary Schools of Higher Learning" called for the promotion of the standardized, orderly, and healthy development of continuing education of higher education, in order to meet the demand for lifelong learning for all learning needs. At the same time, the Opinions on Deepening the Reform of the Construction of Modern Vocational Education System was launched to coordinate the synergistic innovation of the "three educations" and provide solid support for economic

and social development and the comprehensive development of human beings. It can be seen that the integration of the collaborative-innovation policy of “three educations” is not proposed overnight. Each was independent of the others at first, and then came the connection and communication within them, and now the synergistic development of the three are proposed and updated in continual policies and documents. In the process of China’s “three educations” from independence to communication and then to the integrated and coordinated development, both the discourse system of education policy is constantly adjusted and updated, and the policy text is launched, so as to create favorable conditions for the collaborative-innovation development of “three educations”.

### *5.2.2 Policy proposals and suggestions help accelerate the introduction of policies*

During the two sessions, various motions, proposals and suggestions entered the policy stream, promoting the collaborative-innovation development of “three educations” into the national decision-making process. By checking the information disclosure column on the official website of the Ministry of Education, it can be found that the Party and the State attach great importance to the collaborative-innovation development of the “three educations”, and members of the CPPCC have made suggestions and put forward hundreds of proposals on this topic. Those proposals include strengthening school-enterprise cooperation to promote the development of vocational education, the strategic transformation of continuing education in ordinary colleges and universities, and building a lifelong learning system through the coordinated development of the “three educations”, etc. It can be seen that CPPCC members play an important role in the flow of policies and their advice is an extremely important part of the flow of policies for the coordinated and innovative development of the “three educations”.

### *5.3 Political source: high-level attention and public demands are the fundamental driving force for the decision-making of "three educations" collaborative innovation and development*

#### *5.3.1 Party and state leaders attach great importance to the collaborative innovation of the three religions*

As the core of the policy-making system, the important instructions of the Party and state leaders on the collaborative-innovation development of “three educations” is an important political element that drives the related policy agenda [25]. In 2014, the State Council promulgated the “Decision on Accelerating the Development of Modern Vocational Education”, which proposes to explore undergraduate vocational education, opening up new horizons in the development of vocational education; the report of the 19th CPC National Congress clearly pointed out that China’s economy has shifted from high-speed growth to a high-quality development stage, and the reform and development in the field of education have also shown a new trend; in 2019, the Implementation Plan for the National Reform of Vocational Education established vocational education on an equal footing with general education, and initiated a pilot project for undergraduate-level vocational education, which has injected new vitality into the development of vocational education; In 2020, the Fifth Plenary Session of the Nineteenth Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) explicitly proposed the construction of a high-quality education system, pointing out the direction

for the long-term development of China's education; in 2021, the Education Law of the People's Republic of China was revised, emphasizing the implementation of a continuing education system, encouraging the development of various forms of continuing education, promoting the mutual recognition of learning achievements and articulation, and promoting lifelong learning for all; the report of the 20th CPC National Congress pointed out that the collaborative innovation of the "three educations" aimed at optimizing the positioning of the type of vocational education, and building a learning society with lifelong learning concept for all people; in May 2023, General Secretary Xi once again emphasized the coordinated development of the "three educations" in the fifth collective study of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee, highlighting the importance of our country's development in the field of education and China's firm determination to promote the integration of vocational and popular education, the integration of industry and education, and the integration of science and education. The party and state leaders attach great importance to creating a favorable political environment for the collaborative-innovation development of "three educations" to become a national decision. And all the efforts aim to promote China's "three educations" from the state of independence of one another to the communication and connection stage and then into a new stage of coordinated innovation and development.

#### *5.3.2 The people are calling for a quality, efficient and fair education system*

When the government pays attention to specific issues, the main driving force behind these issues is that they have widely attracted deep concern of the general public. In the vein of political decision-making, national sentiment is regarded as the common concern and deep thoughts of the majority of the people in a country on the current issues, which is usually displayed in the form of public opinion and amplified by the mass media, thus influencing the basic framework and orientation of policy making. In China, the Communist Party of China (CPC) has always adhered to the principle of "people first", promoted education development with the people in mind, and is committed to building a high-quality education system that meets the needs of the people. From the point of view of China's actual socio-economic and educational development, "doing a good job of education to the satisfaction of the people" is mainly reflected in two aspects: one is to ensure a wide range of basic educational opportunities, and the other is to make the people satisfied with educational services through the allocation of scientific educational resources and the implementation of mechanisms. In the face of the current situation, it is necessary to accelerate the collaborative and innovative development of the "three educations", optimize the positioning of vocational education, promote the connotative development of higher education, and develop an open and flexible education system to meet the needs of individualized learning, and build a lifelong learning society for all [26]. In addition, the construction of a learning society and a skill-based society, and the improvement of the lifelong education system are also a positive response to people's mood and the fulfillment of their needs.

#### *5.4 Coupling three streams: "Ensemble" opens the policy window*

In 2023, the "Special Action Plan for Standardization Personnel Training (2023-2025)" jointly issued by the National Standards Commission and other five departments



stressed that it is necessary to strengthen standardized general higher education, promote standardized technical vocational education, and promote the integrated development of vocational education and continuing education in the field of standardization. By promoting the communication and convergence between vocational education, general education and continuing education, it provides macro policy guidance and development guidelines for the integration of “three educations”[27], emphasizing that it is necessary to promote the coordinated development of various types of education through various ways, so as to achieve the goal of educational modernization and meet the needs of diversified talents for economic and social development.

## 6. Conclusion

Based on the perspective of the Multiple Streams Theory, and by constructing the analytical framework of the Multiple Streams Theory, this article explores why the collaborative-innovation development of “three educations” has become a national decision. In terms of the source of the problem, the contradiction between the urgent demand for compound and professional talents in economic and social development and the current single type of education has led to a series of problems. In terms of policy sources, policy documents and proposals for the collaborative innovation and development of the “three educations” continue to emerge. In terms of political sources, the governing philosophy of the Party and state leaders, as well as the urgent need of the people to build a high-quality education system, jointly promote the coordinated innovation and development of the “three educations” to become the fundamental driving force for national decision-making. The coupling of three sources “ensemble” opens a policy window, making the collaborative-innovation development of the “three educations” a national decision.

In the future, we will try to carry out more in-depth research from different perspectives. One is to focus on the application and challenges of new technologies in the field of “three educations” and explore how technology can effectively empower the “three educations” field under the background of new quality productivity. The second is to strengthen international exchanges and cooperation, pay attention to the comparative study of international “three educations” development, learn from international advanced experience and practices, and provide useful references for the development of “three educations” in China.

Although this study makes a qualitative analysis of the development of “three educations” from the perspective of multiple streams theory, there are still some limitations. This paper makes a qualitative study based on literature and real data, but the data source is relatively limited, and the empirical analysis is lacking. Future research can obtain first-hand data through questionnaires, in-depth interviews and other methods to improve the accuracy and reliability of the research.

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