

## **Study on Institutional Mechanisms for Lifelong Learning in Vocational Education**

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**Abstract:** The concept of lifelong learning and its educational practices have been widely disseminated and accepted in the international community. China has also established the goal of building a lifelong learning education system for all citizens, but its institutional pathways still need to be clarified, and its practical implementation requires further expansion and improvement. Based on the analytical framework of neo-institutional sociology, a comparative analysis of the construction of lifelong education systems in major countries around the world can provide certain insights. Research findings indicate that the construction of lifelong learning education systems in various countries is rooted in their national value traditions and emerges from different institutional domains. Therefore, in building a lifelong learning education system that serves all citizens in China, it is possible to start from China's value traditions and carry out institutional design in terms of institutional pathways and operational mechanisms. The constraints on the formation of China's current vocational skills training system have been analyzed from aspects such as limitations of the education system, insufficient training resources, mismatch between market demand and supply, influence of social concepts, imperfect laws and regulations, low corporate participation, regional disparities, and lack of incentive mechanisms. Finally, the paper looks forward to the mechanism of vocational education lifelong learning system in China, suggesting that to further accelerate the construction of a lifelong learning system for all citizens, the positive role of vocational education should be fully played, the current problems in the construction of the system should be deeply analyzed, and efforts should be made from aspects such as optimization of enrollment, construction of

teacher teams, optimization of the education system, and the use of information technology to accelerate the construction of a vocational education service system for lifelong learning for all citizens.

**Keywords:** Vocational Education; Lifelong Learning; Institutional Comparison; System Mechanism; Construction Pathways

### **1. Introduction**

The concept of "lifelong learning for all" dates to the post-World War II period. At that time, countries all over the world were facing the challenges posed by the expansion of education, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, when intense social class conflicts made the traditional elite schooling system in Europe and the United States unsustainable. The concept of "lifelong education", which advocates that education must not be carried out during childhood and adolescence, and that education must not be organized in schools, was promoted by the rulers of Europe and the United States because of its potential function of reconciling and preventing social crises, and then entered the United Nations discourse on education governance smoothly [1]. At the same time, the concept's critique of the traditional education system and its assertion of the right of individuals to education have contributed to the concern for equality in education for disadvantaged groups and to the spread of radical social thinking about emancipation in Third World countries. As a result, the concept of "lifelong education" has been widely accepted by the international community and has been incorporated into national policies in some countries.

Education is "some of the influences that lead to the promotion of learning", while learning is "the process by which people's experiences change". Although both are based on individual rights, the former emphasizes the influence of the national system on the

individual, while the latter emphasizes the choice of the individual as a subject, with an implicit vision of a huge learning market that meets the needs of individual development [2]. China's goal of "building an education system that serves lifelong learning for all" reconciles the two concepts of "lifelong education" and "lifelong learning". On the one hand, it emphasizes the role of the national education system; on the other hand, it foresees the huge market that may be created by the demand for individual learning, as well as the potential changes in learning [3]. Therefore, the construction of an education system that serves "lifelong learning for all" is not only a response to the call of the world trend of education thought, but also a directional decision made by China based on the modernization of education and the choice of path.

## **2. Comparison of Institutional Mechanisms for Lifelong Learning Across Countries**

Although the concept of "lifelong learning for all" originated in Europe and the United States after the Second World War, various educational concepts have been widely discussed, practiced and disseminated around the world, such as adult education, continuing education, community education, education for the elderly, and so on, to broaden the opportunities, length and breadth of individual learning. As a matter of fact, these educational concepts and practices are synchronized with, or even predate, the concept of "lifelong learning for all" [4]. This has also brought about the diversity of connotations of "lifelong learning for all" and its related concepts, such as lifelong education and learning society, etc., coupled with the complexity of the institutional environment in different countries, the institutional origins of the lifelong learning education system and the social presentation of the lifelong learning education system in each country can be said to be very different.

Through international institutional comparison of lifelong learning education systems, the institutional logic and operating conditions of lifelong learning education systems can be understood. Thus, focusing on the top-level design of the international lifelong learning education system, how countries institutionalize the allocation of educational resources under the concept of lifelong

learning. In order of legislative time, France, the United States, Japan, South Korea and Singapore have completed lifelong learning legislation, which can be used as typical cases. This is since in the process of institutionalization, the law is both the most binding formal institutional text and represents the highest level of institutionalization of the field practice system. Among them, France, the U.S. and Japan embody the native state of institutional construction, i.e., the concept of the system has a certain foundation in their own countries, and the system paths and modes of operation have been borrowed from other countries, resulting in a certain range of institutional proliferation [5]. South Korea and Singapore, on the other hand, have demonstrated the migratory character of institutional construction, i.e., they have completed their own institutional construction by absorbing institutional elements from other countries [6]. At the same time, as newly industrialized countries in Asia, their institutional experiences have some affinity to China.

France is one of the birthplaces of the modern idea of lifelong learning. The French system is centered on the rights of the nation and is built around a system of continuing vocational education, which, like many European countries, has a tradition of apprenticeships and cram schools. Like many European countries, France has a tradition of technical and vocational education and adult education, represented by apprenticeships and workers' apprenticeships, and the social reforms of the 1950s, with their democratic and emancipatory flavor, combined the idea of adult learning as a fundamental right with the practice of technical and vocational education for adults.

The institutional construction of the lifelong learning education system in the United States relies primarily on higher education. After the Second World War, the superimposition of the baby boom, the rapid expansion of the scale of secondary education, and the effect of the democratic thinking on education made the acceptance of higher education a universal demand of the American people. Community colleges with distinctive local characteristics have become the cornerstone of the U.S. lifelong learning education system by catering to the learning needs of different groups with their low-threshold and open operation,

diversified curricula, flexible learning management, wide geographic distribution, and the ability to articulate with the academic qualification system [7]. On the whole, the construction of the lifelong learning education system in the United States at the national level is more of a direction-guiding system, and its actual operation relies mainly on the autonomous management of state governments and institutions of higher education, which corresponds to the political system of the United States.

Before the concept of lifelong learning entered Japan, a relatively complete system of social education concepts and institutions had already been developed in Japan. Japan's social education concept is in line with the Confucian tradition of indoctrination and has become part of the Japanese national education system in the long process of development [8]. As the concept of social education is highly like the concept of lifelong learning, the institutional implementation of the concept of lifelong learning into Japan is based on the local social education system, and then the institutional transformation is carried out through the government's institutional adjustment. Based on the tradition of social education, the Japanese government has constructed a government-led lifelong learning education system through functional transformation and organizational restructuring.

Compared to France, the United States, and Japan, which all have their own lifelong learning concepts and traditions, Korea, as a latecomer in the establishment of a lifelong learning education system, has borrowed and synthesized various institutional elements from the international community, such as "educational leave" and "learning accounts" from Europe. The system has borrowed and synthesized various elements from the international community, such as 'educational leave' and 'learning accounts' from Europe, 'accreditation and transfer of credits' from the United States, as well as social and educational practices and the adjustment of governmental functions similar to those in Japan. It can be said that the most significant institutional construction feature of the Korean lifelong learning education system is institutional integration [9]. In the process of constructing the system of lifelong learning education, Korea has integrated the elements of the

system in administration, business management and practical operation to form a comprehensive system.

Singapore's lifelong learning education system was initially born in the manpower sector, with three institutional elements - financial support, organizational vehicles and workforce skills certification - underpinning the strategy. It is now structured around the division of labor in industry and career development pathways, with an integrated, multifaceted and intertwined vocational skills upgrading system. After the initial construction of the lifelong learning education system in the MOM sector, it has continued to be expanded in the education sector to include the student population in the lifelong learning education system with a focus on career pathways, with the Ministry of Education (MOE) and statutory bodies directly under the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) in Singapore jointly carrying out the functions of running the lifelong learning education system, resulting in a career-oriented lifelong learning education system that extends from the campus to the world of work [10].

### **3. Problems with the Institutional Mechanisms for Lifelong Learning in Vocational Education in China**

There are several constraints in the process of building an institutional mechanism for lifelong learning in China. They will be analyzed below in terms of the constraints of the education system, the lack of training resources, the mismatch between market demand and supply, the influence of social attitudes, the imperfection of laws and regulations, and the lack of an incentive mechanism.

The limitations of the education system are an important factor affecting the building of institutional mechanisms for lifelong learning, which includes the structure, duration and content of education. For example, the traditional education system may pay more attention to the teaching of theoretical knowledge and neglect the cultivation of practical skills, resulting in a lack of practical skills when graduates enter the workplace. The education timetable may also not be adapted to market demand, making it difficult for students to master popular vocational skills within a short period of time.

Inadequate training resources are also a constraint on the building of institutional mechanisms for lifelong learning, which includes trainers, training equipment and training funds. For example, excellent trainers may be difficult to find, making it impossible for training institutions to provide high-quality training for students. Meanwhile, the lack of adequate training equipment may also make it difficult for students to truly master the relevant skills. In addition, funding for training may also be an obstacle that prevents some people from participating in training.

The mismatch between market demand and supply is another factor affecting the building of an institutional mechanism for lifelong learning, which includes aspects such as what kind of vocational skills are needed in the market and how training institutions can cultivate vocational skills that meet market demand. For example, the market may need a certain number of programmers, but training institutions may focus more on training designers, resulting in an insufficient supply of programmers. Thus, a mismatch between market demand and supply may have a negative impact on the lifelong vocational skills training system.

The impact of social perceptions on the development of institutional mechanisms for lifelong learning cannot be ignored, including the impact of social perceptions on vocational skills training institutions and how to change social perceptions. For example, some people may think that vocational skills training is not important, leading to low participation, or some people may think that certain occupations are "inferior", leading to a lack of training resources for these occupations. Therefore, how to change social attitudes and raise the status of vocational skills training is an important task in forming a lifelong vocational skills training system.

The impact of inadequate laws and regulations on the building of institutional mechanisms for lifelong learning should not be overlooked, including the formulation and implementation of relevant laws and regulations. For example, there may be gaps in the laws and regulations on vocational skills training, leading to some training institutions or enterprises taking advantage of the loopholes, or although there are relevant laws and regulations, they are not enforced vigorously enough, leading to non-

compliance by some institutions or enterprises. Therefore, improving the relevant laws and regulations to provide legal protection for lifelong vocational skills training is an important condition for the formation of a system.

The lack of incentives is also an important factor affecting the building of institutional mechanisms for lifelong learning. This includes such aspects as how to set up incentives to encourage more people to participate in vocational skills training and how to motivate enterprises to actively invest in vocational skills training. For example, some policies may not provide sufficient incentives for individuals or enterprises participating in vocational skills training, resulting in a lack of motivation for them to participate in training. Therefore, the establishment of a reasonable incentive mechanism is crucial to promoting the development of a lifelong vocational skills training system.

To sum up, to build an institutional mechanism for lifelong learning, it is necessary to analyze in depth and solve these constraints, which include the reform of the education system, the optimization of training resources, the improvement of laws and regulations, and the establishment of incentive mechanisms. Only in this way can we better promote the development of the lifelong learning institutional mechanism and meet the social demand for various skilled personnel.

#### **4. Path to Building Institutional Mechanisms for Lifelong Learning in Vocational Education**

In the context of education reform, independent enrolment in vocational education has begun to emerge. Independent enrolment in vocational education is somewhat different from the traditional enrolment system, and it is a new thing that is constantly developing in the field of education in the context of the new era. In the context of the knowledge economy, the scope of vocational education needs to be broadened, and the concept of lifelong learning for all should be used as the basis for the innovation and optimization of independent enrolment, to make vocational education truly become an important part of the learning society. Based on this, vocational colleges and universities in the independent enrollment

process should pay attention to the selection to be diluted, the independent enrollment of general education has an obvious selection characteristic, if vocational education and its same will fall into the general education promotion mechanism. Vocational education should return to the essence, highlighting the service, so that vocational education really become education for all. The intrinsic development impetus of vocational colleges is to meet the learning needs of different groups. Under the background of lifelong learning for all, vocational colleges and universities have to innovate the traditional task of education diversion and form a mode that focuses on individual service. Each vocational college presents individual characteristics in the process of development, which requires the setting of conditions for independent enrolment by region and stage. To further meet the learning needs of different groups, the examination can be used as the main enrolment criterion, and the questions can be jointly issued by schools, enterprises and industry professions. Some specialties can be exempted from the cultural examination, focusing on the assessment of skills.

Teachers play a very important role in the development of education at any stage. In the context of promoting vocational education to serve lifelong learning for all, it is necessary to further improve and optimize the teacher team, and to commit to building a "dual-teacher" teacher team. Vocational colleges and universities can actively learn from the teacher training mechanism of vocational education in developed countries, and build a standard system based on scientific concepts, to achieve the scientific and standardized construction of the teacher team, and to ensure that the teachers not only have solid theoretical foundations, but also have proficient vocational skills, and are able to provide the correct guidance for the growth and development of learners. In order to assess the professional ability of teachers, the vocational qualification standards should be adjusted according to the actual development situation, and the opinions of enterprises, the government and the society should be incorporated into the standards, so as to further standardize the employment mechanism of "dual-teacher" teachers. To further improve the construction level of the "dual-teacher"

teaching force, a lifelong education system should be established based on the concept of lifelong learning for all. Teachers are required to receive pre-service training before they are formally employed, to help them understand their positions and adapt quickly to them. Psychological education should be carried out to help teachers relieve stress. Regularly organize teachers to enter enterprises to learn about actual production practices, so that teachers can go deep into enterprises to understand the actual needs of their positions. For teachers who are already on the job, a hierarchical training model should be adopted. On the one hand, carry out academic training to fundamentally improve the academic level of the teaching team, on the other hand, carry out thematic training activities to improve the practical ability of teachers, to ensure that every teacher has proficient skills, to become an excellent "dual-teacher" teacher. In addition to full-time teachers, there are many part-time teachers in vocational colleges and universities. Part-time teachers are also an important part of the "dual-teacher" teaching team, and they are often rich in practical experience, which can make up for the shortcomings of traditional theoretical education. To improve the stability of the part-time teaching team, it is necessary to improve the part-time teachers' recognition of the profession, sign a reasonable employment contract, give more rights to part-time teachers, so that teachers can devote themselves to education.

In China, there is a problem of disconnection between vocational education and general education. To further solve the problem of disconnection and realize lifelong education for all as well as effective articulation between various modes of education, it is necessary to actively do a good job of articulation of higher education to ensure that various types of education can penetrate into each other, and make up for the disadvantages while giving full play to their own strengths. To this end, a perfect complementary articulation system should be established between vocational education, higher education and adult education. Under the concept of lifelong learning, vocational education should not only teach learners professional knowledge, but also focus on improving their vocational skills and equipping them with good professional ethics. Traditionally, vocational education is



characterized by "one-off education", which is only carried out while the learner is in school. Under the concept of lifelong education for all, it is necessary to promote continuing education and training, and attach importance to post-graduation education, which is more conducive to helping learners solve the problem of employment. With the continuous development of the social economy, many rural laborers have begun to flock to the cities, which puts forward brand-new requirements for continuing education, and we should adopt diversified forms of education based on the concept of lifelong learning, so as to achieve more ideal educational results. Vocational colleges and universities can go into the countryside in the process of development, provide continuing education for farmers, and carry out live education for e-commerce in the context of rural revitalization. Vocational education services for all lifelong learning education system needs the active participation of enterprises, according to the actual development of school-enterprise cooperation development mechanism. Before carrying out educational work, it is necessary to fully understand the actual demand for talents in various fields before carrying out targeted education. Vocational colleges and universities must give full play to their own advantages, predict the demand for talents in various fields, provide technical personnel services for enterprises, and form a win-win situation in the development process.

Vocational colleges and universities should take the actual learning ability and cognition of learners as the prerequisite basis, make reasonable use of "Internet+" technology, and build high-quality online courses adhering to the principle of "learning and practicing at any time". Micro courses, MOOC and other teaching resources can maximize the advantages of vocational colleges in terms of the large supply of educational resources, and make full use of advanced information technology means to further expand the scope of education. Under the traditional education model, learners can only receive education in class, which is limited and unable to meet the changing personalized learning needs of learners. The use of information technology can break the time and space limitations, build a lifelong learning education system for all, rich and diverse learning resources to meet the

actual learning needs of different learners. In addition, vocational education should make reasonable use of big data technology to build a personalized network education platform, give full play to the advantages of online education resources, make up for the shortcomings of vocational education, and truly build a system that integrates vocational education and lifelong learning education. Vocational colleges need to encourage teachers and learners to make use of information technology for learning. Teachers can use information technology to build online courses to make up for the shortcomings of the traditional classroom. Learners can use information technology to complete inquiry learning activities that are limited in the classroom. Teachers can vigorously develop teaching software based on online course resources, and the final software can be used in lifelong education, through which a new education system can be formed in the context of the new era.

## **5. Conclusion**

The construction of a lifelong learning system for all in the service of vocational education is a long-term endeavor, and several factors will affect the final effect of the construction of the system. To further accelerate the completion of the lifelong learning system for all, we should give full play to the positive role of vocational education, analyze the current problems in the construction of the system in-depth, and start from the optimization of enrollment, the construction of teacher teams, the optimization of the education system, and information technology means to accelerate the completion of the lifelong service system for all in the vocational education service. In the future development, the construction of the universal lifelong service system will be more and more perfect, and the social development atmosphere of universal lifelong learning can be gradually formed in our country, and the development speed of various fields will be accelerated.

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