

An Ethnographic Study on the Cooperation Implementation Logic of Dual Qualified Teachers in Vocational Undergraduate Education from the Perspective of Institutional Complexity

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Abstract: In the government-industry-enterprise-university collaborative talent training system of vocational undergraduate education, dual-qualified teachers serve as the core hub connecting multiple stakeholders, yet they have long confronted practical implementation dilemmas arising from conflicts among multiple institutional logics. Taking institutional complexity theory as the analytical framework and adopting the institutional ethnography research method, this study conducts an in-depth analysis of the game process of dual-qualified teachers between macro-level policy requirements and micro-level practical fields. The research shows that, squeezed by the governmental administrative logic, university academic logic, and corporate market logic, dual-qualified teachers fall into structural dilemmas of role fragmentation and resource marginalization. Constrained by the disciplinary norms of existing institutional texts, teacher groups develop behavioral strategies of “strategic compliance” and “symbolic implementation” to satisfy superficial compliance requirements. Some teachers further realize the balance and transformation of resources from diverse sources through “crossboundary network bricolage” and “meaning translation.” This study reveals the functional rupture mechanism of macro-level industry-education integration policies in micro-level implementation links. It also puts forward solutions to resolve the abovementioned development dilemmas by reconstructing classified evaluation systems, setting up boundary organizations, and improving benefit distribution mechanisms.

Keywords: Institutional complexity; Vocational undergraduate education; Dual-qualified teachers; Policy implementation; Industry-education integration

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1. Introduction

Insufficient supply of high-level technical and skilled talent has driven the expansion of vocational

undergraduate education. Amid this expansion, government-industry-enterprise-university collaboration has been established as the implementation mechanism for industry-education integration, and dual-qualified teachers function as the hub for the operation of such a mechanism. They are required to master two sets of competence systems at the same time: solid theoretical teaching and research capabilities, as well as practical enterprise experience sufficient for solving industrial problems.

The problem lies in the fact that the four parties above each follow conflicting codes of conduct. The government focuses on compliance and social benefits; universities pursue academic indicators; and enterprises maximize profits. The intersection of multiple norms gives rise to what Greenwood and other scholars call “institutional complexity”^[2]. At this intersection point, contradictory instructions repeatedly confront dual-qualified teachers. Their daily practice is by no means the linear implementation outlined in policy texts; instead, it constitutes a continuous institutional game: they need to judge whose requirements can be temporarily set aside, whose standards must be given priority, and how to strive for room for maneuver amid constraints. Abandoning the topdown institutional design perspective, this study adopted institutional ethnography. Starting from teachers’ daily experiences, it traces how they navigate multiple logics and what specific strategies they deploy to cope with implementation dilemmas. This shift in perspective may provide more groundrooted factual evidence for the construction of teaching staff in vocational undergraduate education.

2. Literature review and theoretical analytical framework

2.1. Research on policy games between vocational undergraduate education and dualqualified teachers

The legitimacy of vocational undergraduate education hinges on the indepth integration between the educational sector and the industrial sector. The allocation of dual-qualified teachers directly determines whether industry-education integration is substantively delivered or merely exists in name. Existing discussions roughly fall into two threads. One thread focuses on institutional supply and on relations between schools and enterprises. Studies of institutions that run vocational undergraduate programs identify insufficient institutional supply, ambiguous self-positioning, and limited social recognition as the main practical dilemmas^[1]. Research tracing the shift in thinking from school-enterprise cooperation to industry-education integration^[3], together with analyses of where industry and education intersect, emphasizes that the industrial system exists to generate profit while the educational system exists to cultivate people, so that cooperation is sustainable only when the two sides find converging goals and common interests^[4]. Where local economies are weak, few strong enterprises are willing to participate in school-enterprise cooperation^[5]. The other thread turns to individual teachers. It documents the tension between heavy teaching loads and enterprise practice: enterprise placements squeezed into vacations tend to become a formality, enterprises are reluctant to let short-term visiting teachers take on real posts, and standards and appraisal systems for dual-qualified teachers remain incomplete^[5]. Meanwhile, national standards have raised expectations, requiring dual-qualified teachers to add capacity for educational reform and innovation to theoretical and practical teaching^[6].

These two threads share an implicit premise: people implement policies exactly as institutions prescribe. However, within the crosscutting network of governmentindustryenterpriseuniversity, grassroots teachers are far from mere execution terminals; they possess considerable discretionary power. Lipsky accurately named this phenomenon as early as 1980: “street-level bureaucracy”^[7]. The real question to be answered is not how to remedy insufficient institutional supply, but how teachers arrange mutually exclusive institutional

requirements into barely operable action plans in their daily work. A review of research on vocational undergraduate education likewise finds that empirical studies remain scarce and theoretical analysis insufficiently deep ^[8]. At this juncture, the disconnection between macro institutional analysis and micro “working knowledge” constitutes a research gap that has yet to be addressed.

2.2. Institutional complexity and policy implementation games

“Institutional logics” refer to a set of material practices and symbolic systems acting simultaneously upon organizations and individuals. They define what behaviors are legitimate and shape how actors understand their actions ^[9]. When instructions from multiple institutions collide and become incompatible, actors fall into “institutional complexity” ^[2]. The government-industry-enterprise-university network creates exactly such a web, woven from three logics, for teachers.

Table 1. Role Expectations and Evaluation Criteria for Dual Qualified Teachers Under Multiple Institutional Logics

Dimension	Core Goals	Role Expectations	Evaluation Criteria
Governmental Administrative Logic	Policy compliance, social stability, regional economic development	Faithful policy executor, social-service provider	Application for key projects, completion rate of administrative tasks
University Academic / Educational Logic	Knowledge imparting, discipline construction, institutional reputation	Knowledge imparter, academic researcher	Paper publications, teaching-research projects, teaching class hours
Enterprise Market Logic	Technological innovation, cost control, profit maximization	Technical-problem solver, project operator	Economic-benefit transformation, horizontal research projects, patents

Pulled in multiple directions by the three logics, policy implementation is inherently a game rather than pure enforcement. As “institutional agents,” teachers cannot accept all conflicting requirements unconditionally. They have to resort to filtering, compromise, and bricolage: temporarily setting aside certain requirements, partially satisfying others after reframing them, and inserting what they genuinely believe in within interstices. Such operations represent both responses to institutional pressures and a reframing of policy meanings.

3. Research design and methodology

This study adopted the institutional ethnography approach. The core proposition of this method is straightforward: starting from people’s real-life daily experiences, trace how “relations of ruling” that transcend individual contexts penetrate people’s work sites mediated by “texts” ^[10]. For dualqualified teachers, documents for professional title assessment, performance appraisal forms, and university-enterprise cooperation agreements are not neutral tools. They themselves represent power apparatuses that transmit institutional pressures and coordinate the actions of multiple parties. This study is based on teachers’ work experiences and examines the consequences of filling in, circulating, and reviewing these texts.

3.1. Eliciting working knowledge: Research site and interviews

The core material to be elicited from interviews is teachers’ “working knowledge”: not what they claim to have done, but the concrete tasks they handle every day and the operational logics involved in those tasks. This research is conducted at Q University, a representative vocational undergraduate university in southeast China, between December 2025 and May 2026. Fifteen dualqualified teachers, three administrators, and four enterprise executives participated in semistructured interviews. The interviews aim to restore micro-sequences of daily work, including

identifying whom to turn to for coordination when encountering obstacles in on-site enterprise research; determining which indicators can be discounted when pressured by university assessments; assessing how actors judge which competing demands carry greater weight and which requirements can be postponed; and evaluating whether such judgments rely on negotiation, concealment, delay, or other approaches.

3.2. Dissecting mediators: Text-sequence analysis at three levels

The research team has conducted a layered decomposition of national-level industry-education-integration policies, Q University's Measures for the Identification and Assessment of Dual-Qualified Teachers, performance appraisal rules for scientific research, and multiple university-enterprise cooperation agreements.

At the top level, researchers identify key text sequences and trace how a Project Task Book is decomposed into KPI indicators levelbylevel and who is assessed and what is assessed behind each indicator. At the next level, analysis focuses on the obscuring effect of standardized textual discourse: invisible labor undertaken by teachers in repeated communication, dispute mediation, and resource acquisition between enterprises and universities leaves hardly any traces in formal documents. At the third level, the assessment criteria for enterprise KPIs and the clauses stipulated in university contracts are compared within identical project scenarios to observe the collisions between market-logic texts and academic-logic texts occurring at the same time, along with the consequences that arise from these collisions.

3.3. Reconnecting experiences to texts: Mapping institutional relations of ruling

Drawing upon the "articulation" idea of Institutional Ethnography (IE), this study crosscompares empirical materials obtained from interviews with the abovementioned textual analysis. This step finally produces a "map of the relations of ruling." It attempts to demonstrate how institutional logics from governments, industries, enterprises, and universities are projected onto frontline teachers, layer by layer, through seemingly neutral documents such as application forms, task books, and assessment sheets.

A note on researcher positionality: the research team has long conducted vocational education research and possesses insider sensitivity toward relevant fields. This advantage inherently carries risks of bias. Three control strategies are adopted: first, inviting external scholars to conduct blind review and interrogation of coding procedures; second, submitting preliminary textsequence maps to interviewed teachers for verification (member check); third, intentionally suspending theoretical presuppositions during analysis, presenting games among multiple logics as neutrally as possible without preemptive attribution.

4. Research findings: Policy games and implementation dilemmas under multiple logics

4.1. Conflicting expectations: When assessment texts require both distinguished teachers and senior engineers

Descriptions of dualqualified teachers in assessment documents read like an impossible checklist: they are expected to be both distinguished teaching masters and competent senior engineers. Yet energy input for the two roles is mutually restrictive. Q University's assessment system is deeply embedded within academic logic. Vertical research projects and corejournal papers constitute stringent thresholds for professionaltitle evaluation. By contrast, industryeducationintegration policies call for teachers to immerse themselves in enterprises (market logic). On-site enterprise practice takes long cycles, and its outputs related to enterprise-process optimization and technological improvement rarely transform directly into papers or research projects that satisfy academic

assessments. Such all-encompassing role expectations translate into role overload for individual teachers who implement practices.

4.2. Who competes for resources and who is sidelined?

In four-party government-industry-enterprise-university cooperation, interest demands constantly diverge. Universities apply for projects to meet institutional indicators; government funding follows administrative assessment logic; and enterprises seek free or low-cost technical support. Value divergences between schools and enterprises are nothing new. Existing studies note that industry and education run on different tracks, one aiming at profit and the other at cultivating people^[4], and that enterprises in less developed regions show little willingness to cooperate^[5]. The problem is that dualqualified teachers are caught exactly in the gaps of interest conflicts and serve as buffers. High-level representatives sign framework agreements, but front-line teachers bear all the implementation pressures, resulting in “great responsibility with limited authority.”

Texts play a role behind this phenomenon. Documents such as project application forms and task books forcibly embed governmental performance-chasing demands and university indicator pressures into teachers’ daily schedules. Rigid requirements for “tracekeeping” in textual clauses force teachers to devote massive energy to producing documentary materials for inspection: filling work logs, taking photographs, and signing letters of intent. Time that could have been spent in workshops is consumed by such work. Document production activities for bureaucratic auditing instead undermine substantive advancement of technological transformation.

5. Microlevel actions and implementation logics of dualqualified teachers

When academic logic collides with market logic within institutional fields and conflicts cannot be reconciled, and university administrative power holds absolute dominance, the most common response among teachers is “strategic compliance,” which manifests itself as “symbolic implementation”: fulfilling formal compliance requirements at the textual level to cope with topdown assessment pressures, while intentionally setting aside substantive indepth cooperation. In neo-institutional organization theory, this phenomenon is termed “decoupling”^[11]. The case of Teacher Chen (pseudonym) illustrates this point well. Working at the School of Intelligent Manufacturing in Q University, he is an officially recognized dualqualified teacher and once took charge of an industry-education integration training base project.

“When I first went to the enterprise, I spent two months working onsite in the workshop and helped them optimize assembly line technological processes. But when I returned to the university for year-end assessment, the Human Resources Department told me that such work could not count toward workload because no landmark outputs such as core journal papers or horizontal project contracts had been produced. Since then, I have learned to adapt. Now, for university-enterprise cooperation, I prioritize “tracekeeping.” For instance, I focus on holding a grand unveiling ceremony, taking press-release photographs, signing high-value letter-of-intent framework agreements that include disclaimer clauses, and submitting Enterprise-Practice Logs on schedule. As long as these documents look perfect, I can obtain excellent assessment results at the university.”

This narrative itself constitutes a diagnosis. Squeezed by multiple logics, Teacher Chen’s action objectives shift from solving practical production line problems for enterprises toward generating sets of documents recognized by university administrative assessments. Industry-education integration thus appears superficially prosperous, while cooperation actually stagnates at substantive levels. However, strategic compliance does not encompass the entire situation. Some teachers with rich pre-entry industrial backgrounds do not adopt

passive coping strategies when facing identical institutional assessments. Instead, they exhibit certain traits of institutional entrepreneurs. Rather than passive maneuvering, they take the initiative to build informal crossuniversityenterprise boundaries and integrate available resources following the logic of bricolage. The core operational logic of such actions can be summarized as “translation”: smartly translating outputs generated under one institutional logic into legitimate proofs acceptable under another institutional logic.

Teacher Lin (pseudonym) from the Business School serves as a typical example. Before joining the university, she worked for years as a corporate human resources director and managed the implementation and operation of universityenterprisecooperation projects.

“Universities demand researchfund income; enterprises pursue cost reduction and efficiency improvement; students need realworld projects. We cannot achieve these goals in isolation. My approach is “packaged translation.” Drawing upon my corporatesector connections, I took on a humanresourcecompensationsystemoptimization project for a large private enterprise. The consulting fees were transferred to the university in the form of a horizontal research project, satisfying research assessment requirements.

Teacher Lin’s case is not fully presented here, yet the operational mechanism of “translation” can already be observed: outputs from a single project are placed into different institutional containers simultaneously to satisfy respective demands.

6. Conclusions and suggestions

6.1. Research conclusions

This study reveals the institutional complexity confronted by vocationalundergraduate dualqualified teachers in governmentindustryenterpriseuniversity cooperation.

First, the “multi-party collaboration” advocated by macro-level policies evolves into fierce conflicts among administrative, academic, and market logics in micro-level practice.

Second, from a historical perspective, the dual-qualified teacher emerged to strengthen students’ practical abilities, expanded with employment-oriented, work-integrated vocational education, and is now expected to develop toward high quality under industry-education integration, with national standards adding capacity for educational reform and innovation to theoretical and practical teaching ^[6]; the logic conflicts observed in this study are embedded in this ongoing redefinition of the role.

Third, dual-qualified teachers cope with institutional pressures via “symbolic implementation” and “cross-boundary network bricolage,” which explains why some current university-enterprise-cooperation projects demonstrate the phenomenon of “coexistence without deep integration.” To fundamentally resolve such dilemmas, we cannot merely count on individual teachers’ microlevel adjustments. Macrolevel institutional supply reforms as well as microlevel evaluationsystem reforms are required.

6.2. Policy suggestions

To resolve policyimplementation dilemmas for dualqualified teachers in vocational undergraduate education, the following suggestions are proposed.

Reconstruct evaluation documents and implement classified and value-added evaluations. Break the hegemony of the unitary “academic logic.” Establish classified evaluation documents adapted to the characteristics of vocational undergraduate education. Assign equivalent weight to achievements directly serving the local economy, such as enterprisetechological transformation and thinktank reports, as

core journal papers. Permit teachers to independently choose between “teachingresearchoriented” and “socialserviceoriented” career tracks.

Set up boundary organizations to buffer conflicts among institutional logics. Establish physicalpowerendowed boundary organizations such as “IndustryEducationIntegration Centers” inside universities. Assign specialized administrative staff to handle tedious documentary work arising from universityenterprise cooperation, liberating frontline teachers from bureaucraticauditing burdens so they can focus on core technological researchanddevelopment and teaching.

Improve benefitdistribution mechanisms to activate genuine endogenous motivation. Governments and universities shall issue more flexible documents governing horizontal research projects and revenue distribution for scientificandtechnologicalachievement transformation. Significantly raise personal revenue ratios for teachers and grant dual-qualified teachers greater resource discretion power in university-enterprise cooperation projects.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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