

A Study on the Policy Pathways for Promoting Common Prosperity in Western Regions through China-Kazakhstan Vocational Education Cooperation

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Abstract: This study examines how to provide endogenous impetus for the common prosperity goal in China's western regions through deepening vocational education cooperation between China and Kazakhstan. To promote common prosperity in the western regions through such cooperation, the study identifies challenges such as vague policy positioning, mismatch between practice and demand, and lack of safeguard mechanisms, which can lead to cooperation becoming a mere "image project" with insufficient practical results. To address these challenges, the study proposes a results-oriented policy pathway: in terms of policy promotion, a "demand-side reverse project initiation" mechanism should be established to accurately match the industrial gaps in Kazakhstan; in terms of policy practice, cooperation projects should be integrated into the county-level scenarios in the western regions to ensure that skills training is linked to income increase targets; and in terms of policy safeguard, an innovative financial model of "risk bottoming-up + profit sharing" should be introduced, including cross-border employment funds and skill appreciation options. The ultimate goal is to form a virtuous cycle of "what the industry lacks-what the trainees learn-how much income increases," upgrading China-Kazakhstan vocational education cooperation from "blood transfusion" support to a mutually beneficial "common prosperity engine." China-Kazakhstan vocational education cooperation is a new win-win growth point under the Belt and Road Initiative between the two countries and a key path to cultivate "blood-making" functions and achieve high-quality development in the western regions.

Keywords: Western Regions; Common Prosperity; "Blood-Making Function"; Policy Pathways

1. Introduction

To highlight the international cooperative relationship between China and Central Asian countries, which is characterized by shared ideals and a common destiny, President Xi Jinping of China has provided a new historical positioning for China's cooperation with Central Asian countries with the phrase "mutual love and mutual benefit." Under the guidance of the "China-Central Asia Spirit" announced by President Xi Jinping, China and Kazakhstan have continuously deepened their cooperation in the fields of politics, economy, and education within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative and Kazakhstan's New Economic Policy "Bright Path," with vocational education emerging as a key area of cooperation. In 2024, Minister of Education of China, Huai Jinpeng, visited Kazakhstan to inaugurate the Kazakhstan Branch of Beijing Language and Culture University, opening up a new situation for educational cooperation between China and Kazakhstan. Currently, the two countries are jointly promoting the continuous implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative through Chinese language education cooperation and the joint construction of Luban Workshops. With the establishment of platforms such as the "China-Central Asia Education Exchange and Cooperation Center," the scope of Sino-Kazakh cooperation platforms continues to expand. Promoting common prosperity in the western regions is an important goal of China's regional coordinated development, which is currently being advanced through measures such as east-west cooperation, industrial support, and talent mobility. Among these, education provides endogenous impetus for promoting common prosperity in the western regions by

increasing the stock of human capital and optimizing the quality of human capital structure. The China-Kazakhstan border is about 1,778 kilometers long, one of the longest land borders between China and Central Asian countries. Therefore, extensive and in-depth vocational education cooperation between China and Kazakhstan, focusing on promoting Kazakhstan's economic and technological development and the common prosperity goal of China's western regions, will gradually explore a vocational education cooperation model with endogenous growth characteristics, bringing a new situation of mutual benefit and win-win to both countries.

China-Kazakhstan educational cooperation has a long history. As early as 2003, China and Kazakhstan signed the "Agreement on Educational Cooperation between the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China and the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan." In 2017, this agreement was further revised and supplemented, expanding the scope of educational cooperation between the two sides and deepening the interaction of educational cooperation.

In recent years, China's cooperation with Central Asian countries has become increasingly in-depth. In October 2023, when President Xi Jinping met with Kazakh President Tokayev, who attended the third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, he pointed out that a healthy, stable, and vibrant China-Kazakhstan relationship is conducive to the development and revitalization of both countries. President Xi proposed that the two sides "should tap potential and create new growth points for cooperation." China-Kazakhstan vocational education cooperation is an important measure for the new growth points of cooperation between the two sides. Strengthening vocational education cooperation between China and Kazakhstan is beneficial for both sides to share the achievements of vocational and technical education development, expand the scope of industrial technology dissemination in China's western regions, and provide important support for the construction of a vocational and technical skills talent echelon in Kazakhstan.

Kazakhstan is contiguous with China's western regions. President Xi Jinping pointed out that "the western regions should base themselves on actual conditions such as resource endowment,

development conditions, and comparative advantages, and find the entry points and focal points for grasping the new stage of development, implementing the new development concepts, integrating into the new development pattern, achieving high-quality development, and promoting common prosperity." Common prosperity is an inheritance and development of the historical achievements of China's comprehensive victory in the poverty alleviation campaign. The historical experience of the poverty alleviation campaign shows that "blood transfusion is not as good as blood-making." China-Kazakhstan vocational education cooperation, with its international educational practice interaction and exchange, and the excellent ability to shape the professional quality of the two countries, has accumulated and strengthened the technical talent force with vocational skills as the carrier for economic cooperation and industrial international coordinated development between Kazakhstan and China's western regions. It is conducive to shaping a self-blood-making function of China-Kazakhstan vocational talent echelon and has become a key force for China to achieve the grand goal of common prosperity in the western regions.

Promoting common prosperity in the western regions is the material basis and path dependence for the Party and the country to advance the goal of common prosperity. From the perspective of historical development and change, looking back at the past and looking forward to the future, the high-quality development of the western regions is stepping into a new journey of common prosperity. Vocational education remains one of the important entry points and focal points for the western regions to integrate into the new pattern and achieve the goal of high-quality development. To fully exert the function of vocational education, cultivate the blood-making function of wealth in the western regions, and build an endogenous force of vocational talents for common prosperity in the western regions, it is necessary to continuously explore innovative paths for the construction of vocational education policy systems in the western regions, continuously strengthen research on social support for vocational education, and fully activate the new kinetic energy for the development of China-Kazakhstan vocational education

cooperation.

2. Main Issues Faced by China-Kazakhstan Vocational Education Cooperation Policy in Promoting Common Prosperity in Western Regions

China-Kazakhstan vocational education cooperation is conducive to the construction of policy systems that promote common prosperity in the western regions and to the inheritance and development of historical vocational education policies between the two countries. The positioning, function, and evolution of China-Kazakhstan vocational education cooperation model within the public service policy system of the western regions have their specific historical accumulation, adaptation to local characteristics of the western regions, and reconstruction in the historical evolution of regional policies. Moving forward, the construction of a distinctive vocational education policy system in the western regions, which supports in-depth China-Kazakhstan vocational education cooperation, will focus more on policy quality, optimize educational concepts, strengthen talent supply, and coordinate with regional industries under the call for high-quality development and common prosperity in the western regions. This is an important component in creating a new situation for the vocational education policy system in the western regions.

2.1 Challenges Faced by Policy Introduction in Promoting the Goal of Common Prosperity in Western Regions

China-Kazakhstan vocational education cooperation is highly anticipated. It is not only a strategic fulcrum for the overall upgrade of China's western vocational education policy system but also a continuation and reconstruction of the decades-long educational exchange tradition between the two countries under the new context of the Belt and Road Initiative. However, as China-Kazakhstan vocational education cooperation transitions from vision to institution and from project to policy, a series of issues and challenges in the policy implementation phase deserve attention. These issues are mainly manifested in aspects such as vague policy positioning, suspended functions, and path dependency.

There are issues such as policy dispersion, unclear attribution, and high transaction costs in

the introduction and promotion of China-Kazakhstan vocational education policies, which pose challenges to the implementation of these policies. First, from the perspective of the regional level of policy cooperation, merely including China-Kazakhstan vocational education cooperation in several bilateral documents at the national level is not sufficient to provide strong policy impetus for local vocational education cooperation. In particular, the lack of special policy guidance for the western regions scatters the cooperation matters between China and Kazakhstan in multiple policy modules such as "opening up to the outside world," "integration of industry and education," and "rural revitalization." This makes it difficult to form a stable and expected regional vocational education cooperation policy plan and leading outline, which is not conducive to the expansion and development of local vocational education cooperation between China and Kazakhstan. Second, when the western regions connect with China-Kazakhstan vocational education cooperation, there is a lack of clear and explicit guiding policies to specify whether projects should be placed in diversified policy baskets such as "educational aid to Xinjiang," "development of ethnic regions," or "border economic belt." This can easily lead to the phenomenon of policy resource waste due to multiple reporting channels and repeated evaluation and argumentation for the same project. Third, the lack of policies leads to increased transaction costs. For example, when domestic vocational colleges in China compile talent training programs, they cannot find a "policy anchor point" corresponding to Kazakhstan's talent training standards. In the implementation of policies such as course recognition, credit transfer, and certificate connection, it is easy to lack institutional interfaces, and ultimately, they can only return to a "case-by-case negotiation" mode, which increases transaction costs.

There are significant challenges of suspended functions in the implementation and promotion of China-Kazakhstan vocational education cooperation policies. At present, the "cooperation dividends" of vocational education between the two sides have not yet been transformed into "public goods." First, the talent chain cultivation is suspended. Projects mainly stay at the level of teacher and student exchanges and short-term training, and do not

accurately match the talent gaps in the main industries of the western regions, such as the "eight major industrial clusters in Xinjiang" and the "six new, six special, and six excellent" industries in Ningxia. This leads to a situation where "the government pays money, schools are active, and enterprises stand by." Second, there is a problem of suspended industrial chain in China-Kazakhstan vocational education. Overseas Luban Workshops and training centers mainly rely on Chinese funding, and the proportion of local enterprises and social organizations' investment is less than 15%. It is difficult to embed the cooperation results into the pillar industries emphasized by Kazakhstan's "Bright Path" economic policy, such as petrochemicals, agricultural product processing, and logistics, and its sustainability is questionable. Third, there is a problem of suspended governance chain in educational cooperation policies. At present, the cooperation is still mainly driven by the education and foreign affairs departments, with the absence of functional departments such as development and reform, finance, human resources and social security, and rural revitalization. There is a lack of a "policy toolkit" and a "funding pool" to provide cross-departmental combined support for cooperation projects, resulting in a governance time difference situation where "diplomacy is hot, finance is cold" and "the Ministry of Education is in a hurry, but the industry department is slow."

The inertia and challenges of path dependency in the execution and evaluation of policies after their introduction. Limited by the tension between the "historical genes" and "era demands" of policies, there are issues of path dependency in the implementation of China-Kazakhstan vocational education cooperation policies in terms of systems, concepts, and evaluation. First, there are many institutional path dependency issues in China-Kazakhstan educational cooperation. For example, the western border provinces of China use the "aid to Xinjiang model" to manage international cooperation projects, treating Kazakh students as "aid to Xinjiang class" students, using the same teaching plan and budget item, and ignoring the differences in Kazakh industrial standards and national culture, which leads to "course incompatibility." Second, the conceptual path dependency in the implementation of vocational education policies

is relatively prominent. Some localities still regard vocational education cooperation as a "inspection project" or "image project," pursuing the sensational effect of the "first landing ceremony," and lack sufficient design for subsequent quality assessment, cost sharing, and exit mechanism, forming a cycle of "emphasizing application and neglecting operation." Third, there is an evaluation path dependency issue. Limited by the existing education policy evaluation methods, the performance assessment of the implementation of China-Kazakhstan vocational education cooperation policies still uses the linear indicators of "input-activity-output," and has not yet established a result chain assessment of "learning-employment-increasing income-getting rich." It cannot answer the core proposition of common prosperity, "whether the cooperation has truly increased the income of herdsmen in the western region, people who have been lifted out of poverty, and ethnic minority students."

2.2 Pain Points and Dilemmas in the Practice of China-Kazakhstan Vocational Education Cooperation Policy

Differences in policy goals and standards affect the practice of China-Kazakhstan vocational education cooperation policies. The gap between China's vocational and technical talent demand policies and implementation standards, coupled with insufficient dynamic matching between local vocational education departments and the changing needs for vocational and technical talents in Kazakhstan, has led to obstacles in practical cooperation. For example, due to the upgrading of Kazakhstan's industrial and technological demands, there has been a significant adjustment and upgrade in its demand for vocational and technical talents. Since this change was not effectively communicated through policy adjustments and information platform initiatives, the talent gap between China and Kazakhstan still exists. Relying on outdated vocational demand information, the East Kazakhstan Region quarterly updates its shortage of "crop harvesting machine operators," with this information remaining only on the Almaty Human Resources Network. Meanwhile, domestic port industrial parks lack real-time data, and the Wuwei Vocational Education Center in Gansu Province continues to train

"fruit and vegetable graders" based on past talent demand situations. This results in a current shortage of harvesting machine operators and a surplus of graders in Kazakhstan during the harvesting season. The lag in policy adjustment has affected the smooth transition of the entire production cycle.

Coordination issues between policy support funds and market supply and demand have impacted the implementation of vocational education policies and the progress of cooperative talent training. In practice, the main bodies of China-Kazakhstan vocational education cooperation tend to overlook the core principle that the market is the core mechanism for regulating the supply and demand relationship of vocational education talents. For example, in a China-Kazakhstan vocational education cooperation case, according to the relevant regulations of the cooperation policy, the Chinese side was responsible for temporarily adding a "solar drip irrigation technician" class at the Luban Workshop's Kazakhstan branch, requiring additional equipment budget from the Chinese side. However, due to the local fiscal disbursement schedule in China, which is "project initiation at the beginning of the year and settlement at the end of the year," the Ili Prefecture in Xinjiang applied for additional funds after June, missing the training window before spring sowing. As a result, the enterprises in need of vocational skills talents had to turn to technical workers from a third country outside China and Kazakhstan for support. Vocational students in the western region also missed out on job opportunities. The coordination between policy support and market supply and demand is also one of the dilemmas in the policy practice of China-Kazakhstan vocational education cooperation.

Performance assessment models are the main basis for evaluating and implementing China-Kazakhstan vocational education cooperation policies. Unrealistic quantitative assessments are not conducive to achieving effective cooperation. For example, in China-Kazakhstan vocational training cooperation, the performance assessment of Luban Workshops often focuses on "number of trainees and equipment investment," without tracking the practical effect of "Kazakh employment rates." Later, during the Ministry of Education's targeted research, it was found that a Luban Workshop continued to receive policy

and financial support due to "good data," but many trainees failed to pass the relevant skill assessments in Kazakhstan after participating in vocational training, rendering the training outcomes ineffective. In the practice of China-Kazakhstan vocational education policy cooperation, how to achieve performance assessment goals based on the actual results of cooperation has become an urgent shortcoming to be addressed.

2.3 Loopholes and Challenges in the Policy Guarantee of China-Kazakhstan Vocational Education Cooperation

In recent years, China has continuously increased its efforts to promote vocational education exchanges and cooperation with the outside world and has established stable contacts with more than 70 countries and international organizations. In the process of communicating and cooperating with Kazakhstan and other countries, China has explored new paths and platforms to promote and safeguard China-Kazakhstan vocational education cooperation. Efficient and precise policy guarantees are more conducive to achieving the goal of cultivating professional technical talents, supporting national economic and social development, and enhancing international pragmatic cooperation. During the implementation of policies, common policy guarantee measures include increasing financial support, expanding channels for China-Kazakhstan vocational education cooperation, and ensuring the transparency of information in China-Kazakhstan vocational education cooperation. However, in the process of implementing China-Kazakhstan vocational education cooperation policies, the "cross-border dilemma" of financial funds has limited the depth of China-Kazakhstan cooperation. Vocational and technical training that has invested a large amount of manpower and material resources domestically faces challenges in employment implementation due to factors such as "certification difficulties" and "cultural differences." For example, in the process of China-Kazakhstan vocational education cooperation, the risk compensation fund and per-student funding system for vocational education in the western region are both based on domestic education. If there are adjustments by the Kazakh side regarding the "Work Permit for Foreign Teachers" or skill

assessments, the policy text will lack effective "cross-border risk" compensation clauses, and the initial investment in vocational education cooperation will face losses.

China-Kazakhstan vocational education cooperation policies face the dilemma of upgrading traditional safeguard functions that are "adequate" but "not aligned." Currently, China-Kazakhstan vocational education cooperation faces challenges such as "imbalance in cross-border practical training subjects, lack of risk compensation funds, and absence of sustainable self-sufficiency indicators." How to explore and achieve a win-win vision for China-Kazakhstan vocational education cooperation and promote the goal of common prosperity in China's western region urgently requires solving a series of safeguard challenges in the "last mile" of vocational education cooperation policy mechanisms.

3. Development Paths for China-Kazakhstan Vocational Education Cooperation Policy to Promote Common Prosperity in Western Regions

To alleviate the series of difficulties and problems in the introduction, implementation, and safeguarding of China-Kazakhstan vocational education cooperation policies, and based on the future vision of China-Kazakhstan vocational education cooperation, a reverse design approach from the perspective of outcome-oriented thinking should be adopted. This approach should focus on the development path selection and design of China-Kazakhstan vocational education cooperation from two angles: the complementary advantages of resources and human capital. Overall, one of the construction paths for China-Kazakhstan vocational education cooperation policy to promote common prosperity is to start from the development needs of common prosperity in China's western regions and design the path around how to promote the characteristic and high-quality development of the western regions. Meanwhile, it is necessary to reconstruct the endogenous driving force for the development of human capital and technical connotations of vocational education to promote common prosperity in the western regions.

3.1 Policy Promotion: A New Model for Vocational Talent Gap Training Based on Demand-Side Reverse Project Initiation

Facing the future deep integration of China-Kazakhstan vocational education, the main cooperating entities and educational authorities should make policy promotion judgments and accelerate the establishment of an "Early Warning Mechanism for Western-Kazakhstan Industrial and Technical Talent Gaps". By having border cities (such as Horgos and Alashankou) jointly report "shortage occupations + salary ranges" to the Kazakh side on a quarterly basis, and through the National Development and Reform Commission or relevant functional departments in China, a "China-Kazakhstan Vocational Education Cooperation Project Repository" should be established. For projects included in the repository, the central budgetary investment policy should set application conditions to achieve a new model of vocational talent training that is demand-driven: "train what is lacking". By reverse-constructing the content of China-Kazakhstan vocational education policies from the occupation gaps, a "cross-border industry order express lane" should be established. This lane will proactively review and build the list of occupations newly included in the early warning "project repository." Provincial functional departments responsible for approval should promote a "build first, approve later" approach for China-Kazakhstan vocational and technical talent training projects. By initiating and filing the projects, the relevant performance review conditions can be supplemented in subsequent periods, thereby completely solving the timeliness pain point of "approval not keeping up with the harvesting season".

3.2 Policy Practice: Embedding China-Kazakhstan Pilot Projects into Western County-Level Vocational Education Scenarios

In the practice of China-Kazakhstan vocational education policies, support for vocational and technical training at the county level in the western regions should be emphasized. For example, by focusing on counties in Xinjiang, Ningxia, and other areas, efforts should be made to expand and create "Common Prosperity Experimental Classes". By directly linking vocational training enrollment quotas to the seasonal peaks of technical labor demand in Kazakhstan, such as harvesting, maintenance, and cold chain operations, targeted and

face-to-face skill training support can be provided to individuals from low-income families. Meanwhile, to assess the effectiveness of policy practice, after passing the vocational skills assessment and graduation, the results of assistance can be included in the county government's performance targets for promoting "common prosperity", and cross-border income can be incorporated into the county's "common prosperity" assessment indicators. In fact, research has found that some China-Kazakhstan cooperative vocational skills training "Luban Workshops" play a significant role in cultivating skilled talent. To further expand and promote the effectiveness of policy practice, China-Kazakhstan vocational education policy practice could introduce "mobile workshops", where skill training equipment is loaded into containers. Based on the good land transportation infrastructure between China and Kazakhstan, these workshops can continuously complete skill certification projects that meet Kazakh standards, avoiding resource idleness caused by "building fixed bases—demand shift".

3.3 Policy Safeguards: A Results-Oriented Financial Security Plan of "Risk Bottoming-Up + Profit Sharing"

Top-down policy safeguards and supporting funding can help deepen China-Kazakhstan vocational education cooperation. A "China-Kazakhstan Cross-Border Employment Common Prosperity Fund" could be established at the central level, for example, using an "employment voucher" model to promote stable employment of low-income trainees from China's western regions in Kazakhstan. The cross-border employment fund would inject funds directly into training schools for teachers' travel to Kazakhstan and the transfer of new skill equipment, helping China-Kazakhstan skill cooperation to complete a development cycle of "successful employment—fund recycling", replacing the traditional prepayment blood transfusion support model.

Risk capital should be encouraged to enter the "cross-border skill" training model of China-Kazakhstan vocational education. A tripartite employment risk security policy, shared proportionally by the central and provincial governments and individual trainees, should be introduced. When uncertainties arise in China-Kazakhstan cooperation, such as sudden changes in industrial policies, exchange

rate fluctuations, or cooperation suspension, which can easily lead to internship interruptions, reasonable cross-border employment insurance can provide a good risk buffer for trainee transportation, living subsidies, and other expenses, effectively avoiding greater economic losses for trainees.

To encourage the dual growth of skill level improvement and personal income for vocational skills personnel, a "vocational skill appreciation option" model could be introduced. If trainees in China-Kazakhstan vocational education cooperation can achieve a salary increase exceeding the local average growth rate within 3 years through their own efforts after obtaining a joint certificate, a policy could be introduced to return a certain proportion of the excess to the China-Kazakhstan vocational education cooperation institutions as a "quality reward". This would allow training schools involved in China-Kazakhstan vocational education cooperation to share in the dividends of human capital appreciation, thereby shifting from "blood transfusion finance" to "blood-making dividends".

4. Conclusion

The three aspects of policy promotion, practice, and safeguarding revolve around the dual goals of "increasing income in the western regions and meeting labor demands in Kazakhstan", thereby truly transforming China-Kazakhstan vocational education cooperation into a sustainable engine for common prosperity in the western regions. By reverse-engineering the policy loop based on outcomes, China-Kazakhstan vocational education cooperation can become a "perpetual blood-making machine" for common prosperity in the west. The resonance of demand-side project initiation, credit stacking, employment vouchers, and risk insurance converts "Kazakhstan's shortage of occupations" into "learner income data" in real-time, locking cross-border industrial fluctuations, skill appreciation, and financial returns into the same feedback loop. This achieves a quantifiable, traceable, and shareable cycle of "what the industry lacks—what the learners study—how much income increases—how much funding returns", upgrading China-Kazakhstan vocational education cooperation from a "showcase project" to a "common prosperity engine" and continuously releasing the long-tail benefits of mutual beneProject Source: Phase II

of Chongqing International Distinctive Projects

Acknowledgments

This paper is supported by European Studies Center of Chongqing Jiaotong University, Phase II of Chongqing International Distinctive Projects: "Policy Impact and Social-support System of China-Kazakhstan Cooperation in Vocational Education"(Project No.: 2023ESC17)

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