

The Governance Dilemmas and Reform Pathways of Labor Education in Higher Education under the “Three-All Education” Paradigm

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Abstract: *Against the backdrop of modernizing the governance system of higher education in the new era, labour education—an institutional arrangement central to fulfilling the fundamental mandate of fostering virtue through education—has become closely intertwined with the quality of talent cultivation and the enhancement of college students’ employability. It has consequently emerged as a pivotal agenda in higher education reform. From a governance perspective, however, the advancement of labour education in universities continues to encounter structural constraints, including insufficient institutional provision, weak coordination among educational stakeholders, fragmentation across the educational process, and underdeveloped operational mechanisms. These deficiencies have impeded the effective realization of labour education’s formative function. The “Three-All Education” paradigm—emphasizing education by all staff, throughout the entire process, and across all dimensions—offers a systematic framework and normative orientation for optimizing the governance architecture of labour education. Guided by the institutional logic of comprehensive and coordinated cultivation, universities should undertake a structural reconfiguration of labour education governance. At the level of actors, this entails establishing a multi-stakeholder, collaborative governance mechanism; at the procedural level, strengthening the systemic integration of the educational chain; at the spatial level, deepening curricular integration and expanding experiential learning platforms; and at the institutional level, refining evaluation systems and safeguarding mechanisms. Such reforms would generate a governance framework characterized by clearly delineated responsibilities, efficient operation, and orderly coordination, thereby promoting students’ holistic development while enhancing both educational effectiveness and institutional governance capacity.*

Keywords: *At Higher Education Institutions, Labour Education, Three-All Education, Fostering Virtue through Education*

1. Introduction

In the new era, from an early age, to esteem and embrace labor, to temper their will through practice, to cultivate affective commitment. As the principal constituency of labor education, university students are expected to internalize and propagate the ethos of labor and to develop a scientifically grounded conception of its value (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China (MOE, 2020). Yet persistent social tendencies—manifested in the devaluation of manual work, insufficient respect for laborers, and indifference toward the fruits of labor—continue to exert influence. Among some undergraduates, a preference for comfort and an aversion to sustained effort reveal deficiencies in the formation of stable labor values, habits, and dispositions (Zhong & Wang, 2021). These phenomena, to a considerable extent, reflect systemic shortcomings in the implementation of labor education within universities, including fragmented programming and underdeveloped institutional mechanisms (Liu, 2022). Strengthening labor education in higher education is therefore indispensable to cultivating a new generation equipped with moral integrity, intellectual rigor, physical vitality, aesthetic sensibility, and practical competence (Communist Party of China, 2018). Embedding the “Three-All Education” paradigm—education by all members, throughout the entire process, and across all dimensions—into university labor education offers a pathway toward institutional coherence, mitigates tendencies toward marginalization or superficiality, and enhances the overall efficacy of educational governance (MOE, 2020).

2. The Value of Advancing Labor Education Under the “Three-All Education” Framework

Within this comprehensive paradigm, reinforcing labor education among university students carries profound contemporary significance (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China (MOE, 2020). It constitutes a necessary step in implementing the Party’s educational policy and fulfilling the fundamental mandate of fostering virtue through education (Communist Party of China, 2018), while also serving as an essential vehicle for cultivating and practicing core socialist values. Labor is the foundational condition of human existence and social development, a proposition grounded in the Marxist theory of historical materialism (Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, 1846/1970). As Anton Makarenko (1935/1988) observed, labor represents a basic element of any coherent educational system. Anchored in the Marxist conception of labor, integrating labor education throughout the entire process of talent cultivation facilitates the formation of sound labor values and nurtures a conscious disposition to respect, revere, and embrace work (Marx & Engels, 1846/1970; MOE, 2020).

National development depends not merely on the scale of the labor force but, more fundamentally, on its overall quality. As modernization deepens and industrial specialization intensifies, higher education faces escalating demands regarding the structure of students’ competencies (MOE, 2020). Systematic labor education cultivates disciplined habits and practical skills, encourages students to emulate exemplary workers, and fosters a disposition characterized by diligence, creativity, and responsibility (Communist Party of China, 2018). In so doing, it advances the objective of educating individuals who combine moral integrity with professional competence and who are prepared to shoulder the historical mission of national rejuvenation.

As an integral component of the national education system, labor education performs both foundational and integrative functions within the framework of balanced development across moral, intellectual, physical, aesthetic, and labor domains (MOE, 2020). Through labor, students refine moral judgment by recognizing labor as the source of material and spiritual wealth—a central thesis in Marxist labor theory (Marx & Engels, 1846/1970). Through labor, they enhance cognitive capacity by integrating theoretical knowledge with experiential application, thereby strengthening problem-solving and innovative capabilities (Dewey, 1938). Through labor, they fortify physical health and resilience; and through labor, they cultivate aesthetic appreciation by experiencing the beauty inherent in creation and accomplishment (Makarenko, 1935/1988). In this way, labor education generates synergistic effects across multiple dimensions of personal development (MOE, 2020).

Empirical observation suggests that insufficient engagement in labor practice has left some students with comparatively weak physical endurance, limited practical competence, and attenuated labor consciousness (Liu, 2022), thereby constraining professional advancement and holistic character formation. The absence of sustained labor experience may also erode appreciation for the value of work and impede the development of thrift and responsibility (Zhong & Wang, 2021). By contrast, robust labor education enhances perseverance, fortifies the capacity to confront adversity, and nurtures a spirit of industriousness and innovation (MOE, 2020). These qualities, forged through practice, readily transfer to academic pursuits and future professional trajectories, laying a durable foundation for successful social integration (Dewey, 1938).

At a broader civilizational level, the Chinese nation has long esteemed diligence, courage, and enterprising resolve (Communist Party of China, 2018). Strengthening labor education reinforces students’ sense of civic responsibility and guides them toward a rational conception of employment, encouraging service in grassroots and strategically vital sectors. At the individual level, it supports the internalization of values such as patriotism, dedication, integrity, and collegiality (Communist Party of China, 2018), fostering a generation capable of initiative and accountability. At the societal level, it contributes to a cultural climate that esteems labor and celebrates creativity, thereby advancing social equity and civilizational progress (MOE, 2020). Accordingly, systematically advancing university labor education under the aegis of the “Three-All Education” framework is not merely an internal imperative of educational reform but also a vital safeguard for students’ comprehensive development and for the sustained advancement of society (Communist Party of China, 2018; MOE, 2020).

3. Structural Constraints in the Governance System of Higher Education under the “Three-All Education” Paradigm

Since the articulation of the “Three-All Education” paradigm (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China (MOE, 2017), universities have undertaken a series of reform initiatives. Nevertheless,

the enduring influence of conventional pedagogical models has constrained substantive progress in labor education (Liu, 2022). Persistent deficiencies—manifested in inadequate coordination among educational stakeholders, fragmented program design, weak articulation across developmental stages, and an underdeveloped institutional architecture—continue to impede effective implementation (MOE, 2020). In practice, the absence of rigorous pedagogical guidance, stable institutional safeguards, and systematic oversight has attenuated the incentives for multi-actor participation and diluted educational impact (Communist Party of China, 2018). A systematic appraisal of these structural constraints within the “Three-All Education” framework is therefore indispensable to fulfilling the fundamental mandate of fostering virtue through education .

First, the commitment of educational actors remains comparatively attenuated (Liu, 2022). In some institutions, labor education occupies a peripheral status within the curricular hierarchy, contrary to the policy orientation that emphasizes its independent and foundational role (MOE, 2020). Course offerings lack structural coherence and are frequently subsumed under ideological and political theory courses, without an autonomous curricular framework or tiered design (Zhong & Wang, 2021). Such arrangements obscure the disciplinary specificity and contemporary relevance of labor education. Pedagogical practice often privileges theoretical exposition over experiential engagement, reflecting an insufficient appreciation of the formative significance of labor competencies at the tertiary level (Dewey, 1938). Moreover, the absence of dedicated administrative structures and stable financial appropriations has resulted in constrained investment in facilities, equipment, and professional personnel, rendering many initiatives largely symbolic (Liu, 2022).

At the familial level, excessive emphasis on academic performance has, in some cases, eclipsed attention to the cultivation of labor consciousness and life skills (Zhong & Wang, 2021). Particularly among single-child households, relatively privileged developmental environments may limit opportunities for sustained labor engagement, thereby weakening the foundational role of family-based labor education (MOE, 2020). At the societal level, utilitarian and consumerist value orientations—characterized by the pursuit of rapid material success—have eroded respect for labor (Marx & Engels, 1846/1970). Insufficient public recognition of exemplary workers and limited supply of structured social practice positions further diminish the supportive function of society in collaborative education (Communist Party of China, 2018).

Second, the integration and development of labor education resources remain inadequate (MOE, 2020). Under the comprehensive requirements of “Three-All Education,” labor education should bridge online and offline modalities, as well as curricular and extracurricular domains, to achieve multidimensional coverage (MOE, 2017). In practice, however, classroom content is often dispersed and overly theoretical, with insufficient systematic planning or disciplinary refinement (Liu, 2022). Extracurricular practice platforms—including work-study programs, volunteer initiatives, and production-oriented internships—are limited in scale and capacity, constraining broad student participation (Zhong & Wang, 2021). Campus labor culture lacks depth and continuity; thematic activities are episodic rather than institutionalized, and thus fail to cultivate a sustained normative climate that esteems labor. Meanwhile, the educational potential of digital platforms remains underexploited, with lagging infrastructure and limited integration between virtual and physical learning environments (MOE, 2020).

Third, the formative outcomes of labor education have yet to fully materialize (Liu, 2022). Some students exhibit attenuated labor consciousness and limited intrinsic motivation to engage in practice, reflecting an incomplete understanding of the relationship between labor and personal development (Marx & Engels, 1846/1970). The cultivation of disciplined labor habits, self-sufficiency, and public responsibility remains uneven (Makarenko, 1935/1988). Influenced by instrumental value orientations, certain students approach labor participation with outcome-oriented or credential-seeking motives, thereby subordinating processual learning and weakening the internalization of labor spirit (Zhong & Wang, 2021). Traditional biases that privilege intellectual over manual work persist, underscoring the need to reinforce respect for laborers and appreciation for the fruits of labor (MOE, 2020). Collectively, these tendencies constrain the integrative and transformative potential of labor education (Communist Party of China, 2018).

In sum, substantive gaps remain in the implementation of labor education with respect to conceptual internalization, resource coordination, and demonstrable outcomes (Liu, 2022). Advancing reform under the aegis of the “Three-All Education” paradigm requires the construction of a coordinated governance mechanism, the strengthening of curricular architecture, the expansion of experiential platforms, and the cultivation of a robust campus labor culture (MOE, 2020). Concurrently, institutional safeguards and evaluative systems must be refined to incentivize meaningful participation and ensure accountability

(Communist Party of China, 2018). By guiding students toward a scientifically grounded conception of labor value and enhancing their practical competence, universities can facilitate a transition from formalistic compliance to substantive, content-driven development, thereby synchronizing improvements in educational quality with gains in governance efficacy .

4. Reform Pathways for Advancing Labor Education under the Guidance of the “Three-All Education” Paradigm

For an extended period, labor education remained subsumed within moral and intellectual education, its distinctive function attenuated and, at times, marginalized (Liu, 2022). With the transition toward high-quality economic and social development and the concomitant demand for composite, practice-oriented talent , the integrative value of labor education has regained salience (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China (MOE, 2020). Questions concerning how to cultivate sound labor values among youth, enhance practical competencies and innovative capacity, activate intrinsic developmental motivation, and foster a campus culture that esteems labor have consequently emerged as central concerns in higher education governance (Communist Party of China, 2018). Under the aegis of the “Three-All Education” paradigm (MOE, 2017), universities should construct a comprehensive labor education system encompassing all participants, the entire developmental process, and multiple institutional domains. By embedding labor education across successive stages of student growth and promoting coordinated advancement across moral, intellectual, physical, aesthetic, and labor dimensions, institutions can establish a renewed configuration of labor education suited to contemporary conditions (MOE, 2020).

First, universities should establish a collaborative, multi-actor framework integrating the efforts of institutions, families, and society at large (MOE, 2017). Within universities, strengthening faculty capacity is essential (Liu, 2022). A hybrid system of full-time and part-time instructors dedicated to labor education should be developed to enhance pedagogical expertise, theoretical literacy, and practical supervisory competence (MOE, 2020). Instructors in ideological and political theory courses should deepen their commitment to labor-oriented value formation by incorporating the Marxist conception of labor (Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, 1846/1970), relevant legal frameworks, and the ethos of craftsmanship into classroom instruction . Counselors, academic advisors, and administrative and service personnel should likewise exercise their educational functions through structured activities—such as thematic seminars, residential management, and campus service initiatives—thereby embedding labor education into students’ quotidian experience (Communist Party of China, 2018).

The family constitutes the primary site of early labor socialization (Zhong & Wang, 2021). Parents should move beyond an exclusive emphasis on examination performance and instead model and encourage participation in household labor, cultivating independence and responsibility through daily practice (MOE, 2020). The transmission of constructive family traditions can reinforce values of diligence, thrift, and respect for work, thereby fostering synergy between home and school (Communist Party of China, 2018). At the societal level, a public culture that esteems labor must be actively cultivated . Enhanced dissemination of exemplary worker narratives and the expansion of structured social practice platforms—through collaboration among government agencies, enterprises, and civic organizations—can broaden opportunities for both productive and service-oriented labor engagement (MOE, 2020), forming an integrated support network for experiential education.

Second, labor education should be implemented in a developmentally sequenced and process-oriented manner (MOE, 2017). For first-year students, foundational instruction should emphasize the normative significance of labor, clarifying its relationship to individual growth and social progress (Marx & Engels, 1846/1970), while cultivating disciplined behavioral habits (Makarenko, 1935/1988). During the second and third years, labor education should be more deeply integrated with disciplinary study and social practice (Liu, 2022). Through university–enterprise partnerships, innovation and entrepreneurship training, and research-based experiential learning, students can consolidate theoretical knowledge through application, thereby strengthening professional competence and innovative capacity (Dewey, 1938). In the final year, emphasis should shift toward professional ethics and structured internships, leveraging industry–education integration to enhance occupational awareness and civic commitment , and facilitating a smooth transition from academic to professional life (MOE, 2020).

Third, pedagogical and institutional mechanisms must be refined to reinforce coordination between classroom instruction and experiential practice (MOE, 2020). The classroom remains the principal arena for normative guidance and conceptual formation (Communist Party of China, 2018). A systematic

articulation of labor theory should be complemented by innovative instructional modalities—including case-based analysis and situational deliberation—to enhance intellectual rigor and relevance (Dewey, 1938). Professional curricula should expand structured practice components, embedding labor values within laboratory training, clinical placements, engineering design, and other applied contexts that cultivate resilience and methodological precision (Liu, 2022).

Simultaneously, the formative potential of co-curricular and cultural programming should be fully leveraged (MOE, 2017). Thematic initiatives aligned with commemorative occasions—such as Arbor Day and Labor Day—can embed labor values within campus festivals and volunteer service activities (Communist Party of China, 2018). Platforms such as the “Internet Plus” Innovation and Entrepreneurship Competition and the “Challenge Cup” can facilitate interdisciplinary collaboration and stimulate creative problem-solving (MOE, 2020). Through such integrative mechanisms, labor spirit becomes embedded not merely in isolated activities but within the broader institutional culture .

Fourth, labor education should be woven into the fabric of everyday campus life (MOE, 2020). Initiatives such as residential civility programs, waste classification management, and structured work-study arrangements can transform routine tasks into formative experiences (Liu, 2022). Campaigns promoting dormitory hygiene and green campus development cultivate responsibility and collective consciousness (Communist Party of China, 2018). Moreover, evaluation mechanisms should be innovated to move beyond singular metrics, incorporating diversified forms of outcome presentation to enhance students’ sense of engagement and achievement (MOE, 2017).

5. Conclusion

Under the guiding principles of the “Three-All Education” paradigm, labor education in higher education should achieve an organic integration of normative orientation, competency development, and institutional support. By constructing a collaborative governance architecture, optimizing stage-specific cultivation pathways, reinforcing the synergy between classroom instruction and experiential learning, and embedding labor practice within daily life, universities can facilitate a transition from formalistic implementation to substantive, content-driven development. Such transformation will enhance students’ labor literacy and comprehensive capability, thereby providing a robust foundation for cultivating a generation characterized by balanced development across moral, intellectual, physical, aesthetic, and practical domains.

A clear recognition of the strategic significance of labor education must be accompanied by a sober assessment of prevailing structural constraints. The deep institutionalization of the “Three-All Education” paradigm can mitigate the marginalization of labor education, mobilize diverse stakeholders, activate intrinsic motivation, and strengthen collective commitment. Simultaneously, it enables universities to transcend entrenched institutional rigidities, clarify the integration of labor education throughout the full trajectory of student development, and embed it within the broader educational system encompassing moral, intellectual, physical, and aesthetic formation.

The mutually reinforcing alignment of labor education and the “Three-All Education” framework not only optimizes the structural configuration of labor education but also amplifies the overall effectiveness of comprehensive educational reform. It constitutes both a necessary condition for achieving high-quality, sustainable development in labor education and an indispensable pathway for advancing the modernization of China’s talent cultivation system in the new era.

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