

THE EVOLUTIONARY LOGIC OF HIGHER EDUCATION ONLINE EDUCATION POLICIES -- AN ANALYSIS BASED ON HISTORICAL INSTITUTIONALISM

LinXia Li

Department of Education, Gachon University, Gyeonggi-do 13120, Republic of Korea.

Abstract: As a crucial area where technological change and educational governance converge, online higher education exhibits significant historical path dependence and institutional inertia in its policy evolution. Analyzing the historical evolution of online higher education policies since the reform and opening up from a historical institutionalist perspective reveals that these policies have gone through several stages: a policy initiation stage driven by development needs; a policy construction stage driven by deepening reforms; a policy innovation stage driven by informatization; and a policy upgrading stage driven by the impact of the pandemic. Looking ahead, we should leverage deep-seated social structures to promote the improvement and innovation of online higher education policies; coordinate internal and external driving forces to ensure the long-term development of online higher education; and overcome path dependence to eliminate obstacles to policy development.

Keywords: Historical institutionalism; Online higher education; Policy change; Multiple entities; Path dependence

1 INTRODUCTION

As the concept of “Internet + Education” gradually becomes a reality, online education, while serving extracurricular learning, has also become a crucial cornerstone of school education, even assuming responsibility for school education during the pandemic. Higher education online education is gradually evolving from a marginalized supplementary form of education into an indispensable component of the higher education system. Since the launch of the “Modern Distance Education Pilot Project” at the end of the 20th century, policies on higher education online education have undergone several stages: exploration and pilot projects, standardization and rectification, systematization, and digital governance. The outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020, in particular, became a “critical moment” for promoting the widespread adoption of online education and for centralized policy adjustments.

Higher education online education specifically refers to the pilot work deployed within the Modern Distance Education Project, specifically run by higher education institutions approved by the national education administration department. It represents the earliest application of modern information technology in distance education in my country, namely, third-generation distance education. As overall education informatization enters a stage of integration and innovation, especially with the rapid development of online education driven by the COVID-19 pandemic, online education is moving towards a new stage of “Internet + Education.” Building a new educational ecosystem based on modern information technology is becoming a new direction for education reform and development.

However, current research on online education policies in Chinese universities mainly falls into three categories: problem-solving studies, comparative studies between countries, and studies on policy connotations. These studies offer suggestions regarding the formulation procedures, content, value orientation, and legalization of online education policies. While research on online education policies in universities both domestically and internationally is diverse and offers increasingly rich perspectives, it lacks a theoretical framework to examine the evolutionary logic of online education policies. Therefore, this study, based on historical institutionalism, traces the evolutionary logic of online education policies, analyzes the deep structure, driving mechanisms, and path dependencies influencing policy changes, and then rationally analyzes the future direction and optimization path of online education policies, aiming to provide theoretical guidance and action references for the future policy layout of science education in my country.

2 THEORETICAL FOUNDATION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Foundation

As a classic school of thought in new institutionalist political science, historical institutionalism integrates the essence of sociological institutionalism and rational choice institutionalism. It bridges the gap between macro and micro levels, leading to meso-level institutional analysis, and is dedicated to exploring how time processes and historical events influence the generation and change of institutions within a specific structural context[1]. Historical institutionalism has developed an analytical framework of “macro background—meso-level institutions—micro-level actors.” Educational policy research guided by this framework generally includes three action paths: outlining the evolution of policy change, exploring the institutional logic of policy change, and predicting rational choices for policy innovation [2]. This classic analytical framework consists of two analytical paradigms: one based on historical perspective and the other on structural

perspective. The historical perspective paradigm treats institutions as independent variables, relying on the tracing of historical facts to analyze the stages, themes, and patterns of institutional change from aspects such as key nodes, path dependence, and gradual transformation, thereby clarifying the diachronic factors influencing the policy process. The structuralist analytical paradigm selects macro-level dimensions such as economy, politics, and culture to explore how general, deep-seated factors influence the formation and change of institutions, and reveals the driving forces of institutional change by examining the interactions between actors[3].

Historical institutionalism is a mid-level institutional theory that emerged in the 1980s. This theory posits that institutions are both independent and dependent variables: as independent variables, the focus is on how institutions influence social reality; as dependent variables, the focus is on the conditions that influence institutions [1]. Historical institutionalism views history as dynamic and creates key nodes for dividing historical periods[4]. While my country's policies on online higher education do not fall under the narrow definition of institutions, they do belong to the category of "rules" at the meso-level. Employing historical institutionalism helps to clarify the internal workings of the evolution of these policies. Based on this, this paper will adopt a historical institutionalist perspective, primarily analyzing the following: First, it will divide the curriculum into several stages based on key milestones, summarizing characteristics and outlining historical logic. Second, it will conduct an institutional logic analysis from three aspects: the path dependence of the institution itself, its macro-level deep structure, and the driving mechanisms of micro-level actors.

2.2 Literature Review

Current research on online education policies in Chinese universities can be broadly categorized into problem-solving studies, comparative studies between countries, and policy connotation studies, providing suggestions for the formulation procedures, content, value orientation, and legalization of my country's higher education online education policies.

Problem-solving studies occupy a dominant position in the research on online education policies in Chinese universities. They primarily analyze the institutional roots of problems encountered during policy implementation and propose improvement suggestions. The formulation and implementation of online education policies in Chinese universities suffer from a phenomenon of "institutional inertia," with policies often existing only as guiding documents, lacking mandatory constraints and legal support, resulting in limited policy implementation effectiveness[4]. To further address this from a quality assurance perspective, Chen Lijuan argues that the current lack of unified standards and external evaluation mechanisms in higher education online education necessitates the construction of a multi-stakeholder collaborative quality supervision system [5]. Regarding the allocation of educational resources, although "Internet + Education" has promoted the dissemination of high-quality educational resources, it is also driving a new educational revolution. The integration of emerging information technologies such as the Internet, big data, and artificial intelligence with education and teaching is changing traditional educational concepts, organizational forms, methods, and learning styles, posing challenges to teachers' professional competence and authority [6].

In comparative studies between countries, Song Jian and Yang Lin analyzed the crucial guiding role of the emergence [7], formation, and expansion of MOOCs in American universities in their educational development, providing some reference for the construction of MOOCs in Chinese universities.

In terms of policy connotation research, Guo Can and Chen Enlun [8], based on multi-source theory, analyzed that my country's online education policy has successively undergone three stages of transformation: from primarily organizational and capacity-building policies, to the initial construction of an online education policy system, from primarily mandatory and normative policies, to the basic formation of an online education policy system, and finally, the integration of guiding and capacity-building policies, and the innovative development of an online education policy system. By employing semantic network analysis, this study points out that core terms such as "educational equity," "lifelong learning," and "quality assurance" frequently appear in online education policy texts, reflecting the national governance goals of promoting education modernization and fairness and justice [9-10].

While some scholars have reviewed policies on online higher education, few have analyzed the overall development of these policies from a historical institutionalist perspective. This study attempts to explore the formation of the online higher education system holistically from two dimensions: historical context and institutional logic. On the one hand, through longitudinal historical tracing, it traces the historical context of the formation of the online higher education system and identifies key nodes driving its development. On the other hand, through horizontal institutional logic, it deeply explores the macro-background, driving mechanisms, and path dependencies influencing the formation of the online higher education system, thus presenting a three-dimensional picture of its formation.

3 RESEARCH METHODS

Historical institutionalism focuses on the interaction between the deep structure of institutions and the behavior of micro-actors, centering on the deep structure, dynamic mechanisms, and path dependence of institutional change, thus providing a new perspective for the analysis of institutional change. Deep structural content, developmental dynamic mechanisms, and historical path dependence analyze the logic of policy development from different angles and are key aspects of historical institutionalism. Specifically, deep structural content focuses on the impact of institutional change on policy change at the macro and micro levels; developmental dynamic mechanisms emphasize the roles played by different stakeholders in the policy change process; and historical path dependence emphasizes the influence of past policy foundations on future policy development, attempting to explore the logical relationships between policy development

and change through historical context. Overall, historical institutionalism, as a theoretical framework for analyzing policy, has important reference value for analyzing policy development and change. Therefore, this study attempts to analyze the evolution of online education policies in Chinese universities using a historical institutionalism framework, examining the underlying structures, dynamic mechanisms, and path dependencies that influence these policy changes. The aim is to provide a theoretical basis and practical reference for the future direction and optimization of online education policies in Chinese universities.

4 RESEARCH RESULTS

4.1 Historical Trajectory of Online Education Policies in Chinese Universities

4.1.1 Policy initiation stage driven by development needs (1978-1998)

The 1978 “Notice on Issues Related to the Establishment of Educational Television in Schools” was the first policy document in my country to mention the development of distance education in the field of higher education. The 1980 “Report on Accelerating the Development of Higher Education” led to the vigorous development of audio-visual education in higher education sector. The 1998 “Opinions on Developing Modern Distance Education in my country” for the first time incorporated online education into the higher education and lifelong education system. This stage was marked by the reform and opening up of my country in 1978. From its inception, online education in universities has received attention and encouragement from the state. However, policy formulation was still in the exploratory initiation stage driven by development needs. There were no separately detailed documents; instead, the policy relied on a macro-level design based on documents on the development of distance education, clearly defining its development direction as adapting to the modern era and serving lifelong education.

4.1.2 Policy construction stage under the guiding principle of deepening reform (1999-2009)

Guided by the 1999 “Action Plan for Revitalizing Education for the 21st Century,” online education developed rapidly. In 1999, the “Several Suggestions on Launching the First Batch of Pilot Projects for Modern Distance Education in Regular Universities” initiated the establishment of pilot universities for online education. In 2000, the “Notice on Implementing the New Century Higher Education Teaching Reform Project” proposed the initial establishment of a modern distance education resource and service system. Also in 2000, the “Announcement on Strengthening the Management of Educational Websites and Online Schools” strengthened the management of online education. Over the next decade, strict regulations were continuously introduced in various aspects.

During this period, with the deepening reforms in various fields in 1999 as a key milestone, higher education online education policy entered a system construction phase focusing on organizational development, capacity building, and strong regulation. At this time, policies focused on content standardization and emphasized standardization and rigor in form, resulting in the basic formation of higher education online education system while maintaining strict regulations.

4.1.3 Policy innovation stage dominated by informatization (2010-2019)

With the 2010 “National Medium- and Long-Term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010-2020)” as its guiding document, the policy on online higher education entered an innovation stage dominated by information technology. The 2011 “Interim Measures for the Management of Enrollment and Unified Examination Data in Online Higher Education” promoted the transformation and development of market mechanisms. The 2012 “Opinions of the Ministry of Education on Comprehensively Improving the Quality of Higher Education” proposed the requirement to build a high-quality educational resource sharing system. In April 2018, the Ministry of Education issued the “Education Informatization 2.0 Action Plan,” formally proposing that education informatization should achieve an upgrade and transformation.

During this stage, the rapid development of modern information technology, represented by 4G in 2010, was a key milestone. Policy on online higher education entered an innovative development stage dominated by information technology, characterized by streamlined administration, decentralization, information technology development, and an emphasis on quality. At this time, relevant policies, while originally adapting to modernization and serving lifelong education, added elements of information technology.

4.1.4 Policy upgrading phase under the impact of the pandemic (2020 to Present)

Marked by the Ministry of Education's “Guiding Opinions on Organizing and Managing Online Teaching in Regular Institutions of Higher Learning During the Epidemic Prevention and Control Period” issued on February 4, 2020, the education system entered an upgraded phase under the influence of the epidemic. The “Notice on Coordinating the Prevention and Control of COVID-19 and the Reform and Development of Education in the Education System” guided the unprecedented scale and scope of online teaching in the history of higher education. During this phase, with the sudden outbreak of the 2020 epidemic as a key juncture, the policies for online education in higher education, built upon decades of experience and a well-established system, were able to effectively guide the widespread implementation of online education during the epidemic, summarize and evaluate its effectiveness, and proactively design for the transition between online and offline teaching. This further advanced the policies for online education in higher education in guiding modernization and serving lifelong learning.

4.2 Deep Structure in a Macro Context

This paper analyzes the deep structure, driving mechanisms, and path dependence of policy changes in higher education online education from the perspective of historical institutionalism, aiming to clarify the logic of these policy changes. Institutional change from a historical institutionalist perspective refers to the process of a new system replacing an old

one, mainly including two types: sudden change and gradual change. Regardless of the form of change, it stems from the influence of various external factors. The external “large-scale socio-economic or political background” and cultural concepts, to a certain extent, constrain institutional change, constituting its deep structure.

First, economic development leads to changes in talent demand. The socialist market economy and modernization under reform and opening up require a large number of people with higher education. The traditional model of higher education can no longer adapt to the changing talent demand brought about by economic development, thus giving rise to a series of policies on higher education online education. Second, the transformation of the national education system leads to streamlining administration and delegating power. In the early stages of reform and opening up, higher education system was characterized by centralized power. After the "Decision of the CPC Central Committee on the Reform of the Education System" was issued in 1985, streamlining administration and delegating power became the general direction of the relationship between the government and universities for decades to come. Specifically, in the early stages of online education in Chinese universities, many pilot schools faced strict policy restrictions regarding enrollment, scale of operation, and examination quality. With the deepening of educational reform, a model of “government-led, university-based, and socially participated” has gradually taken shape. Finally, information technology has propelled the development of online education. With the advancement of modern information technology, the integration of big data, artificial intelligence, and VR with education has become increasingly close. The emergence of MOOCs, online libraries, and live streaming has enriched the types of online education.

4.3 Dynamic Mechanisms in Micro-Actors

Institutional change is often the result of the combined actions of different actors, a process of interest negotiation among multiple actors (such as scholars, students, and university stakeholders). Under different historical contexts, the interests of these actors will change to varying degrees.

First, updated theoretical concepts contribute to the development of online education policies in higher education. Historical institutionalism argues that institutional change is constrained by the rational "calculations" and conceptual understanding of actors. The development of online education policies in higher education is inseparable from the continuous improvement of policymakers' understanding of online education. For example, the active suggestions and advice from organizations such as the National People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference can effectively promote the scientific development of policies. Second, decades of practice in online education in higher education have driven policy development. According to statistics from the Ministry of Education, as of April 2024, my country had 68 pilot universities for distance education, offering 768 MOOC courses, 454 million registered users, and serving 1.277 billion learners domestically. During the pandemic, my country launched an international platform for online education in English, actively contributing Chinese solutions to the world. Such numerous online education practices in higher education call for richer and more comprehensive policies. Finally, the expanding audience of online higher education has spurred the development of online education policies. Since my country implemented its policy of expanding enrollment in higher education institutions in 1999, the number of people enrolled in higher education has maintained a steady growth trend. Faced with this vast audience, online teaching requires continuously enriched and improved policies to guide its development.

4.4 Path Dependence in Policy Evolution

In historical institutionalism, path dependence is a crucial theory applicable to the analysis of institutional change. The historical evolution of online education policies in Chinese universities exhibits a strong tendency towards path dependence. According to historical institutionalism's path dependence analysis, the historical evolution of online education policies can be divided into two categories: path breakthroughs resulting from institutional ruptures and self-reinforcement under the continuation of institutional norms.

(1) Path Breakthrough. Looking at the historical trajectory of changes in online education in universities, the reform and opening up in 1978 was a path breakthrough that caused a major upheaval, a top-down, government-driven, and mandatory change. Subsequently, both the key moments in 1999 and 2010 were induced changes that altered the inertia of institutional development, never deviating from the general direction of modernizing online education and serving lifelong learning.

Furthermore, historical institutionalism highly values the important role of historical contingency in the study of institutional change. The sudden outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020 can be seen as a typical contingent key moment. In a short period, it strongly promoted the implementation of the “classes suspended but learning continues” policy, forcing online education in universities to achieve leapfrog development in both its content construction and practical methods. However, this sudden event did not occur entirely outside the existing institutional path. The policy responses and institutional adjustments it triggered remained a continuation and acceleration of the existing development trajectory of online higher education, rather than a fundamental directional shift.

(2) Self-reinforcement. Historical institutionalism argues that once an institution is established, it will rely on its own inertia to form a self-reinforcing mechanism to lock in its advantages. First, the establishment of an institution is often accompanied by high fixed costs. In the process of constructing the policy system for online higher education, a large amount of resources need to be invested in policy design, technology platform construction, and institutional exploration in the early stages, resulting in relatively high entry barriers. However, as the system gradually operates, the marginal cost

gradually decreases, making maintaining the existing policy system the most cost-effective and rational choice.

Second, the learning effect in policy implementation continuously increases the acceptance of institutional arrangements by various participating entities. The establishment of online higher education policies is not achieved overnight, but rather gradually progresses through the continuous accumulation of experience, benefit evaluation, and behavioral adjustment by actors, reflecting a typical endogenous learning logic of institutions.

Third, the coordination effect helps to strengthen the organizational foundation and practical stability of policies. As the policy framework advances, various supportive structures, such as the Higher Education Online Education Examination Committee, are established, further enhancing the complementarity between systems and forming a stable policy implementation network and community of interests.

Finally, the formation of adaptive expectations effectively reduces the uncertainty of institutional evolution. As higher education online education policies gradually demonstrate their effectiveness, public and relevant organizations gain greater confidence in policy sustainability, generally forming consistent expectations and institutional acceptance, thereby promoting the stable evolution and self-consolidation of policies.

5 CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

Analyzing the evolution of online education policies in higher education from a historical institutionalist perspective reveals four stages, following a principle of gradual and incremental change. Its institutional logic possesses its own path dependence and internal and external dynamics, influenced by the complex interplay of policy itself, the external macro-environment, and internal micro-actual actors.

Looking ahead, the formulation and optimization of online education policies in the post-pandemic era need to uphold institutional continuity while responding to the practical needs of educational modernization, digital transformation, and the construction of a lifelong learning system in the new era. Specifically:

At the macro level, it is necessary to further stimulate market vitality, promote the formation of a multi-stakeholder governance structure for online education, establish a more flexible and open education supply system, and enhance universities' independent innovation and platform integration capabilities in the digital education market.

At the institutional level, it should be recognized that online education in higher education is at a critical institutional juncture, facing a historical opportunity to transition from “emergency online education” to “normalized blended education.” Therefore, it is necessary to formulate systematic policies, optimize the mechanism for integrating online and offline teaching, clarify the institutional role of universities in the digital education system, and promote the rule of law in digital education.

At the micro level, it is necessary to further integrate social resources, enhance teachers' digital literacy and teaching abilities, encourage student participation in curriculum design and teaching feedback, and create a learner-centered online education culture. Simultaneously, attention should be paid to absorbing industry-university cooperation, international experience, and industry resources to guide universities in developing more adaptive micro-implementation mechanisms for policy implementation.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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